Male Call: Fifth-Grade Boys’ Reading Preferences

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The findings in this study can help teachers discover entry-point books that meet boys’ personal standards and keep them engaged.

As a first grader, Kurtis (all student names are pseudonyms) checked out informational books. Only informational books. Every week, all year long. Never the beautifully illustrated, happily ever after, picture storybooks that his teacher read aloud each day. Just books with facts—preferably lots of facts. According to Kurtis, he wanted to read books that “had real stuff in them.” So he read about spiders and sharks and knights in armor and karate. Often the same books reappeared time and again in his backpack, as the school’s informational picture book selection was limited.

By fifth grade, Kurtis had figured it out. Read an Accelerated Reader (AR) selection worth a high point value, preferably a series book, and get your AR points established. Then read books about “real stuff”—a biography of Ben Franklin, a history of the plague, and those fact-filled books such as the world almanac and sports record books. By reading a series book, he’d cut down on his “getting to know the book’s setup” because he’d already been introduced to the setting, plot structure, and usual characters in previous books in the series. In his view, this was “just reading without having to figure things out.”

Because Kurtis had already created a schema by reading an initial book in a series, he just tweaked it with each new series book he read. So he’d zip through one of Brian Jacques’s Redwall books and take the AR test. Then he could spend the rest of the nine-week grading term with his nose stuck inside informational books of his own selection without any teacher-required obligations attached to them. In short, he was reading purely to satisfy his own passion for reading. Rosenblatt (1995) would be endeared to these boy readers who read nonfiction both efferently and aesthetically.

Boy Readers

As teachers, we often agonize over our boy readers. Research from international test results comparing boys’ and girls’ reading scores indicates that in 31 countries, female students perform better than their male counterparts in reading, resulting in boys being labeled “the new disadvantaged” (Foster, Kimmel, & Skelton, 2001). We’ve long known that boys are far more apt to be referred for special reading services and special education than their female peers (Farris, Fuhler, & Walther, 2004; Valdes, Williamson, & Wagner, 1990).

Research also points out that, overall, boys devote less time to reading, tend to be less confident readers, have less motivation to engage in reading, do not especially value reading as a free time activity, and have less interest in reading than girls (Baker & Wigfield, 1999; Chen, 2008; Gambell & Hunter, 2000; McKenna, Ellsworth, & Kear, 1995; Mok & Cheung, 2004; Sokal et al., 2004).

When boys are surveyed regarding their beliefs about reading, many say they view the act of reading as a feminine activity (Dutro, 2002; Tenenbaum & Leaper, 2002). Even in the primary grades, research by Katz and Sokal (2003) has indicated that 24% of second-grade students view reading as a feminine activity.
So what is the ideal pedagogical environment for stimulating boys' reading habits? Dyson (2006) wrote that everyday voices are welcomed in a permeable curriculum in which children's relationships with each other are a kind of breeding ground for meaningful literacy use. Moreover, it includes ample guidance so that diverse populations and audiences can be made socially sensible for and with children; in this way, children are supported in entering new kinds of textual conversations, new sorts of dialogues with the world. (p. 152)

Brozo (2002) pointed out the need to engage boys in literacy when he wrote that this should be "the highest priority when developing reading curricula and seeking to foster independent reading habits" (p. 2). Although many concerned teachers try to do as Brozo has suggested, there are still too many indifferent or struggling boy readers. Indeed, there are too many indifferent teachers who fail to grasp the sociocultural worlds of their students as readers (Gee, 2008).

**Teachers and Boy Readers: Creating the Proper Social Context in the Classroom**

The social plane and cultural practices in which boys—the learners—and learning exist, that is, the sociocultural context in which meaning is constructed, must be considered. "Different sociocontexts yield different ways of being literate" (Hammerberg, 2004, p. 650). "Values, attitudes, beliefs, feelings, experiences, and relationships" (Compton-Lilly, 2008, p. 668) all impact the social and cultural dimensions of learning, which teachers must recognize as the differences that learners bring into the classroom as differences. Gee (2001) argued that "comprehension of written and verbal language is as much about experience with the worlds of home, school, and work as it is about words" (p. 714).

As boys progress through school, it becomes more difficult to motivate them to read. Although teachers seek to find that just-right book for every reader, the one that will get a particular boy engaged in literacy is oftentimes elusive. And why? Perhaps it is because 75% of K–12 teachers are female, with the elementary level having a higher percentage of female teachers than does the secondary level (U.S. Department of Education, 2006). In addition, consider that female preservice and inservice teachers may readily relate to the girls in their classes who focus on "chick lit." Many may read it themselves along with romance novels and magazines. But "boy lit" is often a foreign language.

So what topics do boys prefer to read about? There are several methods by which researchers have attempted to discover boys’ interests and reading preferences. Worthy, Moorman, and Turner (1999) conducted a survey of reading preferences and found that boys preferred to read comics, magazines, and scary stories. However, such texts have a history of being the forbidden genres in school and classroom libraries (Gambell & Hunter, 2000; Jacobs, 2007). Now, graphic literature is more widely accepted, and is often part of library collections to help foster students' love of reading (Harris, 2008; Norton, 2003).

Another survey study conducted by the State Library of North Carolina analyzed the reading preferences of children ages 2 to 18 years old (American Library Association, 2003). The results indicated that boys’ top five subject preferences in a school or public library centered on animals, science, sports, literature, and biography. As literacy educators, we need to acknowledge the reading preferences and interests of boys in our classrooms and examine what types of texts are available to use that will encourage boys to read.

We, the authors of this article, are teacher education faculty members and former teachers. As such, we’ve fielded hundreds of preservice and inservice teachers’ questions about which books are good titles of fiction for boys to read. Often we shared our own personal favorites—*Stone Fox* (Gardiner, 1999), *Hatchet* (Paulsen, 2006), *Sounder* (Armstrong, 1969/2001), and *Where the Red Fern Grows* (Rawls, 1996). With the exception of *Hatchet*, these are all dead dog stories. As we reflected upon our own teaching experiences with boys and considered our own sons’ reading interests, we discovered we needed to learn more about boys’ reading preferences. As we taught our undergraduate elementary education classes, sometimes without a single male student present, we noticed that our students leaned toward books they had loved as young girl readers and were generally unfamiliar with books that boys tended to select from library shelves.

In this article, we present the results of a qualitative study conducted with fifth-grade boys who dialogued about books they were reading using
e-mail exchanges with female teacher education candidates. The purpose of this qualitative study was twofold: (1) to examine the reading preferences of fifth-grade boys and (2) to motivate inner-city boys to read more. This study was part of a federally funded Teacher Quality Education grant from the U.S. Department of Education.

Background of the Study

Setting and Participants

This study was conducted in a school–university partnership elementary school located in an urban area in the Midwestern United States. Elementary teacher education candidates who were enrolled in an undergraduate children’s literature course were partnered with 16 adolescent boys in two fifth-grade classrooms. Student demographics of the two classrooms were similar to the school. Recent data from school records indicate that 64% of students were eligible for free or reduced-cost lunch. The students’ ethnic backgrounds were 17% African American, 19% Hispanic, and 54% Caucasian. As for academic performance, 57% of the fifth-grade students either met or exceeded the state learning standards in reading.

At the beginning of the study, all of the boys in the two classrooms participated (a total of 27), but that number dropped to 16 by April when the study ended. Some students dropped out midyear as they did not want to have a new partner from the university; others dropped out due to the difficulty in typing their responses.

The two classes were selected because their school was one of four schools involved in the federal grant obtained by the university. Their teachers had requested involvement with the university and assistance with motivating boys to read, and the course work of the undergraduate children’s literature class lent itself to the project.

Book Selection

The fifth-grade boys were provided with a collection of fiction and nonfiction books that were selected based upon recommendations from teachers in the field, children’s literature experts (Newkirk, 2002; Ross, McKechnie, & Rothbauer, 2006), and from award-winning children’s and young adults’ literature book lists.

At the request of the classroom teachers and school district administrators, there were more titles that were novels than informational books so that future use after the study ended might include literature circles. It should be noted that the classroom and school libraries were relatively sparse in terms of recently published children’s books. The school district did not permit comics to be used in classrooms and only those magazines that were education focused (Time for Kids, Weekly Reader) were approved. Additionally, the grant would only fund books, not periodicals.

In selecting books for the purpose of supporting struggling readers, Pam Nelson, the principle researcher, and the two classroom teachers considered books that had features to support reading (i.e., built-in questions, repetitions, pictures, sidebars, and references). Such features lend themselves to capturing the visual interest of nonreaders. Selections were also based upon each book’s likelihood of being an “entry point book,” those reading materials that grab boys and result in their learning the joy of reading (Young & Brozo, 2001). The Shadow Children series by Margaret Haddix was the most read series, followed by the Alex Rider books by Anthony Horowitz, then A Series of Unfortunate Events by Lemony Snicket.

Finally, it was important to offer thematically related novels and informational books so that students had opportunities to re-encounter content of the fifth-grade social studies curriculum. For example, several books were chosen to supplement units of study such as the Lewis and Clark Expedition and the U.S. Civil War. Such a collection of books were selected to help dispel the intimidating aspect of reading that many of the fifth-grade boys felt.

E-mail Journals: An Alternative to the Paper and Pencil Method

The dialogue journal is a medium of written communication between two individuals who exchange authentic conversation about literature (Atwell, 1987; Staton, 1980). These dialogue journals are traditionally exchanged between teacher and student through written entries in a bound composition notebook. As an alternative, this project sought to stimulate boys’ reading
by engaging in conversation about literature using e-mail. A positive aspect of e-mail is that it is a vehicle of communication that gives readers an opportunity to think and respond to literature in an instantaneous manner. This method also gives students a little thinking time as they form their individual responses. As Hancock (2008) pointed out, the development of new and various forms of technologies provide for “a new vision and dimension for reader response research” (p. 108).

In order that the boys be able to electronically correspond with teacher education candidates, the grant funded a cart of laptop computers, a communication tool that provided new, enticing experiences for several boys. Each boy selected a pseudonym such as “Pacman” or “Bears fan.” The teacher education candidates used first name pseudonyms they had selected. All e-mail correspondence went through both the classroom teacher and the university instructor as a selective screening measure.

**Data Collection and Analysis**

E-mail correspondence began in September and continued through April. The fifth-grade students were required to send one e-mail a week to the teacher education candidates describing and reacting to the literature they were reading. Students frequently commented on their likes or dislikes about a book and posed questions to which the teacher education candidates responded.

Data sources for this project included (a) printed e-mail correspondence between teacher education candidates and fifth-grade boys, (b) transcripts of interviews and discussions with the project director, Pam Nelson, and (c) field notes to record classroom observations and reflections. Once a week, the project director assumed the role of participant observer (Johnson, Avenarius, & Weatherford, 2006). She observed boys self-selecting books, observed classroom teachers during read-aloud sessions, and observed boys talking about books with peers. In addition to being an observer, the researcher also participated in the classroom during these times. In this role, she provided a cart of laptops for the boys and assisted them with their e-mail correspondence. This process required much of her time, as the boys had limited keyboarding skills. Field notes were kept to record classroom observations and informal interactions.

In addition, e-mail correspondence was collected to provide insight on the boys’ reading preferences.

Interviews were conducted with boys. These focused on their reading preferences and the reasons for those preferences. Questions that guided the interviews included

- What books did you enjoy reading?
- What did you like about the books that you chose to read?
- What do you mean by “the book looked good”?
- Who recommends books to you?

Data analysis was inductive and used the constant comparative method described by Glaser and Strauss (1967). E-mail correspondence between the teacher education candidates and the fifth-grade boys were read and interpreted by the researchers Pam Farris, Pam Nelson, and Donna Werderich. Descriptive codes were assigned to identify patterns of boys’ reading preferences. Transcripts of Pam Nelson’s interviews and field notes were also read and coded to explain any connections between the boys’ reading preferences and the different instructional techniques used by teachers. Such data helped to identify six observations about boys’ reading preferences.

**Observations: What Boys Read and Why**

1. Fifth-grade boys selected books that “looked good.” Classroom observations during independent reading time revealed that boys often selected a book to read based on the look of the cover. There were several types of books that fit into this category. One was the cover featuring a character engaged in what might be considered as dangerous, life-threatening activities such as depicted in *Dive: The Deep* (Korman, 2003a) and *Dive: The Discovery* (Korman, 2003b).

Observations also revealed that the lower ability, struggling readers would typically thumb through the presentation of the print layout in the book. Those books with wide, generous margins and easy-to-read fonts such as *Frindle* (Clements, 1996) were often selected. Notably these books have large print, were relatively short compared with the other choices, and have lots of white space.
The boys preferred books with significant characters who weren’t depicted as perfect but rather had believable flaws.

Finally, books with unusual or interesting fonts or those with textual features that were out of the ordinary were read. For instance, in Spinelli’s (1992) Do the Funky Pickle, the “notes” that passed between characters are written in italics rather than in the same font as the text. Gutman’s (2000) Jackie and Me: A Baseball Card Adventure includes historical photographs of Jackie Robinson and other baseball memorabilia in the back matter. In an interview, one boy reported, “I can just sit here and look at encyclopedia [Hibbert, Green, Sacks, & Morgan, 2003] all day.” The visual features such as captions, photographs, and illustrations throughout the book captivated him.

2. E-mail correspondence indicated that boys chose books that were part of a series or written by a favorite author. For example, many boys read and responded to Haddix’s Shadow Children series that begins with Among the Hidden (2006). In addition, many of the boys read Stormbreaker (Horowitz, 2001), the first in the Alex Rider Adventure series, and had gone on to read other titles in the series.

3. In one-on-one interviews with the project director, the boys indicated they enjoyed following a character through a number of situations and, in the case of sequel books, over years. For instance, the boys who read the first book in the Dive series by Gordon Korman also read subsequent books in the series. The boys preferred books with significant characters who weren’t depicted as perfect but rather had believable flaws. Particularly popular were those books with characters who faced and met challenges, which showed that any disabilities or liabilities were often overcome or were used in a positive way to meet challenges.

4. Boys chose fact books and informational books that had short passages supported by photographs or cartoon drawings. Evocative graphics and pathways to follow served as hypertext elements that appealed to boys in this study. Cutaways, pictures with captions, and multilayered books with a singular storyline were preferred.

In addition, the classroom teachers’ practice of offering a selection of informational books that connected with the school curriculum was especially important in both of the classrooms. For example, one teacher provided a number of books on the topic of the Lewis and Clark Expedition that the students used to locate information that extended, conflicted with, or supported the information in their social studies textbooks. Later in the year when the students were studying the U.S. Civil War, the teacher read Charlie Skedaddle (Beatty, 1996) aloud to the entire class and asked them to compare this work of historical fiction to identified sections of their textbook. All of these practices encouraged the boys and the girls in the class to use various resources to gather more information and insights on the war and its effects on the entire country. In the case of the boys in the class, after listening to Charlie Skedaddle as a read-aloud and making connections with the social studies textbook, their search for additional resources drew them to the informational picture book Secrets of a Civil War Submarine: Solving the Mysteries of the H.L. Hunley (Walker, 2005), a book read by a number of the boys and their teacher education partners.

5. Both classroom teachers regularly included read-alouds of fiction and nonfiction texts. The better boy readers were strongly influenced by this well-established and effective practice. They often selected a book by the same author or on the same topic that the teacher had shared in the read-aloud. These stronger readers also shared recommendations of books with friends as well as with the teacher education candidates. The note from Pacman to his teacher candidate is a good demonstration of this.

Dear Taylor,

Me and my friend goku picked a book called the miserable mill [from Snicket’s A Series of Unfortunate Events, 2000]. He’s got a different book but its still an unfortunate event book we will trade when the book is done then we can read that book. From pacman (4/4/06)

On the other hand, struggling readers depended almost exclusively on books that teachers read aloud in the classroom, preferring not to venture into selecting books on their own if it wasn’t necessary.

6. Boys responded to book discussions when they had established a relationship with their partners and were invited to share their expertise by answering the question “What do boys like to read?” The following is a letter written by a teacher education
candidate to one of the fifth-grade boys in the group. The letter followed the last day of the project for the fall semester.

Dear Bears Fan,

Even though this is our last email, I want you to know that you will soon have a new friend to email and read books with. Regardless of whether we ever communicate with each other again, I want you to keep reading, and never stop learning. You have taught me lessons during our email conversations that I could not have learned in my college textbooks or from my college professors. I want to personally thank you for teaching me how to be a better teacher. Good luck in all of your future activities, and never stop reaching for your dreams... GO BEARS!!! (12/05)

During the next semester, though the student had a different university partner, he chose more challenging books. His responses to his new partner about the book **Touching Spirit Bear** (Mikaelsen, 2001) were quite detailed and insightful, as can be seen in the following excerpt.

Dear Madalyn,

I am done with the whole book!!! I think that’s one of the best books I have ever read!!! My favorite parts were where he gits into the fight with the other boy and the other part I liked was in the middle of the book when he is in the wilderness and when he “meets” the bear. Those are my most favorite parts of the book. What are yours?? Sincerely, Bears Fan (3/21/06)

**Technical Difficulties**

Students had limited access to computers. Further, the schools involved in the project did not have a certified library media specialist to assist teachers and students with technology. This meant that most of the students had not experienced basic instruction in computer use. Their lack of computer skills affected the ease with which the boys typed their thoughts on the computer at the beginning of the study. The following correspondence demonstrates the initial difficulty a boy had in composing his journal response on the computer:

Dear Kat,

How are [First attempt]

Dear Kat

How are you? [Second attempt]

Dear Kat

How are you? I j [Third attempt]

Dear KAT,

I’m just now getting on space e [Fourth attempt]

Dear kat

How are you doing? I just got on space expoler. I’m starting now. What chapter are you on. [It] is interesting. Space is very cool. What do you think about space? [Fifth and final message sent]

With weekly support from the principle researcher and their classroom teachers, the boys developed stronger keyboarding skills and more competent use of the computer over the course of the two semesters. Here is one student’s e-mail, from late in the project, about **Maniac Magee** (Spinelli, 1999):

Dear Anna,

I remember when they are chasing Maniac McGee while he was running on the railroad with the Cobras chasing him and throwing rocks. They said, “When he’s dead, let’s get ’im.” My thoughts were while I was being chased. I was thinking the same way he was and then I realized to face my problems and talk things out with other people.

John McNab said that beating up a kid was the same as striking someone out. That’s on page 30. That’s pretty sad. You don’t want to do that. They went looking for him. They were stunned. This is an interesting story, but it’s sad so I wouldn’t recommend my mom to read it because she’d be crying in an instant.

Your buddy,

Heartbreak Kid

Despite their frustrations with typing, many of the boys experienced an increase in motivation. Toward the end of the project, one of the classroom teachers reflected,

The boys were very intrigued with corresponding with the college students, although their writing skills and typing skills were limited. It appeared that the communication with the college students made them open and read the books, and once they started on them, the whole interest really took off. (Interview with classroom teacher, May 6, 2006)

**Closing Thoughts and Implications for Practice**

The findings of this study highlight the importance of helping boys find entry point books that meet their personal standards. As one of the classroom teachers explained, “We paid more attention to books boys loved.” The boys in this project mentioned that they enjoyed reading informational books with enticing...
pictures and drawings, and that they liked seeing how a character developed throughout a book series.

Through e-mail correspondence with fifth-grade boys and from discussions during their children’s literature methods course, the female preservice teachers learned about the interests of boy readers. These preservice teachers discovered that boys often preferred books with adventure and action such as the Dive series by Gordon Korman, and as a result, tended to remark about the action in the plot of a book when dialoguing with their boy partners. The female participants noted that they began paying more attention to reading habits of male students in their own families (i.e., brothers or nephews), asking them for advice in selecting books. In considering what books to recommend to boys, the preservice teachers noted that they needed to become familiar with culturally relevant titles. They also observed that many culturally relevant books targeted girls more often than boys (i.e., *Becoming Naomi León* by Pam Muñoz Ryan [2005]). To help others in choosing books that appeal to boy readers, we have included lists of suggested books (see Table 1) using categories established by the fifth-grade boys in this project.

### Table 1
**Books That Appeal to Boys**

Jacques, B. *Redwall* series (fantasy world of small animals).  
Rowling, J.K. *Harry Potter* series (magic). |
Horowitz, A. *Alex Rider* series (spy series). |
| Books with a character who goes through a number of situations or years | Farris, P.J. (2007). *Crossover dribble*. Mahomet, IL: Mayhaven.  
Kinney, J. *Diary of a Wimpy Kid* series.  
Smith, J. *Bone* series. |
Teachers may also consider multicultural titles such as *We Are the Ship: The Story of Negro League Baseball* (Nelson, 2008) and *Jackie and Me: A Baseball Card Adventure* (Gutman, 2000). When gathering multicultural literature, teachers may want to look to authors such as Gary Soto and Walter Dean Myers, and explore award-winning books from the Coretta Scott King and Pura Belpre Awards. Armed with the right knowledge, teachers can place an appropriate book into the hands of almost any boy reader. Doing so means examining the characteristics and features of books that are appealing to boys.

When considering how this project affected the boys’ reading, the classroom teachers agreed that it increased their interest in reading. One teacher reported, “They read more, were more enthusiastic about reading, and shared lists of books that were ‘must reads.”’ This was also noted by a reporter from a local newspaper who visited the school during the second semester of the project. After interviewing one of the boys, the reporter wrote,

> he wasn’t much of a reader before the school year. Then he got the chance to dig through the bin of books provided...for the project...and to email college students on laptops... Now he reads 30 to 40 minutes a night before bed. (Kolkey, 2006, B1–B2)

Throughout this project, the boys were engaged and motivated by interesting books and accessible technology. Laptop computers enabled connections to be made among boys and preservice teachers. Over the course of the study, the boys developed positive relationships with their undergraduate partners. This notion is not new; for instance, Doherty and Mayer (2003) described how e-mail communication over an 8-week period developed positive relationships between middle school students and their teachers. The importance of the opportunity to connect with members of the wider community in new ways must also be considered as entry points to boys’ literacy.

The addition of technology that had previously been unavailable to the students to some degree changed the sociocultural makeup of the classroom. Since only boys were included in the study, their e-mailing preservice teachers in another city seemed to give some a feeling of importance and increased self-worth. What they were thinking and feeling about the books they were reading was of interest to someone they had never met. This confirmed Leu’s (2002) pronouncement that the new literacy classroom using technology calls for students to not only assume diverse responsibilities but also to engage in effective learning experiences that involve classmates, teachers, and those outside of the classroom connected by technology to them.

Indeed, there are engaging new technologies such as Wikis and Twitter that could be integrated with reading curricula. Getting boys motivated to read at an early age requires our utmost attention. Keeping them reading is an ongoing challenge.

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