The Achievement Gap in Reading: Exploring The Gender Literacy Connection for Boys

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What Are Your Opinions About Boys and Reading?

1. Boys read less well than girls because in our society literacy and masculinity are incompatible.

2. Even if many boys are poor readers, males in our society are privileged and do not need special attention.

3. Our feminized school environment has contributed to boys’ lack of interest and achievement in reading.

4. The books and other reading material boys are asked to read in school contribute to their lack of interest in reading.

5. The time boys spend with new media is reducing time for traditional print reading, which is contributing to their declining achievement scores.
The “Big” Issues

**Academic Achievement**

Boys underperform relative to girls on most measures of verbal ability (e.g. state reading and writing high-stakes tests; NAEP; PISA; PIRLS; etc.)

Boys are overrepresented in remedial reading, learning disabilities classes

Boys receive most of the Ds and Fs in elementary school

Boys are far more likely to be retained at grade level than girls

Fewer boys than girls attend/graduate from college
The “Big” Issues

New Literacies

- Definitions of literacy are expanding to include digital literacies, youth media, and virtually any act of meaning making as “reading.”

- Evidence can be found for male youth participating actively in the “mediasphere”

- Boys’ expertise with digital and media literacy may not be privileged and/or valued in most academic contexts
The “Big” Issues

Social Justice

African-American and Hispanic-American boys have the lowest reading achievement.

Male youth of color are over-represented among the ranks of high school dropouts.

Boys of color disproportionately represent incarcerated youth who also have very low literacy skills.

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The “Big” Issues

**Sociopathy** (in the U.S.)
- Males commit most suicides
- Males perpetrate most homicides
- Males commit most acts of family violence
- Males comprise most of the homeless
- Males comprise most drug addicts
- Males comprise most AIDS carriers
The “Big” Issues

Insidious Sexism

Males continue to dominate political, corporate, and institutional life in America (and elsewhere in the world)

As girls make significant strides academically and professionally, advocates of boys’ academic needs want to ensure male primacy, thus invoke “crisis” to rally popular support
The “Big” Issues

Hegemonic Masculinity

“Boy-friendly” curricular schemes do little more than perpetuate gender myths and stereotypes

Binary notions of gender as a basis for literacy curricular decisions exclude all the different ways of “being male” or “being female”
History

• For as long as there have been schools, there have been boys who would rather be elsewhere:

• And then the whining schoolboy with his satchel and shiny morning face creeping like a snail unwillingly to school. (Jacques in Shakespeare’s As You Like It)
History

- The pattern of gender differences in reading favoring girls began to be noticed as soon as such comparisons could be made (Herman, 1973; Holbrook, 1988; Samuel, 1943)
- Arthur Gates’ landmark study of 13,000 elementary school children in 1961 popularized the idea of female reading superiority
- Curiously, at the same time in Germany in the 1960s, when most elementary teachers were male, boys demonstrated superior reading achievement over girls (Preston, 1962)
History

- With the rise of modern feminism in the U.S., attention shifted to redressing years of neglect of academic/schooling needs of girls (e.g., Title 9; anti-discrimination acts that include girls/women)
- *Gender and Education* journal founded in 1988
- *Reviving Ophelia* (Pipher, 1995)
- *Failing at Fairness* (Sadker & Sadker, 1995)
Current Trends

• Gender differences in reading have become engrained in popular consciousness
• News media encourage “crisis” mentality
• Popular press books continue to be written (e.g., Richard Whitmire’s *Why Boys Fail*; Peg Tyre’s *The Trouble with Boys*)
• Major reports reinforce achievement differences (e.g., Center on Education Policy, 2010)
• Shift from establishing the gender differences in achievement to explaining them and developing interventions for boys
Current Trends

- Challenges to what are seen as essentialist responses to issues of boys’ reading achievement patterns

- Feminists and gay scholars argue for a nuanced and inclusive literacy curriculum with a critical agenda that interrogates how gender is constructed through text and other media
What does the literature say about the achievement gap?

- A reading achievement gap in favor of adolescent girls over adolescent boys is significant in all 139 studies in which such comparisons were made (Lietz, 2006).

- The gap was more pronounced for NAEP in the United States, and for the more recent assessment programs in Australia and the Program for International Student Assessment conducted by the OECD.

- Variables such as age or whether or not English was the language of test administration did not emerge as factors that had an impact on gender differences.
What does the literature say about gendered preferences and practices?

- Female students consistently read more than male students from primary education to higher education (Blackwood, Flowers, Rogers, & Staik; 1991; Hall & Coles, 1997; Gambell & Hunter, 2000; Greaney & Hegarty, 1987; Millard, 1997; Moffitt & Wartella, 1992; Simpson, 1996; Watkins & Edwards, 1992; Whitehead, Capey, & Maddren, 1974)

- Gender plays an important role in students’ reading choices.
What does the literature say about gendered preferences and practices?

- There is a general consensus in the literature that female students devote more time to narrative fiction than male students (Blackwood et al., 1991; Coles & Hall, 2002; Davies & Brember, 1993; Gambell & Hunter, 2000; Greaney, 1980; Hughes-Hassell & Rodge, 2007; Moffitt & Wartella, 1992; Simpson, 1996; Whitehead et al., 1974).
What does the literature say about gendered preferences and practices?

Large-scale studies in the United Kingdom of children’s reading interests (Coles & Hall, 2002; Hall & Coles, 1997; Whitehead et al., 1974) found:

- Boys read less than girls; even when ability and attainment were held constant, girls of a given ability group tended to do more voluntary reading than boys in the same group.

- Girls read remarkably few non-narrative texts, whereas boys read considerably more non-narratives than girls.
What does the literature say about gendered preferences and practices?

- Girls read more books about relationships and romance, while boys read more science fiction and fantasy, sports-related books, and war and spy stories.
- More females than males read for enjoyment outside of school, while males were more apt to read for information or to learn how to do something.
- Boys’ literacy choices tend to give greater emphasis to taking information from the text rather than analyzing motivation or characterization (Coles and Hall, 2001)

Implication:

- If school definitions of literacy were broadened to embrace the kinds of texts that boys prefer, boys would be more motivated to read and learn.
What does the literature say about gendered preferences and practices?

In a study of 16,000 individuals aged 15 and over from 15 European Union Member States in 2001, Skaliotis (2002) found:

- More females than males reported having read books over the previous 12 months in all countries.
- This pattern was valid for all levels of educational attainment.
What does the literature say about gendered preferences and practices?

In Australia, Simpson (1996) investigated the reading practices of girls and boys aged 10-12 and found:

- Girls read more and read narrative fiction almost exclusively; they read very little of other genres, including non-fiction.

- Boys as a group read less but read more non-fiction and had a broader interest in topics.
What does the literature say about gendered preferences and practices?

Studies of reading preferences and habits in Taiwan and Hong Kong show a pattern similar to Western nations:

- Females are reading more than males in elementary and secondary school (Lin, 2000; Mok & Cheung, 2004)
What does the literature say about gendered preferences and practices?

In the United States, Hughes-Hassell and Rodge (2007) studied the leisure reading habits of 1,340 students in grades 5 through 8 at an urban middle school in a large northeastern city and reported:

- 54% of male students ranked comics as the favorite leisure reading choice
Explanations

- Test Bias
- Attitudes and Behaviors
- Choice of Reading Material
- Reading as a Gendered Activity
Some research suggests that reading assessments are biased against boys, either in the way the tests are constructed or in the manner in which they are graded.

Girls are more likely to be accustomed to using reading strategies such as scanning and re-reading text—the same reading strategies that are needed in large-scale assessments.

In Lietz’s (2006) meta-analysis investigating gender differences in reading achievement across 139 studies showed that gender differences in half of the studies could be explained by differences in test design.

On PISA, boys demonstrate superior performance on non-linear reading tasks.
Attitudes and Behaviors

- As a result of their attitudes and behaviors, girls tend to have a greater number of experiences with reading activities, which may explain their better performance in reading assessments such as NAEP and PISA.

- By contrast, boys’ attitudes and behaviors may be acting as barriers in the development of the reading skills needed for high performance on reading assessments (Smith & Wilhelm, 2002)
Differences in genre preferences are frequently cited as an explanation for differences in reading performance between boys and girls.

Boys’ preferred genres may not find their way into classrooms or library shelves because teachers are predominantly female and teachers’ own reading preferences are reflected in the books they select for their students (Bauerlein & Stotsky, 2005; Worthy, Moorman, & Turner, 1999)
Boys frequently view reading as a feminine activity and this can reduce their motivation to read (Dutro, 2002; Tenenbaum & Leaper, 2002)

Boys who view reading as a feminine activity tend to have formed this perception at a very early age
My Participation in a Boys Book Club

- The study grew out of my participation as an electronic member of an all-boys book club
- Ann, the reading teacher, found she had eight seventh-grade boys in one of her 45 minute remedial classes.
- In her search for ideas and suggestions that would help her improve the boys’ reading skills and attitudes, she came upon my work with boys and literacy
The Boys Book Club

- Ann wrote me in early September of 2003 asking for suggestions and ideas; I was living in Knoxville, Tennessee.

- In planning with Ann it was decided that a book club context for the class could increase the boys’ participation in their own literacy development.

- She and the boys invited me to join the club, which was officially formed in October 2003.
The Boys Book Club

- Book Club Members included Nara, Colin, Ricardo, Jaimi, Michael, Renard, Tony and Esteban
- All were youth of color in a school with an ethnic mix to the overall school population: 46% Hispanic American; 22% African American; 22% Euro American; and 9% Asian American.
“Renard”
“Tony”
“Estaban”
Context and Method

- My participation spanned seven months from October to May, 2003-04

- The eight students along with their teacher read various culturally relevant texts and engaged in culturally informed practices
Examples of Culturally Relevant Texts

- *Scorpions* (Walter Dean Myers)
- *Trino’s Choice* (Diane Gonzalez Bertrand)
- *The Watson’s Go to Birmingham—1963* (Christopher Paul Curtis)
Examples of Culturally Informed Practices

- Member-Centered
  - Reading material was selected based on boys’ interests and approval
  - Boys’ helped generate and were given choice of response options to material read

Sample Activities in Response to Books:
- Exploration of violence by male youth within book club members’ neighborhoods and community
- Exploration of gangs in club members’ neighborhoods and community
- Celebration of members’ family histories
Major Findings

- Boys were more engaged in book club than in regular reading class
- Boys attitudes toward reading improved
- Boys developed healthier understanding of masculinity
- Six of the eight boys passed the reading portion of the state test that spring
Deconstructing Hegemonic Masculinity

- “Real Men” Unit in the barrio in South Texas

- Archetypal texts that offer boys the surprising and multifarious faces of masculinity

- Bean & Harper’s “Reading Men Differently”
Research Directions

- How can alternative/youth media/literacies motivate boys to read academic texts? (e.g., bridge texts)

- How might these practices be used to engage boys in deconstructing hegemonic masculinity?

- What levels of engagement, critical thinking and consciousness are possible when boys are given choice in their response options/formats to school texts?

- How do we honor boys’ discourses of desire while encouraging and nurturing more sophisticated text choices and more thoughtful reading?
“Failing to meet the literacy needs of all young boys isn’t so much a crisis as it is an imperative educational challenge...

Furthermore, concerns about boys’ reading attitudes and achievement should be framed around more responsive literacy instruction and interactions for all children. Boys need to be engaged and capable readers not solely to be as good as or better than girls, but to increase their educational, occupational, and civic opportunities and, above all, to become thoughtful and resourceful men.”

From *Bright Beginnings for Boys*  
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Remember…

Boys are our hope for the future,  
But you are their hope today.

Thank you!