



Reading Boys

As I met him at the door to the classroom, he tried to avoid my eyes. “Tim, where’s your book? I thought you chose one at the library.”

“Don’t make me find a book. . . just let me sit in class today, OK?”

“But that’s what we’re doing today. . . we’re reading. Do you want to get another book before class starts?”

“Mr. Jones. . . do I have to? I hate reading.”

* * *

In a 6th-grade classroom across town, Jason slumps at his desk and mutters, “This is

stupid!” as the teacher asks him and his friend Gregory, who sits across from him, if there’s a problem that requires them to talk out loud during reading class.

* * *

Down the hallway from Jason and Gregory, 2nd-grader Elijah dutifully—and slowly—sounds out each word on a page filled with words, losing all continuity and sense of story as the classroom aide points to each word with her finger.

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Educators today know there is a problem with boys and reading. Many male students do not like to read. Many boys can read well but choose not to do so. And sadly, others cannot read at the appropriate grade level.

BY DOUGLAS A. JONES

Of course, we all recognize that without appropriate skills and positive experiences with reading, the rest of a young man's formal education will be a challenge—for him and for his teachers. Reading is at the heart of school. When students do not see themselves as readers, too often they struggle to learn and to find meaning and belonging in their education. According to data recently released by the U.S. Department of Education and reported in *USA Today*, American boys are falling farther and farther behind girls in academics. The report states that more boys have learning disabilities, that more females are earning bachelor's degrees, and that boys trail girls in both reading and writing. In addition, the article notes that more boys than girls are held back a grade.¹

We have all had students who slink through the day, avoiding the teacher's eye or who disrupt the class with silliness, anger, and/or menace. Many of the boys in our classes meet with huge obstacles to becoming readers who will grow up to be productive, responsible, and happy men—fathers and uncles, grandfathers and brothers who value the written word and all the power it holds, and who model this behavior for others. William G. Brozo speaks of “the importance of literacy as boys develop a sense of self.”²

By focusing on boys and reading in this article, I do not mean to suggest that girls have no challenges with reading or that all boys are challenged in this area. Improving students' reading will not fix all society's problems. However, we need to explore our obligations as teachers to young male readers. This article will suggest positive steps teachers can take to foster in their male students a greater engagement with reading.

Why Don't Boys Read?

Jim Trelease, author of *The Read-Aloud Handbook*, explains that “reading is the single most important social factor in American life today.”³ Without a doubt, boys who fail to connect early with reading will encounter problems in school. Difficulty in school is a cru-

cial, negative element in many males' downward spiral of defeated and often deadly behavior. Statistics from the late 1990s cited in a recent article in the *Journal of Adolescent and Adult Literacy* provide an unsettling picture of the hazards of being male today:

- Males commit 90 percent of all murders.
- High school boys are four times more likely than girls to be murdered.
- Boys are twice as likely as girls to be victims of violent crimes such as robbery and assault.
- Ninety-four percent of the nearly one million inmates in U.S. prisons are males.
- Nearly 125,000 youths, mostly males, are behind bars.
- Males are responsible for the vast majority of cases of domestic violence.
- The suicide rate for boys 10 to 14 years of age is twice that of girls, four times higher for ages 15 to 19, and six times higher for ages 20 to 24.⁴

While I do not believe that reading is the great panacea for society's ills or that fixing problems with boys' reading will eradicate males' deadly behavior, I do believe that fostering in boys a greater ability for and appreciation of reading will go a long way to curb much of society's despair by allowing young men a greater chance at obtaining a good education. At least reading is an area about which we teachers have knowledge and influence; I think it is worth our time to pay attention to what is going on and do something about it.

Solutions to Boys' Problems With Reading

In order to do something about the problems many boys have with reading, we need to first review what is known. Trelease reminds us that “students who read the most, read the best, achieve the most, and stay in school the longest.”⁵ Eve Bearne and Molly Warrington's research confirms that “literacy cannot be separated from issues of self-esteem and preferred learning styles.”⁶ How can we get boys to read more and feel that it is worth their effort?

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Many of us would probably note significant differences between boys' and girls' reading in the area of content. Traditionally, much of children's reading falls into “boys' books” and “girls' books.” While this probably represents an unfair generalization, certain subjects do appeal more to one gender than to the other.

Research into boys' reading offers several telling points to consider when addressing boys' reading issues. In “*Reading Don't Fix No Chevys*”: *Literacy in the Lives of Young Men*, Michael W. Smith and Jeffrey D. Wilhelm summarize much of the recent research and cover many elements that contribute to boys' disinclination to read. They found that:

- Boys do not comprehend narrative as well as girls;
- Boys are less interested in leisure reading than girls;
- Boys prefer reading newspapers and magazines; they lean more to escapism and humor;
- Boys do judge a book by its cover; and
- Boys tend to think of themselves as bad readers.⁷

Many teachers are aware that many of their reluctant male readers can indeed read very well, but choose not to do so. It is important to distinguish between the *illiterate* male and the *aliterate* male. Many boys apparently do not find satisfaction in reading—especially as it is taught in school—and that dissatisfaction makes them progressively less likely to rely on reading to help them find meaning in their

lives. As teachers, we need to recognize these points as we plan and execute our classes.

Thomas Newkirk in *Misreading Masculinity: Boys, Literacy, and Popular Culture* focuses on the need for readers to discover that satisfaction in reading is the key to success in school: “Unless we can persuade students that reading is a form of deep, sustained pleasure, they will not choose to read; and because they will not choose to read, they will not develop the skills to make them good readers.”⁸ Teachers need to explore how boys develop into readers who find pleasure in their literacy. They need to identify boys’ reading interests and expectations.

Books for Boys?

This is especially true when teachers choose reading selections for the whole class: Will they appeal to boys? Because the majority of elementary teachers, school librarians, and children’s authors are women, choices of children’s reading material is mostly filtered through women. There is no doubt that whole-class reading assignments of *Number the Stars*⁹ by Lois Lowry, *Sarah Plain and Tall*¹⁰ by Patricia MacLachlan, or *Jacob Have I Loved*¹¹ by Katherine Paterson are great reading, but we must go out of our way to find books that appeal strongly to boys as well. Brozo advises: “Reading engagement should be the highest priority to teachers of disinterested and struggling readers, because only as boys encounter literature that speaks to their unique male imaginations are they likely to become regular and lifelong readers.”¹²

Additionally, we ought to consider allowing students to select materials they want to read. If we expect boys to read deeply and for their own purposes, we must give them experience in choosing books to read. Our school and classroom libraries will thus need to include a broader selection—especially informational books, since many boys prefer this type of reading over stories and narratives.¹³ Our classroom bookshelves should include well-written nonfiction along with good biogra-

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phies and autobiographies intended for young readers.

Allowing boys to choose their own reading will also require us to rethink our policies about what kinds of reading material are suitable in the classroom and library. That is a challenge for many of us—especially in the Christian school. While I do not pro-

pose that Adventist schools lower their standards, I do think we need to recognize the pervasive influence and appeal of mass culture as we look for reading material that will engage boys. And, as any classroom teacher knows, boys are not generally “tasteful” in their interests. That fact will require us to explore what is acceptable for boys’ (and girls’) reading choices.¹⁴

Thus, as teachers, we need to seek out the many excellent books that appeal to a boy’s sense of adventure, competition, humor, physical prowess, and inspiration. I would invite classroom teachers to get acquainted, or reacquainted, with titles such as *Maniac Magee*¹⁵ by Jerry Spinelli, *A Day No Pigs Would Die*¹⁶ by Robert Newton Peck,



*Hatchet*¹⁷ by Gary Paulsen, *Bud, Not Buddy*¹⁸ by Christopher Paul Curtis—and a host of other worthy and notable books about strong, likeable, and responsible male characters.

Schedule Time for Reading

We need to schedule time in class for personal reading. Many teachers have made reading workshop an integral component of their language-arts curriculum at both the elementary and secondary levels. Allowing students to read for their own purposes ensures that there is a regular time for reading each day. Teachers who have implemented this approach tell me that their students, both boys and girls, look forward to settling in with “a good read.” This needs to happen at school because reading at home does not occur in a large number of households.

Books about males by males are possible choices. Newspapers and magazines should be available as well; encyclopedias, almanacs, and atlases appeal to the male readers who prefer informational texts over stories. If a book, newspaper, or magazine grabs a boy’s attention, use it to redirect his attention and energies. It just may spark a lifelong commitment to reading.

Along with providing time for reading in school, we need to allow time for students to talk about what they have read. Bruce Pirie in *Teenage Boys and High School English* explains that “it is crucial that there be sharing time. . . some way for kids (and teacher) to hear what other people are enjoying reading.”¹⁹ Kids need to know how adults who value reading behave—they choose books that interest them and then talk about them to other people.

Our goal must be to get boys to make a lifelong commitment to reading. This is best achieved when boys see this modeled by other males. Whether it’s a teacher, a principal, a pastor—or more significantly—a father, grandfather, uncle, or brother, a man who reads provides boys with a powerful image of what it means to be male. A brother who reads the newspaper, a father who has a stack of books

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by the side of his bed, a grandfather who takes his grandsons to the library—these men provide boys with a positive and more complete image of masculinity. As teachers, we need to look for ways to incorporate reading men into our classrooms.

I was honored when one of my student teachers recently asked me to guest read for her 2nd- and 3rd-graders’ “bedtime” story in the school library early one evening. The students and their families met together in their slippers and pajamas, some clutching their teddy bears, and I read Mo Willems’ *Don’t Let the Pigeon Drive the Bus*.²⁰

Many of the children did not have fathers or grandfathers at home to read to them, so I like to think that some of the little boys there that evening caught a glimpse of how wonderful it would be to be someone who enjoys reading, laughs at stories, and wonders what story will next catch his imagination.

Conclusion

We need to read to boys, and to encourage men to read to boys. And we need to *read boys*. By that, I mean we must take another look at how the boys in our classrooms negotiate reading. We need to observe our boys who are engaged readers and then look for ways to duplicate their positive reading traits, expectations, and behaviors in the rest of our students. Reading boys offers great rewards—as we help these young men develop into caring, responsible men whose literacy is a blessing to all. ✍



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