

“If Dragons ‘Would Eat’ [sic] Pink Hearts, That Would Be Ok”: Preadolescent Boys’ Paths to Reading

Geneviève Brisson

University of British Columbia
genevievebrisson@gmail.com

Abstract

This article explores a study of five preadolescent boys’ perceptions of reading and readers, and the role of agency on their reading paths. The boys, in grades five to seven, shared their thoughts and experiences through individual and group interviews. The findings suggest that these boys adapted norms and practices of the dominant discourse among their male friends to pursue their own interests in reading. Some participants, however, stated they sometimes experience pressure to assume gender-appropriate preferences in order to be accepted by their (male) peers.

Introduction

The press is rife with articles claiming boys should be considered “disadvantaged” (“We must”, 2009), that they require different kinds of instruction (Taylor, 2004), unique reading materials (Jobe & Sakari, 2002), and more male teachers and mentors (Booth, 2002; Brozo, 2002). One prevalent assumption is that boys mostly choose non-fiction over fiction (Jobe & Sakari, 2002). Studies of gender and literacy provide other perspectives about the relationship of boys and reading and writing, offering a more complicated picture (Blair & Sanford, 2003; Love & Hamston, 2001, 2004; Moffatt, 2003; Sanford & Blair, 2008; Smith & Wilhelm, 2002).

This paper reports a study that explored why some boys enjoy reading literature for pleasure. The following questions framed this research: What perceptions do these boys have of reading? How does agency influence their paths to reading? The participants of this study were readers of novels, and admitted to be, to differing degrees, “avid” readers of fiction. They served as fascinating counterexamples to the literature describing boys in accordance with a forged, gendered, and homogeneous image. Using these preadolescents’ own words and experiences, I explore their reading preferences and perspectives to challenge the pervasive rhetoric of boys as non-readers and of reading as a feminized practice.

Theoretical Framework

Traditionally, literacy has been defined as the ability to read and write words on paper using standard forms of national languages (New London Group, 2000). This restrictive definition has been contested. In the academic education field, researchers now use an abundance of terms for literacy, such as school literacy, community and family literacy, digital or computer literacy, and multiple literacies (Blair & Sanford, 2004). This study explores one aspect of literacy: the act of reading print-based texts, such as informational books, comics, novels, magazines, (sports) cards, and any other print materials during leisure time. As such, this inquiry incorporated a wide definition of literacy that surpasses the boundaries set by traditional literature in the field.

In this study, I contrast elements of a social-learning-theory point of view with a poststructuralism approach to gender to inform the understanding of a particular group of boys' reading paths. Social learning theory presents gender as learned through individuals' interaction within their environment, through socialization both at home and at school (Rowan, Knobel, Bigum, & Lankshear, 2002). According to Maynard (2002), children learn gender roles through reinforcement of appropriate behaviour and imitation of same-sex role models within schools and families. Understandings of *normal* masculinity often excludes literary reading, viewed as a feminine activity. The socialization model tends to portray children as non-agentive or passive beings, who take in anything their parents or teachers model for them.

According to Maynard (2002), this model does not provide an explanation for the wide variation within genders. For instance, there are boys who adopt the ways of being masculine displayed by the adults surrounding them, and boys who appropriate ways not related to the form of masculinity assumed by their parents or promoted in class by teachers. A poststructuralist view on the concept of discourse provides a theoretical frame to explore such variations, and is therefore central to this study. Baxter (2003) defined *discourses* as powerful sets of assumptions and expectations governing mainstream social and cultural practices. They contain *implied theory*, which delineates the so-called *normal* way for each human being to speak, read, write, and dress. The concept of discourse is closely linked with notions of power. Baxter (2003) suggested that within social contexts there are plural and contending discourses that constitute power relations. In any given context, there may be both dominant discourses constructing stereotypical and restrictive views on masculinity and gender, and resistant discourses supporting more open or nuanced constructions of masculinity and gender. The fact that differential power is attached to various displays and discourses surrounding acceptable behaviours for boys might explain boys' reluctance to adopt some behaviours, such as reading, even after having seen them displayed by other boys or grown men (Rowan et al., 2002).

Young (2000) postulated that human beings are part of many communities and learn the practices of their concomitant discourses as they participate and adopt the rules and values of the social group as their own. These discourses, according to Baxter (2003) and Young (2000), are embedded within institutions or social groups, such as families; peer groups; and schools. These institutions help to produce normative models of masculinity (Rowan et al., 2002) and, according to Connell, it is in everyday actions within these social groups that masculine identities are actively constructed and accomplished (as cited in Young, 2000). These powerful institutions impose relative values of different versions of masculinity upon individuals.

These discourses shape boys, but boys' actions and thoughts can also reshape the practices associated with these discourses. Some boys may challenge practices identified as masculine and attempt to transform them to legitimize their way of practicing masculinity (Young, 2000). In conceptualizing *agency* for this research, I draw on Baxter's (2003) work. She defines agency as individuals' ability to actively renegotiate discourses. Within this study, agency refers to the ability of preadolescent boys to navigate; negotiate; or resist discourses of peer culture, masculinity, and parental values in order to think and choose for themselves.

Literature Review

Popular discourses often highlight a perspective of boys as disadvantaged at school in many subjects, but more specifically in literacy. However, research reveals that only certain groups of boys perform poorly or disengage from reading (Cortis & Newmarch, 2000; Gilbert & Gilbert, 2001; Power, 2001). In the following section, I discuss studies addressing perceptions of boys and reading from the vantage of social-learning-theory and poststructuralism.

Role Models

Social learning theorists argue that modifications of boys' actions requires training for new responses (Rowan et al., 2002). Foster, Kimmel, and Skelton (2001) claim that increases in male teachers positively affects boys' academic achievement, particularly in English. Booth (2002) suggested that boys require male role models for reading and writing to lead them to rich reading paths, whereas Brozo (2002) argued that boys' reading behaviours improved with the inclusion of visiting adult male readers from a variety of social classes.

Sullivan (2003) suggested that as boys get older, they mirror the archetypal fathers' reading: boys were then drawn toward trading cards, magazines, and newspapers. Boys who read books gravitated toward non-fiction works about people's lives,

sports, and natural phenomena. According to Booth (2002), even if more fathers these days show interest in the literacy lives of their children, literacy education is still mostly a feminine field. Thus, from a social-learning-theory point of view, boys learn that reading is a feminine activity and that it is not appropriate for them (Brozo, 2002; Maynard, 2002).

Normative Discourses on Boys and Reading

Post-structuralist feminism acknowledges the differential power attached to competing perceptions or discourses on what it means to be a boy or a man (Rowan et al., 2002). Boys may be reluctant to engage in what is legitimated through television, school, and family as feminine behaviours. In her study of a group of 10- to 12-year-old students, Moffatt (2003) witnessed numerous discussions among children, where reading was constituted as an inappropriate activity for boys, and where they thought that boys' gender performances were monitored closely by peers. Boys suffered serious social repercussions—such as ridicule and marginalization—if they stepped outside of the confines of normative masculinity. Martino's (2001) data were similar: Forty-two percent of the adolescent boys he surveyed rejected reading. They devalued reading and saw it as a passive and feminized activity.

Agency

Love and Hamston (2004) explained how committed readers in their study asserted their own agency by balancing three kinds of leisure reading. They read magazines and Internet websites to satisfy their interests in male youth culture, they read pragmatically-oriented texts about hobbies, and they chose fiction to conform with their parents' values about the educational value of fiction as leisure reading. In Young's study (2000), boys admitted to crying sometimes, even if the hegemonic discourse of masculinity worked to sustain the belief that men do not cry. It can be argued that further research is needed to explore the powers and limitations of normative discourses. The study described below sought to illustrate individual boys' paths to literary reading by looking at the particular boy's perceptions of reading as well as the influence of these boys' agency on their paths to reading.

Methodology

This study comprised the examination of five 11–13 year-old boys' experiences with reading. Over a period of one month, I conducted one 45-minute semi-structured individual interview with each participant, and a one-hour group interview with all participants following, a conversational style and open-ended questions (Merriam, 1988). I also used readers' narratives (Smith & Wilhelm, 2002) —short texts presenting different situations related to reading— to keep the boys interested and to trigger facts that direct questions about the boys' own experience that might not otherwise have been brought out. The last part of the interview comprised a browsing session in the library, during which the boys showed me what they like to read and how they made their choices.

I audio-recorded and transcribed all interviews. Following transcription of the interviews, I entered an immersion phase (Wellington, 2000), where I listened to parts of the recording and read and re-read my transcriptions, keeping in mind my research questions. I held “a conversation with the data” (Merriam, 1988, p. 131), making notes in the margins and highlighting what seemed significant in relation to the research questions. In order to help efficiently manage the large quantity of interview data, I used NVivo, a qualitative data analysis software, to assist with the organization and coding. I used a method of “constant comparison and contrast” as suggested by Delamont (2002), and searched for irregularities and contrast, as well as patterns and themes.

Participants

From the time I started working on the recorded data from the interviews, I knew the boys by their aliases: Cam (13 years old), Xela (13 years old), John (11 years old), Ryder (12 years old), and his twin brother, Joey (12 years old). Cam's family “influenced [him] toward reading.” His father is a teacher, his mother reads “realistic novels,” and she had given him “a bunch of Newberry-winner” and other books. Furthermore, his older brother and sister like to read fantasy, a genre Cam also enjoys reading. At the time of the interview, he was re-reading *The Edge Chronicles* (Stewart, 1998) as well as *Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone* (Rowling, 2000). Xela likes to read fantasy, science fiction, and crime/spy novels. Xela

said his younger brother likes fantasy, and that his parents read “pretty big novels most of the time.” At the time of the interview, his father was reading *The Da Vinci code* (Brown, 2003). Xela wanted to read *The Da Vinci code* because his father had said he would enjoy it.

John enjoys reading adventure/ action and military stories, as well as non-fiction and sports books. He is a fan of video games and, at the time of the interview, he was reading *Halo* (Nylund, 2001), an eponymous series of an X-Box game he loved. His brother had introduced him to the video game, but not to the books. John stated that his brother reads only the “books he had to do for homework” or his computer’s screen. According to him, both his parents read work-related materials. His mother reads for her academic courses, and his father “had to read a lot of stuff ‘cause he was a psychiatrist.”

Ryder and Joey are twin brothers, and they are both avid fiction readers. Ryder is deeply interested in fantasy and mythology, and he is passionate about dragons and swords. At the time of the interview, he had just read *Eragon* (Paolini, 2003) and *Eldest* (Paolini, 2005). Joey really likes to read books about adventures and magic. At the time of the interview, he was reading *Magyk*, (Sage, 2005), and *The Penultimate Peril* (Snicket, 2005). He had also recently read the *Eragon* series, following Ryder’s recommendation. Both boys mentioned that their mother influenced their choices of reading materials. Before they were able to read on their own, she would read them *Harry Potter and the Philosopher’s Stone* (Rowling, 2000) before bedtime. The brothers also stated that their mother was an avid reader, juggling many books simultaneously. Talking about their father, Joey said he did not read very much, whereas Ryder said he read on camping trips.

Limitations of the study

Given the small sample of boys I used in this study, and the use of a *first come, first served* convenience sample, it is possible that the data gathered might not be generalized to other populations or settings (Morrow, 2005). Moreover, the fact that I placed the posters advertising the study in a public library, a setting that I cannot assume is visited by all preadolescent boys, has surely also influenced the composition of the sample. For instance, my original focus was on any kind of reading of print-based texts, but the boys who showed interest in the study were all readers of fiction. Furthermore, *boys* as a category is problematic from poststructuralist perspectives, as boys cannot be described as a monolithic or homogeneous group. In this article, I do not attempt to make dichotomous arguments where boys who are readers are opposed to boys who do not read, nor do I try to inscribe “boys as certain sorts of literate subjects” (Martino, 2008, p.99). Instead I try to contribute to the understanding of the issue of gender and reading as a complex matter.

Findings

In this section, I discuss the findings of this study in accordance with the sub-themes of participants’ perceptions of reading and readers and boundaries of masculinity. I highlight below factors influencing participants’ perceptions on reading and influences on their behaviors as readers. Moreover, I also connect the investigative findings to notions of gender norms and agency.

Perceptions of Reading and Readers

From my participants’ point of view, reading was a “cool” activity, even if they had many other interests, such as sports, scouts, television and video games. Despite being busy, they enjoy reading, talking about books, and recommending books to friends. Cam explained that, “reading in my opinion is not boring because you can go places, like you can read about something and you can kinda feel like you’re there.” Joey’s remark was similar to Cam’s:

I guess... I like to read because it’s like doing something... except it’s something that you can’t do normally because, say, you’re there fighting in a battle, you can’t really do that. Or you’re just riding on horseback cross land... you can’t do that very easily and it’s just cool that you can do anything you want basically when you’re reading.

On the other hand, the boys were aware that some of their classmates disliked reading or thought it was stupid. Xela explained, “you wouldn’t wanna read a book while your friends are going out playing and stuff, having fun. You would

probably be with them.” Joey clearly stated that he really liked to be with his friends, suggesting that reading and being with his friends were mutually exclusive.

My participants further noted that at least one of their parents read or talked about his or her readings with them. For instance, Xela’s parents read “pretty big novels most of the time,” and Joey’s mother often read passages of her books to him. Cam spoke at length of his sister, who recommends books to him. The boys were in contact with feminine and masculine models of readers, but they did not necessarily identify more strongly with what their fathers read.

Consequently, reading was not described as a feminine activity by the boys in this study. Some books, however, were described as inappropriate for boy readers. John emphasized the external appearance of girls’ books, saying you could definitively “judge a book by its cover.” He stated that no boys would read a pink book covered with hearts. During the group interview, he mentioned again that pink books were not attractive to boys, and Ryder agreed with him, commenting that pink books with little hearts all over the cover were not for boys, but “if dragons ‘would eat’ [sic] pink hearts, that would be ok.” The boys did not wish to be associated with what they described as girls’ books. During the group interview, they tried to distance themselves from these books. For instance, Cam talked about a *Dear Canada* book he had read.

GB: Have you ever read a girls’ book?

Cam: Technically, yes. I was being completely convinced by my librarian that it was NOT a girl book but it just happened to have a girl on the cover... but it WAS a girl book!

The boys distanced themselves from books that they perceived as belonging to the female domain. Making fun of girls’ books seemed to be a good way for them to establish this distance. In his individual interview, John talked about *The Sisterhood of the Travelling Pants* (Brashares, 2001) which, in his opinion, was the utmost example of a girls’ book, and he turned the storyline into ridicule.

Additionally, the participants talked about resisting or negotiating their friends’ tastes and interests to pursue their own. They were all really clear about what genres and subjects they were interested in reading, and Cam; Ryder; John; and Joey said they would deviate from the line drawn by their peers, since they would read a book none of their friends wanted to read.

I read some books... some of my friends think dragons are stupid and I think... [I am] fascinated or... I’m like super [interested] about dragons and swords. (Ryder)
If like if I read ‘oh this is supposed to be a good book’ and my friends are like ‘I don’t think it’s that good,’ I’d still ... probably try and read it... yes ‘cause I usually just read whatever I feel like reading, especially when I have nothing to read. (Cam)

Xela, however, said he would probably not read a book none of his friends wanted to read. He specified that he usually “stuck with [his] friends’ judgement.” Moreover, the five participants agreed that they would not go as far as to read *girls’* books.

Agency

When asked to talk about boys in general, to go beyond their own reading practices, Cam; Joey; Ryder; and John argued that boys could assert their agency when they were choosing reading materials. Cam stated that, “there’s no limits saying... laws saying ‘boys cannot read this book’ or that ‘girls cannot read this book.’ You’re allowed to read whatever you want.” However, Xela; Ryder; and John also made comments in their individual interview suggesting that boys might not always have the choice or the right to read whatever they want:

GB: Can boys read whatever they want?

Xela: Yeah but sometimes they’re a bit pressured not to read pink-covered books

GB: Pressured?

Xela: Oh well... they’re joked at: ‘ha ha, you’re reading a pink book, ha ha ha.’ It makes him feel like ‘oh, I don’t really wanna read this anymore.’ But most of the time, there’s not really anything wrong about reading a pink book... [It’s just that] their friends don’t like them reading pink books... It takes away sort of their reputation reading pink books. ‘Cause pink... most people think is a girl colour.

Ryder's comment was along the same lines as Xela's. He put forward the idea that some boys might be afraid or embarrassed to talk about some books, if they were *corny* books. Ryder and Xela said consequences of reading a girls' book went from being laughed at to being embarrassed. When asked what would happen if he read a book with little hearts on the cover, John first stated that he would not do it, and after probing he added: "I would... I could... overnight I'd grow long hair and... become a girl."

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to gain a better understanding of what may influence these particular boys' paths to reading by looking at how they perceived the norms of reading and, within these norms, how acting with agency is influencing their paths to reading. Findings suggest that, despite naming many female role models of readers, the participants do not view literary reading as feminine activity. They do, however, suggest that reading preferences are influenced by gender. There is also ambivalence when it comes to choosing reading materials since the participants discussed both self-restrictions and norms constraining them.

The participants were influenced by more than one set of assumptions and expectations that governed their social and cultural practices. One discourse the participants seemed aware of was the dominant discourse among their male friends. They stated that their friends were mostly non-readers. Nevertheless, reading was a favourite activity of the participants. This finding concurs with previous research (Love & Hamston, 2004) in that the participants appeared to balance sports and other activities popular among their male friends, a norm of their discourse of male peers, and reading, an activity they enjoy. Significantly, the participants' successful balancing contrasts with work by Moffatt (2003) and Cherland (1994), who have indicated social consequences for boys who practiced seemingly gender-inappropriate behaviour.

At the same time, none of the participants of this study wished to be associated with girls' books. They felt there were restricting norms that constrained boys to act in specific ways in order to be accepted by their peers. In that, they mirror Moffatt (2003) and Cherland's (1994) conclusions that there are social consequences for boys stepping outside of the boundaries of normative masculinity.

From a social-learning-theory point of view, a predominance of female role models of readers lead boys to regard reading as an unsuitable activity for them, since it belongs to the dominion of women (Brozo, 2002; Maynard, 2002). Despite the fact that they named many female role models of readers, such as mothers and teacher-librarians, the participants do not seem to have established such an association. Following Maynard (2002), one could conclude that the socialization model that tends to present children as passive beings does not account for boys appropriating ways of being masculine that are not displayed by their parents or teachers. The participants, however, might have omitted to mention other role models in their lives. It is therefore possible that what these boys saw around them might have had an influence on their decision to be readers.

Conclusion

Results from this study suggest that there are preadolescent boys who are passionate readers and who believe that reading activities are *cool*. In this paper, I have attempted to contribute further to the limited amount of research that has been conducted into the reading practices of preadolescent boys who define themselves as avid readers of fiction. This group of boys is, in some ways, theoretically very important: they are a step toward proving that nothing is innately anti-reading in boys.

Moreover, boys are far from being a homogeneous group when it comes to reading. The participants in this study described themselves as readers. Within this clearly defined identity, they acted with agency. They resisted the dominant discourse among their male friends in that they read, even if it was not their friends' favourite activity. However, there was a limit to their agency. There seemed to be an unspoken *law* that prohibited these boys from reading *pink* books. However, as Ryder clearly stated: "If dragons 'would eat' [sic] pink hearts, that would be OK," clearly suggesting that, when it comes to reading, his enthusiasm for dragons overrides his aversion to the colour pink. This example illustrates the fluid space of interaction between agency and resistance and/ or adaptation in relation to the dominant discourse about reading among their male friends.

This study provides insights into the phenomenon of boy readers via exploration of Cam's, Ryder's, Joey's, Xela's, and John's perspectives and experiences. Having parents and siblings as reading models seems to be an influential factor explaining why these boys have chosen to identify as readers. Moreover these boys loved to immerse themselves in stories because it allowed them to explore and discover worlds. They took great pleasure from reading fiction. This pleasure may be the very quality that gives them a sense of agency, which allows them to overcome most if not all taboos about being readers. The discussion here about the perceptions and experiences of five preadolescent reader participants may raise questions among essentialist mindsets and challenge discourses describing boys as non-readers and reading as a feminized practice.

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