



Evidence Summary

Boys are Reading, but their Choices are not Valued by Teachers and Librarians

A Review of:

McKechnie, Lynne (E.F.). " 'Spiderman is not for Babies' (Peter, 4 Years): The 'Boys and Reading Problem' from the Perspective of the Boys Themselves." The Canadian Journal of Information and Library Science 30.1/2 (2006): 57-67.

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Abstract

Objective – This study looks at what constitutes legitimate reading material for boys and how this material is defined in light of assessed gender differences in reading, and is part of a larger, ongoing research project on the role of public libraries in the development of youth as readers.

Design – Semi-structured, qualitative interviews and book inventories.

Setting – The research originated from the MLIS 566 (Literature for Children and Young Adults) class at the Faculty of Information and Media Studies, University of Western Ontario, London, Ontario, Canada.

Subjects – Forty-three boys, ages four through twelve, were interviewed. Most of the boys

lived in Ontario, although a few came from other Canadian provinces.

Methods – Library school students who were registered in a Literature for Children and Young Adults class interviewed children and young adults about their reading and information practice as part of a "Book Ownership Case Study" assignment. The researcher also interviewed children and young adults, for a total of 137 case studies. For the purpose of this article, a data subset for the 43 boys included in the larger project was analyzed. The boys ranged in age from four to twelve years. The mean age was eight and the median age was nine. The theoretical perspective of reader response theory was used to situate the study. This theory has the relationship between the text and the reader as its focus, and it suggests that to understand the reading habits of boys, there needs to be recognition that the experts about their

reading are the boys themselves. The interviews, which explored reading preferences and practices, were qualitative, semi-structured, and took thirty minutes to complete. In addition to the interview, each boy's personal book and information material collection was inventoried. The researcher used a grounded theory approach to analyze the inventory and interview data to pull out themes related to the research questions. Grounded theory "uses a prescribed set of procedures for analyzing data and constructing a theoretical model" from the data (Leedy and Ormrod 154).

Main Results – The collection inventories revealed that all 43 study participants had personal collections of reading materials. The collections ranged from eight volumes to 398 volumes. There was a mean volume total of 108 and a median of 98 books per boy. In addition to books, other materials were in the collections. Video recordings were owned by 36 (83.7%) of the boys, 28 (65.1%) of participants had computer software, 28 (65.1%) owned audio recordings, and 21 (48.8%) of the collections also included magazines.

In the interview data analysis, a number of themes were revealed. All of the boys except one owned fiction. Some genres appeared frequently and were different than the ones found in the inventories taken of the girls in the larger study. Genres in the boys' collections included fantasy, science fiction, sports stories, and humorous stories. The boys also discussed genres they did not enjoy: classic children's fiction, such as *The Adventures of Robin Hood*, love stories, and "books about groups of girls" (61). All but five boys had series books such as *Animorphs*, *Captain Underpants*, *Redwall*, and *Magic Treehouse* in their collections.

All study participants except for one owned non-fiction titles. When asked what their favourite book was, many of the boys chose a non-fiction title. Holdings included subjects such as "jokes, magic, sports, survival guides,

crafts, science, dictionaries, maps, nature, and dinosaurs" (62).

In addition to books, the boys reported owning and reading a wide range of other materials. Comics, manga, magazines, pop-up and other toy books, sticker books, colouring books, puzzle books, and catalogues were among the collection inventories. Only one boy read the newspaper.

Another theme that emerged from the interview data was "gaming as story" (63). The boys who read video game manuals reported reading to learn about the game, and also reading to experience the game's story. One boy's enjoyment of the manual and the game came from the narrative found within.

Various reading practices were explored in the interviews. Formats that featured non-linear reading were popular. Illustrations were important. Pragmatic reading, done to support other activities (e.g., Pokeman), was "both useful and pleasurable" (54).

And finally, the issue of what counts as reading emerged from the data. Many boys discounted the reading that "they liked the best as not really being *reading*" (65). Some of the boys felt that reading novels constituted reading but that the reading of computer manuals or items such as science fair project books was "not really reading" (65). A distinction was made between real books and information books by the boys.

Conclusions – The researcher explored what has been labelled as the "problem" of boys reading in this paper. She found that the 43 boys in this study are reading, but what they are reading has been undervalued by society and by the boys themselves. Collection inventories found a large number of non-fiction books, computer magazines, comic books, graphic novels, and role-playing game manuals—items not necessarily privileged by libraries, schools, or even by the boys themselves. The researcher suggests that "part of the 'boys and reading problem' then lies in what we count as reading" (66). By keeping

what boys are actually reading in mind when it comes to collection development and library programming, children's librarians can "play a central role in legitimizing the reading practices of boys" (66).

Commentary

This is a worthwhile study that illuminates the reading habits and preferences of pre-teen boys. The researcher is aware that qualitative studies are not generalizable and is careful to indicate that the results of her analysis are particularly for the boys participating in the study. The themes that emerged from the data analysis are useful for public and school librarians who are interested in learning more about the preferences of their young male patrons. The individual collection inventories revealed some good information about what the boys value and what they enjoy and find worthwhile in terms of reading materials. The researcher's remarks about the valuation and privileging of certain types of reading and information material by the boys themselves are interesting observations. They suggest that perhaps librarians can play a part in validating the materials chosen by boys, and that such validation could have an effect on what is seen as the problem of boys and reading.

The researcher has indicated that this paper is part of a larger research study. As such, this paper is brief and focused. The book inventory

results are interesting and informative, and the themes that emerge from the qualitative interviews shed light on boys and reading. If anything, more examples from the boys' own voices would have fleshed this paper out. For readers who are interested in the mechanics of such a study, it would have been helpful to have additional information on how the data were analyzed into themes, as well as a bit more about both the reader response theoretical framework and the grounded theory approach.

This paper is worthy of note as it allows the boys to speak for themselves, and it reveals fascinating information about the habits and preferences of a patron group which has offered challenges to many public and school libraries/librarians. In terms of applying this research to practice, librarians may consider expanding collections to reflect the types of reading materials found in the boys' personal collections, starting book clubs that include the additional reading materials (e.g., video game manuals, comics), and observing to see if the results of this study are similar to what they are seeing in their own library patrons.

Works Cited

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