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Kay Hyatt

College of Education & Human Development, University of Maine

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COLLEGE OF EDUCATION & HUMAN DEVELOPMENT

Selected News Releases

Literacy Outside School More Real for Boys

ORONO, Maine - The problem with boys as portrayed by the popular media presents only part of a complex picture of the social, school and literate lives of adolescent males, according to a collaborative study from the University of Maine and Rutgers University.

Far from being socially alienated, unemotional and disinterested in school, boys in the study had close groups of friends with whom they readily shared interests and concerns, and they recognized the necessity - if not the relevance - of schooling for success, say Jeffrey Wilhelm of UMaine and Michael Smith of Rutgers. And rather than being turned off by reading as a feminine activity as often reported in the on-going debate, the boys valued and employed literacy in a variety of meaningful ways.

Most of the research establishing literacy as the widest current gender gap and the public attention it generates ignores the fact that some boys who reject or dislike school-based literacy lessons use reading and writing in varied and productive ways in other areas of their lives, say Wilhelm and Smith. Both have written extensively about the teaching and learning of literacy.

The consistent conversation and reports generalizing boys' personal, social and academic shortcomings inspired the researchers to take a closer look at the controversy, not to determine more quantitative averages, but to consider individual differences. By following a diverse group of adolescent boys and examining their favorite activities, as well as their attitudes toward reading, Smith and Wilhelm connected what boys like to do and how their literate behavior plays into those interests.

The yearlong study involved 49 sixth-12th grade boys, who ran the gamut of ethnicity, social class, geography and school success at four diverse sites: an urban high school comprised almost entirely of African American and Puerto Rican students; a comprehensive suburban high school; a rural school; and a private all-boys school.

While schools do tend to work against the literacy development of boys in subtle and complex ways, the researchers concluded, boys in the study relied on and engaged in a broad array of literate activity that had an important function in their lives and accomplishments outside of the classroom.

Smith and Wilhelm are detailing and their findings and recommendations for schools in a book tentatively titled "Reading Don't Fix No Chevies:" The Place of Literacy in the Lives of Young Men, forthcoming from Heinemann.

Most of the boys felt bored and disenfranchised by school. Knowing how to read was important; reading itself was not. Almost universally, the boys indicated that school curriculum did not work

for them and did not address their interests or goals. However, they generally believed in the necessity of school as a credentialing agency to get to the real life stuff they desired -freedom, possibilities and success.

The boys expressed a huge contrast between school reading and life reading. School reading was assigned; life reading was freely chosen. School reading was unconnected to their interests; life reading built on their developed interests. School reading was usually too long and too hard; life reading usually consisted of short passages and was sometimes challenging, but the boys felt competent to read what they chose. School reading was not used; life reading was readily applied to their lives. School reading involved mostly books and textbooks; life reading involved media, video, TV, music lyrics, Internet sites and a variety of popular culture texts, magazines and newspapers.

Although only seven of the boys turned to books outside of school, which is the conventional description of being a reader, all of the boys were engaged in literate activity in important ways.

Among highlights of the study:

- Being part of a small close-knit group of male friends was absolutely central to boys' lives and often influenced their literate activities. For example, one boy regularly checks the Internet or newspapers to keep up with hockey scores because his friends expect him to know this information. Another, who admits to hating school and homework, is a professional wrestling aficionado and keeps a notebook detailing more than 600 wrestling moves. This passion for the sport is a quality that defines him to his friends.
- The desire for visible and immediate signs of accomplishment was important to all the boys. Being good at something motivates their activity in that field, and they quickly give up on something if they don't see progress. Only one boy reported feeling this sense of accomplishment in his reading.
- They want to be challenged, but in contexts in which they feel confident of success or at least improvement. One of the primary attractions of video games is that the level of difficulty increases with the player's expertise. Many of the boys recalled reading "Goosebumps" books, which they liked but are now too easy. However, some currently feel overmatched by school reading assignments, which defeats the challenge.
- Readings the boys enjoy have a purpose: getting information, figuring out what happens, making things, keeping track of things, helping others. A high school student who was a talented mechanic but couldn't read exemplified their appreciation of literacy in doing important work. He depended on magazine illustrations to guide him, and if he needed more details, he would ask someone to read the accompanying text.
- The desire for choice and freedom in classroom texts, assignments and projects was pervasive. When literacy touches their passions and interests, the boys embrace it as a way to feed those interests. They almost uniformly enjoy the novelty brought by textual ruptures like satire and irony that allows them to see in a new way. Only one boy in the study did not like watching the TV show, "The Simpsons."
- The boys viewed school, and English class in particular, as immutable. Though they had many critiques of how school failed to address their needs for relevance, interest, choice, competence and learning, they did not see how it could be changed to work better for them.

- The importance of a positive teacher-student relationship to learning or not learning and the boys' perspective of an inherent social contract to be appropriately educated was evident across the board. As the highly reluctant student so well versed in the language and maneuvers of wrestling said of his English teacher: "If she even knew that I was interested in wrestling, I would read her books."

Teachers, the researchers say, must embrace a wider perspective of literacy and blend a variety of sources and strategies to connect with and motivate students and effectively prepare both boys and girls for a multi-media communications future.

While emphasizing their own belief in the importance of the traditional role of literacy and literature in the classroom, Smith and Wilhelm suggest that schools:

- expand their view of what counts as worthwhile reading
- connect literacy instruction to the interests that boys value
- offer a choice and some control over what students read
- create lessons that are active, social and visual (such as the use of drama)
- teach before students read the text rather than after to give them a sense of competence going into the reading

Wilhelm and Smith are associate professors of literacy education and directors of the National Writing Project at their respective institutions.

Researcher contact information:

Michael W. Smith, Rutgers University

Telephone: (732) 932-7496, ext. 120

email: micsmit@rci.rutgers.edu

Jeffrey D. Wilhelm, The University of Maine

Telephone: (207) 581-2746

e-mail: jeff.wilhelm@umit.maine.edu

Wilhelm is on sabbatical, doing research in Australia, but can be reached via e-mail.

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Contact: Kay Hyatt, (207) 581-2761

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