

Let's Study Gender Gap On Reading

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Abstract (Document Summary)

University of Alberta Prof. Heather Blair says the reading gender gap may simply be a sign that girls are better at writing tests, and not necessarily one that boys don't read well.

"It is our contention that boys are engaging in literacy events outside school that, although not ensuring success in school may be better preparing them for the world beyond school," say Blair and U of A colleague Kathy Sanford in a new study called *Morphing Literacy: Boys Reshaping Their School-Based Literacy Practices*.

Blair argues that all students will need both kinds of literacy: conventional literacy of novels as well as an understanding of the new medium of computers. To entice boys in the classroom, "we need to recognize the distinctly 'boy like' flavour of their lives, their humour and interest in action..."

Full Text (714 words)

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Yes, there's much to be proud of in the first-rate performance of Alberta students in the latest round of international achievement tests. Our 15-year-olds took top honours in the country in math, science, reading and problem-solving, and were also in the top ranks of the 41 countries participating in tests under the auspices of the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development.

But when the deserved applause dies down, there is an interesting -- even worrying -- finding about a gender gap in performance that warns us not to get complacent.

In Alberta -- and in every OECD country but Europe's tiny Lichtenstein, for that matter -- girls continue to score higher than boys in reading. And since reading is key to understanding other subjects, this is potentially "an area of concern," as the report too mildly puts it.

Are boys behind in reading because school is failing to teach them? Or are conventional literacy tests inaccurate when they measure boys' literacy skills, which can be different than girls? The evidence is mixed.

The Edmonton public school board has kept track of gender differences in student achievement results for about seven years, says spokeswoman Gloria Chalmers. What's interesting is that though boys consistently score somewhat lower in language arts achievement tests, they do

just as well as girls in social studies and science - - both subjects where one assumes reading comprehension is important for good marks.

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There is definitely a difference between genders on reading preferences. Boys can and do read lots, but they are selective in what they read. The study of the narrative story in a novel -- a conventional classroom activity -- might not be as captivating to boys as the sports pages, nature books, computer games, action novels, humorous stories, or their beloved trading card games like Yu Gi Oh.

These out-of-school reading activities aren't all bad, says Blair.

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Boys will spend lots of time reading instructions to play Yu Gi Oh cards, interpreting their symbols, knowing the story of each creature illustrated on the card, learning highly descriptive language. Blair says boys learn how to strategize, use graphics, take risks -- a type of literacy not acquired in analysing a novel.

If school tests measured this kind of literacy, boys would score better, she says. Some of these game activities aren't viewed positively by parents and teachers, who see too much video gaming and not enough reading as the problem. But these games may be used to help boys develop conventional literacy skills in the classroom.

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An Edmonton Public Schools discussion paper raises the possibility of a bias in the current curriculum favouring more passive, "female" learning styles in reading. In response, elementary schools have widened the range of reading material to include more non-fiction and a variety of texts, both printed and digital, Chalmers says. Schools also give different writing assignments.

So far those measures haven't reduced the gap -- to the extent there truly is a meaningful gap after some of this new thinking about literacy has been taken into account.

Understanding the truth about this crucial ingredient to learning is vital, however. Even in top-ranked Alberta, we need to know to what extent we are failing the video-game generation of boys, and what aspects of the new electronic world are actually an asset in education.

[Illustration]

Photo: Reuters, File / Actor Billy Crystal reads his kid's book *I Already Know I Love You*. Boys read differently than girls, experts say. ;

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