

Introduction

It has now been over 40 years since the start of my career as an educator. I began my first job teaching English at an all-black high school in rural South Carolina, USA. In that single-level building with the leaky roof, undersized gymnasium, and no air conditioning system, I came face to face with boys who, in the words of Sven Birkerts (2006), “had never bathed in the energies of a book” (p. 84). These were boys who could not read at a level necessary to understand and enjoy the stories and plays from the required literature anthology. William, a 6’7” 17-year-old star basketball player, was in one of my 11th-grade sections. As I handed out textbooks on the first day of class, he leaned close to my ear and whispered, “I don’t know how to read.” I quickly came to the realization that to engage William and his classmates as readers, I would need to use every bit of my creative energy. Although it ran counter to my sensibilities as an English teacher, I made a fateful decision in those first weeks to dispense with my beloved Silas Marner and Julius Caesar, and the vaunted poets, playwrights, and novelists of the past and experiment with young adult literature.

I was looking for something that the students would find more accessible and meaningful. I found it in Alice Childress’s (1973) *A Hero Ain’t Nothin’ But a Sandwich*. This story of a young adolescent boy’s drug addiction and alienation while growing up in Harlem transformed my class. Attendance and behavior problems decreased noticeably. Students were eager to read, or at least try to read. When we finished the book, they clamored for more of the same. Even William made modest progress that first year, although he dropped out the next. I would often spot his looming frame hanging out on the only street of commerce in our small, poor town. Unfortunately, he was eventually arrested and found guilty of dealing narcotics. It was the last I ever heard of him.

Of course my own literate history is very different from that of African American teens growing up in hot, dusty tobacco country, whose ancestors

were slaves and sharecroppers. Nonetheless, when it comes to literacy, we all have something in common – where we begin our literate journeys may have little resemblance to where the journey takes us and, certainly, where the journey ends.

Since those days as an inchoate literacy teacher, I have spent untold hours in general and remedial classrooms in numerous schools around the United States and across the globe, observing and learning from other teachers, conducting demonstration lessons, and gathering research data. The overwhelming impression I have been left with is that more must be done to reach the growing numbers of listless, detached, and struggling male readers. I have also found a clear and recurring pattern of concern among teachers: Too many boys do not like to read, are choosing not to read, and are suffering academically as a result.

I wrote this book based on an ongoing desire to share my experiences and ideas with the many teachers, parents, researchers, and others who are equally concerned about boys' literate futures. The guiding premise for this book, as for all my speaking and writing about boys, is *engaging boys in literacy should be the highest priority when developing reading curricula and seeking to foster independent reading habits*. To achieve engaged reading, I propose the use of a great variety of texts along with a range of practices that are likely to improve boys' thinking about what they read and increase their motivation to read.

My Perspective in *Engaging Boys in Active Literacy*

Although this book is filled with many descriptions of promising literacy-focused programs and practices for boys, I strived to do more than write a compendium of techniques text. Since opinions abound about boys' academic and social development, it is essential to establish and analyze the research literature on central issues and related aspects of this topic. Thus, in the first two chapters, I identify the big issues surrounding literacy and learning for boys, accompanied by salient research findings. Each of these issues is further developed in subsequent chapters where additional evidence from the research literature is brought to bear. Moreover, I draw principally upon the evidence base from North America and from across Europe. In doing so, I expand what is known about boys literacy development to inform instructional practices and programs. Readers of this book, then, will appreciate the balanced approach I establish, combining accessible descriptions and analysis of relevant research with instructional and programmatic approaches to

Why a Book Just about the Literacy Needs of Boys?

3

increasing boys' reading and writing motivation and expanding their literacy and learning.

Why a Book Just about the Literacy Needs of Boys?

Boys need special attention with respect to their literacy development and attitudes. I make clear in the opening chapters that overwhelming evidence from North America and Europe (Chudowsky & Chudowsky, 2010; Mullis, Martin, Foy, & Drucker, 2012; OECD, 2016a) shows that boys have the lowest scores on standardized measures of reading and verbal ability. Furthermore, boys dominate the rolls of remedial reading classes and those who have difficulty learning to read (Lietz, 2006; Wheldall & Limbrick, 2010). They also make up the largest group of dropouts and delinquents (Child Trends Data Bank, 2015). These, however, are only school-related phenomena. When one considers that males (a) commit all but a small percentage of homicides, (b) are far more likely to be victims of violent crime than women, (c) take their own lives at alarming rates, and (d) make up most drug addicts and people who are homeless (Callanan & Davis, 2011; National Alliance to End Homelessness, 2016; National Institutes of Health, n.d.; Noguera, 2008), addressing boys' needs becomes all the more urgent.

It is well known that boys who drop out of school are likely to have weak or poorly developed literacy skills (Hernandez, 2012; Whitmire, 2010). These dropouts become vulnerable to a life of underemployment and unemployment and, far worse, are at a higher risk of becoming criminal offenders (Sum et al., 2009). It is also known, however, that engaged readers have a much greater chance of staying in school, expanding career and life options, and maturing into self-actualized adults (Hofstetter, Sticht, & Hofstetter, 1999).

This book, then, is devoted to identifying issues that impinge on boys' literacy development, exploring what the research literature has to say about these issues, and describing how teachers have used engaging texts and practices to help boys overcome low literacy engagement and skill and stay the course as readers and writers. Once boys develop a sense of self through active literacy, they increase their chances for an expansive intellectual journey throughout school and beyond. This is critical because it has been shown that possession of highly developed literacy abilities can ultimately lead to better lives for themselves and those around them (Hill, 2014). I have found that boys become more engaged readers and learners when motivated by exposure to texts and practices that capture their

imaginations. These include the young adult novel that served as a central text in the “Real Men” unit described in Chapter 3, to the graphic novels employed by secondary teachers in science and math explained in Chapter 7, to a boys’ book club that link soccer and reading as described in Chapter 6. These texts and approaches, as well as the many others presented in this book, serve as examples of how to build capacity and enjoyment in reading for male youth.

Organization and Content

Each chapter begins with a short advance organizer highlighting the big ideas and main chapter topics. Each chapter also contains a special feature called “Boys in the Real World.” The goal of this feature is to capture the attitudes and practices of actual boys who struggle with reading and writing or are unmotivated by typical, school-based texts and literacy schemes. Within this feature are prompts designed to stimulate reflection on the scenario and creative ideas for increasing the boy’s level of engagement with literacy and depth of understanding of text. In the final section of Chapters 3 through 8, “Promising Programs and Practices,” I describe a variety of literacy practices from within classrooms and schools as well as those situated in homes and communities that have heightening boys’ engagement and achievement.

Chapter 1 introduces the primary issues of the book and raises concerns about boys’ literacy behavior. I present evidence that supports the need to help boys discover or become reacquainted with the pleasure and value of reading. I also discuss the connection between reading ability and academic success. While taking an advocacy position on behalf of boys, I also nuance notions of a “boy crisis” by drawing attention to those male youth at the greatest risk of failing to develop engaged and effective literacy abilities. Finally, I assert that reading engagement and skill will position boys for the competition and opportunities in the twenty-first century.

Chapter 2 digs deeper into the critical issues surrounding boys’ literacy development. Keeping in focus those boys who, according to research, are the most needful of effective and responsive literacy practices and programs, I foreground factors of socioeconomic status, immigrant status, language learning, technology/new literacies, engagement, and literate identity. Also explored in this chapter is the developmental nature of gender-based reading differences between boys and girls.

Chapter 3 trains a lens on masculinities and identities and their relationship to boys’ literacy achievement and attitudes. One of the important

Organization and Content

5

goals of this chapter is to challenge and caution against hegemonic masculinity responses to boys' literacy needs. This chapter initiates a section entitled "Promising Programs and Practices" that appears in all subsequent chapters. In it, I provide a full description of a unit I participated in with lower-secondary level students. Named the "Real Men" unit, the goal was to expand literacy skills of struggling youth from a school in the barrio of Texas, USA, while helping them develop critical literacy practices for challenging stereotypic masculinity.

Chapter 4 presents additional ideas and research evidence related to socioeconomic factors and their impact on boys' literacy development and achievement. I take up related issues in this chapter, such as the rise of a skills-based global economy and the need for boys to possess sophisticated and flexible literacy abilities to compete in such a world. In the "Promising Programs and Practices" section, I describe and exemplify specific school- and home-based approaches that have been employed with male youth to expand reading and writing skills and heighten engagement in literacy.

Chapter 5 is devoted to the relationship between boys' immigrant status and new language learning on their literacy learning. In addition to bringing additional research evidence to bear on these factors, I also share examples of practices and programs, such as book clubs and the "my bag" strategy, that have had positive impact on linguistically and culturally different male youth.

Chapter 6 focuses on the importance of engagement in boys' literacy development. I demonstrate the universal significance of engagement for reading achievement and consider theoretical guidelines for crafting engaging literacy curriculum for boys. In the "Promising Programs and Practices" section of the chapter, I describe, among other approaches, a particularly outstanding program in Germany called "Kicking and Reading" that combines soccer training with reading training for upper-primary level boys.

Chapter 7 acknowledges the active role boys play in our digital world. As the evidence supports, boys are more engaged in literate activity when they are able to take advantage of new media and ICT tools. Moreover, boys have shown higher reading achievement on electronically mediated assessments. Because of the mounting evidence for this pattern, I describe, in the "Promising Programs and Practices" section of the chapter, instructional approaches that link school-based literacy learning with male youths' outside-of-school texts, such as graphic novels, and electronic media.

In Chapter 8, the last chapter of the book, I foreground what is known from the research literature about boys' writing development and achievement. As is the case with reading, boys often struggle with writing, though this area of literacy development for boys does not receive as much attention as it deserves. Several examples of teachers engaging boys in reading and learning through writing – from poetry to mathematics – are woven into this chapter and featured in the final chapter section.