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LESSONS IN LEARNING

Why boys don't like to read:
Gender differences in reading achievement

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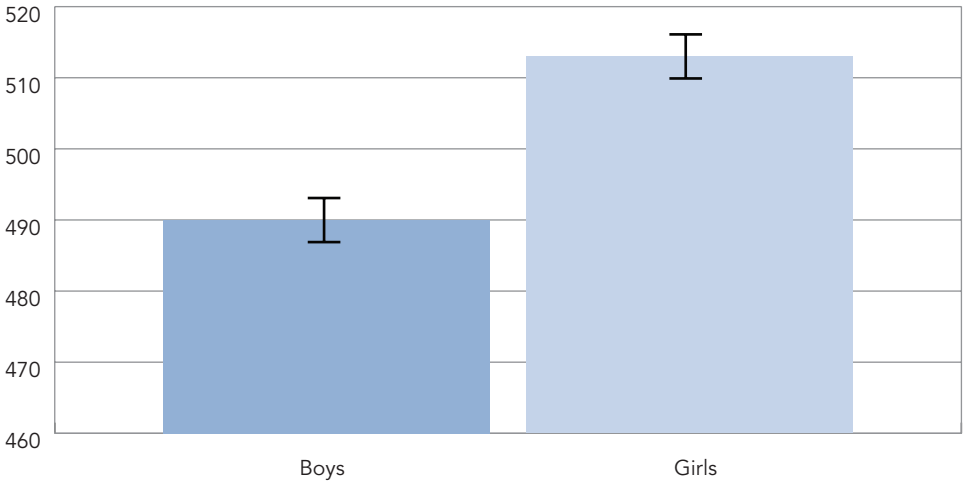
The latest reading assessment results of the Pan-Canadian Assessment Program (PCAP-13) reveal that the majority (88%) of Canadian 13-year-olds perform at or above the expected level of proficiency.[1] These results also reveal a persistent literacy gap between boys and girls: with the Canadian average set at 500, girls outscore boys by 23 points (see Figure 1). Many factors contribute to the gender gap in literacy. Boys and girls show differences in reading attitudes, behaviours and preferences, all of which can have an impact on performance in reading assessments.

Gender differences in reading, math and science scores

The PCAP-13 results are not surprising: the gender gap in reading is not a new phenomenon. The 1994 and 1998 School Achievement Indicators Programme (the predecessor to the PCAP-13) assessments revealed that both 13- and 16-year-old girls performed better in reading and writing than their male counterparts.[2,3] Additionally, a female reading advantage has been observed in the 57 countries participating in the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA), in which 15-year-olds are assessed in reading, math and science.[4,5]

Figure 1:
Mean reading scores for Canadian 13-year-olds

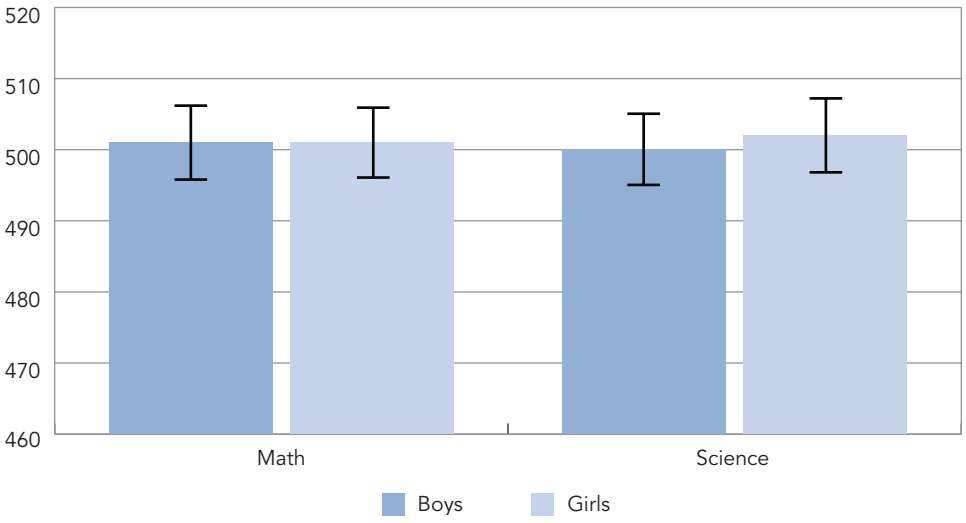


Source: Council of Ministers of Education, Canada. PCAP-13 2007: Report on the assessment of 13-year-olds in reading, mathematics, and science.

In contrast to the reading results, the PCAP-13 assessment revealed that 13-year-old boys and girls perform at similar levels in math and science testing (see Figure 2). The Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS), which assesses students in Grades 4 and 8 and in the final year of high school, revealed some gender differences in science and math achievement. In 1995, there were no gender differences among fourth graders, a slight difference favouring boys in science among eighth graders, and a larger difference favouring boys in math and physics by the end of high school. The 1999 assessment focussed on eighth graders and revealed a male advantage in science but no differences in math.[6] (See also a previous Lessons in Learning: Gender differences in career choices: why girls don't like science).

Canadian PISA results typically reveal small differences favouring boys in math and science and larger differences favouring girls in reading. In PISA 2000, there were no gender differences in science, a small (10-point) difference favouring boys in math, and a larger (32-point) difference favouring girls in reading.[7] A similar pattern emerged from the 2003 results: boys outperformed girls by a small margin (11 points) in both math and science, and girls outperformed boys by a larger margin (32 points) in reading.[8] In 2006, there were no gender differences on the combined science scale (though boys and girls performed differently within different science domains), but the large gender gap in reading remained.[9]

Figure 2:
Mean math and science scores for Canadian 13-year-olds



Source: Council of Ministers of Education, Canada. PCAP-13 2007: Report on the assessment of 13-year-olds in reading, mathematics and science.

Why do girls outperform boys on reading assessments?

Test bias

Some research suggests that reading assessments are biased against boys, either in the way the tests are constructed or in the manner in which they are graded. For example, girls are more likely to be accustomed to using reading strategies such as scanning, re-reading and discussing text—the same reading strategies that are tested in large-scale assessments, such as the PCAP. Results from one meta-analysis investigating gender differences in reading achievement across 139 studies showed that gender differences in half of the studies could be explained by differences in test design.[10] Additional gender differences in attitudes and behaviour suggest, however, that test bias is not the only factor at work.

Attitudes and behaviours

Boys and girls show a number of reading-related differences that go beyond performance differences on large-scale assessments. Girls tend to do more non-assigned reading, reading for enjoyment, or reading for general interest than boys. Girls report liking to read more than boys and more girls than boys rate themselves as confident readers.[11] Girls also report more out-of-class reading, more sharing and discussion of reading materials and more time doing homework than boys.[12,13,14] Boys, on the other hand, report that they prefer watching television or movies over reading. Boys spend less time reading than girls, are less motivated to pick up a book, do not value reading as an activity, are less confident readers and see themselves as having lower reading skills than girls.[15]

As a result of their attitudes and behaviours, girls tend to have a greater number of experiences with reading activities, which may explain their better performance in reading assessments such as the PCAP. By contrast, boys' attitudes and behaviours may be acting as barriers in the development of reading skills.

Why don't boys like to read?

Choice of Reading Materials

Differences in genre preferences are frequently cited as an explanation for differences in reading performance between boys and girls.[16] While girls generally like to read narrative fiction, boys typically enjoy a wider variety of genres covering a broader range of topics. A number of studies have shown that girls prefer texts such as horoscopes, best-sellers or popular fiction, romance stories or novels, modern or classic fiction, plays, poetry, song lyrics, and books about contemporary issues. Boys are more interested in cartoons, comics, news, sports pages, science fiction and fantasy stories, hobby, craft, and special-interest books.[17,18]

A recent study in the United States found that the genres preferred by boys were available in only one-third of classrooms, in part because teachers and librarians disapprove of them as appropriate forms of school-based reading.[19] Others have claimed that these genres do not usually find their way into classrooms or library shelves because teachers are predominantly female and teachers' own reading preferences are reflected in the books they select for their students.[20]

Reading as a Gendered Activity

Boys frequently view reading as a feminine activity and this can reduce their motivation to read.[21,22,23] One recent Canadian study concluded that 24% of Grade 2 boys view reading as feminine.[24] Seeing reading as a "girls' pastime" can diminish motivation for boys, who share social affiliation with one another by rejecting reading. Girls, on the other hand, achieve the same social affiliation by embracing reading.[25]

Across Canada, the male proportion of the full-time educator workforce dropped from 41% in 1989–1990 to 35% in 1999–2000.[26] While it has been suggested that the lack of male teachers to serve as role models for positive attitudes toward reading contributes to young boys' negative perceptions of reading, there is no strong evidence showing that increasing the numbers of male teachers has an impact on boys' perceptions of reading. Boys who view reading as a feminine activity tend to have formed this perception by the time they start school. Once in school, whether they have male or female teachers appears to have no effect in changing boys' perception of reading as a feminine activity.[27]

Lessons in Learning: How to encourage boys to read more

Expose boys to reading from an early age

Boys' gendered attitudes towards reading keep them from reading as frequently as girls, which in turn has a negative impact on boys' reading scores. To counteract this, exposing boys to books and reading from an early age is an important way to create enthusiasm for books before they enter school. Further, it is important to expose boys to a variety of texts before the age of 7 or 8, while they are still developing their gender knowledge. Boys can profit especially from male reading models, although exposing both boys and girls to a variety of reading models can foster their perception of reading as an activity suitable to both males and females.[28]

Provide boys with reading choices

Whether at home or school, providing boys with the kinds of books that appeal to them is an essential strategy for motivating boys to read.[29] Books about sports, stories about animals, adventure tales with male protagonists or natural events can alter boys' attitudes toward reading as a feminine activity. Further, catering to boys' reading preferences by providing access to a wide variety of texts promotes reading fluency and confidence in reading ability in addition to encouraging positive attitudes toward reading.[30]

Educators can diversify their class reading lists and library collections in order to appeal to the reading tastes of boys as well as girls. Appealing to boys' tastes can be accomplished by simply engaging them in discussions about the material they enjoy reading. Finding the right books for children and parents to read together can significantly influence boys' perception of reading.

Online resources

Guys Read aims to motivate boys to read by connecting them with materials they enjoy and in the formats they prefer. The site emphasizes that boy-friendly non-fiction, humour, comics, graphic novels, action-adventure, magazines, websites and newspapers all count as reading. Users can search for titles, as well as recommend books which boys would enjoy.

Big Guy Books uses digitally enhanced photographs to get young boys hooked on books in the face of competition from visual media, such as video games and television. Big Guy Books pairs text with cinematic illustration and is geared to a range of grade levels.

Teachers can turn to the Books for Boys Catalogue compiled by teacher librarians for the Teachers Association of Book Publishers of British Columbia (ABPBC). The catalogue lists books with annotations suggesting appropriate grade levels, comments and cautions where necessary, and subject areas using the curriculum for the BC school system as a guide. The catalogue is organized according to elementary, secondary, and cross-grades (books that are appropriate at both levels). Similarly, the Richmond Hill Public Library and Edmonton's City Library have web pages listing reading suggestions for boys.

The Ontario Ministry of Education has created a comprehensive Boys' Literacy web page which includes a series of videos, research reports, and guides targetted at helping teacher teams develop their teaching and assessment strategies for improving boys' literacy achievement.

The Winnipeg School Division's Library Resource Centre provides an extensive guide to books, journal articles, and websites to help motivate boys to read.

Conclusion

Narrowing the gap in reading achievement between boys and girls is no simple task; however, parents and educators can implement solutions both at home and at school to change boys' gendered view of reading. Reading to boys from an early age and exposure to male reading models can make a big difference in boys' attitudes towards reading and help level the field with their female classmates. Providing boys with the books they enjoy is also important. Strategies such as these motivate more boys to pick up a book, improve their literacy skills, and enjoy reading as regular activity.

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