

# Why Boys?

All educators share the common goal of providing equitable learning opportunities for every student in the classroom. Providing equitable opportunities for girls is a familiar topic; providing them for boys is a relatively recent issue, but one that is appearing with increasing urgency on education agendas around the world.



## Quick Facts

- An increasing volume of evidence indicates that gender is a significant factor in both choice of reading materials and reading achievement for boys and girls.
- Boys typically score lower than girls on standardized tests in the language arts.
- Boys are more likely than girls to be placed in special education programs.
- Boys are less likely than girls to go to university.
- Dropout rates are higher for boys than for girls.

## What test scores tell us

The following provincial, national, and international assessments have produced results that echo the findings listed above.

**Manitoba Standards Tests:** The results of the Senior 4 English Language Arts Standards Tests administered January 2004 and June 2004 to Senior 4 students show that boys do not perform as well as girls in reading and writing.

**Progress in International Reading Literacy Study (PIRLS):** The PIRLS assessment conducted in 2001 revealed that Grade 4 girls performed better than boys in all thirty-four countries where the assessment was administered, including Canada, where two Canadian provinces, Ontario and Quebec, participated in the study.

**Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA):** The results of the PISA assessment conducted in 2000 show that girls performed better than boys on the reading test in all countries and in all Canadian provinces.

**School Achievement Indicators Program (SAIP):** In the 2002 SAIP writing assessment, 13- and 16-year-old girls across Canada scored higher than boys in the same age groups.

The evidence of weaker reading and writing skills among boys provided by these and other assessments has become an issue of major concern, since poor literacy skills can have a profound effect on performance in other subjects, as well as on students' success throughout their lives.

## Towards a solution

Addressing the needs of boys effectively will require dialogue and the collective expertise and talents of all partners in the education process, including government, educators, parents, and community members.

Among these partners, however, educators play a particularly important role in determining how individual students develop as readers and writers. It is critical that we provide classroom experiences that respond to the interests, needs, and learning styles of all students, and that we explore ways to engage boys and girls equally as readers and writers.

### Can't read or don't read?

G. Kylene Beers identifies three distinct categories of students who *can* read but don't:

- *the dormant reader*: "I'm too busy right now!"
- *the uncommitted reader*: "I might be a reader, someday."
- *the unmotivated reader*: "I'm never gonna like it!"

Beers concludes that there is no single "template" for the aliterate student; rather, there are individuals who have differing views about themselves and about reading. By understanding these views, we can gain greater insight into why some students choose not to read.

(Beers, 1996, pp. 31–33)

As they get older, boys increasingly describe themselves as non-readers. Few have this attitude early in their schooling, but, according to some experts, nearly 50 per cent describe themselves as non-readers by the time they enter secondary school.

## **What about girls?**

Although gender is a significant factor, it is not the only factor at play in determining performance in reading and writing. In fact, the differences *among* boys and *among* girls are greater than the differences *between* boys and girls. Consequently, educators must be careful not to focus on the gender differences between students, but rather to recognize that the effectiveness of certain approaches in literacy instruction may be tied to gender. With that understanding, teachers will be better able to provide appropriate and equitable opportunities for both boys and girls.

Although the strategies contained in this guide focus on engaging boys in reading and writing, they also represent practices that will enhance the learning environment for both boys and girls.

## **Taking gender differences into account in the classroom**

Michael Smith and Jeffrey Wilhelm identify the following gender differences related to literacy that teachers may encounter in their work with individual learners:

### **With respect to achievement:**

- Boys take longer to learn to read than girls do.
- Boys read less than girls.
- Girls tend to comprehend narrative texts and most expository texts significantly better than boys do.
- Boys tend to be better at information retrieval and work-related literacy tasks than girls are.

### **With respect to attitude:**

- Boys generally provide lower estimations of their reading abilities than girls do.
- Boys value reading as an activity less than girls do.
- Boys have much less interest in leisure reading than girls do, and are far more likely to read for utilitarian purposes than girls are.
- Significantly more boys than girls declare themselves to be non-readers.
- Boys . . . express less enthusiasm for reading than girls do.

*(Smith and Wilhelm, 2002, p. 10)*

! “Boys’ underachievement is a major concern. Nationally, boys fall behind girls in early literacy skills and this gap in attainment widens with age. The challenge of raising achievement directly addresses the learning needs of our students and the professional growth of our teachers, and enhances the role of the school as an agent of social change. We want to give boys and girls the best opportunity to become powerful learners.”

*(UK Department for Education and Skills, n.d.)*

In a study of 10- to 12-year-olds, Elaine Millard found that the following characteristics of reading programs in schools contributed to a reading environment that was more relevant to the interests of girls than of boys:

- discouragement of certain kinds of literature as unsuitable for classroom reading
- insufficient guidance from the teacher in choosing what to read and in helping students develop a range of reading strategies
- use of reading activities as a time-filler
- a limited selection of genres
- the disparity between students’ sense of why reading is important (e.g., to give them a good start in life) and their perception of its purposes in school (e.g., primarily as reading stories for pleasure).

*(Millard, 1997, p. 1)*

Educators in Manitoba schools may wish to review their own reading environments and practices. In responding to a 2003 Ontario survey conducted as part of the Ontario Secondary School Literacy Test (OSSLT) on students’ reading and writing activities outside of school, boys reported that they read a wide variety of materials outside of school, including newspapers (50%), comics (35%), manuals or instructions (25%), and magazines (64%). In addition, 82% of boys reported that they write e-mail messages and participate in chat-room conversations.

! “[Wilhelm and Smith found that] boys who were considered to be problem or highly reluctant readers in the classroom had very rich literate lives outside of school, and used various forms of literacy to pursue their interests and goals. . . . In essence, none of the boys in [Wilhelm and Smith’s] study rejected literacy. What they did almost universally reject was ‘school literacy.’”

*(Hyatt, 2002, p. 12)*