

Book Talks and Boys:
Impact of Teacher Led Book Talks on the Interest in Reading of 5th Grade Boys
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Abstract: Given the fact that boys are lagging behind girls in measures of reading achievement and interest in reading (OECD, 2011), the aim of this study is to evaluate the effectiveness of teacher-led book talks on the interest in reading of adolescent boys. For the study, a group of 51 fifth graders were surveyed and then exposed to four weeks of book talks. After a second survey, changes in interest were reported. Book talks were found to have an impact on boys' interest in reading though girls were found to have been affected more.

Keywords: boys, reading, teacher-led book talks, interest

Introduction

When many teachers are asked to think of a student who is not engaged in reading, they most likely think of a boy. Many might say that boys just do not seem to be as interested in reading as their female counterparts. But, why? Researchers and teachers tend to blame many different factors for this phenomenon. Some say the problem is biological. They point to the idea that boys have a harder time sitting still long enough to become engaged in the reading process. Others say the problem is sociological in nature. They blame a lack of positive male role models in the lives of students. Whatever the reason, the question becomes what can educators do to increase boys' interest in reading? The purpose of this month-long study was to determine if book talks, a popular teaching strategy, is effective at changing boys' attitudes towards reading.

Background

Many educators and researchers are becoming increasingly concerned about the reading progress of boys. However, the problem is not a new one. The debate about what teachers can do to increase the intrinsic motivation of students contains some agreed upon strategies, but boys are still losing ground to girls.

Boys have lagged behind girls in terms of reading achievement and interest for many years (Brozo, Sulkunen, Shiel, Garbe, Pandian and Valtin 2014). In fact, the latest data from an international reading assessment shows that girls are not only performing better than boys in measures of reading ability, but the gender gap in reading for enjoyment is getting larger, mostly due to boys' interest levels dropping faster than those of girls (OECD, 2011). Since Kirby, Ball,

Geier, Parrilla, and Wade-Wolley (2011) found that “reading interest was significantly correlated with reading ability” (p. 276), it leaves many educators and researchers wondering how they can improve student interest in reading.

Much of the literature surrounding reading interest focuses on what educators can do to get students motivated to read. In one study by Daniels and Steres (2011), the authors found that students were “more engaged” with reading when teachers made time for reading in school, gave students access to books, and gave students the autonomy to choose reading materials. De Naeghel et al., (2014) found that when students perceived that their teachers supported their autonomy, their intrinsic reading motivation also increased. However, the study found that this was truer in girls than it was in boys (p. 1561). So while giving students the freedom to choose reading materials does increase reading motivation for all students, it is not as effective with boys.

Time, access to books, and student choice are not the only factors that can affect student interest. Miller (2010) mentions that she has seen student interest and motivation to read increase when she recommends books to her students. She also mentions that only a few of her students will read a book without a recommendation from her (2013). Likewise, a study of intervention students found teacher book talks, when paired with other strategies, to be effective at increasing attitudes towards reading (Wozniak, 2011). Serafini (2013) proposed that young male readers are supported when varied instructional strategies are paired with book talks that are targeted to their interests.

Even though the literature is clear about the conditions that promote interest in reading, boys still enjoy reading significantly less than their female counterparts. A recently published

study by Scholastic found that 61% of girls ages 6-17 enjoy reading for fun. The percentage of boys in the same age group who enjoy reading for fun was only 41% (2015). Because girls remain more interested in reading than boys, it has been suggested that further research is needed on strategies that would motivate boys to read (Logan and Johnston, 2010).

It is difficult to generalize what strategies will work with different students because no single strategy will likely work for everyone. It does seem that there are some strategies that experts agree are effective at motivating the majority of students. For example, giving students time to read, choice of reading materials, and promoting a literate environment through book recommendations seem to be effective with many students. But are these methods likely to work with adolescent boys?

Research Question

The researcher has used book talks in his classroom for many years as an instructional strategy aimed at motivating students to read. However, he always wondered whether they were truly effective at changing the interest in reading of students, especially boys. The purpose of this study was to see if exposure to regular book talks would affect fifth grade boys' interest in reading.

The expected outcome of the study was that when boys were exposed to regular teacher-led book talks, many would show a slightly increased interest in reading demonstrated through a survey. It was not expected that exposure to book talks would produce a monumental gain in such a short period of time. Girls were also expected to see larger gains in interest after being exposed to teacher-led book talks.

Methods

Setting and Participants

The researcher in this study has taught fifth grade for 14 years. Twelve of those years have been spent teaching reading/literacy in a middle school setting. He has presented at conferences on issues related to boys and literacy as well as student engagement. He actively researches and seeks strategies to help keep boys engaged in reading.

For this study, the researcher used two classes of students from a suburban school in a college town located in the southern United States. The school serves approximately 540 students in a district of 9,752 students. The ethnic composition of the school itself is fairly similar to that of the district. The school is 64% white, 26% African American, and 8% Hispanic. In the school where the study took place, approximately 48% of the students qualify for free and reduced lunch prices. The school serves a variety of students from low income, middle class, and affluent families in grades five through seven. Classes are organized on an eight period schedule. Literacy classes are blocked, so students receive an hour and a half of language arts instruction daily. It was during these literacy classes that book talks were conducted.

The children in the study were students in the researcher's fifth grade classroom during the 2015 school year. Though the focus of the study was on the reading interests of boys, girls were surveyed as well. Participants in the study included 51 total students. Twenty nine of the students (56.9%) were boys while 22 were girls (43.1%), so gender ratios in the study slightly favored boys. None of the students in the study currently received special education services

for reading though one was served for math. Thirteen (25.4%) of the students were identified as gifted including seven boys (13.7%). All of the students in the study were proficient speakers of English which was the language of instruction.

Data Collection

Participants in the study were given a ten item Likert scale survey which is included in Appendix A. The survey was designed to measure the interest in reading of the participant. The reading survey is an adaptation of a survey called the Elementary Reading Attitude Survey which was created by Michael McKenna and Dennis Kear (1990). The survey was shortened and adapted by the researcher to focus predominantly on personal reading rather than personal and academic reading.

Students were asked to rank their interest in a variety of reading related topics. For example, some items asked students how they feel about reading for fun, the reading that is done in school, and how they like hearing about new books. Participants were asked to rank their interest in each of the ten items by circling a number from one to ten. Items were read aloud to the students to ensure that reading ability did not affect students' answers. Surveys were then scored by giving ten points for an answer of 10, nine points for an answer of 9, etc. Totals for each of the items were then added to give a composite score out of 100. Composite scores were then converted to a percentage. Scores near 100 percent indicate a high interest in reading.

To help find patterns in the data, average scores for individual items were also considered for each survey. After surveys were gathered, the average score for each item was

calculated by finding the mean. The mean score for each item was then converted to a percentage to allow for easy comparison.

After a period of four weeks, during which students were exposed to twelve teacher-led book talks in a variety of genres, the same survey was given to students. The average score for students was compared using pretest and posttest scores. Average scores for each of the 10 items were also examined to see if changes occurred more frequently for some items.

To increase the validity of the survey, the researcher also kept anecdotal notes to see if students did really exhibit a change in interest. He took informal notes based on conversations with students. These notes also documented which books that were discussed in class were checked out more frequently from the classroom library by boys. He also took notes after having informal conversations with boys about the books they were reading or wanted to read.

Data Analysis

When the students were given the modified version of the Elementary Reading Attitude Survey at the beginning of the study, scores for boys ranged from 46 percent to 98 percent. For the 29 fifth grade boys who were surveyed, the average boy reported a score of 75.34 out of 100, or 75.34 percent. This number would serve as a baseline for comparison.

During the next four weeks, the researcher performed a series of 12 book talks for the students. The books that were used can be found in Appendix B. In hopes of appealing to many different reading preferences, a variety of genres such as humor, mystery, science fiction, and horror were included. Since the focus was on personal reading, rather than instructional reading, books with a wide range of reading levels were used. Only books that had multiple

copies available in the researcher's classroom library were considered so that students would have access to the titles. Also, the researcher selected books that he enjoyed in hopes that students would witness and share his enthusiasm.

After exposure to the book talks, a posttest was given to students to see if any changes had occurred. The results are shown on Table 1. The students were surveyed using the same instrument. For the posttest survey, boys had a range from 48 percent to 98 percent. However, the total average score for fifth grade boys climbed to 79.31 percent. Overall, 16 of the 29 boys surveyed reported increased interest in reading, 10 reported a decrease, and 3 had no change in interest. Comparatively, 16 of the 22 girls who were surveyed reported increased interest, 5 reported a decrease, and 1 had no change.

Table 1: Average Pretest and Posttest Scores by Gender

Boys Pretest Average	Boys Posttest Average	Change for Boys	Girls Pretest Average	Girls Posttest Average	Change for Girls
75.34%	79.31%	+3.97%	81.90%	86.95%	+5.05%

Table 2: Average Ratings by Question

Item number and topic	Gender	Pretest Average	Posttest Average	Change
1. Reading during free time at school	B	81.7%	85.2%	+3.5%
	G	90.0%	95.9%	+5.9%
2. Reading for fun at home	B	72.8%	73.4%	+0.6%
	G	74.5%	81.4%	+6.9%
3. Reading during summer vacation	B	53.8%	51.4%	-2.4%
	G	60.0%	68.2%	+8.2%
4. Starting a new book	B	82.4%	89.7%	+7.3%
	G	9.05%	9.68%	+6.3%
5. Going to the library	B	81.7%	81.0%	-0.7%
	G	86.4%	87.7%	+1.3%
6. Stories you read in reading class	B	86.9%	94.8%	+7.9%
	G	90.9%	86.4%	-4.5%
7. Spending free time reading	B	74.1%	79.7%	+5.6%
	G	80.5%	88.6%	+8.1%
9. Going to a bookstore	B	69.0%	73.1%	+4.1%
	G	83.6%	92.3%	+8.7%
10. Hearing about new books	B	84.1%	93.1%	+9.0%
	G	86.4%	94.5%	+8.1%

Findings

After analyzing the data, a few patterns started to emerge. As other research would suggest, boys did have a lower interest in reading than their female counterparts. In both the pretest and the posttest, the average boy scored lower than the average girl when it came to overall interest in reading. For the pretest, boys scored an average of 6.56 percent lower than girls. For the posttest, boys reported lower scores by 7.64 percent when compared to girls. It seems that while the strategy of being exposed to regular, teacher-led book talks was effective at increasing interest in reading for both genders, it was more effective with girls than it was for boys.

After being exposed to regular, teacher-led book talks, boys reported gains in interest for eight of the ten items tested. For boys, the average scores for individual questions on the pretest ranged from 53.8 percent to 86.9 percent. Scores for individual items on the posttest ranged from 51.4 percent to 94.8 percent. For comparison, girls' scores increased for all but one item. The average girl's score for individual items on the pretest ranged from 60 percent to 90.9 percent. Posttest items for girls had a range from 68.2 percent to 96.8 percent.

For the eight items in which boys showed growth, changes between 0.6 percent and 9 percent were observed. Of the two items that declined, the item which changed the most was interest in reading during the summer. Boys reported a 2.4 percent decrease in interest in summer reading. Comparatively, girls showed an 8.2% increase on the item that concerned reading during the summer. The only item for which girls showed a decline concerned their feelings about the stories they read in reading class.

Some of the most telling information came from anecdotal notes taken by the researcher. Some titles seemed to be more frequently checked out by boys. Wendelin Van Draanen's book *Swear to Howdy* was quite popular for several weeks after its introduction to the classes. Many boys commented that they loved the humor found in the story. One boy, who reported a 16 percent increase in interest over the course of the study, read the book in three days. He commented, "I've never read a book that fast before! It was so good!" The researcher was then able to take the opportunity to steer him towards other humorous titles.

The graphic novels that were included in the study were quite popular among both boys and girls. These books, once introduced, were quickly passed around among friends. When asked what he liked about graphic novels, one boy commented that he loved them because he could finish them quickly. It also seemed that interest quickly spread to other graphic novel titles that were not introduced in class. *Bone* by Jeff Smith and *Amulet* by Kazu Kibuishi became popular among boys after the book talks.

Discussion

Since the average boy reported a 3.97 percent increase on the survey after being exposed to teacher-led book talks, the hypothesis that boys would show increased interest was confirmed. Girls, however, improved by 5.05 percent. Also, only 55 percent of boys showed gains in interest compared to 73 percent of girls. This seems to indicate that the strategy of teacher-led book talks is more effective with girls.

One interesting thing to note was that eight of the 29 boys showed gains in interest of at least 10 percent. Only three girls, out of the 22 surveyed, made gains of 10 percent or more.

Perhaps, because the average girl had a higher pre-test score, girls did not have as much room for improvement. Only two students in the study reported a drop in interest of 10 percent or more. Both were boys. For the most part, over the course of the study, girls showed steady incremental gains in interest. Boys were more inconsistent. The strategy worked very well for many males, but two boys saw significant drops in interest.

Surprisingly, there was one area in which boys reported higher interest than their female classmates. After the book talks, boys reported higher interest in the stories that were read during reading class. This could be due to the fact that many boys were enjoying the book that the class was currently reading when the posttest survey was given, or it could be that boys enjoy reading more when it is done in a more social setting.

Some book talks were largely unsuccessful with boys. Two realistic fiction books, *The Graduation of Jake Moon* by Barbara Park and *A Million Ways Home* by Dianna Dorisi Winget, were not checked out by any boys during the study. When asked about these books, most boys said that there were other books that they wanted to read more. I believe that one of the reasons that these books may have been less popular among boys is the fact that they are more character driven. Boys may not have been interested in these books because they tend to prefer stories that have lots of action (Hebert & Pagnani, 2010).

There were some limitations which could have influenced the results of the study. The sample size was relatively small. One wonders whether the same results would be found in a larger study. Also, since this study only included a suburban school, questions about replication in a rural or urban school must be discussed. The school where the study took place had many

of the books that were discussed available for checkout. The same results would not likely be found if students only listened to book talks and were not given access to the actual books afterwards.

Another factor that must be considered is the study itself. Since the researcher had many conversations with students about their reading interests and future book choices, it is possible that those conversations could have played a role in increasing motivation more than the book talks themselves.

Since this was a before and after study, another limitation was the absence of a control group. Would the same results have been found if the book talks were not introduced? Future research should focus on replicating the study with a control group to see if the change was definitely related to introduction of teacher-led book talks or if other factors might have been at play.

Since the book talks were more successful for some students than for others, the study makes a good case for more targeted use of book talks. Getting to know students and their interests through conversations or some sort of interest inventory could help teachers learn which books to share with which students. This might change the results of the study since students are more likely to be exposed to books they will enjoy.

Appendix A

Name _____ Date _____

1=Terrible

10=Great

1. How do you feel when you read a book in school during free time?

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

2. How do you feel about reading for fun at home?

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

3. How do you feel about reading during summer vacation?

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

4. How do you feel about starting a new book?

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

5. How do you feel about going to the library?

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

6. How do you feel about the stories you read in reading class?

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

7. How do you feel about spending free time reading?

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

8. How do feel about getting a book for a present?

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

9. How do you feel about going to a bookstore?

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

10. How do you feel about hearing about new books?

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

Appendix B

Book Title	Author	Genre	Grade Level Equivalent	Lexile Level	Date
<i>Swear to Howdy</i>	Wendelin Van Draanen	Realistic Fiction(Humor)	5.1	620L	September 15
<i>Things Not Seen</i>	Andrew Clements	Science Fiction	6.2	690L	September 17
<i>The Missing: Found</i>	Margaret Peterson Haddix	Science Fiction	6.2	750L	September 18
<i>El Deafo</i>	Cece Bell	Graphic Novel	2.7	GN420L	September 21
<i>The Graduation of Jake Moon</i>	Barbara Parks	Realistic Fiction	5.1	680L	September 23
<i>Three Days</i>	Donna Jo Napoli	Mystery	4.6	490L	September 25
<i>Canned</i>	Alex Shearer	Mystery	3.5	630L	October 6
<i>Sunny Side Up</i>	Jennifer and Matthew Holm	Graphic Novel	2.9	GN240	October 7
<i>A Million Ways Home</i>	Dianna Dorsi Winget	Realistic Fiction	3.8	660L	October 8
<i>I'm Not Who You Think I Am</i>	Peg Kehret	Mystery	5.9	640L	October 13
<i>I Am Malala</i>	Malala Yousafszai	Nonfiction	5.9	830L	October 14
<i>The Last Apprentice: Revenge of the Witch</i>	Joseph Delaney	Fantasy (Horror)	7.2	840L	October 15

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