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# Boys and Literacy: Motivation Starts with Understanding Their Interests

BY MELISSA BEREZINSKI, MARIA SABATINI, AND BELINDA CLEARY

**J**acob\* is a bright, inquisitive, energetic first grader. He is interested in a host of activities: soccer, swimming, riding his bike, Legos, and anything with robots, aliens, or soldiers. He has a strong vocabulary with exceptional expressive language skills. He cherishes being read bedtime stories, yet at school he would rather do anything but read the stories that are available at the first-grade level.

Michael is an eighth grader with a razor sharp mind. He is in honors math and science, and does well in social studies. However, he does not enjoy reading or writing. When it comes to doing the assignments that are mandated by the curriculum, Michael is very resistant. He is falling behind in his English class and frequently states, "This is boring."

Nahid is repeating 10th-grade English and failing the class for the second time. He openly and often makes comments such as "school is dumb." He comes to class but does not participate in class discussions, nor does he complete his reading or writing assignments. When he does read and write, he does it well. He has an excellent grasp of English, his second language, and has shared that sometimes he likes to read and write, but that he hates school.

Although Jacob, Michael, and Nahid have exhibited that they are capable of achieving the literacy competencies needed to succeed academically, they are not interested in reading what is presented in school. Tragically, these three boys are not alone. Over the past four decades there has emerged well-documented evidence of a gender gap in reading beginning in the early grades and continuing through the secondary level (National Center for Education Statistics, 2009). Could Jacob's, Michael's, and Nahid's lack of interest in school literacy be a contributing factor to this gap?

As experienced teachers and graduate students in Literacy Education at Madonna University, we have been deeply concerned about the long-term trend of low achievement. As mothers of sons, this gender gap was close to each of our hearts. Having shared in the challenges of reaching students like Jacob, Michael, and Nahid, we committed ourselves to finding out whether a strong correlation existed between interest and achievement, and if so, what strategies we

could implement in our own classrooms to improve the success of our male students.

## What the Research Reveals

While exploring the nature of the gender gap, we found a staggering amount of research investigating the impact that motivation has on boys and the reasons why it may be lacking. The research shows that certain conditions have to be present to motivate boys to read. Many boys will engage in literacy tasks only when they are interested in the topic, feel a personal connection to the topic, see a real-life or immediate purpose for reading, and believe they can be successful. Table 1 on page 23 highlights key information in our review of the research on boys' motivation to read.

The common thread in the current research is clear: tapping into boys' interests is essential to their success. If boys are not interested they will not be motivated to engage in the task. As teachers we should ask ourselves: *Have we done all that we can to understand our boys' interests and apply it to the lessons we teach and the tasks we assign?* It is evident from the latest MEAP (Michigan Educational Assessment Program) scores that a change needs to occur. The 2008 and 2009 MEAP reading scores revealed that in grades 3-8 there was a consistent pattern that showed males lagged behind females as detailed in tables 2 and 3 (page 25) from the Michigan Department of Education (MDE) website.

## The Development of Our Reading and Interest Survey

Boltz (2007) states that well-meaning educators "often assume that they know what is best for students," but wonders "at what juncture should the students' viewpoints be taken into consideration?" (p. 2). While many of us ask our students for sug-

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\*The names of the children have been changed to protect their privacy.

**Table 1. Research on boys' motivation to read**

| Research/Review          | Findings   |
|--------------------------|--|
| Stanovich (1986)         | A study, dubbed the Matthew Effect, showed students who read often, improve their reading, which motivates them to read more, resulting in their becoming even better readers; conversely, poor readers who read less, will likely continue to lag behind in reading skills.   |
| Brozo (2002)             | Choice and control are two ingredients commonly missing in instruction provided to adolescent boys who are not reading as would be expected for their grade level and who are disinterested and reluctant readers... An alternative approach should focus on giving reluctant and bored readers the opportunity to choose reading materials and control the kinds of responses and extensions, such as assignments and activities associated with those materials (p. 18).   |
| Blackburn (2003)         | Cites Smith and Wilhelm (2002): Educators should teach in ways that give boys a sense of control and competence, provide clear goals and feedback, and appropriately challenge them with coursework relevant in the present time.<br>Cites Maynard (2002): Boys are attracted to text with heroes, "battles for power," and domination. In addition, boys are motivated by their own interests, whereas girls are more willing to perform for their teachers.<br>Cites Rowan et al. (2002): The authors note the importance of integrating technologies and broadening our view from "literacy" to "literacies." |
| Smith and Wilhelm (2004) | In their research study, they found that boys liked activities in which they were competent and could be successful. Boys favored activities on which they could receive clear and immediate feedback on their competence, and if achieving competence seemed unattainable, it was better to give up than to struggle. They found that boys often rejected "school" literacy because it was too difficult and the content was too obscure. However, boys accepted home literacy: texts that were appropriately challenging and extended their competence in ways that were meaningful to them.                   |
|                          | <b>Continued on page 24</b>  |

|                             |  |
|-----------------------------|--|
| Taylor (2004)               | The researcher suggests that educators start by broadening our definition of literacy to include what boys are already doing outside of school in the area of literacy and to include the topics about which they are interested (p.3). She reminds us that all boys are unique individuals, and we must be careful not to make stereotypical assumptions about what they will like to read (p. 4).  |
| Merisuo-Storm (2006)        | Research in Finland found that boys were more selective readers than girls and that their top choices were comics, humorous stories and adventure books. They expressed interest in book series but a strong dislike for fairytales and poetry. Boys were also more sensitive to gendered material. They did not want to pick up anything that could be considered "girlish."  |
| Boltz (2007)                | Interest in the material and self-selection is critical. Boys generally want to read action, adventure, comics, graphic novels, and nonfiction text. They enjoy humor and fantasy and like to read about things they do or want to do. Boys feel removed from their reading assignments. They recognize the importance of the assignments to their grade, but feel that they are not helpful or relevant to them personally (p. 18).   |
| Marinak and Gambrell (2010) | According to the National Literacy Trust (2001), fourth-grade girls significantly outperform fourth-grade boys in all the G8 countries* (p. 2). Boys have a less positive attitude about reading. A decrease in positive reading attitude generally begins in the 4 <sup>th</sup> grade. Low motivation to read for boys is strongly related to the value they place on reading activities (p. 7). Students may reject literacy tasks that are lacking in purpose and personal value, therefore strategies and/or interventions designed to bolster the motivation of boys should consider personal use and what boys value when reading (p. 7). |

\*G8 countries are Canada, France, Germany, Italy, Japan, Russia, the United Kingdom, and the United States.

gestions, we do so in less than systematic ways. As caring teachers we are genuinely interested in our students as people, not just as students. Therefore, to facilitate the process of determining students' interests, we set out to construct an inventory that would provide rich information about their interests. We began by looking at the kinds of reading interest inventories available to teachers and found that there was room for improvement. Looking carefully at the reading inventory provided by the MLPP (Michigan Literacy Progress Profile, 2001) we found two areas of weakness. First, the questions, in our opinion, did not target rich, detailed information about reading interests and preferences. Secondly, questions such as, "*What do you think about as you choose what you will read?*" may be too difficult for students who have not received adequate training in how to engage in meta-cognitive thinking.

We continued to examine a number of other interest inventories from a variety of sources, including fellow teachers. In her book, *The Book Whisperer*, educator and writer Donalyn Miller (2009) gave us valuable insight as to the kinds of questions to ask and how to use the results of the interest inventories to help all students to enjoy reading.

The purpose of our inventory is to find out what students like, rather than have them analyze themselves as readers. From our research, we developed a reading interest inventory that can be used with students in the fourth grade and beyond (see Appendix A on page 29). We targeted fourth grade as our starting point based on research that indicates

that boys begin to fall behind in grade 4 (Marinak & Gambrell, 2010). However, this inventory can be used with younger grades as well if given orally as an interview (which is how we preceded with Jacob, the first-grade student noted in the opening of this article). We used open-ended questions in order to get information from a student as a whole person and not just a reader. For example, we ask the questions: "What do you like to do in your free time?" and "What did you enjoy about your favorite book?" Taylor (2004) and others remind of the need to broaden our definition of literacy to include boys' out-of-school literacies; therefore, we decided to include questions about non-school-related reading. These types of questions can provide valuable insight into the topics in which an individual student has an interest and/or feels competent, thus allowing for more tailored literacy lessons and choice of reading materials.

This inventory is meant to be a dynamic tool that can be adapted to meet the specific needs of students. The entire inventory can be turned into a web-based survey, which may be more appealing to technology-savvy students. Special needs students, including ELL students, can have the inventory read to them.

## Using the Survey to Guide Instruction

It is not enough to simply glance at the results and place the surveys in a file. Making the link between students' interests and classroom instruction requires teacher initiative. Flynt and Brozo (2009) state,

**Table 2. 2008 Reading and Writing Proficiency levels 1-2\***

|        | Reading |     |     |     |     |     |  | Writing |     |     |     |     |     |
|--------|---------|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|--|---------|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|
|        | 3rd     | 4th | 5th | 6th | 7th | 8th |  | 3rd     | 4th | 5th | 6th | 7th | 8th |
| Male   | 85%     | 81% | 80% | 78% | 77% | 73% |  | 56%     | 39% | 58% | 71% | 72% | 68% |
| Female | 88%     | 85% | 83% | 83% | 83% | 79% |  | 66%     | 50% | 69% | 80% | 84% | 81% |

**Table 3. 2009 Reading Proficiency Levels 1-2\***

|        | 3rd | 4th | 5th | 6th | 7th | 8th |
|--------|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|
| Male   | 88% | 82% | 84% | 85% | 80% | 79% |
| Female | 92% | 86% | 87% | 90% | 84% | 88% |

\*Level 1=Advanced    Level 2=Proficient

Staying abreast of developments in the world that students live in, whether it is music, sports, or what they are reading on the Internet, can go a long way toward developing teacher "street creds." This level of personal connection with students can translate into a more productive classroom environment (p. 537).

Furthermore, to improve student learning, Brozo and Flynt (2008) stress the role motivation plays in learning: "We understand that students must have more than the skill; they must also possess the will to read and learn" (p. 173). The research is clear: the most effective teachers incorporate students' interests to more fully engage students in reaching literacy standards and objectives.

Therefore, teachers can start by using students' responses to the inventory to select specific reading materials for classroom use. Miller (2009) explains in detail how she spends the first few days of school gathering a supply of books and reading materials to last a couple of weeks for each student based on the responses to the interest inventory. By selecting text based on students' interests, she is able to lead rich conversations about their reading. With guidance the students learn how to find text on their own to match their interests.

Providing an ample supply of books and other reading materials to match each student's interest should be done throughout the year, not just in the first few weeks of school. Teachers need to expand the genres, topics, and text mediums they provide for students to read. Students should be allowed, in fact encouraged, to read what they enjoy without regard to teachers' preferences, even if it may, in students' parlance, "gross us out." Reading material should include magazines, web-based reading, and multimedia text. Boys need to be given options and choices in selecting topics of interest to read and research.

To make the most effective use of the information collected through the Reading and Interest Inventory, the following suggestions are offered:

- Legitimize boys' interests by allowing for a variety of mediums: traditional text, magazines, electronic formats, songs, etc.
- Use boys' interests to engage them in conversation in order to form a connection with them.

- Incorporate students' interests into writing and project assignments, allowing them to choose what they research and how they present their findings (e.g., dramatization, music, multimedia demonstrations).
- Post a dry erase board where students can jot down current ideas or interests as topics for reading and writing.
- Let the students look through the book orders and help to decide which books to order for the class.
- Create an environment for students and teachers to openly share what they have enjoyed reading; book talks, book reviews, etc., are ways to help students discover new books or text they may like.
- A great place to start for students who are looking for suggestions for future reading would be a classroom recommendation folder. Inside the folder would be simple reviews of books and texts from their peers saying what they liked or disliked and whether they would recommend it to a peer.
- Include free reading time in school to make sure that students have time to explore many sources just for the pleasure of reading.
- To further motivate boys, develop a purpose for reading that would appeal to boys, such as finding answers to real problems, or searching for information about an interest or hobby.
- Seek role models-not only male authors, but males in the community who can demonstrate the pleasure and value of reading; invite them into the classroom to share their reading experiences, read aloud to students, conduct book talks about their favorite books, or serve as mentors.

## The Reading and Interest Inventory in Action

We began this article with a brief profile of three students. This section will target two of those students, Jacob and Michael, presenting first a summary of each student's survey responses followed by several instructional suggestions for motivating and engaging each student (see Appendix B on page 30).

First grader, Jacob, is already showing signs of boredom with his classroom reading assignments. In order to prevent his current attitude from becoming a more serious problem, we administered the survey to determine steps that can be taken now to improve his motivation and thus his outlook on reading. Because he is a first grader this survey was appropriately adapted and read aloud to him as an interview. Below is a summary of Jacob's responses:

- He likes spy books, science fiction, fantasy, non-fiction, and Boy's Life magazine. He enjoys books about the history of airplanes and how to make things.
- He likes to watch Phineas and Ferb on TV because they invent "cool" stuff.
- He likes to explore the Lego website.
- His favorite author is Tedd Arnold because he likes his Fly Guy books.
- He likes to build things, play checkers, and play with his Nerf guns. He enjoys role-playing where he is a spy or a character from Star Wars.
- He is involved in a range of sports including swimming, soccer, basketball, and tae kwon do.
- To make school reading more fun, he suggests reading for shorter amounts of time throughout the day rather than for a long duration of time in the morning. He also wants to read Star Wars books with friends.

Working with his responses, the teacher can assemble a supply of books, magazines, websites, pictures, and other materials on these topics of interest for Jacob. Books by Tedd Arnold and information about him should be included. These resources can be used for independent reading, guided reading instruction, and writing assignments.

It is not enough to simply have these resources available. To build his motivation to read and write, Jacob should be allowed to help create his own authentic literacy assignments that will meet the targeted teaching objectives. For example, if the teaching objective is Grade Level Content Expectation: R.IT.01.01: *Identify and describe the basic form, feature, and purpose of a variety of informational genre including simple "how-to" books, science and*

*social studies magazines* (Michigan Department of Education, 2011), Jacob can select the informational text he will read. He will then be guided to examine and identify the features of the informational text he chose. He can also be given choices about how to demonstrate his knowledge of text features. Possible options would include an oral or written explanation, or the use of pictures and drawings. To focus on "how-to" writing, Jacob can create his own Lego structure along with a set of written instructions. Jacob also indicated a preference for shorter reading periods and being able to read with friends. There is a good chance that Star Wars books would also appeal to other boys in his class. A variety of collaborative strategies can be used to explore such books of interest, such as shared and paired reading. Language Experience Approach (LEA) is another excellent strategy that can be used with Jacob. With this strategy, Jacob would be able to dictate a story to the teacher based on topics of interest, which can then be turned into his own reading material. This should be of high interest to Jacob since it originates from him and was written in his own words. He may also feel more connected to the classroom activities if the teacher makes a personal connection by engaging him in conversation about things that interest him. For example, the teacher can tune into an episode of Phineas and Ferb and casually discuss some of their inventions. Small acts such as these could strengthen the teacher-student relationship, thus fostering greater cooperation and more effort to read and write in the classroom.

We now turn to Michael's responses, which are summarized below:

- He enjoys adventure, fantasy, and action stories.
- His favorite author is Rick Riordan.
- His favorite book is The Lord of the Rings.
- Much of his focus is on video games and war media.
- He also likes to draw and do word searches.
- His suggestion for making reading more fun is to do projects.

Here again, in order to motivate Michael to engage fully, the classroom literacy assignments should link to his interests. Because many of Michael's interests fall outside of the realm of what is valued in the

traditional curriculum, it will be especially important to allow him choices based on his interests whenever possible. Showing a genuine interest through conversations about his interests is a place to begin. Since Michael is an older student, he can be given greater responsibility for gathering resources on topics of interest. In addition, having some of his interests represented in the classroom would be a way of encouraging and validating him as a learner. A poster or colorful book cover of his favorite author that is hung in a prominent place is one simple way of accomplishing this goal. Michael can also be given a choice of topics when the objective is to write an essay. Michael suggested projects as a way for reading to be more fun. Research shows that boys want to solve problems and work for a real purpose. Project-based learning is centered on these principles. Project-based learning is a highly effective way to engage students in authentic learning activities. It leads to increased student motivation, cross-curricular skill building, and because students are actively applying their reading and writing it also fosters better retention. The teacher could offer an opportunity to create a new video game or build a gaming website which would be shared with others online. This could be an individual or group project that would involve researching, problem solving, collaborating, recording the steps, creating something unique, and building computer literacy. Michael, along with peers, could present his project (website or video game) to his classmates or school community and explain the process he used along with the problems and challenges he faced and how he solved them.

### In Conclusion

The purpose of the inventory is to gather information about students' interests, and then use their interests to motivate them to tackle the literacy objectives required within the curriculum. The depth of the responses will vary greatly. Some students may not answer all the questions, or may give very limited responses. Even brief or no responses may offer some insight into a student's attitude about literacy, skills related to expressive language, or metacognition. The responses can also be used to begin a conversation to probe more deeply if the teacher feels the need to have more information. The goal is not to expect detailed answers to each question, but to elicit as much as the student can provide or is willing to divulge. It is an effective way to begin the ongoing

process of uncovering what motivates each student.

Teachers should administer the Reading and Interest Inventory periodically throughout the year because students change and expand their interests as they develop and mature. Finding ways to motivate students needs to be an ongoing and integral part of good instruction, and may well help to close the gender gap in the achievement of literacy skills.

Addressing the gender gap in literacy should be a concern to everyone. We suggest that teachers begin by finding out what appeals to boys and use that to motivate them to read and write. By starting with what boys enjoy, educators can gradually guide boys into areas of reading prescribed by the Michigan Department of Education and district curricula. If students like Jacob, Michael, and Nahid never learn that reading can be valuable, purposeful, and enjoyable in their present lives, they will leave our classrooms today unprepared for the literacy demands of tomorrow—for success in school, college, and the workplace.

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### Appendix A

#### Reading and Interest Inventory

1. If someone is going to read aloud to you, what would you like them to read?
2. What was the name of one of your favorite books you read? What did you enjoy about the book?
3. Who is one of your favorite authors and why?
4. What web sites do you like to visit? What do you like about these web sites?
5. What do you listen to, or read to learn about what is going on in your neighborhood, city, state, country, or world?
6. What magazines and newspapers do you like to read? What do you like about them?
7. What genres do you like to read? What do you enjoy about them? (fiction, non-fiction, fantasy, science fiction, comedy, plays, etc.).
8. What other things do you like to read? Why do you enjoy them?
9. What do you do in your free time?
10. What TV shows do you watch?
11. If you have favorite TV shows explain why you enjoy them.
12. What is one of your favorite movies and why?
13. Describe the kinds of games you like to play. (board games, video games, card games, etc.).
14. What things hold your interest the most?
15. Who do you look up to, or admire? Why do you admire this person(s)?
16. Give your teacher ideas or suggested assignments to make reading more fun for you this year.

## Appendix B

**Results of Jacob's Reading and Interest Inventory**

*Answers were dictated. Researcher read the questions and recorded his answers.*

1. If someone is going to read aloud to you, what would you like them to read? ***How to make things, real crystal caves, the history of airplanes, spy books***
2. What was the name of one of your favorite books you read? What did you enjoy about the book? ***Star Wars books, the imaginary weapons, droids, spaceships, outer space wars that take place.***
3. Who is one of your favorite authors and why? ***Tedd Arnold because he writes Fly Guy and I like those books because the Fly says the boy's name.***
4. What web sites do you like to visit? What do you like about these web sites? ***Lego website pick all sorts of Lego games to play.***
5. What do you listen to, or read to learn about what is going on in your neighborhood, city, state, country, or world? ***Listen on TV***
6. What magazines and newspapers do you like to read? What do you like about them? ***Boy's Life because it tells you funny things and it's about cub scouts.***
7. What genres do you like to read? What do you enjoy about them? (fiction, non-fiction, fantasy, science fiction, comedy, plays, etc.). ***Fiction, non-fiction***
8. What other things do you like to read? Why do you enjoy them? (Question was skipped)
9. What do you do in your free time? (This question was rephrased: What activities do you do when you are done with school? What do you enjoy doing?) ***Playing basketball, soccer, swimming, ice-skating, gymnastics and tae kwan do.***
10. What TV shows do you watch? ***Phineas & Ferb, Zeke & Luther, Mystery Hunters***
11. If you have a favorite TV shows explain why you enjoy them. ***Phyneas & Ferb because they build cool things.***
12. What is one of your favorite movies and why? ***Harry Potter because the wizard is cool & Megamind because of the cool inventions.***
13. Describe the kinds of games you like to play. (board games, video games, card games, etc.).(his responses were same as #9)
14. What things hold your interest the most? Skipped

15. Who do you look up to, or admire? Why do you admire this person(s)? *Mom, dad, my family. Because we're nice. We bend the rules sometimes because they love me.*
16. Give your teacher ideas or suggested assignments to make reading more fun for you this year. *Read for shorter amounts of time. Read with friends. Read Star War books.*

### Results of Michael's Reading and Interest Inventory

1. If someone is going to read aloud to you, what would you like them to read?  
*An adventure book*
2. What was the name of one of your favorite books you read? What did you enjoy about the book?  
*Lord of the Rings. I love adventure books.*
3. Who is one of your favorite authors and why? *Rick Riordan. He writes good books.*
4. What web sites do you like to visit? What do you like about these web sites?  
*Mostly game websites. Games are fun.*
5. What do you listen to, or read to learn about what is going on in your neighborhood, city, state, country, or world? *I look on Yahoo.com*
6. What magazines and newspapers do you like to read? What do you like about them?  
*Don't read either.*
7. What genres do you like to read? What do you enjoy about them? (fiction, non-fiction, fantasy, science fiction, comedy, plays, etc.). *Fantasy, action, adventure.*
8. What other things do you like to read? Why do you enjoy them? *Nothing really.*
9. What do you do in your free time? *Play video games.*
10. What TV shows do you watch? *Ninja Warrior*
11. If you have favorite TV shows explain why you enjoy them. *Obstacle Course*
12. What is one of your favorite movies and why? *Indiana Jones, Good Action*
13. Describe the kinds of games you like to play. (board games, video games, card games, etc.). *First Person Shooter, Call of Duty*
14. What things hold your interest the most? *Drawing*
15. Who do you look up to, or admire? Why do you admire this person(s)? *The guitarist from Dragon Force. He's awesome.*
16. Give your teacher ideas or suggested assignments to make reading more fun for you this year. *Word finds and projects.*