The Bridges Between Boys and Literacy in a Third Grade Classroom

Tiffany Carnevale

St. John Fisher College
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Abstract

This one month study focused on engaging third grade boys and what bridges that gap between them and literacy. This study took place in a suburban school district, again in one third grade classroom. The classroom was chosen based on the volunteering of the teacher. The five students were chosen based on their reading assessments performed by their reading teacher. This study consisted of a teacher interview, student interviews, and classroom and student observation. The students were observed in the classroom where they receive reading instruction. The results showed that there are two different bridges that engaged the male students and that the results showed that there are three factors that impact the engagement of these male students: Classroom environment, home literacy environment, and student interest. This study gives a limited picture of male engagement in literacy. An implication is that teachers and districts need to redefine their traditional definition of literacy and to incorporate non-traditional literacies, such as expanding their literature genres and incorporating reader’s theater into their classrooms.
Introduction

Have you ever been in a classroom where the male students are staring off into space during literacy instruction? Where the male students tell you that they hate to read and that they would rather look at pictures? Or that the book is boring? After my student teaching experience, I decided that I wanted to look deeper at the difference between the genders and their engagement in literacy. Trying to motivate any student who is not engaged in literacy can be extremely difficult for both parents and teachers. I want to be able to engage male students who struggle in reading, and allow them to gain the same perks of reading that male students who enjoy reading do. The purpose of this study was to find what are the contributing factors that affect the engagement of struggling readers. I also wanted to know what struggling readers thought of themselves as readers. I also wanted to observe how teachers were helping support these struggling readers in order for them to be successful.

Review of Literature

Existing research indicates that there is a relationship between engagement in reading and achievement (Clark et al, 2008; David et al, 2006; Heller, 2006; 2007; Moss, 2007; Smith 2003). There has been considerable concern in the past about literacy or the lack there of when it comes to boys. The differing expectations between the two genders may lead to difficulties in the future. There are three major concepts that seemed to lie across most research that has been
recently studied over the past couple of years. One concept would be the relationship between engagement and literacy achievement. Another would be male underachievement in male students. And the last would be self-selected reading, reader’s theater, genres, series, and other tools that help motivate students. There is a gap between what students want and what schools actually provide.

Kathy Sanford (2005) encapsulates the remaining differences in expectations for boys’ and girls’ uses of literacy in schools.

Boys are engaging in the world differently, using alternative literacies for their present and future benefit. In the long run, in many social structures boys will still benefit by being male, and girls will still lose out by being female. However, as boys continue to increase their confident engagement with technology, it is possible that they will decrease their engagement with people in their lives, that the virtual world will further remove them from caring for the real world around them. Teachers, as representatives of society, cannot always assume that the traditionally masculine world and values are best. They need to begin to see the value the collaboration and caring that girls have the courage to offer as they engage in the world differently. (2005)

Further research examines the effects of engagement on literacy achievement. Lenters (2007) reported that socio-cultural practices that occur in the context of a family, and its community are related to boys’ development in literacy. “As long as children see print as purposeless or nonsensical, they will find attention to print aversive and be bored” (Millard, 1997). There are three specific areas of influence that contribute to shaping the attitudes and expectations of reading: that of the family, that of the friends, and that of the people in school. It is important to
look into how people view themselves as readers, and the ways in which their early reading experiences have been differentiated in relation to their gender. The research by Millard marked patterns of gender difference in the experience of reading.

Until we have acquired more detailed evidence of how differential access by class and race, as well as gender, to both old and new forms of literacy, continues to shape attitudes and relationships to reading and writing in school, it is difficult to set priorities for the encouragement of good classroom practice. (1997).

Lenters (2007) also demonstrates that a child’s literacy development is learned through family and community involvement; such as enhancing the bedtime story and incorporating electronic literacy tools. Heller (2006; 2007), like Lenters (2007) expresses that when a child is in a risk free environment and given sufficient support and modeling from the teacher, they will actively engage in literacy activities. It is also quite obvious that the “higher the complexities of a literacy task, the more engaged students would be” (Davis et al, 2006, p. 4). In any classroom and in any situation, the more students are engaged, the more they will achieve academically.

Moorman et al (1999) discussed the gap between student preferences and materials that schools provide and the important of providing students with an array of materials to engage students. It has been researched that boys are much more selective readers in that boys prefer to read comic books, humorous books, adventure books, and series books, and most districts don’t provide these types of literacies. Clark et al (2008) observed that “boys struggle more with academic success issues than girls in areas such as work completion, organization, motivation, and achieving to their potential” (p.117).
Theoretical Framework

This research is on what’s bridging the gap between boys and literacy. Current researchers look at engagement of boys and literacy from a sociocultural perspective. Sociocultural Theory is defined as “the child as an active member of a constantly changing community of learners in which knowledge constructs and is constructed by larger cultural systems” (Larson & Marsh, 2005, p.100). Other researchers that have supported this theory would be Rogoff (1995), and Vygotsky (1978). The Sociocultural Theory focuses on how children and people alike acquire language through their everyday experiences (Larson and Marsh, 2005).

Using the Sociocultural Theory to guide my research, I am seeking to examine what bridges the gap between boys and literacy. Throughout my teaching experience, I have come to find that every child learns differently and has different interests. These differences in interests with literacy have vital connotations for engagement in boy’s literacy practices. My research takes cultural, demographic, and ability level variations into account when considering the best “bridges” between boys and literacy. Researchers have supported the idea that students, whether male or female, come to school with different literacy experiences and that those students who come to school with structured literacy practices at home have the most success. My research focuses on finding the best literacy vehicles for teachers to utilize to bridge that gap between boys and literacy.
Guiding Question

Existing research indicates that there is a relationship between engagement in reading and achievement. Therefore, given the theoretical stance that literacy is a socially based, interactive process, it is necessary to approach the question of the relationship between engagement and achievement in boys by observing students engagement in literacy practices and to interview them about their interests and needs in order to fully engage in literacy practices. As such, this research asks, what is the cause of the gap between third grade boys and literacy? And how can we, as educators, help bridge that gap?

Methods

*Design*- In order to truly look into this topic, the research will involve qualitative methods including: observation of students and teachers during literacy instruction, student interviews, teacher interviews, and a collection of student reading and writing assessments. Details of the research protocol are as follows.
Setting- The study takes place at General William Floyd Elementary School, in the town of Holland Patent, a suburban district. There are a total of 375 students and 60 staff members. The school is a Pre-K through Fifth Grade building and is one of the two elementary schools in the Holland Patent School District. General William Floyd does not have a diverse population. The majority of the population is Caucasian. At General William Floyd Elementary School there are 60 students who are eligible for free lunch, these students make up 20% of the student population. Thirty students receive a reduced-price lunch, making up 0% of the student population. The annual attendance rate for General William Floyd Elementary School is 92%. General William Floyd Elementary has a 1% student suspension rate. There are 37 students with limited English proficiency at General William Floyd Elementary School. These students make up about 10% of the population. General William Floyd Elementary has 38 students who receive special education; these students make up 10% of the student population.

Participants- The participants will be five third grade boys. These boys were picked based on their reading assessments, which determined that they are at or below grade level in reading, or are underachieving in reading. Three of the boys in the study receive Academic Instruction Services for reading. These five boys are in two different classrooms for reading instruction. Three of the boys receive reading instruction in a regular education classroom and two of the boys receive education in a small class, 12:1:1. The two teachers also participated in the research. I have an existing relationship with one of the teachers, as she is my sister-in-law.
Consent- Informed consent will be obtained through a letter and permission slip from the parents of the five boys. The five boys will be asked to give their assent to the researcher verbally during the interview. I explained to the students that I was interested in their motivation towards reading. They were told what this study would consist of (an assessment, observation, and interviews) and approximately how long I would be studying them. I also explained that they are able to withdraw from the study at any time if they feel it is not something they would like to be a part of. The two teachers will also give their informed consent during the interview.

Data Collection- In order to conduct my research I used three sources of data collection; observations, student interviews, and teacher interviews. The primary source of data collection was observations, which were supported with personal interviews and journals reflections.

Observations

The classroom was observed twice throughout the study for two whole school days. During each observation I focused on both the method of instruction from the teacher as well as the student reaction to the delivery of the instruction. I acted as an observer within the classroom throughout the class time whereas I am usually jumping into the lesson helping co-teach the lesson. I paid close attention to the reaction of the students as well as the direction the teacher took as she initiated literacy instruction and leading SSR (self-selected reading). I sat in the back of the classroom at a table and recorded both teacher and student interactions throughout the lessons. I looked at how often and when the male students participated in the classroom. In order to formally record these observations, I took highly structured field notes on the selected students and teacher.
Student Interviews

Throughout the course of the research there was a total of five student interviews. These interviews lasted anywhere between five to seven minutes in length that focused on their thoughts and feelings about literacy, how they see themselves as a reader, and what their home literacy environment is like. An observation, as stated earlier, will also be conducted on the students in their classroom. I looked at what the students were doing during independent reading and how engaged they were during this time as well.

Teacher Interview

Throughout the course of the research there was also a total of one teacher interview. This interview lasted approximately twenty minutes. I focused the interview on what the teacher does to engage her students no matter what gender. I also focused some of the questions on her thoughts about differences between genders and what she sees between the two. The interviewer transcribed the interviews.

Data Analysis- Data was analyzed by using an interpretive approach. I wanted to understand the practice of self-selected reading in the classroom, particularly with regards to the engagement of boys.
Findings

Classroom Environment

Through observations it became quite evident that the classroom environment has a direct effect on the level of engagement in boys during literacy instruction and literacy practices. In Miss Anna’s classroom, it promotes literacy by being a literacy-rich environment.

Miss Anna has a plethora of books, magazines, news articles, pamphlets, etc. available in her room. She also makes sure to always display books relevant to the content we’re learning about.
For example, if they are learning about multiplication, Miss Anna will have several books about multiplication available. If they are learning about butterflies, she’ll have fiction and nonfiction books and magazines available on display for her students to look at if they have further interest or want to know more about the topic. Miss Anna also makes it a point to introduce those books after she introduces a concept. Miss Anna also is very cognizant about being very enthusiastic about it to the enthusiasm transfers over to her students. Miss Anna believes that if the students can sense her enthusiasm for reading and literacy, then that will pour into the “children’s soul and they will share that same enthusiasm and love for reading”. She comments,

“First and foremost, I’m enthusiastic about reading. Just talking about a book and showing the kids I’m excited about it and think that the book is awesome makes them want to read it – and often times they argue over being the first to read the book. Second, I expose my students to lots and lots of books – and a wide variety, too. I send home book orders and order books that I know the students will like or have an interest in with my bonus points or my own money. I keep in mind the whole class, but I also keep in mind the one boy who won’t read or do anything that isn’t related to sports... so I make sure to buy chapter books that have to do with sports in different genres.”
The picture above is of just one of the many areas where Miss Anna displays her classroom books. The blue shelves to the left of the picture are where she displays her books that are on the topic they are currently learning about.

When I asked Miss Anna in our interview if she incorporated self-selected reading into her literacy instruction this was her response.

“I do have an SSR block in my daily schedule. My school follows the 4-Blocks model, so that is one of the blocks we are required to have in our daily plans. My students always have a minimum of 20 minutes to read silently anywhere around the room. The students keep a daily log of their reading in their SSR folders. Their folders also contain ideas for things to discuss during their SSR conference as well as things to think about and questions that I’ll be asking them when we conference. The students really enjoy their reading time and usually beg for a few more minutes.”

When it came to self-selected reading, she made it very clear that the students themselves do all the picking of their literature. Miss Anna explained that in the beginning of the school year she does a mini-lesson on book care and how to choose the right book. She relates the lesson to Goldilocks and the Three Bears. She explained that there are books that are too easy, there are books that are too hard, and then there are books that are just right. The class then makes a chart and they discuss the criteria for each category and they come up with examples for each. Miss Anna then has the students go off and pick a book and report back on where the book fits them. They also have a section in their reading log to explain if they thought a book was too easy, a book was too hard, or if a book was just right. During conference time, which she calls on a few
students a day during self-selected reading time, she discusses with the students what books they are choosing and to see if there is some sort of pattern. It could be that the student(s) is picking all easy books, and won’t explore any difficulty or challenge themselves in reading, or that they continue to pick books that may be too difficult for them and they do not truly understand what they are reading. Since this study took place towards the end of the year, Miss Anna commented that “the students have really gotten the hang of their reading comfort level and are doing a really nice job of choosing their own books.”

When I asked Miss Anna if she saw a difference in the level of engagement between the male and female students in her classroom, she was a little hesitant before she answered. Miss Anna proceeded to answer the question as such,

“Yes and no. Females, in general, are better behaved and calm. They’re more likely to pay attention when we’re reading or writing than the boys. The males, however, will more likely pay attention if they are motivated or if they’re interested.”

I then proceeded to ask her what she the contributors are. Miss Anna believes the contributing factors would be motivation, interesting topics, and that she thinks males definitely have a harder time sitting still for a longer period of time. She feels that if the book is gross than the boys are definitely more into it!
Home Literacy Environment

Through student interviews and after talking with Miss Anna about each student I interviewed, I feel as though I received a pretty good idea about each student and their home literacy environment. According to student interviews the amount of time the boys spend on reading at home, or outside of school, directly affects the boy’s feelings about reading and the level of engagement during ELA (English Language Arts) in school. During the interview with Ethan, he happily stated that he truly enjoys reading and tries to read before bed every night. Ethan also practices the books that Miss Anna sends home from guided reading with him mom. Ethan also made mention that his mom likes to take him to the library, especially over the summer. He said they try to go once a week and take out a few books for him to read before bed or to take on trips with him for the car ride. After talking with Miss Anna about Ethan and his home literacy environment, she made it very clear that Ethan’s mom takes school and learning for her children very seriously and knows that with “practice makes perfect” (Miss Anna). Shane is another student who says that he enjoys reading and that he practices a lot before bed. It is quite evident that these two boys’ families understand the importance of reading at home. And that learning doesn’t just happen in the school setting. Since these two boys, Ethan and Shane, are engaged in literacy activities in their homes, they are more capable of engaging in literacy practices and instruction when in school and enjoying doing so. This was definitely observed in my classroom observations. When I asked the remaining boys if they enjoyed reading at home or what they do at home to practice their reading, most replied “I don’t have time” or “I always forget”. During my observations these three boys has the most difficulty staying engaged and on task. These three boys were talking to other students, one of the boys asked if he could organize the book shelf, and the other kept getting up to use the bathroom in the classroom (once to actually use the
bathroom, once to blow his nose, and then another time to wash the pen off his hand). Since these three boys have not been engaged by their parents in literacy practices at home, they seem to lack the skills required to sustain engagement in the classroom.

**Student Interest**

Again, through student interviews and teacher interviews, the data proposes that student interest has a direct influence on the level of boys’ engagement during literacy instruction and literacy practices. After hearing this response from Miss Anna listed above, I couldn’t help but ask what the more popular genres are or what appears to be the reading material that the male students are interested in. Miss Anna responded with, “*Nonfiction without a doubt.*” She also mentioned that anything to do with tornadoes or bugs is a hit. They also love fiction book series like *Captain Underpants, Diary of a Wimpy Kid, Bones*, etc. The grosser the book the better the engagement and interest in reading they have. Miss Anna also mentioned that the boys enjoy *Marvin Redpost* and *Ready Freddy* books.

Miss Anna and the boys also mentioned that they very much so enjoy Reader’s Theater. This is a reading strategy that teacher’s use to help students with fluency, reading with voice, and reading for pleasure. There are many other benefits to Reader’s Theater as well. Miss Anna uses this strategy to really get the boys involved in her classroom. Miss Anna has scripts made of many different stories; she then splits the students up into groups. The students are then to choose characters to be and they are to read through their lines to truly understand the character. The groups are then given a certain amount of time to create hats and use props to help present
their story to the classroom. As I was observing this strategy, and partaking in one of the groups, I couldn’t help but notice how engaged every single student in the class was. Some of the boys that I was really focusing on and interviewing were extremely involved. Some of the boys wanted to be two or three different characters. It was such a pleasure to see the engagement and enthusiasm from each student.

**Implications**

This study gives a limited picture of student engagement (or the lack there of) in one third grade classroom. In the classroom where this study took place it is clear that you cannot generalize these findings due to the fact that this study was done during a one month period in one classroom. When I first started my research, I was focusing on the literacy act of reading a book, both at school and at home. Now several questions have come out of this research as I analyze my findings: 1). What do we, as teachers, define as literacy? 2). How can we encourage non-traditional literacy activities, and 3). How can we incorporate these into our classroom and consider other literature (not district driven) into our literacy instruction? To answer these questions I would take this research to the next level and re-interview the five boys. I would first start out by asking what these boys think literacy is, what is another way of reading. I would have a conversation with the students, their parents, the teacher(s), and the administration. Analyzing this data has left me as the researcher and as a future educator to really think about this work beyond the study. It is quite obvious that the reading of a book is important for students, it is also important that they engage in what they are reading or at least in everyday non-traditional literacies, and are aware that they are doing so. As teachers it is our job to not only teach
students what literacy is what it looks like, but to redefine our own definitions of literacy and include non-traditional literacies into our classrooms and literacy instruction.

Limitations
This study took place in one classroom at one grade level, in one suburban school district and thus the results cannot be generalized. In addition, I only observed in school, and did not observe the students’ homes, or interview their parents. Therefore I was unable to truly get a good picture of the students’ home life and the literacy involvement there.

Conclusion
The most obvious factors contributing to the engagement of boys in a third grade classroom were the classroom environment, the literacy involvement at home, and the students’ interest. In order to engage these boys, a teacher must have an organized classroom, full or literature of many different genres, and an enthusiastic teacher who values literacy. The teacher needs to know what types of texts appeal to her students and need to have those available to them. While Miss Anna did express her knowledge of the boys’ interests in reading genres, the majority of the boys were not interested in the texts that were found in their classroom. The few books that she did have in her classroom she purchased herself and the boys would fight over. The teacher must also be aware of the literacy practices occurring outside the classroom and truly encourage all parents to take part in their child’s literacy education.
Appendices

Teacher Interview

1). How does your classroom promote literacy?

2). Do you incorporate self-selected reading into your literacy instruction?

3). Do you select the reading materials for your students? Or do you expect your students to select their own reading materials?
   a). If you expect your students to select their own, what are their guidelines (if any) for the students to follow in selecting them?

4). Do you see a difference in the level of engagement between males and females during language arts instruction?
   a). If so, what do you think the contributors are?

5). What kinds of reading materials (genres, series, etc.) appear to be of the most interest to the male students in your classroom?

6). What kinds of reading materials (genres, series, etc.) appear to be of the most interest to the female students in your classroom?

7). What do you do to encourage literacy learning in your classroom?
   a). Is there a difference between the way you encourage male students compared to female students?
Student Interview

1). What is your favorite subject in school?

2). What is your favorite thing to do outside of school?

3). Do you enjoy reading?

4). How often do you read at school? How often do you read at home?

5). Do you think you are a good reader?

6). Do you enjoy reading in your reading group?

7). Do you enjoy having self-selected or independent reading time?

8). What types of books do you like? Do you have a specific genre?
References


Steps to Success: Crossing the Bridge Between Literacy Research and Practice introduces instructional strategies linked to the most current research-supported practices in the field of literacy. The book includes chapters related to scientifically-based literacy research, early literacy. For a novice writer, there are many things to think about: forming letters on the page, writing left to right in a horizontal line, leaving spaces between words, using letters to represent the sounds in words, capitalizing proper nouns and the beginning of sentences, and placing punctuation in appropriate places. Today, handwriting is usually taught in kindergarten through third grade, but much less