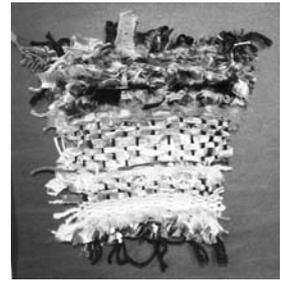# Reading for Pleasure Among Year 13 Boys: What are the Possibilities and Problems?

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ABSTRACT

Boys' literacy has been, and continues to be, an area of concern for educationalists at all levels. The decline in boys' reading, which may have negative consequences for their learning, becomes more marked as they get older. This project examined possible reasons for this and implemented strategies designed to increase Year 13 boys' reading. The strategies, such as 'speed-booking' and creating a community of readers, were successful in encouraging boys at this level to read more but it became apparent that the biggest deterrent to boys' reading at this level was a lack of time. The study also indicated that boys are reading significant amounts online but this is not acknowledged in the school environment. One way to encourage boys' literacy is to create intervals of time in which they can read freely and also acknowledge the wider literacies in which they engage.

BACKGROUND TO THE INQUIRY

Boys' literacy has, in recent years, become a major focus for educationalists at all levels. Much of the statistical data to emerge suggests that boys are underperforming against girls in many of the critical areas of reading and literacy. This trend was identified in all OECD countries in 2000 and duplicated in 2006 research published by the Programme for International Student Achievement (Marshall, Caygill & May, 2006). New Zealand statistics confirm this trend and show that girls outperform boys in literacy across all ethnic groups and are more likely to demonstrate positive attitudes to reading (Ministry of Education, 2007). Another critical feature of this trend is that boys' lack of engagement with literacy and reading in particular becomes more marked as they progress through school (McKenna, Kear & Ellsworth, 1995; Moore, Bean, Birdyshaw & Rycik, 1999).

Research suggests that it is important to provide adolescents with appropriate literacy support (Alvermann, 2002; Snowball, 2008) as maintaining the reading habit throughout school can have significant advantages (Cunningham and Stanovich, 2001). Cunningham and Stanovich also suggest that the volume of reading is a critical factor in promoting vocabulary acquisition and verbal skills and that "reading has cognitive consequences that extend beyond its immediate task of lifting meaning from a particular passage" (p. 137). It seems obvious that the habit of reading for pleasure can have great benefits for our students and that it is a worthwhile effort to find out why boys in Year 13 no longer read extensively and whether this trend can be reversed.

The research context for this inquiry is a boys' integrated secondary school (with day and boarding students) where I am the librarian. Over the past five years I have noticed, from both my own observations and evidence collected from library borrowing statistics, that boys borrow fewer books as they progress through the school and that this trend is particularly dominant in Year 13. A possible conclusion from this data is that boys' motivation to read declines as they get older and this conclusion is corroborated by both New Zealand and international research (Australian Centre for Youth Literature, 2001; Ministry of Education, 2007; National Endowment for the Arts, 2007). My inquiry is focused around establishing the reasons for this decline in motivation and attempting to reverse it by utilising approaches which tap into boys' interests.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Much of the current research on adolescent literacy acknowledges that teenagers are operating in a world which requires them to be literate in diverse and challenging ways to deal with the barrage of information they confront on a daily basis (Alvermann, 2002; Moje, Young, Readence & Moore, 2000). Unfortunately, most of today's teenagers will experience an education system that privileges traditional print-based literacy over more diverse interpretations of literacy (Alvermann, 2002; Alloway & Gilbert, 1997) and much of what they prefer to read is not given a place in the classroom environment (Worthy, Moorman & Turner, 1999). The preference for print-based literacy is further endorsed by many parents who

may consider their sons to be reluctant readers when in fact they are very capable readers in the modes that interest them (Love & Hamston, 2003). Although many teenagers are reading smaller amounts of traditional materials (National Endowment for the Arts, 2007; Australian Centre for Youth Literature, 2001), even reluctant readers admit to being engaged by reading when the material is appropriate to their interests (Snowball, 2008) and creating a broader and more inclusive approach to literacy can have positive effects for teenagers (Alvermann, 2002; Worthy, Moorman & Turner, 1999).

Another factor which makes the consideration of literacy and reading for pleasure a complex and multi-layered issue is gender. As previously stated, boys seem to be falling behind girls in many literacy related areas (Marshall, Caygill & May, 2006; Australian Centre for Youth Literature, 2001). It is, however, important to consider that not all boys are underachieving and that the culture and background of some boys may have an important impact on their literacy practices (Hall & Coles, 2001; Martino, 2003). For many boys, literacy is associated with feminine or 'girly' subject matter (Alloway & Gilbert, 1997; Martino, 2003; Millard, 1997) while other subjects like mathematics or science are acceptably 'male'. From an early age, many boys associate reading with female members of their family or female teachers (Millard, 1997). Their narrow interpretation of masculinity is frequently policed and supported by the boys themselves (Atkinson, 2009; Martino, 2003) and any real engagement with literacy may be rejected because it challenges their understanding of their masculinity (Dutro, 2003; Millard, 1997). It is, however, possible to challenge this narrow conception of masculinity and encourage boys to construct their own interpretations of masculinity which may then give them the freedom to engage more openly with literacy (Hurrell, 2001; Dutro, 2003).

One of the ways in which boys may be encouraged to develop their own interpretation of masculinity is through critical literacy and consideration of multiple readings of the same text (Alloway & Gilbert, 1997; Moje, Young, Readence & Moore, 2000). Shared reading experiences may be a useful way to establish critical literacy practices and a broader acceptance of literacy (Millard, 1997). In addition, the critical skills of considering alternative interpretation of texts are exactly the skill set that today's teenagers need to make sense of the constant onslaught of information they face.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The main research question that I would like to address with this inquiry is:

> How can boys in Year 13 be encouraged to read for pleasure on a regular basis?

This question can be answered by implementing strategies to improve reading levels and assessing the efficacy of each with the following questions:

> In what ways does speed-booking encourage Year 13 boys to read for pleasure?

How does book buying and the creation of a reading community encourage reading among Year 13 boys?

RESEARCH METHOD

My inquiry was done with the help of an English teacher who agreed that I could have access to her two Year 13 English classes. All the boys in Year 13 classes were asked to complete a survey about the time that they spend reading and their reading preferences (Appendix A). Letters explaining the project were attached to all the surveys and boys were asked to take the letters home to their parents. Boys under 18 were required to return signed letters of consent from their parents. The boys themselves were informed of the purpose of the study and of its voluntary nature and their participation in the survey was taken as an indication of consent. The names used when referring to comments made by the boys are not their own. As a point of comparison, boys in a Year 13 statistics class who did not take part in any of the class activities, were also asked to complete the survey about reading. This was done to see whether there were any changes in their reading patterns over the same period. If there weren't, it was more likely that the changes in reading levels in the English class could be attributed to the intervention conducted with this class rather than other factors such as more time available for all classes at this time.

Boys in these Year 13 classes then took part in an exercise called 'speed-booking' in which they were divided up into four groups per class. Each group was given a limited period of time to peruse a selection of books on four tables. They scrutinised the cover, read the blurb of the book and read through the first few pages. When the time (five minutes) had elapsed, a bell was rung and boys moved on to the next table where the process was repeated. They could take with them one book that they had selected. At each subsequent table, boys could either retain the book they had chosen or replace it with another book. At the end of the

session, boys could borrow books that they wanted to read but there was no compulsion to do so.

Two boys were selected from each class to accompany me on a book buying exercise to a local bookshop. The boys were given a free rein and a budget of $100.00. Once the books had been processed for library use, the boys who had chosen them were asked to explain their choices to their classmates and promote the chosen books.

Four boys were selected from both classes for an interview (Appendix B) about their reading habits. They represented a range of interests and abilities and both boarders and day boys. After all the activities were completed, borrowing figures from the library records for the period of the inquiry were collected.

DATA COLLECTION

For this inquiry a range of both quantitative and qualitative data was collected. By collecting different types of data, it is possible to see whether the findings of each type of data confirm or contradict each other. The practice of using at least three different data collection methods, or triangulation, is considered to increase the validity and depth of research findings (Berg, 2009). Although triangulation of data collection methods is not strictly necessary for qualitative research, it does serve to enhance research findings and often provides new lines of inquiry in unexpected contradictions or agreements.

Data for this inquiry was collected from library borrowing statistics before and after the intervention, from surveys completed by the boys, and from in-depth interviews with four boys. The library borrowing statistics were analysed to see if there was any increase in borrowings after the interventions and which of the interventions generated more borrowing. These figures were also compared with the library borrowing records of the boys in the statistics class who did not take part in the reading activities. It should be noted that library borrowing statistics have been used throughout as an indicator of reading. Although borrowing of library books does not automatically indicate that they are read, it is reasonable to assume that borrowings are a broad indicator of reading, especially when confirmed by other data sources such as surveys and interviews.

The survey responses and interviews were subjected to a simple form of content analysis (Berg, 2009) to reveal common themes. In addition to this, the survey responses and interviews for boarders and day boys were compared to see whether there were any clear differences between the responses for the two groups.

RESULTS

The statistical evidence collected in the form of library borrowing records indicated that Year 13 boys were borrowing substantially fewer books than in previous years. This was true of both groups of students (English classes and statistics class). This was confirmed by both the surveys and the in-depth interviews with boys. In the English classes (20 boys) 16 boys indicated that they currently read less than they had done in previous years. Two read more and two boys read the same amount. In the statistics group (11 boys) nine stated that they read less and two boys indicated that they read the same amount. My own observations of the frequency of their visits to the library and the number of conversations I had had with Year 13 boys about their reading throughout the year were a further confirmation of this trend.

After the speed-booking intervention, a total of 12 books were issued, five to one class and seven to the other. The number of books issued after the book buying and discussion exercise was lower but this may have been because the exercise involved fewer books. All but one of the new books which had been chosen by the boys were issued (eight books in total) and several boys put reserves on the new books. In the same period, boys in the statistics class who did not take part in the activities, issued five books. Overall borrowing statistics for this period indicate that 46 books were borrowed in a period of three weeks by all Year 13 boys as opposed to 176 over the previous seven months. The significance of this is further illustrated by considering that in a similar three-week period earlier in the term, 13 books were issued to Year 13s.

Several themes emerged from the analysis of the surveys and the in-depth interviews. The first of these is that boys read a wide range of material and are usually able to find something which interests them in the school library. Of the boys surveyed (31) only one boy stated that he was unable to find reading material of interest in the library. The preferred reading materials were newspapers and magazines but several boys read widely in all categories. Fiction reading was one of the most infrequently selected categories of reading (five out of 20 boys).

Another theme apparent in the interviews and confirmed by the surveys was the amount of online reading boys are doing. Five of the eleven statistics students surveyed and 14 of the 20 English students, stated that they read online material regularly. Internet sites that the boys mentioned included current affairs sites, social news sites like 'Reddit' where content is rated by users and moves up and down in rank, and web-browsers

like 'StumbleUpon' which recommend websites to users based on their interests and preferences. One boy, Chris, frequently read online material for one and a half hours a day, while another, Sam, said that he read online for at least half an hour a day. For many boys, reading online seemed to be part of their daily routine as shown in Chris's comment: "After a long day, I'm knackered and I want to relax by reading Reddit".

By far the most common and dominant theme to emerge from the data collected was that of lack of time for reading. Every boy involved in the surveys and interviews indicated that he read less because of time constraints. The most frequently given reasons for this were pressure of academic work and sporting commitments. Socialising was the third most frequent reason given for less reading. Interestingly, only three boys indicated that time spent on computer gaming cut down on their reading time. In reply to the question about why they read less, nearly every boy commented on having less time.

Jack: "Time to read is less, considering sport and NCEA."

Fred: "Too much else on like important exams, schoolwork and university applications."

Chris: "In earlier years, English periods included a library period where I would borrow books. now have to go to the library in lunchtime which I am not prepared to do because that is when I catch up with my mates."

Pete: "More responsibilities, sports and work, free time is being cut down."

There were no significant differences between the amount of time spent reading by day boys and boarders. One of the boys interviewed, Chris, believed that boarders read more than day boys but this was not confirmed by the surveys or other interviews.

DISCUSSION

This inquiry suggests that boys can be encouraged to read for enjoyment and entertainment by interventions such as speed-booking and involving them in the purchase of new books and discussion with classmates. This type of activity may be successful because it more actively engages students in the process of selecting and sharing books (Alvermann, 2002). It also appears that this involvement has a ripple effect as indicated by the overall number of books issued to Year 13s during the period of the activities but not linked directly to the classroom intervention. This figure was substantially higher than in a similar period earlier in the term and included boys who did not

take part in the activities. I believe that this was a result of starting discussions about books and initiating a community of readers who are likely to support and encourage reading. One boy who was interviewed said "I haven't read for ages but this has inspired me".

My inquiry confirms the findings of research which shows that teenagers today are reading a far wider range of material and that much of this is not print-based (Alvermann, 2002; Alloway & Gilbert, 1997). The incidence of online reading was a common thread through all the surveys and several participants indicated that they read for long periods online every day. These non-print based literacies are often not acknowledged in the school situation (Worthy, Moorman & Turner, 1999), and there is little acknowledgement of the importance of online reading and the positive effects that this may have (Johnson, 2011). Recognising this broader literacy will become increasingly important in schools and classrooms and may have significant advantages for teenagers (Love & Hamston, 2003; Millard, 1997; Worthy, Moorman & Turner, 1999).

Students in my inquiry did not seem to consider that gender might have an impact on their reading habits. No boys in the surveys or interviews made any reference to reading being more appropriate for girls as was found by other studies (Martino, 2003; Millard, 1997). Several boys indicated that sporting commitments prevented them from reading and this may have a male bias but this was a less common reason for reduced reading than academic work. The lack of importance attached to gender may be influenced by the context of a boys' school which has no easily accessed point of comparison in reading habits. It may also be because newspapers and online reading in which the boys engage most frequently have a more masculine image than fiction reading (Love & Hamston, 2003) which was the least popular type of reading in my inquiry.

The major theme of lack of time for reading which emerged from this inquiry has been identified by many researchers as having a serious impact on teenagers' engagement with literacy (Millard, 1997; Moore, Bean, Birdyshaw & Rycik, 1999; Rothbauer, 2009). The activities which I utilised to encourage reading were designed to increase interest in reading but had the additional benefit of creating time that could be devoted to reading. Data from the surveys and interviews showed that, with the exception of one boy, all the boys were able to find interesting material to read in the library. This suggests that the creation of a period of time in which boys were encouraged to read for pleasure was as important as providing interesting

material. As Millard (1997) states "... schools need to be more pro-active in drawing up literacy policies which provide more time for reading in school" (p. 46).

IMPLICATIONS FOR FUTURE PRACTICE

Until this inquiry, I did not have a full understanding of how important it is to utilise student-centred approaches in encouraging reading for pleasure among Year 13 boys. Catering to their interests, while important, is not sufficient to encourage boys to read for pleasure. It is also necessary to create a 'community' of readers who support each other's reading and have a sense of involvement in the library. Creating such a community may mean that I have to utilise more activities which encourage greater participation and involvement from the boys.

One way of encouraging a community of readers could be to tap into the existing peer culture which has been shown to be a powerful factor in creating an effective learning environment (Nuthall, 2010). Online reading is an important part of the peer culture of our senior students and if we are to utilise this, a less traditional print-based interpretation of literacy has to be adopted.

One of the problems that has emerged from this research is that it is insufficient for me in my role as librarian to promote the development of student-centred literacy practices and a community of readers for Year 13 students. In order to be effective, this policy has to be endorsed by English teachers and the whole school community. School-wide policies which promote critical literacy across the curriculum and encourage a less print-based interpretation of literacy are necessary to give boys greater opportunities to engage with literacy (Alvermann, 2002; Millard, 1997).

The results of this research have shown me that one way to encourage reading for pleasure among senior boys is to create pockets of time in which boys can read material of their choice. In the past when boys have come to the library in their study periods, I have encouraged them to read the paper and then move onto something more productive. I now realise that for many boys, this may be the only time when they have access to reading material and the opportunity to read. Ensuring that boys have time to read is as important as ensuring that they have suitable material to read.

CONCLUSION

I believe that this inquiry has shown that it is possible to encourage senior boys to read for pleasure by tapping into their interests and creating a student-centred environment in which they have a greater sense of involvement and connection. Although the time for this inquiry was limited, the effects of instigating activities such as speed-booking and book buying in which the boys were directly involved, were illustrated by the increased borrowings for Year 13s. This result extended beyond the group who were involved with the classroom activities and would, I believe, have an ongoing effect. This inquiry has also highlighted that in order to connect with the peer culture of this age group, it is necessary to adopt a less traditional interpretation of literacy and accept that multimedia literacies can have considerable benefits for teenagers.

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AUTHOR'S PROFILE

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Bev Harrison is a secondary English and Social Studies teacher, currently working as the librarian in a secondary school. This project was undertaken as part of the requirements for a Postgraduate Diploma in Education at Massey University. Bev has a keen interest in all aspects of boys' literacy and in 2009 she was involved in an action research project on boys and literature sponsored by the International Boys' Schools Coalition (IBSC).

APPENDIX A

Student Survey

Name:

1.   Are you a boarder or a day boy? (Circle one)

2.   How much time do you spend reading for entertainment each day?
     Less than 15 minutes
     15 minutes
     30 minutes
     More than 30 minutes

3.   How does this compare with how much time you spent reading for entertainment in Year 10?
     I read less now
     I read the same now
     I read more now

4.   If you read less than you used to, why do you think this may be?

5.   If you read less than you used to, what activities have taken the place of reading?

6.   If you do read for entertainment, when would this be?

7.   Do you read any of the following? (Circle as many as you like)
     Newspapers
     Magazines
     News websites (e.g. Stuff.co)
     Non fiction books (e.g. biographies or sports books)
     Fiction
     Online material

8.   Do you find reading material that interests you in the library?   Yes   /   No

9.   What reading material would you like to see in the library?

10.   From what sources, other than the school library, do you get reading material?

APPENDIX B

Sample Interview Questions

1. Do you think you read less/more/the same as you did when you were younger?

2. What do you think the reasons for this might be?

3. Do you enjoy reading in your spare time?

4. What kind of things do you read?

5. What do you read on the internet?

6. Do you come to the library as much as you did when you were younger?

7. What might the reasons for this be?

8. Do you read things that other people have recommended?