

SUPPORTING BOYS AS READERS

Frank Serafini

The challenges of getting boys to read are well documented, but not necessarily well understood (Smith & Wilhelm, 2006). Too often, the challenges associated with boys and reading are focused on such factors as society's lack of focus on literacy skills, parents failings to inspire reading in boys, and internal motivational factors rather than looking at the environments created for reading in and out of school (Weaver-Hightower, 2003). In other words, we all too frequently blame boys themselves for not wanting to read.

One documented challenge is that boys tend to spend less time reading than girls do in elementary school (Tyre, 2009; Zambo & Brozo, 2008). There may be different reasons for this. One reason might be the lack of positive male role models for boys. Boys do not tend to identify themselves as readers because the male role models they look up to don't engage in reading as regularly as female readers. Other reasons for the possible lag in boys' reading amounts and skills are as follows (Alloway, 2007; Smith, 2003):

- The things boys like to read are often not allowed in schools.
- Boys are generally less concerned with reading to please the teacher.
- Most elementary school teachers are female (approximately 90%) and may not relate to boy readers as well as girl readers.
- Young boys may be more physically active than girls and are less willing to sit and read for extended time periods of time.

Although the research on each of these reasons for boys struggling with reading and not reading

enough is inconclusive, it illuminates some of the challenges we face as teachers in supporting boys as readers (Smith & Wilhelm, 2002; Young, 2000). There are several ways we can help boys develop a sense of themselves as readers and get the books they want into their hands. In this column, I offer the following 10 strategies for supporting boys as readers.

Provide Wider Access to Reading Materials

First, we need to provide access to a wide variety of books and reading materials that are interesting to boy readers. Teachers and parents have to let go of some of their biases about books that contain underwear, farting, and slapstick misbehavior and allow boys to read books that they find engaging. Our goal is to get boys to comprehend more difficult, complex material, but first we have to get them reading.

Here is a list of characteristics adapted from Smith and Wilhelm (2002) describing the types of books boys tend to choose:

- Focused on plot—not focused on drama and emotions
- Visually appealing—interesting visual elements—graphic novels, magazines
- Purposeful—provide information boy readers can use

The department editor welcomes reader comments. Frank Serafini is an associate professor of Literacy Education at Mary Lou Fulton Teachers College, Arizona State University, Phoenix, USA; e-mail fserafini@mac.com.

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- Readily familiar—main characters that boys can easily relate to
- Edgy—often contain controversial or contemporary issues
- Humorous—contain a sense of mischief, slapstick

Simply making books boys like more available in their classrooms and allowing boys to pick out what they want to read may be a good start, but without support and encouragement, access alone may not be enough to get them to read.

Balancing Fiction and Informational Texts

It is also important that we provide boy readers with access to a wide variety of informational texts in our classroom libraries. Boy readers tend to prefer informational texts in addition to, or in preference to, fictional narratives. Reading about rocks, space, and animals is as important as wandering through a secret garden. In all too many classrooms, dramatic novels with female protagonists tend to outnumber books about worms and sports. As a boy reader, I was starved throughout elementary school for books on the topics that really interested me.

Support Browsing

In addition to providing wider access to a more extensive range of books and other reading materials, helping boys to select appropriate texts to read and explore is also necessary. We can't just abandon struggling boy readers at the

library door. In addition, teachers need to conduct book talks that focus on books for boy readers. The best book talks are those that begin, “If you liked that book, you will enjoy this book as well.” Browsing through a library collection with finicky boy readers will help them get to know what is available and what they may like but don't know exists. In addition, online book reviews at www.thebook.com and www.carolhurst.com; booklists on www.guysread.com, www.readkiddoread.com, and gettingboystoread.com; and children's choice awards like those given by the International Reading Association (www.reading.org) will help provide more choices and recommendations for boy readers.

Use Shorter Texts

Boy readers, like many readers today, tend to read shorter texts more often than 300–400-page novels, with the Harry Potter series being an obvious exception. Reading opinion columns, essays, news articles, featured magazine articles, short stories, and informational texts is just as important as reading novels. High-quality, shorter texts can be found in magazines, brochures, online collections, and anthologies. These texts may require less time commitment, but can still engage boy readers in challenging material that allows them to use the strategies being demonstrated in their classrooms.

Complex picture books are great texts for boys to explore and require

less time to read than full-length novels. In my elementary classrooms, picture books by Graeme Base, Chris Van Allsburg, David Weisner, Mo Willems, Dr. Seuss, Colin Thompson, Anthony Browne, Maurice Sendak, and William Steig were the ones that my boy readers selected over and over again. To support teachers, I have created a list of my favorite picture books and novels for boy readers at www.frankserafini.com/book-lists/boysbooks.pdf.

Provide Extended Amounts of Time to Read

Not only do we as teachers need to provide boys with greater access and support for selecting reading materials, we need to provide greater amounts of time to read and talk about texts. You cannot get better at reading if you don't spend time reading; it's just that simple. We should talk with our boy readers about when is an optimal time for them to read. Not all boys like to read at night or first thing in the morning. We need to help boy readers figure out when they are going to find space for reading in their busy lives.

Reduce the Focus on After Reading Activities

Throughout my years of interviewing boy readers, the most common complaint boys have offered about reading in school, aside from not being allowed to choose what they read, is

“You cannot get better at reading if you don't spend time reading.”

all the activities they are required to do when a book is finished. Dioramas, book reports, worksheets, quizzes, and other “enrichment” activities take up precious time in the reading program. Sharing one’s noticings and interpretations in whole class and small group discussions should be the primary way of responding to texts. Rereading favorites, selecting texts that are connected to what has been read, and offering recommendations for other readers are things lifelong readers say they do on their own. If these activities support successful, lifelong readers, they will support boy readers as well.

View Reading as a Social Activity

Allowing boy readers to explore and discuss books with their friends can be an important experience for becoming a successful reader. Many young boys do not like the solitary nature of reading extended texts. They want to read with their friends and talk as they are exploring texts that interest them. In many of my classrooms, my boy readers engaged with complex picture books in small groups on a daily basis. It was as much about the exploration of these texts as it was about sharing ideas with their friends.

Focus on Visual and Multimodal Texts

For many years, comics and graphic novels have been essentially banned from the classroom. Unfortunately, these are also the texts that boy readers love to read. Multimodal texts, such as picture books, graphic novels, comics, and informational texts, allow boy readers to make sense of the narrative or information provided through more

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than one mode of representation, for example, drawings, photography, and diagrams. Although comics and graphic novels are often deemed less complex than novels, recent research suggests this is not the case, and these multimodal texts require readers to use a variety of interpretive strategies to follow along with these texts.

Invite Male Readers Into the Classroom

For many boys, female classmates, sisters, and mothers provide the primary models of being a successful reader. For some boy readers, it would be hard to identify another boy or man they respect who would be a positive role model as a reader. Inviting brothers, teachers, fathers, and other male members of the community who are successful readers to discuss their reading lives with boy readers can help debunk the myth that *real men don't read*. The more boys can connect to other literate males, the better the chance they will come to see themselves as readers.

Develop Boys' Identities as Readers

Finally, we need to help boys see themselves as readers and understand both the immediate as well as the future purposes for becoming a proficient reader. In other words, we have to find ways to make reading cool both in and out of school. All the access to books in the world will not make boys pick up a book if being a reader is not something

they aspire to become or isn't an identity their peers would approve of.

Concluding Remarks

Of course, most of the preceding recommendations are just as relevant for girl readers as they are for boy readers. Classrooms that provide greater access to reading materials and opportunities for extended discussions support all types of readers. However, focusing on boy readers in our schools requires teachers to rethink some of the texts they use regularly and the strategies for supporting boy on their journeys as readers.

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