

CHAPTER FOUR

Boys and Reading in School

A Different Kind of Struggle

When Juliet informs Romeo that he is kissing “by the book,” she is not complimenting him on his literacy.

—THOMAS NEWKIRK

Will’s mom, a private tutor and retired reading specialist, drove him home from school one early October afternoon. He was still getting tired after a full day of first grade, and she reconsidered her plans to go to the library. “Will, I was thinking of stopping at the library on the way home. What do you think?” Will perked up at the thought, “Can we go? I want to go! I need to get some books.”

At the library, Will headed straight for the *Judy and Stink Moody* series by Megan McDonald (www.judymoody.com/#books). He knew exactly where the series was located. He took a book he had not yet read and walked around the corner to the shelves of comic books. He selected a Garfield book and leaned against the wall. He opened the book and read what he could, giggling every now and then.

After checking out their selections of hardcover books and audiobooks, Will and his mom listened to *Cricket in Times Square* (Selden, 1960) in the car. When they arrived home, Will’s mom took his backpack from the trunk and asked about his day. Will mentioned that he had to stay in for recess again to complete his reading worksheets.

“I had to hide my anger,” Will’s mom explained later. “Why would anyone want to keep an active 6-year-old boy in for recess to finish reading worksheets when this could keep him from being able to sit still and stay engaged for the long afternoon? You know that worksheets don’t teach how to read, *and* the child obviously loves reading! I remember this day clearly because I could no longer let the missed recesses continue. I made an appointment with the teacher and told her, as respectfully as I could, that my son was not to be kept in for recess. Any work that needed to be done was to be sent home for

homework. And so began a 5-year struggle I didn't foresee: the struggle of my bibliophile son with the school's reading curriculum."

Will's home life and preschool experiences were immersed in language and literacy. He went to first grade ready to learn, but the literacy curriculum didn't sustain his interest. He wasn't motivated to fill in worksheets, and he rebelled against the hamburger structure (i.e., bun/contents/bun = topic sentence/details/concluding sentence) he was forced to use when writing. He had little voice in choosing reading and writing topics and didn't value many of the assignments he was asked to complete (Smith & Wilhelm, 2006). Will and many of his male classmates were struggling to make sense of literacy at school.

This chapter explores boys' special struggles with the literacy curriculum in schools along with research that begins to explain the reasons for these struggles. Suggestions on how to engage boy readers (and writers) are offered by researchers, experts, and Will himself. But, first, back to the story about Will.

"I finally realized what was happening with Will's literacy education in the final weeks of first grade," Will's mom remembered. "I had returned from the International Reading Association Conference, and I was unpacking the books that I brought home for him. After inspecting the pile, he whispered in my ear, 'Mom, you know I hate reading.' My stomach instantly ached, and I'm sure I turned white.

"Almost a week later I found the books I had given Will from IRA. He had a stack of trade books next to his bed but none were the books that were obviously intended for reading instruction—and with that I finally understood what Will had really said to me. He didn't hate *reading*, the activity; rather, he hated "reading," the subject taught in school. Will saw no connection between reading at home and reading at school—and *how could he?* There really *was* no connection! At home, reading was a pleasurable, authentic experience in which literature was discussed, while at school reading was not pleasurable, not discussed, and far from authentic."

This disconnect between reading at home and reading at school appears to be a common phenomenon (Smith & Wilhelm, 2006; Sullivan, 2009). Smith and Wilhelm (2006) noted that the young men in their study drew a line between their home lives and school lives and made no connections between the literature read at school and their own lives. One student went so far as to use different words to describe reading that took place at home ("lookin' at the newspaper") and "reading" that took place at school (p. 25). Since reading is intended to be a potentially transformative meaning-making experience, why isn't real reading happening for boys at school?

In general, males still score below females in reading. The Nation's Report Card (National Assessment of Educational Progress, 2010) showed that in 2009 eighth-grade boys scored an average of 259 on a 500-point scale, while females scored 269 (0.3 standard error). Fourth-grade boys scored 218 while the girls scored 224 (0.3 standard error). Reading scores from 2007 to 2009 stayed the same for fourth-grade males, while scores for eighth-grade males increased by one point. Clearly, there is an achievement gap for males in reading.

Neu and Weinfeld (2007) explain that in education boys can become lost because their natural character isn't acknowledged. When the school system doesn't consider boys' interests or build on their interests, it is more difficult for boys to achieve. Furthermore, teachers tend to reject the kinds of stories boys like to read and write—that is, ones featuring action, violence, and twisted humor—and in doing so, they tend to turn boys off (Fletcher, 2006; Guzzetti, Young, Gritsavage, Fyfe, & Hardenbrook, 2002; Newkirk, 2002).

On average, boys spend less time reading than girls, and this disparity of time spent on task creates a major barrier to their success in school (Goldberg & Roswell, 2002; Neu & Weinfeld, 2007; Sullivan, 2009). Of course, as just noted, in many classrooms boys are not allowed to engage meaningfully with many of the topics that most naturally interest them. The literate world of boys is less well known or accepted by (predominantly female) teachers in schools, but thankfully this predisposition is beginning to undergo change. Increasingly, literacy leaders are trying to develop more boy-friendly literacy practices (without shortchanging the needs of girls).

HELPING BOYS TO REJOICE IN LITERACY

Given that so many researchers, authors, and teachers are actively investigating the area of boys in relation to education, literacy leaders may very usefully rethink how male students generally interact with literacy in the schools. In this next section, current trends in the research on boys and reading are reviewed.

Finding What Gets Boys Excited

Determining what most excites boys' imagination is important to helping them broaden their interests and views of the world (Sullivan, 2009). Reading on subjects of high interest is naturally motivating (Neu & Weinfeld, 2007) and has been known to stimulate reading undertaken for the sheer pleasure of it. Surveys and self-reports are an excellent way to gather relevant data on this issue, and one example is given in Figure 4.1. This example includes suggestions from a group of 11- and 12-year-old boys when solicited for advice on what a teacher should ask to gather information about what excites and interests them. It was encouraging to see that some of the questions directly related to reading even though reading was not mentioned when speaking with them.

Interest Survey for Boys

Name (optional): _____ Date: _____

1. List three (or more) things you like to do. _____

2. Your favorite Internet site is _____
because: _____

3. Your favorite video game is _____
because: _____

4. List three (or more) music selections on your play list. _____

5. List the names of three (or more) authors you know and like. _____

6. Which reading genres interest you? Circle all that apply.
mystery action and adventure science fiction fantasy
biography nonfiction/information realistic fiction poetry
humor graphic novels historic fiction other: _____

FIGURE 4.1. An example of an interest survey developed specifically for boys.

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Once the relevant data are assembled, teachers are urged to gather together all kinds of reading materials related to the students' expressed interests. School librarians are always willing to assist in developing a rotating library collection that will offer a variety of reading genres and interesting topics over the course of the academic year. Librarians in public libraries are also very happy to assemble monthly "book bags" for classroom distribution.

Getting Those Boys Reading

So, you are asking, "How do I get the boys to read now that I have gathered appealing reading materials?" One way is Sustained Silent Reading (SSR) (Pilgreen, 2000). Although it has fallen out of favor with the recent increase emphasis on testing and assessment, pleasure reading in school—especially for boys and most especially for boys in middle and high school—deserves much greater allotments of time.

Buck (2010) has drawn attention to the importance of SSR in high school. She was dismayed to find that her 12th-grade students read only assigned books and knew that this could be contributing to declining reading scores (National Endowment for the Arts, 1997, 2004, 2007). Research has found that from 1992 to 2002 18- to 24-year-olds in general had a -20 percent decline in literary reading, the "steepest rate of decline in reading since the NEA survey history began" (National Endowment for the Arts, 2009, p. 4). From 1982 to 2002, males' literature reading declined at a higher rate than females' (National Endowment for the Arts, 2009). Stotsky (2006) has observed persuasively that if decreases in reading are a function of how the curriculum has evolved, then the curriculum must be changed.

To ensure that students read more frequently for enjoyment, Buck (2010) conducted an experiment by starting each English class with a period of SSR. In September, students began silent reading when the bell rang to start class and continued until the preset time was up, averaging some 50 minutes, in all, per week. Students self-selected their reading materials, with only textbooks and novels for English or literature classes disallowed. During this set period of time, Buck also engaged in SSR herself.

Buck (2010) found that students stayed engaged with their reading 91% of the time. They were discreetly observed twice a week, and although there was no significant increase in reading attitude by January, Buck observed that the students were actively engaged in reading and "did not mind reading during class" (p. 34). She also observed that most students completed reading books they started during SSR, they discussed what they were reading informally, and they readily exchanged book recommendations with their classmates.

This authentic reading time proved to motivate these 12th graders to read. This scheduled period was truly a time for pleasure reading without the journaling, testing, or book report assignments that, for example, make boys—especially—view reading as work (Guzzetti et al., 2002; Smith & Wilhelm, 2006). Students more actively sought out the classroom and school libraries, some borrowing books that Buck had read and rec-

ommended. Although Buck did not implement the SSR period specifically for her male students, they certainly read more than they would have without the SSR time.

Another way to increase reading for enjoyment is to involve families in reading for pleasure at home. McCormick (2010) found that when fathers consciously read for pleasure in front of or with their boys, those boys' motivation for reading increased significantly. It is important to note that she also found that mothers helped increase motivation, and the affect was found for girls too.

Suspecting that families' beliefs about recreational reading could prove central to developing lifelong readers (Guzzetti et al., 2002; Tyre, 2008), McCormick (2010) created a program to encourage parents—but especially dads (or other male role models)—to get into the daily habit of both reading with their children and reading for themselves. Watching their key role models exhibit positive reading behaviors sends a powerful message to boys; namely, that reading is both masculine and gratifying (Neu & Weinfeld, 2007). In her study, McCormick (2010) simply asked that parents (particularly the fathers) increase the reading they were already doing by 5 minutes a day. This sole requirement meant that 10 minutes of reading would be increased to 15, and if there were no prior established reading habits, 5 minutes a day would be fine, to start. To track their consistency, moms and dads were encouraged to keep separate logs documenting the amount of time spent reading with or in front of their children. The insistence on separate logs was intended to impress upon the dads that their reading had a real and measurable impact on their children and that reading was not meant just for moms (McCormick, 2010).

Each week an e-mail was sent to all of the kindergarten, first- and second-grade parents to keep them connected and encouraged. These e-mails suggested ways to engage in literature discussions, find interesting materials, and increase their own reading (see Figures 4.2 and 4.3 for the e-mails' text).

Knowing that parents were more likely to stay involved if they could choose the materials they read, McCormick recommended not only fiction but also nonfiction and informational texts for authentic, enjoyable reading, like the sports page, comics, web pages, magazines, blogs, recipes, e-mails, brochures, and even manuals. She encouraged dads to read in front of their children rather than alone as some men do (Sullivan, 2009), and asked them to deliberately refer to what they were doing as "reading." Sullivan (2009) asserts that having boys observe their fathers reading newspapers doesn't really qualify as "watching reading," but many would disagree. Reading is reading, and boys can use reading as a way to learn and celebrate who they are and who they might be (Zambo & Brozo, 2009).

Book Recommendations

Although most girls would readily accept a book recommendation from a teacher, many boys would not. Neu and Weinfeld (2007) found that boys generally resist female teachers' book recommendations. While valuing book recommendations from males, especially peers, simply leaving reading selections around for boys to discover was the best way to entice them into reading.

Dear Families,

First of all, I want to thank all of you for your willingness to participate in this program. Motivating children to read is a very important matter for me, and I'm eager to begin our work together and make a difference. I'm really excited to have your support, and I appreciate your time and energy.

I'm enlisting all of you to modify your home reading habits. Basically, I'm asking you to increase the amount of leisure time reading you do every day at home in the presence of your child by a minimum of 5 minutes each day. I understand that your days are very busy and that most of the reading you do probably occurs when the kids are in bed and you have time to yourself. Nonetheless, the purpose of this reading program is to change an image of inaction to action so that there can be an impact on your child's impressions of the value of reading and on his or her motivation to read.

I'm encouraging not just one parent to participate but BOTH parents in two-parent households. Research shows that, more frequently than not, it is the mother who reads most frequently with the kids and is observed engaging in leisure-time reading. Considering the chronically lower levels of reading motivation and reading achievement among boys, I am asking that you provide a model of *both* parents reading at home so that your child can associate reading with everyday activities that you both value and enjoy. Like every other value, lesson, and moral that we share with our children, the way reading is modeled is absorbed by them. This is our opportunity to see if the cliché "Do as I say, not as I do" can be turned around to create a home environment where parents not only encourage reading but also support it by actively participating in reading during their own free time.

Here is your assignment: increase the amount of leisure-time reading (whether of newspapers, magazines, novels, or Internet articles) that you do in the *presence* of your child every day by at least 5 minutes. More time than that would be great, but I am asking for at least 5 minutes each day. I understand that some days do not provide the opportunity for reading, so please try to "make up" lost minutes for any days you may miss on other days of the week. For example, if you worked late or had a meeting to attend on Tuesday, make up for the lost reading time of Tuesday by reading at least 10 minutes on Wednesday.

Every Monday I will send a reading log to you via e-mail. The first reading log is attached to this e-mail. You can choose to track your reading every day and save the information or reflect back on your reading on Sunday. On the following Monday you will then e-mail the reading log back to me, one for each participating parent, and begin the tracking of your reading for the following week, much like your child completes a reading log in the classroom.

Obviously if you received this e-mail, I have at least one e-mail address for your family. If both parents in your household are able to participate, I would appreciate e-mail addresses for each parent. When sending me additional e-mail addresses, please make note of your child's name as well for my record keeping.

I will also be including reading strategy and skill ideas to support the ways that you and your child can read when I send out the weekly reading logs. I hope that you find these helpful, and I would love to have your input. Happy reading!

FIGURE 4.2. The first weekly parent e-mail sample.

Will, whom you read about earlier in the chapter, suggests asking a librarian for help in selecting books, but he himself prefers to find recommendations on the Internet. Now in middle school, Will still reads for enjoyment when he isn't playing video games. He begins his search by seeking out specific genres, zeroing in on sites that include numerous book titles or annotated bibliographies. For example, he searches for "list of mystery books" and finds a variety of sites, such as www.mysterynet.com/authors, which catalogs the names of mystery writers and offers first chapters of selected titles. Once at the site, Will clicks on "Agatha Christie" to find her biological profile, background information on how some of her books came to be written, and listing of all of her authored titles.

Will also visits the library websites of major cities to get recommendations. The New York Public Library, at www.nypl.org, has "summer reading recommendations" cat-

Hello, Fantastic Parent Participants,

I hope that you continue to enjoy your increased reading time. I know that life is busy and comes at you rapid-fire, but I want you to know that your child is benefiting from your increasing your reading time.

I received last week's reading logs from a few overachievers who sent them in unsolicited (nicely done!). Please try to send your reading log to me by Tuesday night since I'm keeping track of the amount of leisure time reading. Please don't stress out if you didn't read every day—I'm not grading you! Of course, I'd love to see everyone reading frequently every night, but I'm a realist with two small children myself, and I understand that it's not always that simple. I'm hoping for an average of 5 minutes every night, but feel free to exceed that minimum number!

I am glad to have so many families with both parents participating. I encourage both parents to participate if you're in a two-parent household, and you can start even now. Both parents can submit their reading log at the same time if that's easier.

I received some questions asking if parents should track the minutes they read with their child in addition to the minutes they model reading. The answer is yes when the reading is done for leisure time, not for school work. Document any leisure time reading that you do in your house—maybe it's you with a magazine, newspaper, or book; maybe it's you and your child cozying up to read a favorite Roald Dahl book (just to throw out the name of a much-loved author). Focus on promoting reading as a valuable, enjoyable activity that you want to do. Discuss what you are reading, and share the ways that reading makes you think about things in new ways. As a parent, you play the most prominent role model in your child's life. You can help by sharing the way recreational reading connects to your life and makes you think. If your child sees you taking reading to this level, he or she is more likely to do the same.

I really enjoyed reading through your reading logs as they come in. Some of you shared anecdotes of new reading behaviors you're seeing in your child since the program began; while others are sharing strategies for getting in your reading time, such as using audiobooks during drives and taking family trips to the library for new inspiration. I hope that you are sharing with your child the reasons *why* you read. By "reasons," I don't mean citing this reading program but rather the underlying reason that you pick up a book, newspaper, or magazine or look at an Internet article. You do it to learn more about the world, challenge yourself to try new things, learn about new places, and even escape from your daily grind for a little bit.

Share with your child the connections that you make through your reading. Even beginning readers are able to grasp quite a bit and begin applying the lessons to their own reading. When they see you using reading as a useful tool, they will be more likely to do the same and hopefully will find a new value in reading that will stay with them throughout their life. Then, if you're feeling really daring, ask them what they think about their books and about the connections they make in their reading. Did the book or magazine article make them think of something that happened to them? Something from another book or movie? Something on the news or at school?

Shared reading (reading with your child) is a fantastic place to let them try this activity first. Read a chapter of a book like *Charlotte's Web* (White, 1952) or *The Fish in Room 11* (Dyer, 2004), and make a connection or two after reading it. Then, after you've modeled a few connections, challenge your child to make a connection *with* you. Once they get the hang of that, pull back and see if they can do it on their own. It's pretty cool once it starts happening.

One last resource I want to share with you today is www.guysread.com. Please check out this website. It's sponsored by a nonprofit organization headed by Jon Scieszka (an author kids love), whose mission is to motivate boys and men to read more by connecting them with really interesting reading selections. You'll find fantastic resources for boy-friendly book titles, interesting statistics on boys and reading, and information on encouraging male role models associated with reading. Click on that link, and I'm sure you'll be as excited about it as I am.

I thought I'd also mention two great books about reading to and with your child. The first is *How to Get Your Child to Love Reading* by Esme Raji Codell (2004), and the second is *The Read-Aloud Handbook* by Jim Trelease (2006). Both of these books highlight ways to engage with your child while reading with him or her, and how to pick books that will interest him or her, in addition to presenting an amazing list of titles. These two books are available at Amazon.com, but you can also get your hands on a copy in the local library, especially if you reserve it first online.

Thank you again for participating as we find ways to get our children motivated to read.

FIGURE 4.3. Weekly parent e-mail midprogram sample.

egorized by age level and includes recommended authors, series, and specific books, with the jacket covers pictured. The Chicago Public Library, at www.chipublib.org, includes recommended kid and teen titles on their main menu. The “For Teens” section includes the book title and jacket cover, reviews written by teenage peers, and a link to an annotated bibliography.

Reading Selections

Boys should have a wide variety of reading materials available from which to choose, including:

- Nonfiction
- Comics
- Newspapers
- Web pages
- Graphic novels
- Fiction that includes, for example:
 - Male protagonists
 - Action, adventure, courage, and determination
 - Humor
 - The creepy, weird, and shocking

Knowles and Smith (2005) insist that each classroom library should include at least one current copy of the *Guinness Book of World Records*, and we agree. We have seen well-loved copies of that volume shared over and over by boys in our own classrooms.

Brozo (2002) discusses the importance of emphasizing book selections that allow boys a natural entry point into reading such as the *Harry Potter* (www.jkrowling.com) and *Goosebumps* (www.rlstine.com) series. These texts were also made into movies or television series, supplying an additional visual component that is especially valuable to boys (Knowles & Smith, 2005; Smith & Wilhelm, 2006). Tatum (2009) stresses that entry point selections for adolescent boys should reflect their activities, interests, and sometimes confusing and uncomfortable stage of life. Scieszka (2005) notes that boys just need books that *they* want to read.

After the titles are selected, they need to be organized in an accessible way. Organizing a wide variety of book selections for boys in classroom libraries can be coordinated in a number of ways. In the primary grades, classroom libraries may be organized by reading level so that students are readily able to pick titles they are able to read. In the higher grades, books may be organized by genre, topic, or type (e.g., books, comics, magazines). Selections can be tagged as specifically recommended for boys, no matter what type of organizational scheme is used. Many teachers include an “I Recommend This Book” sheet on the inside cover (see Figure 4.4). These sheets stay in the book year after year and are frequently perused and taken into account when a title is being considered.

Recommendations for <i>True Stories of the Second World War</i> by P. Dowsell (2003)		
Name	Date	Comment
Vishal Abarci	9/10/10	Thrilling and unbelievable!
Cotey Ito	10/18/10	Be sure to read the introduction. Watch for a show about Iwo Jima on the Military Channel.

FIGURE 4.4. “I Recommend This Book” example.

We suggest in all grades that there be a section of the classroom library that changes over time where teachers can place materials for all reading levels from public libraries or their own personal libraries. We have seen students of all ages who are particularly interested in the books that are kept in the homes of their teachers. Mary Kay would sometimes have former students stop by her classroom just to look at or borrow the books on the shelf that housed her personal collection.

INSTRUCTIONAL STRATEGIES

Because reading is a meaning-making activity, boys especially need strategies to help them immerse themselves in increasingly deep levels of comprehension. The instructional strategies profiled here are research-based and recommended for boys (but also equally appropriate for girls). These strategies include book discussions (Daniels, 2002; Raphael & McMahon, 1997), Question Answer Relationships (QAR; Raphael, 1986), and think-alouds (Davey, 1983). We, of course, advocate for a large number of strategies that are successful with boys, but we choose to highlight these, having implemented them in our own classrooms and clinics with great success. It is not our intention to describe the strategies in great detail here, since they are well known to literacy leaders; we do, however, explain how they may look different through a boy-focused lens.

In general, Neu and Weinfeld (2007) found boys to be most engaged when new instructional strategies were introduced and practiced with texts that held their interest. Instructional literacy activities that were hands-on, multisensory, and that allowed for movement, challenge, and competition were apt to seem the most attractive and productive to boys (Knowles & Smith, 2005).

Book Discussions

Literature circles (Daniels, 2002) and book talks (Raphael & McMahon, 1997) are perfect vehicles to engage all readers. Literature circles and book talks involve discussion groups that respond to a reading, construct meaning about it, and enable readers to move to a deeper level of understanding through collaboration and critical thinking. Boys tend

to engage better in book discussions when they are in a same-gender group and/or when the group is led by a male peer or adult (Smith & Wilhelm, 2006; Sullivan, 2009).

In book discussions, boys tend to take a more efferent stance (Guzzetti et al., 2002). They focus more on action and facts and less on multiple points of view and feelings, even when reading fiction. They also don't respond well to reading intended just to answer preset questions whose answers the teacher already knows, nor to reading aloud without practice or a chance to prepare in advance (Moskal & Blachowicz, 2006; Smith & Wilhelm, 2006; Zambo & Brozo, 2009). Finally, boys need to be told why they are engaging in book discussions since they don't always understand the meaning of the assignment (Rae & Pederson, 2007; Smith & Wilhelm, 2006). Once they understand, they are more inclined to fully participate and learn.

Book discussions are guided by meaningful questions to build on initial and developing understanding and to delve into what Langer (1995) calls "envisionment building," or the creation of a continuous personal interpretation of a text. Open-ended questions enable the group to build on individuals' understanding by exploring, rethinking, explaining, and defending. Along similar lines, Tatum (2009) stresses the use of "essential questions" (p. 90) in boys' discussions. Essential questions create talk about significant issues, inclining the individuals in the group to exchange their views and thereby forcing the consideration of multiple perspectives in creating understanding. Envisionment building and asking essential questions involve boys in book discussions that are engaging and motivating and can be incorporated into the Question Answer Relationship strategy.

Question Answer Relationships

Raphael (1986) developed the QAR strategy to help students understand the relationship between a question and its answer, specifying where and how to answer questions for maximum understanding. In QAR terms, questions and answers are divided into two major categories, namely, "In the Book" and "In My Head," specifying where answers may be found. "In the Book" includes (1) Right There and (2) Think and Search questions and answers. The answer to a literal question can be found Right There "In the Book." For example, what were the names of James's aunts in *James and the Giant Peach* (Dahl, 1961)? The answer (Aunt Sponge and Aunt Spiker) is in the book; you can even point to it. Think and Search questions are also in the book, but the answers need to be pulled together from different parts of the book. For example, name the places to which James and the peach traveled: this is a Think and Search question because the answer, although in the book, is located in multiple chapters.

Boys tend to focus on facts when reading; so, it is especially worthwhile for them to practice answering "In My Head" questions, which entail either (1) Author and Me or (2) On My Own answers. Author and Me questions invite students to consider the story as well as the author's message and then integrate these with their own life experiences and interpretations to answer. One example might be: How would you face the challenge of living in a giant peach? To answer that question, students would both need to know

something about living in a peach but also consider what they think would be challenging about living in a peach.

Students would not necessarily have to have read the book to answer an On My Own question since, in answering, they rely only on their own experiences and views. One example would be: What might happen if “the biggest bomb in the history of the world was hovering over” (Dahl, 1961, p. 108) the city in which you lived? Clearly this question can be answered without having read about the peach floating over New York City.

The QAR approach is helpful to boys because it better enables them to understand where to find the answer to a certain type of question (Gunning, 2008). Boys also should understand that there is a connection between the question type and its answer (Schirmer, 2010). Some questions are literal, but some are inferential and require higher-level thinking.

Think-Alouds

Thinking aloud (Davey, 1983) is a strategy that improves comprehension by verbalizing one’s internal thinking, thus making more apparent the processes that naturally occur during reading. In other words, thinking aloud forces students to think while reading. Consciously using that inner voice while reading helps boys to monitor their use of such other strategies as predicting, imaging, connecting, and clearing up confusion. Although it is important for teachers to model any new strategy, it is vital that they model think-alouds and allow sufficient time for students to practice the strategy often in the classroom.

Teachers should plan their think-aloud modeling session well ahead of time to ensure a proper presentation. The following sample think-aloud, from Humphrey’s *Pompeii: Nightmare at Midnight* (1996, p. 29), focuses on the events immediately after Mount Vesuvius erupted a second time, releasing deadly gasses and tons of ash that buried the inhabitants of Pompeii:

TEXT: A woman died clutching her jewels.

TEACHER: She must have been trying to escape if she had her valuables. She might have been from the part of town where the wealthy lived. Maybe the jewels were excavated and are now displayed in a museum or at the site of Pompeii.

TEXT: A slave died draped over plates he had dropped.

TEACHER: I wonder if this was the slave of the woman with the jewels. He must have been working as the ground was shaking. Maybe the plates dropped because the ground shook! He must have been terrified.

TEXT: A man begging outside the city gate died with his sack.

TEACHER: This man was *outside* the gate with a sack. I wonder what he had in his sack. I guess they were *his* valuables. He could have been trying to get away

from the destruction in the town. This makes me think of deadly fumes and fires. Even now it isn't always the flames that kill people, but many times it is the fumes from toxic materials. The fumes killed many in Pompeii. Maybe more people could have escaped had it not been for the deadly gasses released into the air.

TEXT: At least 2,000 people were killed and buried by the ashes covering Pompeii.

TEACHER: Two thousand people! That is a little more than the number of people that died in Hurricane Katrina and about the same number of students in our district's high schools and middle schools combined. If 2,000 people were killed and buried in Pompeii, I wonder how many more died in Herculaneum.

After the teacher's modeling of the method, students work with partners, alternately reading the next section of text and practicing the think-aloud. To ensure boys' active engagement, the teacher made sure the topic was interesting and motivating, the text included dramatic photos and clear graphics, background information about Pompeii and volcanoes was provided, and same-gender partners worked together. To ensure success and automaticity over time, the think-aloud strategy was repeatedly modeled, students were coached, and the strategy was practiced over a period of weeks.

Smith and Wilhelm (2006) have suggested other types of thinking aloud for their male students. These include (1) free-response think-alouds, in which students write as they read; (2) cued think-alouds, wherein students respond to a specific visual or written cue; and (3) visual think-alouds, in which drawings represent the text or students' connections to the reading (pp. 107–108).

GETTING TO THE CONTENT

Textbooks are the major tool for teaching in the content areas. However, textbooks are relatively dry reading and the content occasionally confusing or misleading. Since textbooks may attract little interest from boys (and girls for that matter), fortunately there are alternative ways to help learn the content. First, many textbooks have allied websites where students can view much the same materials and sometimes even more, including related photos, videos, and hypermedia links. Second, reading everything from picture books to professional books on the same topic helps to stoke students' interest and understanding of the topics covered in the textbooks. For example, first graders might be studying their local neighborhoods in social studies. To supplement the textbook's information, fiction and nonfiction sources providing further background knowledge—in addition to books on the history, famous people, and events of the wider community—should be made available in a special section of the classroom library.

Videos, podcasts, blogs, interviews, and software also help boys understand content. At pbskids.org/rogers/buildANeighborhood.html, first graders can build their own

neighborhood; at www.nationalgeographic.com/podcasts, students can learn about animals from their community as well as around the world; and at www.studentsoftheworld.info/sites/pages.php, students can read blogs about communities in different countries. Another significant resource that can provide useful images that help boys learn content is YouTube. Performing an online search of the name of your own town might reveal a number of interesting videos—like the one featuring a train cutting through the village of Glenview, Illinois, on a winter morning (available at www.youtube.com/watch?v=h5HHFibEYhw&NR=1)!

To make more sense of the content, boys can be encouraged to create and use such visual aids as photos, graphs, outlines, diagrams, charts, and the like. These graphic organizers help clarify informational relationships and structure content so that it is easier to learn (Tate, 2003). Boys can create and use their own graphic organizers when they are provided with oversized paper, rulers, and drawing pencils, which is generally better than having to use an organizer copied onto an 8" x 11" sheet of paper. When using a graphic organizer for the first time, boys are most successful when they are able to copy a model.

One class assignment was to compare and contrast a hurricane and a tornado by using a Venn diagram. Venn diagrams had been modeled in past lessons; so, the students were familiar with the form and the process. The same-gender partners drew two large intersecting circles traced onto unruled chart paper and then filled in the similarities and differences between tornados and hurricanes by using both words and pictures. This exercise was successful with boys because they were (1) using sufficiently large paper to accommodate any issues with handwriting in small spaces; (2) organizing knowledge to assist in their understanding; (3) paying attention to the details of the graphic organizer; (4) able to use pictures; (5) able to replicate the process with practice; and (6) able to complete the task entirely.

The Venn diagram assignment was also successful because of the partner work. Boys work well when they are able to talk, be active, and yet include a bit of play (Fletcher, 2006). Alex, a middle school science teacher, observes this dynamic unfolding in his classes every day:

"I often see that boys working in same-gender groups have less of the pressure to 'perform'—especially for their female peers. In this sense, boys working among themselves often show me deeper knowledge and collaborative skills without having to worry about social stigmas sometimes associated with being studious. I find that I see the most critical thinking and growth with boys when they challenge each other and themselves for the betterment of their group."

Alex enthusiastically talks about how well his male students work together. Alex is a fairly new teacher, but he clearly understands how to reach boys. He understands literacy and how boys "work" with content, both as a hands-on activity and, as much as possible, as an extension of what they enjoy (Fletcher, 2006; Newkirk, 2002).

DIGITAL LITERACIES AND BOYS

The lives of boys have changed radically during the past decade. Boys as young as three own video systems and handheld Internet devices, and they play network and browser-based games with friends online. They don't necessarily need to go out to socialize; they can keep in touch with friends through texting, Facebook, and Twitter. A study by the Kaiser Family Foundation (2010) found that in general those between the ages of 8 and 18 spend an average of 7 hours and 38 minutes a day involved in what they call "entertainment media." The heaviest media users were boys between the ages of 11 and 14, and many who reported heavy use also reported lower grades in school.

Because they are so heavily immersed in it, contemporary school-age children are native users of the digital language needed to effectively interface with today's electronic and digital literacies (Zambo & Brozo, 2009). They are also the best teachers of electronic and digital literacies. Boys in particular seem to be able to figure out these new media without parents' or teachers' assistance. When asked how he learned to use his new video game system, Will explained, "I just jumped into it. I had a little experience playing at a friend's house; so, when I got mine, I just kept trying things until something worked." Will didn't use the manual, and he laughed when asked if his parents had helped him get familiar with the games. "My parents read the manual, but that was only to set the system up. They still don't really know how to use it."

The skills boys have with electronic and other high-tech media will indeed be significant in shaping their future—but so will literacy. The two can be combined to deepen the learning and knowledge that arise from reading and writing. Gauthier et al. (2006–2007) found that shared web spaces like various wiki links and Google Docs were tools that boys found to be highly accessible and easy to use. Google Docs and wikis allow users to collaboratively compose, revise, edit, and add hyperlinks to content while using any web browser (www.docs.google.com; www.wiki.org). Using these links, a research paper could be completed by a group of boys over the Internet without ever having to physically get together.

In the Gauthier et al. study (2006–2007), boys had to work in groups of twos and threes on either long-term science projects or American History textbook chapter outlines. Assignments were distributed so that each individual group member had to contribute equally to the assignment's completion. The groups were able track their efforts, and the teachers were able to monitor their progress while including their own reflections and comments right on the web document.

The completed assignments were found to include more data and ideas of a higher quality when these web-based methods were employed. Approximately three-fourths of the boys said that they would gladly use shared web spaces again for group work. They noted that the web spaces were easy to use and that they were able to be well organized without having to worry about losing their materials. They especially liked being able to work on the collaborative web space at any time and not having to meet directly with their partners in order to complete their assignments. They noted that the web space

provided a better collaborative arrangement than having to email documents back and forth.

IMPLEMENTING KEY IDEAS

Literacy leaders realize that, as readers, boys have special or even unique needs when it comes to literacy. In this chapter we have reviewed these unique needs and recommend a few key ways to support boys in literacy:

- Discover the areas of interest for all students—but especially for boys.
- Have a variety of engaging reading genres available for boys' appraisal and selection.
- Make multiple book recommendations in diverse genres readily available.
- Implement SSR to encourage a love of reading.
- Urge both parents, especially fathers, to read more.
- Teach boys engaging comprehension strategies to bolster their understanding.
- Help boys contend better with textbook content by a variety of means.
- Promote digital literacy technology to engage boys further in literacy activities.

CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

Literacy leaders are committed to providing all students with the tools to be able to read and write, but the gender gap still needs to narrow. On a positive note, the National Endowment for the Arts (2009) study found that after years of decrease, the literature reading for 18- to 24-year-olds in general increased 21 percent between 2002 and 2008 and that the literature reading for males increased at an 11 percent rate during the same years. It is time to implement what is known about the special literacy needs of boys and commit to supporting boy readers. Embracing and celebrating boys and literacy just makes good sense.