

Inviting Boys into the Literacy Club

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Not long ago, I was preparing to talk to a group of teachers about how to best engage children in reading. Peering over my shoulder, my son asked, “What are you doing?”

“Preparing for a talk,” I replied. “Some teachers would like ideas about how to get all of their students, especially boys, motivated to read.”

“Don’t you think it’s strange that you are giving ideas to teachers when you have a son who doesn’t read?” he retorted as he exited the room.



His unanswered question serves as a good reminder that there are many boys like him, those who can read but don’t for a variety of reasons. One reason is that they narrowly define reading as the reading of teacher-selected books. Little do they realize that readers can enjoy many kinds of texts and that reading for a variety of purposes is what helps define readers and reading.

Can we change the perceptions of reluctant readers, thereby inviting them into the literacy club, the real world of reading? You bet we can. Using researchers’ collective findings related to unmotivated readers, and boys in particular, is one of the best ways to start.

What the Research Says:

- 41% think that reading is boring because it doesn’t relate to their interests.
- The act of reading is seen as feminine and they believe that reading is for girls.
- Boys have little or no self-selection of texts. Many times parents, librarians, and teachers often fail to encourage boys to read the kind of books they like.
- They would rather be playing video games—21st century kids connect technology.

So what’s the problem?

- Many boys have a misconception about reading and what counts as reading. Take my son for instance, he is a reader. He reads magazines, Internet articles, social networking sites, etc. All of these texts count as reading, they are just not the traditional form.
- Many boys have a misconception about who reads. As stated before, reading is seen as an activity for girls because many of the reading role models they have are women.
- Little reading = little stamina. Those who struggle to read have not built the stamina to persist.
- Because reading and writing are rudimentary to academic and social excellence, reluctant boy readers are quickly becoming struggling readers as the gender gap grows wider.

Consequently, boys are often perceived as problem readers. They score significantly lower on standardized measures of reading achievement and are 3 to 5 times more likely to have a disability placement and are often retained.

How do we get this turned around?

- 1 Own the problem: it's as much the teacher as it is the boys!**
95% of teachers are women and teachers select books that they like, narratives, fiction, etc. Boys like nonfiction, adventure, and science fiction. Teachers have to be cognizant of what they select and make sure they have provided a variety of interesting topics and genres.
- 2 Let boys do some choosing.**
Learning how to choose is part of becoming a reader. When given the choice, readers will choose text that focus on their interests and therefore are much more likely to read the text they have selected.
- 3 Use what we know about what interests and motivates boys to read.**
Choice isn't enough. The mode of reading material is also important. In this digital age, many boys gravitate toward different forms of cyber text. The interactive design capitalizes on boys' active nature. Provide texts that engage 21st century students by mimicking the visual media they love. These types of exciting, digital-age books with adventure, humor, science fiction, mystery, and biography will hook the most reluctant reader.
- 4 Rethink and refocus instruction** to include many different text types and topics, different text structures, critical reading instruction provided in various learning modalities, and media and technology.
- 5 Use successful reading techniques** such as read and draw, use manipulatives, provide for various learning modalities, and regularly review success.
- 6 Attend to the affective domain.**
Investigators of the Reading 1st initiative efficacy studies reported that there were no gains in reading comprehension. Comprehension is rooted in attitude. We need to recognize that there are variations in the affective domain and at least seven profiles that range from "I hate reading." to "Reading is not very important to me." to "I love reading." And work to address all of these profiles to ensure comprehension success for all readers.
- 7 Provide time for a lot of reading!**
More reading builds more reading stamina and provides time for necessary practice.
- 8 Stay abreast of current understandings about boys.** Debby Zambo and William Brozo's *Bright Beginnings for Boys* and Peg Tyre's *The Trouble with Boys* are both excellent books to get you started.



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