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# Strategies to Encourage and Support the Reluctant Middle School Male Reader

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# Strategies to Encourage and Support the Reluctant Middle School Male Reader

## **Abstract**

Studies (Lee, Grigg, & Donahue, 2007) show that girls outperform boys on reading tests and that boys, especially older boys, are less likely to read for enjoyment in and out of school (Scholastic, 2008). Societal pressure, lack of literacy skills, and lack of motivation are all obstacles that contribute to these findings. In order to raise test scores and the level of reading engagement, teachers, parents, and librarians need to connect these reluctant male readers with books and other reading material that they want to read. Boys prefer non-traditional texts, and though fiction is not a preference, boys crave certain genres and topics. In addition to connecting boys with books, teachers need to establish a learning environment and select instructional strategies that allow boys to be successful in the literature classroom. Including time for leisure reading where books are self-selected and teacher read-aloud is crucial to any literature curriculum. Instructional strategies such as graphic organizers, think aloud strategies, drama, hands-on projects, and literature circles can be selected in an effort to make males feel competent. Differentiated instruction is a template for teachers to incorporate all these options and choices in the content, processes, and products of any unit. With teachers, librarians, and parents working together to implement this research, boys will more likely choose to read.

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Strategies to Encourage and Support the Reluctant Middle School Male Reader

By

Wendy L. Poppema

B.A. Dordt College, 1999

Thesis

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment  
Of the Requirements for the  
Degree of Master of Education

Department of Education  
Dordt College  
Sioux Center, IA  
May 2009

Strategies to Encourage and Support the Reluctant Middle School Male Reader

By

Wendy L. Poppema

Approved:

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Faculty Advisor

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Faculty Advisor

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Date

Approved:

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Director of Graduate Education

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Date

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Finally, I want to thank the Lord for blessing me with this experience. All glory be to Him!

## Abstract

Studies (Lee, Grigg, & Donahue, 2007) show that girls outperform boys on reading tests and that boys, especially older boys, are less likely to read for enjoyment in and out of school (Scholastic, 2008). Societal pressure, lack of literacy skills, and lack of motivation are all obstacles that contribute to these findings. In order to raise test scores and the level of reading engagement, teachers, parents, and librarians need to connect these reluctant male readers with books and other reading material that they want to read. Boys prefer non-traditional texts, and though fiction is not a preference, boys crave certain genres and topics. In addition to connecting boys with books, teachers need to establish a learning environment and select instructional strategies that allow boys to be successful in the literature classroom. Including time for leisure reading where books are self-selected and teacher read-aloud is crucial to any literature curriculum. Instructional strategies such as graphic organizers, think aloud strategies, drama, hands-on projects, and literature circles can be selected in an effort to make males feel competent. Differentiated instruction is a template for teachers to incorporate all these options and choices in the content, processes, and products of any unit. With teachers, librarians, and parents working together to implement this research, boys will more likely choose to read.

## Introduction

Undoubtedly teachers can all relate to certain *hair*-pulling experiences. Particular times of year are notorious for higher than normal decibel levels and students seem to literally bounce off the walls. A few examples of such times are the day before Christmas break, the morning of Grandparents' Day, and the bus ride home from the end-of-the-year field trip. Your patience is tested, but you know that these days shall soon be over and you, in a way, share in your students' genuine excitement.

Teachers can also relate to those certain *heart*-pulling experiences. These experiences can be very frustrating and painful and the 3:30 bell does not make them disappear. Witnessing a girl being socially left out or seeing a child's home life negatively impact his ability to succeed at school are a couple of examples.

Another such heart-pulling experience is a teacher failing to find ways to encourage the reluctant student. Students are reluctant to do tasks that appear to be too difficult, too boring, or both. Teachers are finding that boys, especially older boys, are more likely than girls to be reluctant to sit down and read a book. Many teachers are frustrated with the attitudes and lack of motivation from their male students toward reading. Is it possible that some boys are simply not readers? Are middle school boys too old to acquire a love for reading? Is it acceptable for middle school teachers to dismiss these boys as non-readers and help them to just get by? Answering yes to these questions can be so easy for busy teachers who find the task of motivating middle school male readers too overwhelming. But teachers (and parents) answering yes to those questions is what is truly heart-pulling.

### *Research Objective*

The goal of this research project is to discover strategies that support and encourage the middle school male reader in order to raise the level of reading engagement.

### *Research Questions*

1. What obstacles stand in the way of reluctant middle school male readers?
2. What reading materials engage reluctant middle school male readers? (What would they choose to read?)
3. What instructional reading strategies can teachers implement to draw on male strengths and encourage?
4. What can librarians and parents do to connect reluctant middle school males with books?

### *Definition of Terms*

The following definitions of terms are provided by the researcher, unless otherwise indicated, to promote clarity throughout the study:

**Differentiated Instruction (DI)** occurs when “the teacher proactively plans and carries out varied approaches to content, process, and product in anticipation of and response to student differences in readiness, interest, and learning needs” (Tomlinson, 2001, p. 7).

**Instructional strategies** are the methods that teachers use to help students reach the learning objective. (e.g.: literature circles, KWL charts, book talks, guided reading, discussion)

**Kinesthetic learners** are learners who prefer a physical approach to learning.

**Literacy skills** are the ability to read and write effectively.

**Literature circles** are an instructional strategy designed to allow students to share their insights about books; they often use roles such as Discussion Director, Passage Master, Connector, and Illustrator that aid in facilitating small group discussions (Powell-Brown, 2006).

**Middle school male readers** are boys in middle school generally ranging from ages 12 – 14, but can include boys from ages 10 – 15.

**Middle school** generally includes grades 6 – 8; at times grades 5 and 9 can be included.

**Non-traditional texts** are magazines, newspapers, comic books, graphic novels, and internet articles.

**Silent sustained reading (SSR)** is a time in the school day where students are given quiet, uninterrupted time to read self-selected material for leisure.

**Read aloud** is the act of reading out loud and children/students listen or follow along with the story.

**Reading engagement** is how “into” a book a child is or how immersed a child is in a book.

**Think aloud** is giving verbal expression to what goes on in the mind when reading and what needs to be done when comprehension breaks down.

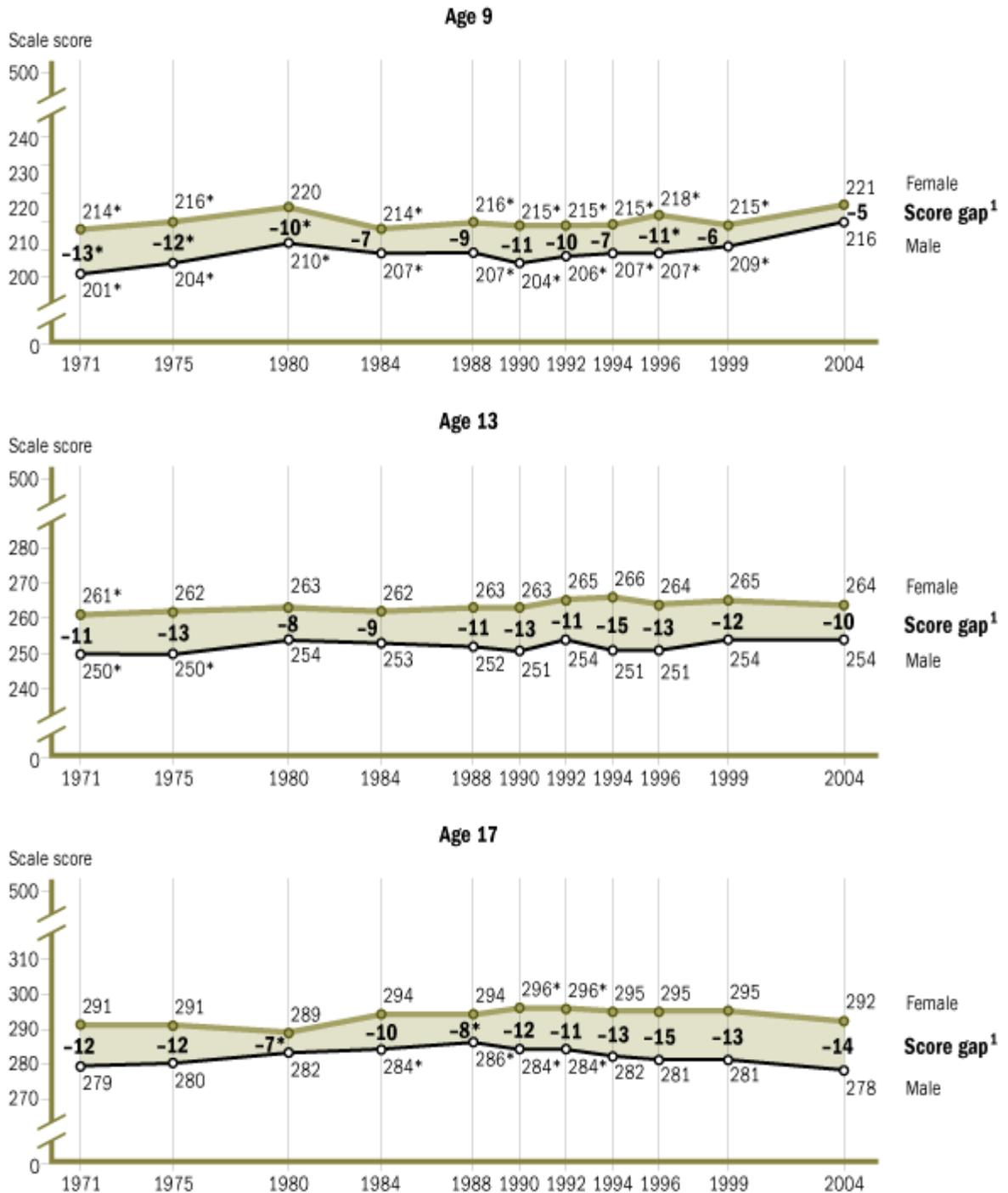
## Literature Review

### *The Problem*

Female students are outperforming male students on standardized reading tests. The National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), also known as “the Nation’s Report Card,” conducts long-term trend assessments and has provided information on changes in the basic achievement of America’s youth since the early 1970s. The US Department of Education reveals on the National Center for Education Statistics’ website that female students outperformed male students in reading tests at age 9, 13, and 17 each time the tests were administered (1971, 1975, 1980, 1984, 1988, 1990, 1992, 1994, 1996, 1999, and 2004.) The same findings show that at the 9-year-old level the gender gap was smaller in 2004 than in 1971.

However, was no significant change in the gender gap at the 13- and 17-year-old level during that same time span. (See Figure 1) This trend continued through 2007 with no significant gains by male students (Lee, Grigg, & Donahue, 2007). “This long, well-documented history of underachievement has helped contribute to an entrenched perception – indeed, an expectation – that many boys simply will not become thoughtful, accomplished readers” (Brozo, 2006, para. 2). It is not surprising, then, that boys outnumber girls in corrective and remedial reading programs (Brozo, 2006).

Figure 1: Trends in Average Reading Scale Scores and Score Gaps for Students Ages 9, 13, and 17, by gender: 1971 – 2004



NOTE: Score gaps are calculated based on differences between unrounded average scale scores. Negative numbers indicate that the average scale score for male students was lower than the score for female students.

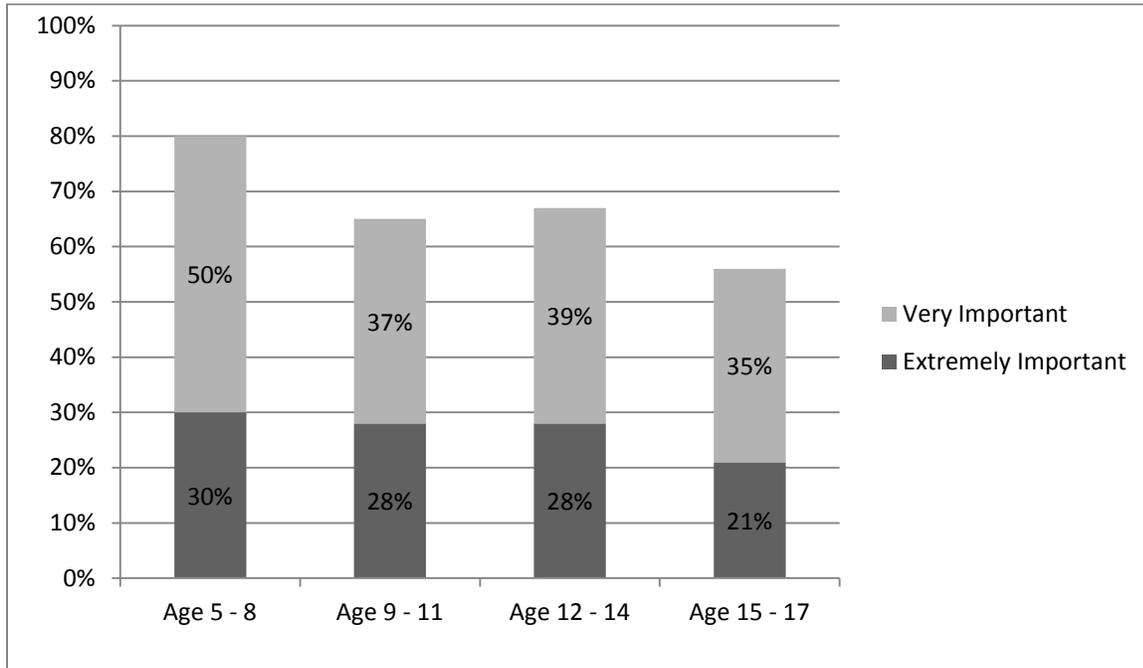
SOURCE: U.S. Department of Education, Institute of Education Sciences, National Center for Education Statistics, National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), selected years, 1971–2004 Long-Term Trend Reading Assessments.

This trend is not limited to the United States. The Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development posted results from world-wide reading assessments done by the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) in 2003. These results, based on the average scores on reading literacy assessments among 15-year-old students in selected countries, showed females outperforming males in every participating country.

The 2008 Kids & Family Reading Report, conducted by Scholastic and Yankelovich, interviewed 501 children ages 5 – 17 and their parents/guardians in 25 cities across the country. One key finding published by this study is that reading frequency declines after age 8 and reading is stronger among girls than boys.

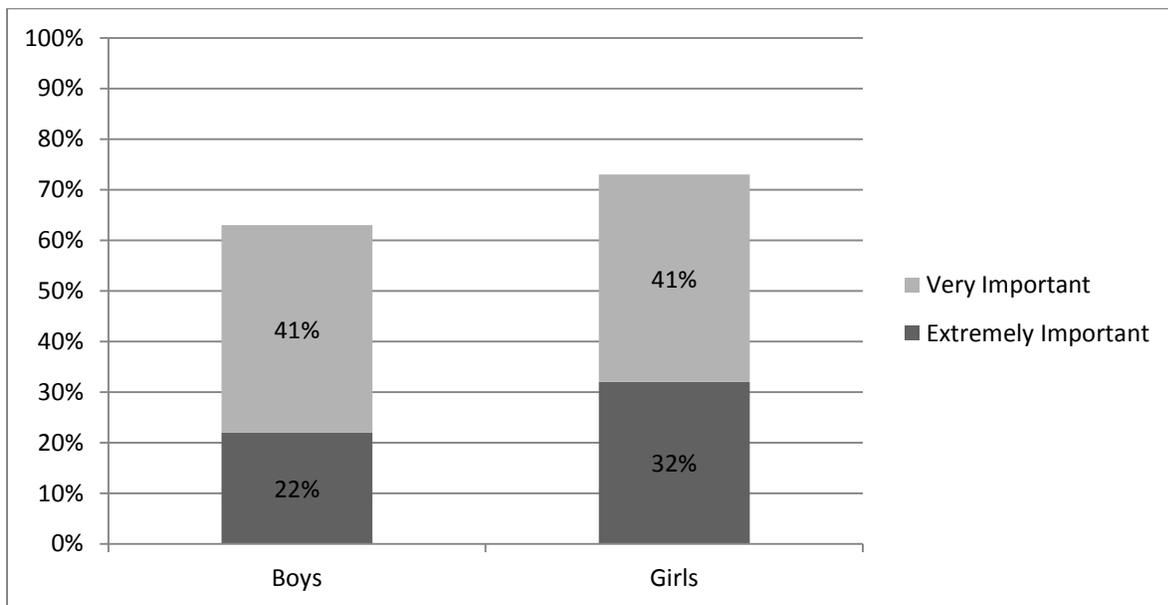
An analysis of this study shows that older boys don't see reading as an important activity. Eighty percent of 5-8 year-old year children think reading for fun is extremely or very important. This drops to 65% among kids age 9-11 and then drops again to 56% among 15-17 year olds. (See Figure 2) When gender is considered as opposed to age, 73% of girls find reading extremely or very important whereas only 63% of boys felt reading is extremely or very important (Scholastic, 2008). (See Figure 3)

Figure 2: Reading for Enjoyment by Age (boys and girls)



Source: Scholastic's 2008 Kids & Family Reading Report

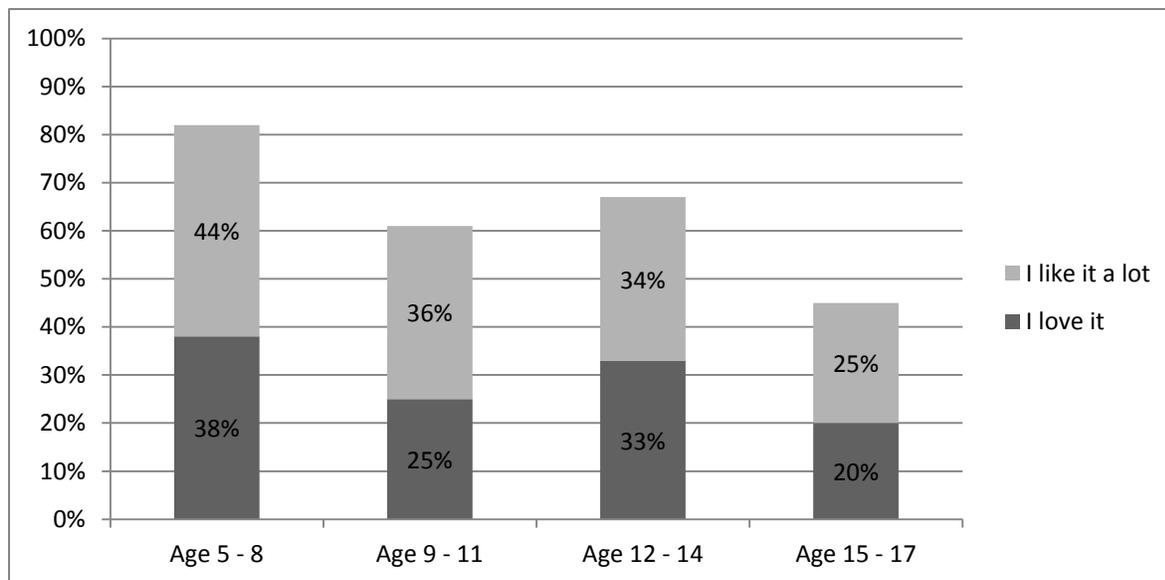
Figure 3: Belief in Reading Importance by Gender (all age categories included)



Source: Scholastic's 2008 Kids & Family Reading Report

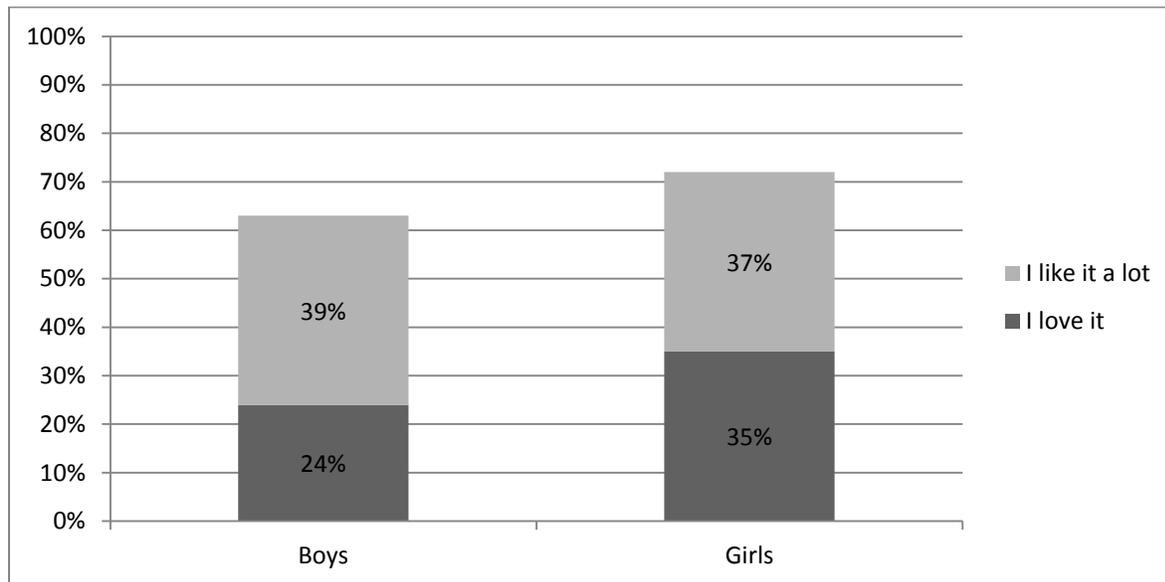
Not only do boys feel that reading is not important, but they also don't enjoy reading as much as girls do. Just over eight in ten 5-8 year old children say they love reading or like it a lot. This drops among all other age groups, declining to 55% among 15-17 year olds. (See Figure 4) Sixty-three percent of boys say they love to read or like it a lot, while 73% of girls made this claim (Scholastic, 2008). (See Figure 5)

*Figure 4: Reading Enjoyment by Age (boys and girls)*



*Source:* Scholastic's 2008 Kids & Family Reading Report

Figure 5: Reading Enjoyment by Gender (all age categories included)



Source: Scholastic's 2008 Kids & Family Reading Report

The study went on to find out how often kids were reading for fun. High frequency readers are those that read every day. Twenty-four percent of those interviewed were labeled high frequency readers. Those that read 4-6 times a week (19%), 2-3 times a week (21%), or once a week (14%) were considered moderate frequency readers. This group totaled 54% of those interviewed. Low frequency readers are those that only read 2-3 times a month (8%), once a month (5%), less than once a month, but at least once a year (3%), once a year (1%) or never (5%). Low frequency readers accounted for 22% of the study group (Scholastic, 2008).

A further examination of this study shows that daily reading declines after age eight and that three in ten 5-8 year olds are high frequency readers. This is the highest percentage of any age group. Children age 9-11 and 12-14 are three times more likely to be low frequency readers than are children age 5-8. That is, they are three times more likely to be reading books for fun

less than once a week. Interestingly, while boys and girls are equally likely to be high frequency readers, boys are more likely to be low frequency readers (Scholastic, 2008).

The evidence is overwhelming. Boys do not score as well on standardized reading tests. Boys do not enjoy reading as much as girls do. Boys do not read as often as girls do.

### *Obstacles*

It is important to note that we should not generalize, and therefore assume, that no boys read. There are men and boys who are avid readers. Research (Haupt, 2003) suggests that there seems to be certain threads of commonality that run through these readers: They either had an adult in their life who read aloud to them, they had a plethora of books at home at their disposal, or they made frequent and lengthy visits to their local libraries. But research is also helpful in identifying the obstacles which stand in the way of boys becoming avid readers. These obstacles are societal pressures, lack of literacy skills, and lack of motivation.

Saying that boys never find reading enjoyable and entertaining is inaccurate. In fact, very few boys label themselves as nonreaders early in their schooling, but nearly 50 percent do by the time they enter high school (Smith & Wilhelm, 2002). Society makes it especially hard for older boys who like to read. More emphasis is put on sports and competition; reading and writing are categorized as more feminine activities. If reading is perceived as feminized, boys will go to great lengths to avoid it (Jones & Fiorelli, 2003). Middle school seems to be a crucial age for this particular obstacle because hormones are building, aggression is increasing, and boys are even more focused on action and exploration.

As they enter high school, the emphasis on strength, masculinity, social acceptance, sports, aggression, hierarchies and power increases even more. If reading isn't perceived as important, if students don't have an academic or professional goal, or if reading is

identified as 'soft' or feminine, then reading would diminish rather than develop their fragile sense of self and growing masculinity. If boys have no male role models or strong women to introduce them to relevant and exciting books, they may not pick up another novel other than those required for high school English. (Haupt, 2003, para.13)

Because the majority of the adults involved in kids' reading are women, boys might not see reading as a masculine activity. This is evidenced by the fact that children of all ages seek book recommendations from their mothers more than often than they do from their fathers (Scholastic, 2008). Boys do tend to relate to the men in their lives and unfortunately men, in general, read fewer books than women (Sullivan, 2004).

The lack of fathers as strong reading role models is not limited to a certain demographic. In a study comparing poverty-level and university-educated families, fathers read to their children only 15% of the time, mothers 76%, and other adults 9%. This finding was the same for both family groups (Trelease, 2001).

The increasing role of sports within society also impacts young males. In 1970, males outnumbered females in college enrollment by a ratio of 59 to 41, but by the year 2000, females outnumbered males 57 to 43 (Trelease, 2001). What happened in that 30-year time period? Trelease suggests that sports may be one reason for this change. Since 1970, ESPN and round-the-clock sports entered into society and are still gaining popularity. With the birth of Monday Night Football, ESPN, ESPN2, and channels dedicated to specific sports, viewers have unlimited access. The audiences are nearly all male. Boys are seeing their fathers focusing on sports and are immersed in a culture where time spent watching and playing sports has taken priority over time dedicated to school.

The second reading obstacle for boys is a lack of literacy skills. Well-deserved attention has been shed on girls' relatively-low achievement in math and science. As a result, girls' achievement in both subject areas has seen documented improvement. However, despite the significant amount of research that has been conducted regarding boys and literacy, literacy scores among boys have not improved (Smith & Wilhelm, 2002). Studies and assessments consistently show that boys have a relative lack of literacy skills and that they continue to lose ground. Jim Trelease (2001) encourages teachers and principals to confront parents with the findings of sociologists like Professor Cornelius Riordan and others that outline an alarming pattern:

Boys are more likely than girls to repeat a grade or drop out of school, suffer from more learning disabilities, are three times more likely to be enrolled in special-education classes, are more likely to be involved in criminal and delinquent behavior, are less likely to be enrolled in college-prep classes, have lower educational expectations, lower reading and writing scores, read less for pleasure, and do less homework. (p. xxi)

Boys are slower to develop than girls and often struggle with reading and writing skills at the primary level (Scieszka, 2005). Curriculum sequencing may ignore this fact. Teachers often stop teaching reading skills such decoding strategies, phonics, and sight word lists in third grade. At that point, teachers expect students to *use* reading skills to learn about other subjects. Since boys develop more slowly and comprehend narrative texts less easily, they may find reading difficult and uninteresting as they progress through school (Schwartz, 2003). Unsurprisingly, a correlation exists between students who struggle with gaining literacy skills and those who do not like to read (Horton, 2005).

Two biological factors that can influence literacy acquisition are hemisphere dominance and learning styles. With the development of neuroimaging technologies such as functional magnetic resonance imaging (fMRI), researchers can now see images of the human brain as it participates in different activities. They have discovered that males and females process information differently. For example, as a male listens, only one hemisphere of the brain shows activity, whereas both the right and left hemispheres ‘light up’ in females. The same phenomenon occurs when males and females engage in reading (Costello, 2008). Additionally, the action-oriented, competitive learning style of many boys can delay their ability to learn to read and write (Scieszka, 2005). When teachers understand these biological differences, they are less likely to diagnose struggling readers with learning disabilities and more likely to give boys time and support to improve their reading skills through research-based strategies.

Many boys are given books that simply don’t interest them, and consequently, they are not motivated to read them. This lack of motivation is a third obstacle facing boys. Typical literature curriculums are based on and stress works of fiction. This is also true for the materials found in most public and school libraries.

Most young adult sections in public [and school] libraries are filled with fiction; there is little recreational non-fiction. If there is recreational non-fiction, it is more than likely to be self-help, health-related, about teen issues or pop star biographies. There might be magazines, but the chances are they are aimed more at girls than boys. Comic books are more than likely not to be there, and graphic novels, if collected, are not featured. There probably isn’t a newspaper lying around. Boys who venture into the YA area will find shelves so jammed that they won’t have a catchy cover catch their interest and it is doubtful if anything but

new books (which again, no doubt are all fiction) will be on display. (Jones & Fiorelli, 2003, para.5)

Boys tend to prefer action rather than character development and relationships, and they tend to prefer “visual media” such as the Internet, non-fiction, newspapers, and magazines. However, research shows that schools favor book-based learning (fiction in particular), and therefore, prevent both girls and boys from becoming fully literate in a wide variety of texts (Asselin, 2003). Much of what boys do read is passed over as non-legitimate reading because it often comes in non-traditional forms. Educators also dismiss the books that boys really crave, insisting that all children read books that foster internal reflection, that emphasize the emotional rather than the physical (Sullivan, 2004). Books that appeal to boys can have questionable content with gross humor or scary storylines, and teachers don’t want to offend others with the books that students choose to read.

Boys are more likely than girls to have difficulty finding books that appeal to them. In fact, 59 % of boys in the 5 – 11 year old range and 59% in the 12 – 17 year old range claimed that there is a shortage of good books for boys their age (Scholastic, 2008). In this survey, only 15% of kids said that they don’t read because they simply do not like to read.

Another aspect to consider is that boys today have more distractions, particularly electronic ones, and are even less likely to come to class ready to get motivated about a book (McCauley, 2005). Research (Haupt, 2003) also suggests that boys are so influenced by television and video games that they take fewer and more limited flights of imagination. “Recent reports suggest that the average 5-7 hours per day that children spend in front of television and computer screens regardless of content, results in less intellectually stimulated and more emotionally disconnected adolescents and adults” (Haupt, para.14).

Can boys overcome societal pressures, a lack of literary skills, and a lack of motivation to increase reading scores and find enjoyment in reading? Researcher Michael Sullivan recalls an experience of one of his colleagues. A mother was trying everything to get her son to read and her efforts were unsuccessful. Then one night, the boy noticed the light on in his little sister's room and he asked his mother why she got to stay up late. His mother told him that his sister was reading her books in bed. “And there's no bedtime curfew when you're reading,” she added. Since that time, the boy now stays up every night reading for hours (Sullivan, 2004). “If we want to transform boys into lifelong readers, we need to discover what makes them tick. Equally important, we need to have a better grasp of the kind of reading that attracts them” (Sullivan, para.3).

### *Books for Boys*

Simply put, a good book for a boy is one that he wants to read. A main point to consider when providing books for boys to choose from is what will truly *engage* them. Reading engagement includes:

- How deeply involved is the student in reading?
- How often does the student read?
- How long does the student read?
- Which kinds of texts are read? (books, magazines, newspapers, comics)
- How much pleasure (if any) does the student find in it or is it always done as work?

All these factors are good indicators of a student's reading engagement. “Metaphorically speaking, it's the ‘want-to’ factor in reading, unmeasured by standardized testing but a giant impetus for voluntarily reading in the 7,800 annual hours outside school” (Trelease, 2008, p. 3).

When students are actively engaged, they can sometimes even forget where they are and what time it is because they are so ‘into’ what they are reading.

The Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development’s 2002 study of 15-year-olds in 32 countries measured how a student’s reading engagement affects literacy. This study discovered that the higher the engagement, the higher the scores; the lower the engagement, the lower the scores (Trelease, 2008). Another finding of this study is that high reading engagement is capable of increasing the scores of all students, including those from the lowest socio-economic group. Motivation, which increases frequency, is therefore a critical factor in encouraging, supporting, and elevating the at-risk reader (Trelease).

Research provides significant information on material that engages boy readers. Because boys don’t comprehend fiction as well as girls, they opt more often for informational text. They are more inclined than girls to choose non-traditional texts such as newspaper and magazine articles, comic books, and graphic novels (Smith & Wilhem, 2002). These materials are often regarded by teachers and parents as not serious enough for class assignments. However, comic books are a frequent childhood choice of people who grow up to become avid readers. Additionally, studies (Trelease, 2001) show Finnish children achieving the highest reading scores in an IEA (International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement) assessment of more than 200,000 children in 32 countries. Fifty-nine percent of these Finnish children said they read a comic strip almost every day.

When introducing boys to comic books, teachers and parents may have to show them how comics ‘work.’ It is important to help them understand the sequencing of the panels, how to tell when a character is thinking and when they are speaking, and how comic books use punctuation to tell thoughts and feelings.

Boys who are reluctant readers are also inclined to be loyal to a series of books. Series books can often be looked down upon in the literary world because they have simple sentence structure and simple plots. However, research (Trelease, 2001) shows that this narrow reading is good for promoting literacy development. Readers don't have to figure out the basics of the storyline each time, but rather can take advantage of the knowledge they gained from previous books in the series.

Comic books and series books may be considered as light, recreational reading, but they often have boys actively engaged and can play a key role in developing proficient and lifetime readers. These experiences may certainly become a springboard for male readers leading them, when they are ready, to the classics.

Content is another facet to consider when selecting books for engagement. Rather than dismissing fiction as an appealing genre altogether, teachers and librarians should focus on the type of fiction they present. Boys reject books that place the character's feelings and emotions in front of action and thus prefer action novels. Girls are likely to check out narratives, stories that focus on relationships between people, but boys prefer to read adventure, science fiction, war stories, history, and sports. Boys have a more tactile 'hands-on' learning style and they prefer subject matter that reflects that. Nature topics, such as bugs, dinosaurs and how things work, are appealing. They like to identify with a character that has his life in control (McCauley, 2005). Boys don't seem to like the problem-focused literature that is often popular in literature classrooms. These stories are based on issues like divorce, abuse, single-parenthood, and addiction.

Boys also lean towards books that match the images they have of themselves. They want to be able to see themselves in the story doing things they like to do or have wanted to do.

Obviously this is why sports stories appeal to many male readers (Moloney, 2000). Many sports stories do not live up to their expectation, however. After reading these stories, boys assume they will be able to do what the main character did. They can get lost in fantasy versus reality. Research (Smith, 2002; Moloney, 2000) also reveals that boys like fiction books that are fun and humorous. Boys are often told to listen, to be quiet, and to clean up. They revel in books that produce characters that break these rules. Boys also like to read about hobbies and things they do or want to do. They seem to enjoy escapism and some boys are very passionate about science fiction and fantasy.

To narrow the reading achievement gap for boys, it is important to get to know the backgrounds and interests of male readers through personal interest surveys or personal reading conferences so boys can be connected with materials that interest them. “By building bridges to boys’ out-of-school activities, carefully observing boys in and out of the classroom, and forming meaningful relationships with them, teachers can capitalize on the resources that boys already possess for becoming engaged and competent readers” (Brozo, 2006, p. 74). Being able to connect what they are reading to real life is very important to boys.

Boys are fascinated with the gross and the disgusting, and it can be hard for teachers and parents to allow boys to read books that seem to be filled with nothing but toilet jokes. In order to build a culture of books and reading amongst our boys, adults need to dialogue with boys and listen to what they actually want to read. “As they mature towards manhood, their fascination for the ghoulish will wane but what will proceed into manhood with the boys is a culture of reading established and nourished through the years of boyhood” (Moloney, 2000, para. 35). Slight controversy comes in when librarians and teachers take this research to the extreme, arguing that boys should be able to choose anything they want to read, even books that are below

their reading level or below an acceptance level of literary value, as long as they are enjoying what they read. It is important to distinguish between books for reading *to* reluctant boys and books for reading *by* reluctant boys (Moloney). This distinction is very important when helping boys connect with books. When a book is read by an adult to the boy, difficulty and length should not matter because the adult can provide decoding and comprehension. Materials for independent reading can be lighter and easier and have less literary significance if boys are getting exposed to high quality literature from the adults in their lives.

A phenomenon to consider when discussing boys and books is the effect of J.K. Rowling's *Harry Potter* series. This craze, according to the author Allison Haupt (2003), has shed light on boys and reading. First of all, boys will read a book on their own, no matter how difficult or foreign, if they're motivated. Secondly, boys' books don't always have to be simplified play-by-play sports dramas, novels full of potty humor, or plots in hyper-drive. Finally, children, even boys, will read hard-cover fiction. She proposes a challenge saying if commercialism can create so much excitement and motivate kids to read *Harry Potter*, then teachers and librarians should be able to take that excitement and enthusiasm and run with it. "Boys will broaden their reading tastes and discover their own favorite authors – if they have the time and motivation to read and access to great books" (para. 19).

Finding books that engage boys is necessary at all ages, but the middle school level is very crucial. One researcher even goes as far to say that the middle grades are the most critical point in a boy's reading education (Haupt, 2003). "If he's not a reader by now, he's not apt to become one without massive encouragement or change. ....At this age children diverge, become even better, more passionate, more devoted readers or become those who only read what is required" (para.12). It may be that these boys never had a teacher, librarian, or parent help

connect them with their ‘home-run book’ (Trelease, 2001). This term refers to the single book that serves as a launching pad for reading.

One could look at middle school as one last chance to grab boys, surround them in the whole of literacy, and hook them up with books that could lead them on the path of life-long reading. Book lists, which are widely available, are valuable tools for finding specific kinds of books for boys to choose from (Haupt, 2003; Scieszka; Jones & Fiorelli, 2003; Moloney, 2000). Appendix A is an annotated bibliography of several of these authors and books. A few authors have only one book listed, but most have many books with high boy-appeal. Appendix B lists where one can locate non-fiction books that may fascinate boys in a library.

### *Instructional Strategies*

Engaging boys in high-appeal, self-chosen books is one way to counter the obstacles facing boys. Selecting appropriate research-based instructional strategies is another remedy. To assist in the selection of instructional strategies, research offers educators broad concepts for the ‘boy-friendly’ literature classroom. *Reading Don’t Fix No Chevys* (2002) is the published result of a year-long study done by Michael Smith of Rutgers University and Jeffrey Wilhelm of the University of Maine. This study involved 49 sixth through 12<sup>th</sup> grade boys who were from four diverse schools and represented a wide range of ethnicities, social classes, geographies, and academic abilities. Identifying these over-arching pedagogical principles is foundational for creating learning environments conducive to boys.

### *General pedagogical considerations.*

In their research, Smith and Wilhelm found that boys expressed a huge contrast between school reading and life reading. They seemed to understand the importance of school and what it meant for their futures, but felt very disconnected from school because the curriculum did not

work for them and did not address their interests or goals. To these boys, knowing how to read was important, but reading itself was not. In her article *Literacy Outside School More Real for Boys*, Kay Hyatt (2001) refers to this very study and summarizes some of Smith and Wilhelm's general findings regarding how boys viewed reading in school.

School reading was assigned; life reading was freely chosen. School reading was unconnected to their interests; life reading built on their developed interests. School reading was usually too long and too hard; life reading usually consisted of short passages and was sometimes challenging, but the boys felt competent to read what they chose. School reading was not used; life reading was readily applied to their lives. School reading involved mostly books and textbooks; life reading involved media, video, TV, music lyrics, Internet sites and a variety of popular culture texts, magazines and newspapers. ( para. 9)

Being part of a small close-knit group of male friends is absolutely central to boys' lives and also influences their literacy activities. For example, in this study, one boy regularly checked the Internet and newspaper for the latest hockey scores to be able to keep up in hockey conversations with his friends. Another boy, who admitted to hating school, kept a journal that detailed more than 600 wrestling moves because the passion for this sport defined him to his friends. A second finding was the desire for visible and immediate signs of accomplishment. The boys were motivated when they felt success in a particular activity, and they gave up on things when they did not see progress. According to Smith and Wilhelm (2004), only one boy reported feeling this sense of accomplishment in his reading. Thirdly, the boys wanted to be challenged, but only in situations in which they knew they had a chance at being successful. One of the things they noted liking about playing video games is that the level of difficulty increases

with the players' expertise. However, some of the boys currently felt overwhelmed by school assignments, which eliminates the motivation to defeat the challenge.

Smith and Wilhelm (2004) also discovered that boys enjoyed reading for a purpose, whether that be for getting information, figuring out what happens, making things, keeping track of things, or helping others. Next, the boys viewed school, English class in particular, as things that would never change. They believed that this was just the way it was going to be. The boys pointed out many ways school had failed to address their needs for relevance, interest, choice, competence and learning, but did not see how school could be changed to work better for them.

The most wide-spread and far-reaching finding of the study was the boys' desire for choice and freedom in selecting books to read and assignments and projects to complete. "When literacy touches their passions and interests, the boys embrace it as a way to feed those interests" (Hyatt, 2001, para.16). Furthermore, positive teacher-student relationships were important. The boys wanted teachers to show they cared enough about them to find out what interests them. As the previously-mentioned, highly reluctant student, who loved wrestling, stated of his English teacher: "If she even *knew* that I was interested in wrestling, I would read her books" (para.18).

Keeping their research in mind, Smith and Wilhelm (2004) suggest that schools consider these over-arching pedagogical principles:

- Expand their view of what counts as worthwhile reading
- Connect literacy instruction to the interest that boys value
- Offer a choice and some control over what boys read
- Create lessons that are active, social, and visual
- Teach before students read the text rather than after to give them a sense of competence going into the reading

One researcher (Sullivan, 2004) offers additional insights philosophy by comparing many literature classrooms to adult books groups. Most adult book groups are made up primarily of women because men are not excited about the sedentary and self-reflective nature of these groups. In contrast to that image is the image of a library's story hour. Here children are surrounded by their peers and caring adults. An illustrated picture book is read aloud to them, they are allowed to get up, sing, and dance, and then given time to create a project in response to the story. Numerous books are on display and participants are encouraged to leisurely browse through them. All of the characteristics of a typical story hour are also key characteristics of a quality literature classroom.

*SSR and read aloud: key first steps.*

Using a portion of the language arts class period for read aloud and independent reading is a way to mimic a library story hour. These elements are very important for motivating boys and supporting them in acquiring the necessary literacy skills. A seven-year study discovered only 3% of class time in middle school is occupied by the act of reading (Trelease, 2001). Another study surveyed 20,000 fourth-, eighth-, and twelfth-graders to find out how much time they were given for Silent Sustained Reading (SSR), reading books of their own choosing. Fifty-six percent of fourth grades read on a daily basis and 18% were given time on a less than weekly basis. A pattern emerges as we see only 21% of eighth graders reading on a daily basis and 53% of them said they were given time on a less than weekly basis. The twelfth grade numbers are even more dismal. Only six percent were given SSR time on a weekly basis and a staggering 83% were given time on a less than weekly basis (Trelease). As a student progresses through school, fewer choices and less time for leisure reading are given.

One case study points out the impact teacher read aloud can have on the middle school classroom. Five teachers in a Virginia middle school decided to incorporate read alouds in their respective classrooms and evaluate the results. These teachers found that students who read at home for pleasure increased from 40 percent to 75 percent and student who never read for pleasure dropped from 60 percent to 34 percent. Eighty-nine percent of students said they liked being read to (Trelease, 2001). Those who stated they did not like being read to were high-ability readers, and felt they could read the book more quickly on their own.

In addition to finding reading enjoyable, read aloud and SSR can improve literacy skills. The International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement (IEA) found that students with the highest reading skills scores from around the world were those who were read daily to by their teachers and those who independently read the most (Trelease, 2001). Teacher and parent read alouds and independent reading time are keys to encouraging boys to read for pleasure and for equipping them with skills they need to read and write at higher levels. In 51 out of 54 comparisons, students' whose language arts programs included SSR did as well as or better on reading tests than students given traditional skill-based reading instruction (Krashen, 2004). This research suggests that in-school SSR results in better reading comprehension, writing style, vocabulary, spelling, and grammar development.

*The Read Aloud Handbook* (2001) houses an entire chapter to effective implementation of SSR and read aloud in the curriculum. Trelease warns teachers not to expect large gains in standardized tests, but rather expect to see change in student attitude. Teachers should choose books they personally would enjoy hearing and then ask for requests from the students. Teachers should also place read aloud at the beginning of the class period because read aloud could be frequently cut short if pushed to the end of the class period. Along with this, teachers need to

decide ahead of time exactly how much of the class period is devoted to read aloud. Next, shorter books are better in this scenario than longer ones. Trelease encourages teachers to not limit read alouds to just books. Magazine and newspaper articles, short stories, poems, and collections such as *Uncle John's Great Big Bathroom Reader* (2002) are wonderful material for read aloud. Teachers should also incorporate book talks about exciting books they could read on their own. Books do not always have to fit in with the curricular topic of the day, so teachers can be courageous with their topic selection. Pictures are a great choice, even in the middle school classroom. In an effort to support the visual student, teachers should have copies of the book available for those that like to follow along. Finally, it is important for teachers to read ahead in an effort to be prepared for difficult vocabulary and to plan a good, cliff-hanging place to stop.

Because boys have expressed their reluctance to read due to finding the process of reading difficult, they can also be reluctant participants in SSR and other free reading times. Audiobooks can provide the support struggling readers, second-language learners, learning-disabled learners, and non-readers need to access literature and enjoy books. Audiobooks can introduce students to books above their reading level, model good interpretive reading, teach critical thinking skills, highlight the humor in books, introduce new genres and vocabulary that students might not otherwise encounter, and provide a read-aloud model (Johnson, 2003).

In addition to having audio books available, the classroom library is a crucial element of the learning environment (Schwartz, 2003). Classroom libraries need to be stocked with attractive, age-appropriate books, magazines, comic books, and picture books that represent many different interests and reading abilities in order to increase reading engagement (Baker, 2002). A well-stocked library encourages boys to pick up a book when they have free time. In

order to promote use, teachers can allow children to help design the library area and organize the materials. Face-out display is displaying the books in such a way that the entire front cover is the first thing a child sees. Children may not be motivated to search through shelves and shelves of books, but displaying a hand full of books in this face-out position may just grab their attention.

*More specific instructional strategies.*

Along with including SSR and read aloud, research also offers more specific reading instructional strategies that support male readers. A feeling of competence is the critical element in the literate lives of boys. Boys will embrace activities in which they are competent or which they felt they could eventually become competent. Further, they will reject activities in which they believe they would be or appear to be incompetent (Smith & Wilhelm, 2004).

It is important for educators to develop students' interest and competence before they are given a challenging assignment. Graphic organizers such as K-W-L charts, Venn Diagrams, webs, and other graphic representations of complex material aid in understanding (Krommer, 2006). Boys in particular can benefit from graphic organizers as an instructional strategy. Being right brain dominant, boys prefer spatial activities controlled from this hemisphere. The organizers help boys to visually arrange information.

Think aloud, as an instructional strategy, gives students an opportunity to develop strategies to monitor their comprehension as they read. This is done by modeling how a good reader thinks through what is being read, stops periodically, thinks about how the text is being understood, and uses self-talk about the strategies that are being used. Thinking aloud gives verbal expression to what goes on in the mind when reading and what needs to be done when comprehension breaks down. It is an instructional strategy that teaches thinking strategies.

Jeffrey Wilhelm's book, *Improving Comprehension with Think-aloud Strategies: Modeling What Good Readers Do* (2001), gives six specific think aloud strategies teachers can consider using with their students. Along with each think aloud, he provides teachers with a list of prompts to coax readers into using these strategies.

1. **Set Purpose for Reading:** Because many students don't see a purpose for reading, they can't identify key details, much less stay engaged. Teachers must help students to see the purpose for reading. Prompts:
  - "The title makes me think that this is going to be about ....."
  - "Reading this may help me to understand....."
2. **Make Predictions:** Student should be taught to predict what the book is going to be about and what will happen next. As students gain information, they should work to correct and revise their predictions. Prompts:
  - "I am guessing that...."
  - "I wonder if...."
3. **Connect Personally:** To connect personally means showing students how use their own experiences or other texts to understand this one. The reverse can happen as well. Students can consider how they might apply what they are reading to life. Prompts:
  - "This story reminds me of ..."
  - "This could help me with....."
4. **Visualize:** Visualizing is taking the sensory and physical details the author gives and creating an image or scene. Creating accurate mental images is crucial to engaged reading. Prompts:

- “I have a picture of .....
  - “I imagine.....”
5. Monitor Comprehension: Expert readers are constantly monitoring their comprehension. Teachers need to help students understand that they should expect to understand what they read and if they don’t, they should stop and identify the problem. Prompts:
- “This is (not) making sense because.....”
  - “This is (not) what I expected because....”
6. Use Fix-up Strategies to Address Confusion and Repair Comprehension: If readers determine they aren’t comprehending what they are reading, they then need to be taught how to repair their confusion. Fixing strategies that can be taught and modeled are rereading, reading ahead to see if that will clear it up, replacing a word they do not know with one they do know and see if it makes sense, and reviewing previous ideas from the text and relating these chunks of concepts to the confusing ideas. Prompts:
- “Since I don’t understand this word, a good strategy would be...”
  - “First I saw, but now I see....”
  - “What I thought this was about no longer makes sense because....”

These think aloud strategies and prompts can be displayed on the wall as a constant reminder to students. These strategies are valuable, eye-opening, and possibly life changing, especially for students that struggle the most. “Think-alouds ensure that the hallmarks of engaged reading don’t remain a big secret to a single child in our classrooms” (Wilhelm, 2001, p.66).

Boys like to be social. The literature circle is an instructional strategy that provides the social aspect that boys crave. Literature circles are small, temporary groups of students that have chosen to read the same book. These circles, designed by teachers and led by students, allow students to share insights about books in meaningful ways. The principles behind this student-driven strategy focus on students, inquiries, connections, and interpretations. (Powell-Brown, 2006). The unit begins by teachers presenting several different book options, usually relating to a theme (courage, animals, orphans, etc.) or from the same genre, and students sign up for the book they want to read. Circles are formed from these selections.

As students read their books, they rotate through different roles that aid in facilitating discussions within the literature circles. Examples of different roles are discussion director (leader of group that generates questions for discussion), literary luminary (reads aloud important sections of the text), connector (shares connections of text to self, world, and other texts), and illustrator (draws or creates other visuals in response to the reading).

At times, it is beneficial to have students work in co-educational groups. The general strengths of each gender can help to accommodate for the general weaknesses of the other gender. However, periodically using single-gender grouping, as in the case, may be as beneficial. This allows boys and girls to explore their dissimilar reading tastes and for each literature circle's discussion to focus on what they want to talk about. Girls feel the need to be more reflective as they discuss the interpersonal relationships of the characters and boys often feel more comfortable discussing plot or action of the story (Costello, 2008). Girls can also dominate the discussion of co-ed groups, but in single-gender groupings, boys are given more time to formulate thoughts and afforded more opportunity to participate.

Boys like to be active and are often kinesthetic learners. Drama is one option that can satisfy a boy's need to move and is another instructional strategy that may make a boy feel competent. After reading a book or story, students can participate in a variety of drama activities. Some examples include: they can act out a scene, perform a section of the story as a choral reading, improvise characters meeting or characters in conflict, dress as the characters and give a presentation, interview characters using a talk show format, pretend to be journalists and reporters conducting an investigation, conduct an infomercial for their book, pretend to be the author and talk to the class, or produce a sequel to the story. Drama allows students to be a bit silly and encourages students to be the book. It fosters independent learning through critical thinking, reflective practice, and cooperative instruction. (Kaplan, 1997).

In addition to drama, there are other ways to incorporate kinesthetic activities. One way to do this and keep lesson plans current, engaging, and boy friendly is taking advantage of major sporting events like the Olympics, the World Series, or the NCAA basketball tournament and all the coverage they receive (Sullivan, 2004). Creating a bulletin board or map gives students a place to post articles about and photographs of the participants. The competitive nature of boys can be fulfilled by launching a contest to see which student can come up with the most interesting or outrageous fact about an athlete. Other ways to channel a boy's competitive spirit are through mock trials, debates, games, and simulations.

Projects are more kinesthetic learning opportunities that enable boys to respond to what they have read in a concrete way through hands-on activities. There are endless project ideas creating a large repertoire of choices for teachers to present to students. Teachers can ask boys to draw a scene from the story. They can draw the scene on a standard size sheet of paper, an over-sized flip chart, a long piece of butcher block paper or paint a mural on large sheets of paper taped to

the wall. Boys can create websites and powerpoints, design a board game, design and build models, draw a comic strip, compile a list of related internet sites, create an illustrated dictionary, produce a newspaper, develop an exhibit, make a video documentary, compile a booklet or brochure, or generate maps, charts, or diagrams to explain ideas (Tomlinson, 2001).

Finally, through another hands-on activity called “My Bag,” a teacher can find out a great deal about individual students’ hobbies, dreams, and experiences (Brozo, 2006). Students fill a bag with items that symbolize different aspects in their lives and then explain them to the class. These bags provide important clues to finding reading material to match a boy’s interests.

*Differentiated instruction: an avenue for implementation.*

The differentiated classroom is a classroom that both applies these general principles and provides a way to implement these specific strategies. Differentiated instruction (DI) is, “a way of thinking about the classroom with the dual goals of honoring each student’s learning needs and maximizing each student’s learning capacity” (Tomlinson, 2003, p. 3). DI requires teachers to increase their understanding of who they teach and what they teach in order to be more likely to be able to be flexible in how they teach. There are three main classroom elements that can be differentiated, or modified, to increase the odds that all students will learn as much as possible. Teachers can modify the content (the information and ideas that are taught), the process (the way students come to understand that information), and the products (the way the students demonstrate what they have come to learn and are now able to do) (Tomlinson).

In addition, there are three student characteristics that teachers can respond to as they craft curriculum and instruction: readiness, interest, and learning profile. A student’s readiness is not necessarily their ability, but rather, a reflection of what that student knows, understands, and can do today. In order to maximize the capacity of learners, a teacher needs to be aware of

what their students know and do not know. The goal of differentiating by readiness level is first make the work a little too difficult for students and then to provide the support they need to succeed at the new level of challenge. Taking in consideration a student's interest is to think about what the student enjoys learning about, thinking about, and doing. Students are motivated to learn and do when it is something that interests them. The goal of differentiating by interest is to help students connect the new information with things they already find appealing. Finally, to differentiate by a student's learning profile is to find out how each student learns best. A student's learning profile is influenced by their learning style, intelligence preference, gender, and culture. The goals here are to make learning more natural for each student and help them learn in the ways they learn best.

DI is an excellent avenue to use to overcome the obstacles that boys face and to create a learning environment conducive to them. The foundational principles of DI match the general pedagogical considerations that Smith and Wilhem (2004) deduced from their study of boys in the classroom. DI furnishes boys with options in what they read (content), in how they read (process), and in how they respond to what they have read (product). It connects life outside school to life inside school by basing curricular decisions on their interests and it offers a higher probability for a boy to succeed because it considers their preferred learning style and current readiness level. (See Appendix C for a sample unit plan.)

It would be erroneous to think that all members of the same gender learn in the same ways. Gender-based differentiation aims, then, to understand the range of learning preferences that may be influenced by gender and to develop effective learning options that span this range so both genders can be successful. Differentiated instruction in this way will not only encourage and support the reluctant male readers of the class, but all readers.

### *Role of Teacher-librarians*

As outlined in Rosemary Horton's 2005 article, *Boys are People Too: Boys and Reading, Truths and Misconceptions*, teacher-librarians, together with the classroom teachers, can use many strategies to improve boys' reading habits. First, teacher-librarians should buy books of all kinds at all levels and pay special attention to ordering those that would be of high interest to boys. Buying more than just novels is crucial in drawing boys to the library. Allocating part of the budget to magazines, comic books, easy readers, graphic novels, picture books, and audiobooks acknowledges that reading happens in many medias. It is also important for librarians to listen to suggestions because boys will tell you what they want. Librarians should find out any book boys have ever read and learn what they liked about. It is important to ask them to tell the story of the book rather than to ask them what they liked about it. As with classroom teachers, librarians should take reading interest surveys and talk to boys one-on-one (Jones & Fiorelli, 2003).

Horton also notes research that encourages librarians to think about the books themselves by improving locations, age, appearance, display, and presentation of books. Barbara Braxton (2003), author of *Bait the Books and Hook Them into Reading* and librarian, even suggests have a "boys only zone" that is used to display books that interest boys. It is not that boys don't go to the library, they do. They use the computers, video gaming systems, and study tables, so put the books where the boys are. (Jones & Fiorelli, 2003).

Another important task for librarians is to promote role models. Librarians can do this by involving parents by compiling a good list for them to buy from or developing a 'take-home' reading program. Inviting fathers, teachers, particularly male teachers and coaches, and older male students to talk about their process as a reader and/or take their turn to read aloud to the

class can establish role models for the boys in the class. Other research (Jones & Fiorelli, 2003) suggests purchasing every ALA (American Library Association) Read poster featuring a male. Since most librarians and English teachers are often female, any example of male reading is worth something. Actively recruiting teenage boys to volunteer and work in the library doing things such as reading aloud to younger classes, reviewing web sites, reading book reviews, or simply assisting in checking out books can place males in a leading role.

Researchers (Jones & Fiorelli, 2003; Horton, 2005) agree that certain programs may encourage boys to get in the library. One specific idea is to have a martial arts demonstration and workshop making sure there is a book on the topic on each chair in the room. Resources can give librarians ideas for other exciting teen events to plan. Booktalking, along with programs, are key ways for librarians to promote literacy and get books in the hands of boys. Librarians should not just hold up the covers, but rather use PowerPoint to show the covers and illustrations. Boys have the need for the visual. Schools should build reference sections for teachers and librarians alike that can aid in booktalk presentation preparation. Such references as *The Read Aloud Handbook* by Trelease (2001), *Great Books for Boys* by Odean (1998), and *The Big Book of Teen Reading Lists* by Keane (2006) can help teachers and librarians locate books and present summaries of these books for the book talks. Libraries should also link up to websites such as [guysread.com](http://guysread.com) which contain book lists by guys for guys.

### *Role of Parents*

Based on research, Laurie Holland (2009), media specialist at Edina, MN Public Schools, has compiled a list of advice to parents. First, parents should take it easy. The amount of reading is more important than the difficulty. Boys may be choosing easy books to reassure themselves that they can read and enjoy books. For this same reason, boys may enjoy shorter

books or books with lots of illustrations. Secondly, parents should let boys choose. Boys may have the impression that reading is a chore that is required of them, but letting them choose the books might fight this impression. Next parents can encourage their sons to read by reading with them. Boys do enjoy stories, but may not enjoy reading them. In order to eliminate this frustration, parents can share the reading or read the entire piece to him. Fourth, parents need to be role models when it comes to reading, especially dads. It is important that sons see their dads reading as to not associate reading with femininity. Finally parents should involve themselves in library and school activities, chess and other challenging mental games such as crossword puzzles. Boys need to exercise their muscles and their minds.

More specific advice is given to parents by Kathleen Odean (1998), author of *Great Books for Boys*. Parents can encourage relatives and family friends whom your son admires to give books as presents. These books can be combined with other physical interest by giving him a soccer ball and a book about soccer. Parents should let their sons know that they acknowledge all of their reading as real reading. Reading for information by following written instructions or for the score of the last night's game is as legitimate as reading novels. Parents should consider having books with trivia and facts, such as the *Guinness Book of World Records* or *World Almanac* or other sports almanacs, around the house. Seeking out informational or fiction books his favorite sport or hobby may motivate boys as well. Parents can subscribe to a magazine that may interest their son. Parents should allow boys to keep their reading private in fear of being teased and respect that he may not want to talk about everything he reads.

Parents can encourage reading using the three B's. The three B's are book ownership, book rack, and bed lamp (Krashen, 2004). It is important for kids to own books of their own, to

have books and other reading materials in book racks in the bathroom, and to have a bed lamp showing kids they are old enough to read in bed just like mom and dad.

### *A Memo to the Boys*

Researchers also give boys themselves tips on enjoying a good book. Michael Sullivan's (2007) homepage outlines five suggestions directed to boy readers. First he encourages boys to take books with them. It is not necessary for boys to sit in their rooms and read, but rather they can take books out walking, biking, on long car trips taking time now and then to read. Second, he taps into boys' desire to create by suggesting drawing pictures of their book's characters, key objects, and landscapes as a way to visualize what's going on and make the book more real. Next Sullivan allows boys to find the funniest part of the book and share it with a friend with the hopes that the friend will share something funny from his book. Choosing a cast to play the part of each character is another way for boys to make their books come alive. These may be famous actors and actresses or just one of their friends. Finally, Sullivan assures boys that it is acceptable to not like every book they read. In fact, he suggests making a list of the worst books in the universe and the dumbest lines from each book.

### *Conclusion*

In order to boost male reading scores and engage them in books, educators, parents, and other adults must help reluctant male readers hurdle the obstacles that stand in their way. Older boys, especially, are at risk to succumbing to these obstacles. The first step is to provide boys with choice and allow them to read what they want to read. Boys like to read non-traditional texts and have particular preferences when it comes to fiction. By discovering a boy's interests and passions, teachers can connect boys with books that appeal to them, increasing their reading engagement, and mostly likely, their reading scores. A classroom's environment, curricular

approaches, and selection of instructional strategies are also keys in helping boys overcome barriers. Boys want to feel competent in the classroom and connect life outside of school to life inside of school. Read alouds and sufficient SSR time provides school time for boys to enjoy reading. Think aloud strategies equip boys with tools to understand and become engaged in what they are reading. Literature circles, drama, and hands-on projects will match with a boy's need to be social, active, and concrete. A differentiated classroom is one that strives to offer all these options as a way to meet the varying interests, ability levels, and learning styles of a middle school classroom. Librarians and parents play an important role and their involvement will increase a boy's chances of becoming a reader. With encouragement and support, the reluctant male reader will read.

### Discussion

The purpose of this study was to discover strategies to encourage and support the reluctant middle school male reader. During my research, I began reflecting on my current practices as a literature teacher. My reluctant readers frustrated me and I was starting to conclude that maybe certain students were just not readers. My research findings convicted me to rethink and make changes to the environment, the curriculum, and the instruction in my classroom.

One of the first things I did was change my classroom environment by making it a place where I could immerse all my students in literacy. I created a much more inviting reading corner with lounge chairs, pillows, and lots of books. Purchasing a variety of books and magazines hurt my budget a bit, but put books at center stage in my classroom. I paid special attention to the books I purchased and conscientiously bought books that were on book lists recommended for boys. Not only did I fill up my bookshelf, but I also purchased different colored plastic baskets

with hanging labels. In each basket, I placed ten or so books sharing the same theme and then wrote that theme on the hanging label. For example, one basket would house books by Andrew Clements while others housed war books. At the beginning of SSR, I would take time to discuss titles in these baskets and every few weeks I would replace those books with a new set of books. I also used my chalkboard ledge to display books face out. These books usually had similar themes to the current read aloud. The librarian and I have been working together to buy more books for boys for the school library. She has also spent some of her summers previewing these recommended books.

I also purchased portable CD and tape players, along with many batteries. I stored these items in other plastic baskets along with books on tape/CD I would check out at the public library. During SSR time or study hall, students could use my equipment to listen to their books. This got to be very popular and students started bringing their own electronic equipment. This past year I also started to download books for students to listen to.

My classroom walls also added to the immersion-into-literacy theme. I created a giant world wall that highlighted all the vocabulary words from our novel and basal units. Students were challenged to find these words in their own personal reading, whether in their library book, textbooks, church bulletins, or in current newspaper or magazine articles. A Starburst was given for each word found. Right beneath the word wall, I designated a place for students to hang book recommendations for others to read. As a class we spent time before SSR orally sharing our recommendations and reporting on the books each was currently reading. Above the reading corner, I designed a soccer themed progress report that showed how many points each particular section in the middle school had earned. Each soccer ball represented 100 points and

students took turns hanging them up. We took some time to celebrate our progress with a few cheers!

At the beginning of the school year, I conduct two surveys, one for my students' parents to fill out and one for the students themselves to fill out. Both surveys have sections that ask about the child's passions, hobbies, and interests. I use that information to keep a journal for books that I can recommend to each student. Since learning more about boys and reading, I have also implemented one-on-one reading conferences. I glean information on student reading during our SSR book talk time, but I enjoy the one-on-one time and feel students really can see that I care about what they as individuals are reading. I have also committed to reading books recommended on the boy book lists in my personal reading time so I can better recommend books and give accurate book talks.

Adding these new activities required me to restructure my curriculum. I allot more of my class time to teacher read aloud, student reading, book discussions, and book conferences and less time on skill worksheets and other basal activities. I always had included time for SSR, but now I use that time to connect my reluctant readers with books and do not assume that they are finding books on their own. Read aloud time is not just for fiction books. I love to use this time to read short articles to my students. At times I would give them a copy as well and allow them a chance to respond. I have a growing file of these materials with topics such as vomiting football players spreading a virus to the opposing team and current popular video games. I also like to share short stories and picture books during read aloud.

I had always loved teaching novel units, but the use of literature circles has allowed my students to choose the books they are going to read for the unit as well as how they are going to respond to what they have read. I do like single-gender groups in this particular situation

because I find that boys and girls do gravitate toward different material. Boys are able to focus their discussions on the plot and work together to create a final project of their choice. Because literature circles are student-focused, they free me up to support the circles that need it.

Sticky notes are in abundance in my classroom as I use them to aid in think aloud activities. Often I give students a pad of sticky notes and ask them to jot down what is going on (or should be going on) in their head as they read. We make predictions, lists of new characters, changes in the plot, strange words, places in the book that we have been to, questions we have, or our favorite quote of the chapter. Sticky notes come in all shapes and we often use the small, narrow ones to help us focus on the main ideas of the chapter.

By applying what I had learned, I saw changes in my classroom. I can attest to gains in student achievement, student engagement, and student attitude as a result of these changes. The most rewarding change was the enthusiasm displayed by so many and how proud they were of their accomplishments. One parent tracked me down at a high school ball game to tell me he couldn't believe how much his son was reading. In fact, he had to tell him to stop reading so they wouldn't be late for the game.

One area for further research is the role advancing technology can play in encouraging and supporting reluctant male readers. Reading online student reviews, blogging about recently read books, and creating websites for book recommendations may be effective avenues for boys to share ideas. These strategies may also allow boys to read and communicate in media in which they enjoy.

It is important for educators to acknowledge the differences between males and females in order for both genders to be successful academically and to grow into life-long readers. However, there is a much more significant reason for this acknowledgement. By respecting

these gender differences teachers are affirming that each are made in the image of God (Stronks & Blomberg, 1993). Christians recognize that all children are gifts from God and have been given different talents and abilities to explore and use. By deliberately discovering and planning for the interests and passions of each of my students, Christian teachers are celebrating the uniqueness of each image bearer in my classroom.

Furthermore, Christian educators should not only want literacy skills for their male students for enjoyment and academic success, but also so they can use the written word in the way God intended it to be used. Language is an incredible gift from God; unfortunately, sin has marred it. The Bible warns against unwholesome talk and other misuses of language, and it supplies us with a guideline of what is acceptable. Responsible uses of this freedom are: truthfulness, fairness, appropriateness, clarity, conciseness, and aesthetic vitality (Van Brummelen, 2002). In addition to simply helping students acquire literacy skills, Christian teachers need to help nurture a respect for language and model how to use it with integrity.

The goals of language learning, as stated by Van Brummelen (2002), are to help students in the following ways.

- To use language with integrity, both functionally and creatively, in order to serve God and serve others: to listen thoughtfully, speak clearly, read critically, and write imaginatively
- To develop communication skills that clarify thought and feeling, and thus contribute to building relationships in community
- To realize and experience how to use language to deepen personal and communal perceptions and insights, and thus to become constructive and reconciling agents in their communities

Literature is for student enjoyment, but Christian teachers should use it for additional, important purpose. Literature can help to shape a student's view of and response to life.

Teachers need to “help students discern the vision of literary works, understand it in terms of a biblical worldview, and respond in a considered personal way” (Van Brummelen, 2002, p. 218).

These discernment skills are essential for a student in today's media-bombarded society. Student can use these questions to explore the beliefs, values, attitudes, and behaviors portrayed in literature:

- How is human nature portrayed? Are people basically good, or are they born with a bias toward sin?
- Are people locked in deterministic patterns, or are they shown to be able to change?
- What is the cause of evil or injustice?
- Is there ultimately hope or meaning? If so, what is its source?

The research alone puts a heavy burden on teachers and parents. Helping reluctant male readers overcome the obstacles that stand between them and literacy is no easy task. But as Christian educators, the task is even greater and more significant. Yes, we want them to read and write, but we also want them to use all language skills discerningly.

I began researching this topic in the summer of 2005 in response to my own classroom experiences. Implementing these research-based ideas and strategies has become a passion, changing the way I think about and support reluctant male readers. My main emphasis has become: “choice, with discernment, and success leads to engagement.” By providing my students, particularly those reluctant male readers, with lots of choices in content, process, and

product and providing them with the support they need to feel competent, I hope to fully engage them in what they are reading, so they can find enjoyment in reading...maybe for the first time.

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## APPENDIX A

## Annotated Bibliography: Great Books for Boys

Bloor, E. (1997) *Tangerine*. San Diego, CA: Harcourt Brace.

So what if he's legally blind? Even with his bottle-thick, bug-eyed glasses, Paul Fisher can see better than most people. He can see the lies his parents and brother live out, day after day. No one ever listens to Paul, though--until the family moves to Tangerine. In Tangerine, even a blind, geeky, alien freak can become cool. Who knows? Paul might even become a hero (Amazon.com, 2009).

Card, O.S. (1985) *The Ender's Game*. New York, NY: T. Doherty Associates.

In order to develop a secure defense against a hostile alien race's next attack, government agencies breed child geniuses and train them as soldiers. A brilliant young boy, Andrew "Ender" Wiggin lives with his kind but distant parents, his sadistic brother Peter, and the person he loves more than anyone else, his sister Valentine. Peter and Valentine were candidates for the soldier-training program but didn't make the cut--young Ender is the Wiggin drafted to the orbiting Battle School for rigorous military training (Amazon.com, 2009).

Clements, A. (1996) *Frindle*. New York, NY: Simon & Simon Books for Young Readers.

Nicholas Allen is not a troublemaker -- he's just creative. When he decides to liven things up in Mrs. Granger's fifth grade language arts class, he comes up with the greatest plan yet. He invents a new word for a pen -- *frindle*. It doesn't take long for frindle to take root and soon the excitement spreads beyond the school and town and unleashes a series of events that rapidly spins out of control (Barnes&Noble, 2009).

Clements, A. (2005) *Lunch Money*. New York, NY: Aladdin Paperbacks.

Greg Kenton has always had a natural talent for making money -- despite the annoying rivalry of his neighbor Maura Shaw. Then, just before sixth grade, Greg makes a discovery: Almost every kid at school has an extra quarter or two to spend almost every day. Multiply a few quarters by a few hundred kids, and for Greg, school suddenly looks like a giant piggy bank (Barnes&Noble, 2009).

Curtis, C.P. (1999) *Bud, Not Buddy*. New York, NY: Delacorte Press.

Ten-year-old Bud, a motherless boy living in Flint, Michigan, during the Great Depression, escapes a bad foster home and sets out in search of the man he believes to be his father--the renowned bandleader, H.E. Calloway of Grand Rapids (Barnes&Noble, 2009).

Dahl, R. (1964) *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory*. New York, NY: Knopf.

What happens when the five luckiest children in the entire world walk through the doors of Willy Wonka's famous, mysterious chocolate factory? What happens when, one by one, the children disobey Mr. Wonka's orders? The nasty are punished and the good are deliciously, sumptuously rewarded (Amazon.com, 2009).

Dahl, R. (1961) *James and the Giant Peach*. New York, NY: Knopf.

When James Henry Trotter accidentally drops some magic crystals by the old peach tree, strange things start to happen. The peach at the top of the tree begins to grow, and before long it's as big as a house. Then James discovers a secret entranceway into the fruit, and when he crawls inside, he meets a bunch of marvelous oversized friends—Old-Green-Grasshopper, Centipede, Ladybug, Miss Spider, and more (Barnes&Noble, 2009).

Deuker, C. (2005) *High Heat*. New York, NY: Harper Trophy.

As the star closer for his high school baseball team, Shane Hunter is untouchable. Firing fastballs at ninety miles per hour, he loves being a winner. But when his father is accused of a crime, Shane's charmed world is turned upside down. Nothing is the way it once was, and Shane's not sure he wants to -- or even can -- pitch ever again. But like baseball, life sometimes throws you curves, and Shane discovers it's how you play the game that counts most of all (Barnes&Noble, 2009).

Deuker, C. (2002) *Night Hoops*. New York, NY: Harper Trophy.

While trying to prove that he is good enough to be on his high school's varsity basketball team, Nick must also deal with his parents' divorce and the erratic behavior of a troubled classmate who lives across the street (Barnes&Noble, 2009).

Gantos, J. (1998) *Joey Pigza books*. New York, NY: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux.

Joey Pigza, who suffers from Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder, is the main character in this series. Joey often struggles throughout the series with balancing his desire to be a good kid and his uncontrollable impulses (BookRags, 2009).

Gutman, D (2002). *The Baseball Card Adventure Series*. New York, NY: Harper Trophy.

These books feature a boy, Joe Stoshack, who can travel through time when he touches baseball cards. When he holds a baseball card, he is transported to the year that card was made and somewhere near the ballplayer on the card. Later he discovers that this power also works on very old photographs. He tries to use this power wisely, and he changes history several times, though in ways not intended (BookRags, 2009).

Hobbs, W. (1996) *Far North*. New York, NY: Avon.

When the engine of their float plane fails during a water landing near the head of Canada's monumental Virginia Falls, what began as a sightseeing detour turns into a survival mission for two high-school students and their elderly companion. With the brutal sub arctic winter about to fall like a hammer, Gabe Rogers, his boarding-school roommate, Raymond Providence, and Raymond's great-uncle, Johnny Raven, are trapped in a deadly wilderness. Braving icy rapids and desperately hunting for moose in their struggle to fend off starvation, all three travelers must rely on the others' knowledge and courage, or survival is out of the question (Amazon.com, 2009).

Hobbs, W. (1996) *Downriver*. New York, NY: Bantam Doubleday Dell Books.

No adults, no permit, no river map. Just some "borrowed" gear from Discovery Unlimited, the outdoor education program Jessie and her new companions have just ditched. Jessie and the others are having the time of their lives floating beneath sheer red walls, exploring unknown caves and dangerous waterfalls, and plunging through the Grand Canyon's roaring rapids. No one, including Troy, who emerges as the group's magnetic and ultimately frightening leader, can foresee the challenges and conflicts. What will be the consequences of their reckless adventure? (Amazon.com, 2009)

Horowitz, A. (2001) *The Alex Rider Series*. New York, NY: Philomel Books.

This seven- book series of spy novels, often compared to James Bond, is about a young spy named Alex Rider. The story opens with a 14 year old orphan Alex Rider learning that his guardian and uncle, Ian Rider, has died in a car accident. Suspicious about the circumstances of his uncle's death, Alex decides to investigate his uncles death and

discovers that Ian was a spy working for MI6 by attempting a dangerous stunt that no normal child would attempt (BookRags, 2009).

Jacques, B. (1986) *Redwall*. New York, NY: Philomel Books.

Only the lost sword of Martin the Warrior can save Redwall Abbey from the evil rat Cluny and his greedy horde. The young mouse Matthias (formerly Redwall's most awkward novice) vows to recover the legendary weapon. In the course of his quest, Matthias forges strong ties with various local animals. As much as the magic of the sword, it is the help of these new friends that enables Matthias to defeat Cluny once and for all (Amazon.com, 2009).

Jennings, P. (1993) *Undone*. Australia: Penguin Books.

Plans come undone. Zippers come undone. Bullies come undone. And so will the readers who try to predict the endings of these eight weird and wonderful stories (Barnes & Noble, 2009).

Korman, G. (1978) *This Can't Be Happening at MacDonalld Hall*. Richhmond Hill, Ont: Scholastic-TAB Publications.

Bruno and Boots are always in trouble. So the Headmaster, aka 'The Fish, ' separates them. Bruno must now room with the ghoulish Elmer Drimsdale. And boots is stuck with nerdy, preppy, paranoid George Wexford-Smyth III. This means war. Because Bruno and Boots are determined to get their old room, back, no matter what it takes (Barnes & Noble, 2009).

Lupica, M. (2006) *Heat*. New York, NY: Philomel Books.

Michael Arroyo has a pitching arm that throws serious heat. Newly orphaned after his father led the family's escape from Cuba, Michael's only family is his seventeen-year-old

brother Carlos. But then someone wonders how a twelve-year-old boy could possibly throw with as much power as Michael Arroyo throws. With no way to prove his age, no birth certificate, and no parent to fight for his cause, Michael's secret world is blown wide open, and he discovers that family can come from the most unexpected sources (Barnes & Noble, 2009).

Lupica, M. (2004) *Travel Team*. New York, NY: Philomel Books.

Danny Walker may be the smallest kid on the basketball court, but no one has a bigger love of the game, or a better sense of how to hit the open player with the perfect pass. Then the local travel team—the same travel team Danny's dad, Richie Walker, led to the national championship on ESPN when he was a kid—cuts Danny because of his height. But Danny isn't about to give up on basketball. It turns out that he's not the only kid who was cut for the wrong reasons. Now Danny and his dad are about to give all the castoffs a second chance and prove that you can't measure heart (Amazon.com, 2009).

Marsden, J. (1993) *Tomorrow, When the War Began*. Australia: Pan Macmillan Publishers.

When Ellie and her friends go camping, they have no idea they're leaving their old lives behind forever. Despite a less-than-tragic food shortage and a secret crush or two, everything goes as planned. But a week later, they return home to find their houses empty and their pets starving. Something has gone wrong--horribly wrong. Before long, they realize the country has been invaded, and the entire town has been captured--including their families and all their friends. Ellie and the other survivors face an impossible decision: They can flee for the mountains or surrender. Or they can fight (Amazon.com, 2009).

Mikaelson, B. (2001) *Touching Spirit Bear*. New York, NY: Harper Collins Publishers.

After his anger erupts into violence, Cole, in order to avoid going to prison, agrees to participate in a sentencing alternative based on the native American Circle Justice, and he is sent to a remote Alaskan Island where an encounter with a huge Spirit Bear changes his life (Barnes&Noble, 2009).

Myers, W. D. (1999) *Monster*. New York, NY: Harper Collins Publishers.

A Harlem drugstore owner was shot and killed in his store, and the word is that 16-year-old Steve Harmon served as the lookout. Was he involved or was he simply in the wrong place at the wrong time? An amateur filmmaker, Steve transcribes his trial into a movie script, showing scene by scene how his life was turned around in an instant (Amazon.com, 2009).

Paolini, C. (2003) *Eragon*. New York, NY: Alfred A. Knopf.

Eragon, a young farm boy, finds a marvelous blue stone in a mystical mountain place. Before he can trade it for food to get his family through the hard winter, it hatches a beautiful sapphire-blue dragon, a race thought to be extinct. Eragon bonds with the dragon, and when his family is killed by the marauding Ra'zac, he discovers that he is the last of the Dragon Riders, fated to play a decisive part in the coming war between the human but hidden Varden, dwarves, elves, the diabolical Shades and their neanderthal Urgalls, all pitted against and allied with each other and the evil King Galbatorix (Amazon.com, 2009).

Paulsen, G. (1996) *Brian's Winter*. New York, NY: Delacorte Press.

In *Hatchet*, 13-year-old Brian Robeson learned to survive alone in the Canadian wilderness, armed only with his hatchet. Finally, he was rescued at the end of the

summer. But what if Brian *hadn't* been rescued? What if he had been left to face his deadliest enemy—winter? (Amazon.com, 2009)

Paulsen, G. (1987) *Hatchet*. New York, NY: Atheneum Books.

Thirteen-year-old Brian Robeson is on his way to visit his father when the single-engine plane in which he is flying crashes. Suddenly, Brian finds himself alone in the Canadian wilderness with nothing but a tattered Windbreaker and the hatchet his mother gave him as a present -- and the dreadful secret that has been tearing him apart since his parent's divorce. But now Brian has no time for anger, self pity, or despair -- it will take all his know-how and determination, and more courage than he knew he possessed, to survive (Amazon.com, 2009).

Paulsen, G. (1991) *The River*. New York, NY: Delacorte Press.

Because of his success surviving alone in the wilderness for fifty-four days, fifteen-year-old Brian, profoundly changed by his time in the wild, is asked to undergo a similar experience to help scientists learn more about the psychology of survival (Barnes&Noble, 2009).

Paulsen, G. (1998) *Soldier's Heart*. New York, NY: Delacorte Press.

In June 1861, when the Civil War began, Charley Goddard enlisted in the First Minnesota Volunteers. He was 15. He didn't know what a "shooting war" meant or what he was fighting for. But he didn't want to miss out on a great adventure.

The "shooting war" turned out to be the horror of combat and the wild luck of survival; how it feels to cross a field toward the enemy, waiting for fire. When he entered the service he was a boy. When he came back he was different; he was only 19, but he was a man with "soldier's heart," later known as "battle fatigue" (Barnes&Noble, 2009).

Pilkey, D. (1997) *The Captain Underpants Series*. New York, NY: Scholastic.

This series follows two pranksters who are best friends and next-door neighbors. They own a popular comic book making club called Treehouse Comix Inc, and every day at school they run off several hundred copies of their latest comic book and sell them on the playground. George is identified by his tie and skinhead haircut, Harold is recognizable by his T-shirt and bad haircut. They have saved the world eight times now. George is 9¾ years old while Harold is 10 years old. They are currently the class clowns of 4th grade at Jerome Horwitz Elementary School, a school which discourages imagination (BookRags, 2009).

Rowling, J.K. (1997) *The Harry Potter Series*. New York, NY: Arthur A. Levine Books.

These seven books chronicle the adventure of the adolescent wizard Harry Potter and his friends Ron Weasley and Hermione Granger. The series is set at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry, an academy for young wizards and witches. The central story arc concerns Harry's struggle against the evil wizard Lord Voldemort, who killed Harry's parents in his quest to conquer the wizarding world (BookRags, 2009).

Sachar, L. (1998) *Holes*. New York, NY: Frances Foster Books.

Stanley Yelnats is unjustly sent to Camp Green Lake where he and other boys are sentenced to dig holes to build character. Stanley learns the warden has them digging holes for something else- but what? (Amazon.com, 2009)

Snicket, L. (1999) *A Series of Unfortunate Events*. New York, NY: Harper Collins Publishers.

This dark-humored 13 book series follows the adventures of three siblings, Violet, Klaus and Sunny Baudelaire, after their parents were killed in a fire at the family mansion (BookRags, 2009).

Spinelli, J. (1990) *Maniac Magee*. Boston, MA: Little, Brown.

He wasn't born with the name Maniac Magee. He came into this world named Jeffrey Lionel Magee, but when his parents died and his life changed, so did his name. And Maniac Magee became a legend. Even today kids talk about how fast he could run; about how he hit an inside-the-park "frog" homer; how no knot, no matter how snarled, would stay that way once he began to untie it. But the thing Maniac Magee is best known for is what he did for the kids from the East Side and those from the West Side (Amazon.com, 2009).

Tolkien, J.R.R. (1954) *The Lord of the Rings*. United Kingdom: Geo. Allen & Unwin.

The trilogy is the saga of a group of sometimes reluctant heroes who set forth to save their world from consummate evil. Its many worlds and creatures draw their life from Tolkien's extensive knowledge of philology and folklore. At 33, the age of adulthood among hobbits, Frodo Baggins receives a magic Ring of Invisibility from his uncle Bilbo. A Christlike figure, Frodo learns that the ring has the power to control the entire world and, he discovers, to corrupt its owner. A fellowship of hobbits, elves, dwarfs, and men is formed to destroy the Ring by casting it into the volcanic fires of the Crack of Doom where it was forged. They are opposed on their harrowing mission by the evil Sauron and his Black Riders (Amazon.com, 2009).



## APPENDIX B

### Nonfiction Areas of Interests to Boys, in Dewey Order

- **000/100/200s:** world records/ computers/ bigfoot/ UFOs/ unexplained/ monsters/ mythology
- **300s:** scary stories/ urban legends/ true crime/ forensics/ military/ study guides
- **500s:** dinosaurs/ snakes and other reptiles/ sharks/ wolves/ outer space/ natural disasters/ math riddles
- **600s:** anything with wheels (bikes, trucks, cars)/ electronics
- **700s:** almost any sport, both professional and amateur/ Gameboy codes/ magic/ drawing/ comics/ optical illusion/ hip hop/ rock music/ cartoons/ Star Wars/ special effects/ puns
- **800s:** jokes/ poetry/ story collections/ riddles
- **900s:** wars/ biographies of athletes, musicians, actors, and explorers

(Jones & Forielli, 2003)

## APPENDIX C

## Sample Unit Plan

Menu Plan: Courage-Themed Literature Circles

Due: 1 month

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**Main Dish (Complete All)**

- After today's book talks, choose one of the books to read with your literature circle.
  - Bud, Not Buddy by: Christopher Paul Curtis
  - The Slave Dance by: Paula Fox
  - Solider's Heart by: Gary Paulsen
  - Esperanza Rising by: Pam Munoz Ryan
  - Mr. Tucket by: Gary Paulsen
- Choose how you would like to complete the reading assignments.
  - Read silently to myself.
  - Read with a partner.
  - Listen to an audiobook.
- With your group, set your assignment schedule.
- Each time your literature circle meets, take on one of the following roles. Each member will assume each role once. Come prepared to each meeting with the activities required for each particular role.
  - Discussion Director
  - Passage Master
  - Connector
  - Illustrator
  - Word Wizard

**Side Dish (Choose Two)**

- Draw a comic strip of your book that likens your main character to a superhero. Include the courageous actions of your character in a five-panel strip.
- Write a letter to the main character of the story thanking them for the courage they showed in the book. Reveal to him/her times in your life that you needed or showed courage.
- Write a script for a popular talk show. Have the talk show host invite the main character on to discuss his/her courageous actions. Use members of your circle to serve as actors and actresses.
- Dress up like the main character of your story. As that character, share aloud a journal entry that character could have written during or after the events of the book.

**Dessert (Optional)**

- Create a powerpoint that encourages others to read year book.
- Find an article from the newspaper, in a magazine, or on the internet that reports on a story where someone showed great courage.
- Add pictures photographs to "courage" mural on the bulletin board. Captions are optional, but helpful.

Department of Education  
Dordt College  
Sioux Center, IA

VITA

Name: Wendy Poppema

Date of Birth: September 6, 1977

Home Address: 1575 6<sup>th</sup> Ave Cir SE, Sioux Center, IA 51250

Education

Dordt College, Fall 1995 – Spring 1999

B.A. Elementary Education

Dordt College, Summer 2003 – May 2009

M.A. Curriculum and Instruction

Academic Experience

Teacher, Orange City Christian School, Orange City Iowa  
August 1999 – Present

