

Boys & Literacy
Dr. Frank Serafini
Associate Professor - Arizona State University
www.frankserafini.com

Some Quick Statistics

85% of students diagnosed with ADD/ADHD are male.

90% of students identified as Learning Disabled are male.

Boys in all industrialized countries score poorer on measures of literacy achievement than girls.

Boys are three times (3x) more likely to be retained.

57% of US college students are female.

65% of high school dropouts are male.

Some Assertions:

- The things boys generally like to read are not sanctioned in schools.
- Boys are generally less concerned with reading to please the teacher.
- Just finding more books that are interesting will not help if boys don't see themselves as readers.
- The differences AMONG boy readers (SES, ethnicity, background, family) are often greater than the differences BETWEEN boy and girl readers.
- In general, boys spend less time reading (especially fiction) than girls.
- Girls find the text within themselves (personal connections), where boys find themselves within the text (projected into the stories).
- Boys see mothers (females) read more frequently than they see fathers (males) read.
- Most elementary school teachers are female (around 90%) and may not relate to boy readers as well as girl readers.
- Boys see themselves as less capable readers than girls.
- Boys need more books with positive (cool) role models.

3 Perspectives on Boy Reading Problems

1. **"Poor Boys"** – victims of single homes, female dominated schools, abandoned by male role models, gangs
2. **"Failing Schools Failing Boys"** – schools fail boys on measurable outcomes (test scores) but fail girls as well
3. **"Boys will be Boys"** – many male readers understand boys that don't read, get outside its nice, sports over books

Why Some Classrooms Are Not Effective for Boy Readers / Writers

Discourage certain reading materials (comics, catalogs, graphic novels)

Provide insufficient support for choosing reading materials

Reading is seen as a sedentary, solitary activity

Limited selections of reading material that are interesting for boys

Boys are not sure of the purpose for reading in these classrooms

Reading is seen as a non-social activity

Strong disconnect between inside and outside school literacies

Strategies for Engaging Boy Readers

Areas for Consideration

1. Providing Opportunities to Read
2. Developing a Community of Boy Readers
3. Supporting Boys' Sense of Self as Reader
4. Providing Effective Literacy Instruction
5. Supporting Boys As Writers
6. Developing Home-School Connections

Providing Opportunities to Read

- **Access** to Reading Materials
- **Time** to Read (at home, in school, in between)
- **Choice** in What to Read as Much as Possible
- **Support** in Selecting Appropriate Materials
- **Response** to What has Been Read

Texts For Boys Should Be (Wilhelm & Smith)

Storied – narrative focus on plot not drama

High Interest – “entry point” books

Visual – graphic novels, magazines

Purposeful – “exportable knowledge,” info to use

Familiar – can identify with main characters

Engaging – sustains engagement over time – series

Multi-Perspective – more than one point of view

Edgy – controversial, about contemporary issues

Humorous – sense of mischief, slapstick

Brief – **engaging across books, not just one book**

Selecting Books

By Genre, Topic, Authors, Settings ...

Book Reviews

Peer Recommendations

Bestseller Lists for boys (guysread.com)

Supportive Browsing

On-Line Support / Reviews / Librarians

A Well Stocked “Boy-Friendly” Library

Humor – “Fart” books

Action Fiction

Non-Fiction – the grosser the better

Series Books – Harry Potter, Percy Jackson, Wimpy Kid

Graphic Novels – Bone, Rockjaw

Magazines – Catalogs – sports, gaming, hobbies, etc
“cards”

On-Line access

CD and videos related to literacy activities

Developing a Community of Boy Readers

Controlled

Only teacher makes decisions

Only teacher knows what will happen next

All students doing same thing at same time

Teacher as arbiter of meaning and correctness

Predetermined Curriculum

Learners are Passive

Structured

Predictable, consistent procedures

Posted schedule

Shared responsibility

Instruction and experiences based on needs and interests of students

Meaning is negotiated in classroom discussions

Responsive Curriculum

Learners are Active

Physical Dimensions

Structured for Interaction

Structured for Class Discussions

Comfortable Places to Read

Access to Reading Materials

An Extensive Classroom Library

Building Community Strategies

Shift from controlled to structured environments

Shoebox autobiographies

Interview Classmates Project

Interest Inventories / Yellow Pages Project

Inviting Male Readers to Class

Boy Book Racks / Book Talks

Reading Buddies

Children’s Choice Awards Projects

Developing a Sense of Self as a Reader

How Boys See Reading

Reading is what girls do.

Reading is for sissies.

Reading is something you do for the future, not for the present.

Reading = School work.

It's hard to find books boys like.

You read to please the teacher.

Reading won't help you get a job.

Reading takes too long.

Once a poor reader, always a poor reader

Images of Readers

Images of readers in children's books:

Often support stereotypical portrayals of boy and girl readers.

Focus on reading as decoding and oral fluency, not comprehension

Portray reading as something very difficult to do

Make readers look like nerds

Seeing Oneself as a Reader

Provide access to male reader role models (invited guests, parents, other teachers, on-line).

Look for books with positive male archetypes.

Provide reading buddies with younger classes.

Sharing reader response notebooks with older students.

Share your own passion for reading and discuss why it is still "cool" to be a reader.

Discuss how boy readers are portrayed in books, and how men are portrayed in commercials and advertisements.

Create a "Rights of the Boy Reader" chart

Providing Effective Literacy Instruction

Uncover the "secrets" of successful reading

Explicit instruction in relevant reading strategies

Teacher demonstrations of reading through think alouds

Bring more visual arts into response activities

Discussions should not be done in whole class settings exclusively (turn-pair-share, small groups, paired reading)

Be careful of how much comes after reading (dioramas)

Provide more book talks

Word games – scrabble, boggle, etc.

Provide books on CD and other online resources

Literature Study Groups

Why Literature Study Groups?

More choice in what is being read

Books of high interest at appropriate levels

Small group social interactions

Have some control over discussions and the topics in the discussion

Chance to argue and debate ideas

Multimodal presentations

Opportunities for self-evaluation

Supporting Boys as Writers

Some Assertions

- What boys choose to write about can be problematic and not sanctioned in classrooms (potty humor, violence, gangs).
- Girls seem to write more for the teacher, where boys write for themselves and one another.
- What elementary teachers read aloud rarely supports the kinds of writing boys like to do.
- In general, personal narrative dominates classroom writing. Boys tend to prefer action and informational writing.

Some Suggestions

- Define varied and authentic audiences for boys to write for, not just the teacher.
- Allow boys a framework of choice to work within.
- Have explicit discussions about appropriate topics for writing and negotiate these decisions with boys.
- Include multiple ways of telling stories (illustrations, video, cartooning, collage) along with written text.
- Allow more “boy-friendly” genres into the writing workshop.
- Focus less on conventions and handwriting at first; allow publishing on computers
- Let writing be more social (work in teams, discussing topics, illustration tables, author’s chair).
- Provide opportunities for talk to support writing.

Creating Home-School Connections

Home to School Connections

Family reading nights

Parent (especially male) volunteers in classrooms as readers

Library visits (obtain library cards)

Books at home programs

Other suggestions ????

The Concept of Flow (Wilhelm & Smith)

1. Competence and Control / Manageable Challenge
2. Appropriate Levels of Difficulty
3. Clear and Immediate Feedback
4. Enjoyment of Losing Oneself in an Immediate Experience
5. Central Importance of Learning as a Social Event

Where Do We Go From Here ?

- Develop self-efficacy in boy readers – sense of agency, willingness to address challenges
- Schools need to align closer to boys notions of literacy (de-feminize)
- Develop interpersonal relationships with other readers (Join the Literacy Club)
- Critique of negative male role models
- Make learning (literacy) activities more social and active (reading detectives)
- Develop positive relationships with teachers
- We have to find ways to make reading cool!

Website: www.frankserafini.com

E-Mail: frank@frankserafini.com