

FAILURE AND NATURAL GROWTH. TEACHING READING TO BOYS IN DEMOCRATIC ENVIRONMENTS

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Abstract:

Statistics show considerably lower results for boys than for girls in reading tests and little interest for it on their part, coupled with generally lower participation of boys in schools across developed countries. Educators are often oblivious to boys' natural reading preferences as a group and reading syllabi as well as reading lists inadvertently favour girls. The pleasure principle adopted to motivate students fails to animate boys and other media, particularly the internet offer convenient escape from the reading class. However, boys benefit from this unintended exclusion by the opportunity for enriching their range of familiar genres and they otherwise naturally tend to take ownership of their reading inside and outside of school, despite knowing their choices are not deemed legitimate by teachers. Parents and educators should offer male role models for readers, restore boys' self-esteem, ensure richness of input and flexibility in school.

Keywords: *feminine bias, alienation, pleasure principle, cultural heritage, male resistance.*

The problem

In today's hyper-institutionalised world, there is mounting pressure on education systems to form both the skills and the minds of the youth they cater for. What used to happen naturally in the field of personal development, with all its unfathomed complexity, is now the precise target and scientific requirement for schools across the globe. How are schools performing their task of teaching reading to boys? What ideologies and methods do they use? What are the flaws and pitfalls of educational systems in that respect and what are the opportunities underlying?

The situation across the developed world often tends to look grim in statistics:

“The statistics are consistent: Young male readers lag behind their female counterparts. According to the Progress in International Reading Literacy Study (PIRLS) in 2001, fourth-grade girls in all of the 30-plus participating countries scored higher in reading literacy than fourth-grade boys by a statistically significant amount. Similar

findings show up in the U.S. National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) scores, as well as in studies in New Zealand, England, Wales, Scotland, and Northern Ireland.” (McFann 2004: 20-21)

Similar findings about boys lagging behind or underperforming girls in schools have concerned scientists and administrators in countries across the affluent democratic world. Far from being limited to reading, boys’ relative failure in school extends to emotional disturbances diagnosed in schools, learning disabilities (roughly 2:1 according to Flynn and Rahbar) and the list goes on with figures on dropping out of school and even graduating from university:

“The US is not the only country experiencing a widening gap between girls’ and boys’ literacy proficiency. A 2000 international assessment of reading ability in 15 year-olds found girls outscoring boys by an average 32 points in Canada, 29 points in France, 35 points in Germany, 30 points in Japan, 26 points in the UK, and 29 points in the US.”

(<http://www.theboysinitiative.org>)

It is our contention that teaching attitudes and philosophies naturally stretch from reading in English classes for native speakers to the way that reading in English as a foreign language is conceived and approached. This paper looks at possible shortcomings observed in reading classes for native speakers in an attempt to draw conclusions for reading in English for speakers of other languages as well.

Causes and implications

As with all serious problems, the causes are multifold and the guilt lies in more than one place. On the one hand, educators have their share. Ali Carr Chellman argues that western democratic biases have yielded policies such as zero tolerance on violence which grew from a natural ban on guns and other weapons in schools to one on discourse and writing perceived as violent and a general discouragement of attitudes and drives often natural to the minds of boys. In a culture of sanitised safety, boys’ frequently aggressive boisterous creativity is something to be deterred. Moreover, the overwhelming majority of teachers, especially in language classes, are female, which has an impact on the kind of reading and the type of imagination which will be promoted and perceived as acceptable. As a result, boys are bound to feel alienated in schools and made to feel they cannot be high achievers in such an environment which does not seek male values and attitudes, especially since what educators do promote is not easily identified as clear-cut feminine content, but civilised humane profound

values, as opposed to dangerous anarchic disrespectful attitudes. In reality, the destructive drive that lies at the bottom of the male soul – or id, as Freud dubbed it – has a natural way of surfacing most often as acceptable constructive behaviour types and avoiding to talk, read or write about it only plunges such a dangerous drive further away from the grip of consciousness, so even for the purpose of deterring violence in a democratic society, such attitudes on the part of educators are ineffective. Finally, as will be outlined below, recent teaching styles and methodological fads put off boys before their potential is even assessed or awakened.

But how exactly are boys different from girls when it comes to reading preferences? Being more drawn to action, pragmatism and less to empathy and relationships, pre-teen and teen boys in middle and high school tend to favour reading for information, for utilitarian purposes, for expanding their knowledge about the world, while girls tend to read for leisure, empathy or self-reflection. One would think that there can be no value judgment or ranking when it comes to such pertinent interests on both sides, but, apparently, reading classes and, more generally, language class syllabi today attribute more value to empathy, contemplation and even, directly, to expressing emotion.

The most obvious departure from female reading preferences lies in boys' interest in non-fiction. They will gladly read magazines on computers, sports, games, gadgets, nature, science and the like, as well as tutorials and articles on such topics found on the internet. Such transactional kind of reading is dismissed so adamantly by educators that even boys and fathers themselves come to agree that they are improper worthless material. If it stands to reason that self-denial should not be the goal of any culture or educational system, then one is left looking for the reason behind such teaching practices. It is not because such types of text may be proven worthless for academic purposes and lifelong learning. Neither is it because western democratic societies are less utilitarian and more romantic. However, schools may tend to be so.

In the past, schools tended to focus their reading and writing more on the cultural heritage embedded in literary texts, inviting students to generalise and abstract. That had the merit of keeping emotion at bay and encouraging all minds, male included, to participate. Conversely, today's educators respond to the pounding waves of sensory literary experience in popular culture with a renewed interest in affective awareness and vow to pursue the personal growth of their students through the contemplation of emotion and empathy. The result is a clear dominance of assigned reading lists by a plethora of "knowledge-of-the-heart" books which are supposed to be read for pleasure. Who could object to that? It turns out that boys do. Elaine Millard's findings show that there are significantly more boys than girls who do not have a favourite book, because, as they complain, in the books they are given, "nothing of consequence ever happens". Moreover, the feminist binary view of children as split into

disadvantaged girls and dominant boys may have lain at the root of the preference of both curriculum authors for English textbooks aimed at native speakers and the choices of TEFL coursebooks and the staff of publishing houses selling graded readers to learners of English. They all seem to swear by the benefits of exposing all children, especially boys, to a more sensitive and contemplative approach to relationships. This view of boys betrays limited offensive perception of how they are equipped to deal with relationships and even a hegemony of the feminine approach to them, ultimately, having the effect of alienating boys from reading. However, if we agree that time-sanctioned masterpieces of literature are all worth reading, including romance, then boys might have a better chance at appreciating such a genre if they were granted the privilege of the old cultural heritage approach rather than solely being forced to display the emotional response of romantic fashion. Other than that, boys will always eagerly just focus on the language of such books or attempt other evasive strategies which will be developed later on in this article.

It is not simply a question of asking boys what they like to read. The pleasure principle which is now so highly esteemed as justification for reading is more biased and damaging than one may be bothered to acknowledge at first. While no one could object to a pleasurable afternoon, what is equated with that concept may be quite objectionable. If reading and writing are construed as expressive and creative in an affective way rather than informational or argumentative, then it becomes clear that educators are limited or biased, though unwillingly, towards girls in their teaching approach. However, as Millard concludes, that may not necessarily benefit girls. While it may feel more at ease to perform reading tasks, it may also limit girls' academic aspirations due to the thinness of the domestic individualistic viewpoint, the limited exposure to text types and literary genres that this approach entails. Although girls may be encouraged by such reading to go into depths and lengths of literary exploration that boys rarely attain, it is no less true to argue that this level of profoundness in only one perspective, with very little of others, actually renders girls' perception of life and the world more imbalanced, inaccurate and ultimately makes them ill-prepared for the world of work where it appears that old discrimination may still be rampant. Ultimately, the pleasure principle is, in itself, a two-edged sword. While it may increase motivation for some students, it also risks allowing for a limited consumer-type tackling of reading pleasure: youngsters may simply stay conservative in their choices of text and get stuck in a rut of repetitive stereotypical experience, often commercial, almost guaranteeing severe limitations on opportunities for personal development for the sake of predictable reading satisfaction. It becomes extremely difficult for teachers to criticise or avoid commercial kitschy literature that popular culture abounds in simply because it has the ultimate argument on its side: pleasure, unquestioned, undifferentiated. In fact, teachers across the democratic world show less and less

willingness to uphold standards of artistic authenticity and complexity before their students simply because they feel they lack failsafe criteria in this context of cultural relativity and apparent hedonism. One other downside of the pleasure principle is that it proves treacherous or risky, since it may lead students astray from rigorous reading comprehension into an arbitrary way of tackling texts based on mood alone. Although it is fair to argue that high fiction is indeed a question of spiritual and emotional wavelength matching between writer and reader, it may prove unfortunate that students now simply feel they have the right to dismiss texts as not pleasurable without delving into the full complexity of multi-layered reading comprehension.

A relative of the pleasure principle and hefty contributor to reading failure is the increased prevalence of visual narratives replacing the printed text, especially for boys. This is because, while television seems to have fair shares of action and character, public and private kinds of film, therefore catering for both boys and girls during their crucial taste formation years, cyberspace, which is now capturing pre-teens and teens much more than television, is a different story. As the Internet begins to irrevocably pervade youngsters' time and interests, it becomes more and more obvious just how much it is dominated by male fantasies, as the largest part of computer games are packed with monsters, quasi-mythical hero fighters, warrior gods and, generally, intense action. While adults usually worry about how such computer fantasies take youngsters away from real-life exercise and socialising, it may be appropriate to worry even more about the more direct effect they have in cannibalising or replacing printed male fantasies or narratives as well as shaping boys' thinking and writing. The latter become both linear and jumpy, undeveloped repetitive as a result. It appears that the development of thinking and writing is much more naturally nurtured in the similarly abstract environment of printed text than the sensorial world of image and sound.

Hidden opportunities

Where does that leave boys, with their poor record of reading scores, their poor impression of their own performance and satisfaction and their often seemingly superficial approach to reading? It may be fair to argue that, while boys may be perceived to formally fail at reading, their accidental unintended exclusion in schools is a blessing in disguise. On the one hand, boys are challenged by this alien environment of school to deal with texts they would not voluntarily choose otherwise and, while many reject them, as we have shown, some actually round off their personality by partially embracing this new feminine perspective. On the other hand, the lack of regimentation for their reading penchant may leave room for natural development which always has the gift of complexity attached as an unsuspected silver lining:

“The modes of literacy in which girls currently outperform boys are dated ones, or, put less extremely, they provide ways of understanding texts that have fewer practical applications than the kinds of literate practices now more frequently engaged in by boys.” (Millard 1997: 154)

“[...] boys’ reading practices are more congruent with the acquisition of social power and financial success.” (Simpson 1996: 273)

The wide range of texts accessible to boys that we hinted at earlier includes the rich varied universe of non-fiction, which helps them better prepare for the challenge of higher education academic texts. Then, as pointed out, there are action narratives but also humour, adventure and fantasy. It is an elusive task to establish just how profound or superficial boys as a whole are compared to girls when it comes to reading, but what becomes certain is that their exclusion from and rejection of the reading class enable boys to reach a significantly stronger balance and scope of perception or even knowledge of the world from reading. Naturally, this comes as an estimation of probabilities rather than a forced generalisation, which means that various individuals of either gender may behave untypically. However, the workings of the educational system and the most typical drives of teenagers seem to converge towards better chances of actual reading success for boys than for girls, although test scores, through their unintended bias, seem to contradict this most blatantly.

Yet another opportunity for boys in the reading class is what Heather Blair and Kathy Sanford (2004) observe as a form of male resistance to teachers’ approach. Far from being passively alienated, boys naturally take initiative and display relative independence of reaction, refusal to conform and even attempts to adapt reading tasks and materials as well as the time given to their needs and preferences. Faced with a typical knowledge-of-the-heart text, they may often choose to adapt time limits depending on how natural the task is or how much detailed attention they feel like granting it, they will spontaneously fall into groups or pairs to gain and give support in adapting or challenging the task, often loudly or disruptively, they will use humour, including mockery and wit or verbal banter. Moreover, while not very eager to do the reading prescribed in school, boys will frequently display great enthusiasm and dedication to their own agenda of reading independent of school, unworthy as it may be deemed by their teachers. This includes, as suggested above, technical manuals, special interest magazines of various types, internet tutorials and other kinds of online text as well as fiction they find naturally appealing.

The Romanian context for teaching reading

The particular Romanian educational environment is a mixture of blessings and hidden dangers for the development of reading in schools, particularly in the EFL class. Firstly, it is a fortunate example of the persistence of the old practice of generalisation and abstraction as reading comprehension and interpretation tools. Coupled with a general persistence of traditional teaching, this means that the pleasure principle is not as deeply entrenched in Romanian teachers' minds as it is in western democracies. However, this also means that Romanian educators' response to the threat of today's visual culture, especially that of cyberspace, is largely inadequate, more similar to the policy of burying one's head in the sand in expectation of the storm than anything else. Teenage boys are inadvertently encouraged to dismiss school teachings as dated, irrelevant and benefit from no guidance or intervention from educators when it comes to their visual culture experience. At the same time, exposure to western popular culture narratives is made more intense and less filtered due to the glamour and increased exoticism that Romanians' distance from that culture naturally creates. This entails a less critical and more enthusiastic reception of commercial fiction for both genders, which can only impoverish young readers' experience. Moreover, Romania is very well covered by broadband internet connection and already has a solid tradition of involvement in cyberspace from young people, which means that Romanian boys' exposure to a tantalising replacement for time-sanctioned printed fiction is high and effective.

Solutions and recommendations

To address the feminine bias in the reading class, one needs to start with the larger environment. Understanding that grown-ups are better off teaching and leading by example, there need to be more male teachers in schools, including among language teachers. Furthermore, fathers would do well to make sure they make their reading visible and prideful to their sons rather than continue the old fashion of downplaying reading as emasculating.

Moving into the teacher's role, the range of text genres needs to be varied considerably to include non-fiction in equal amounts to fiction while making sure to select the level of text difficulty and abstraction suited to the particular age group being taught. As for fiction, although not all genres are immediately accepted by both genders, one must bear in mind the complexity of high quality texts which makes it possible for different readings into the same text and such diverging approaches and interpretations need to be suggested and encouraged from the outset. Daniel Pennac (1994) suggests increasing student motivation and interest by presenting literature not as a knowledgeable critic, but as a passionate reader: sharing one's own favourite books and the reasons behind

those choices does not have to be limiting or imposing, but has the potential of inspiring students through authentic communion of spirit.

One needs to make a clear distinction between what students claim to like in view of their gender bias and an arbitrary fancy, be it choice or denial. The pleasure principle behind reading needs to be challenged and replaced with the search for value, relevance and truth or, in some cases, aesthetic quality. While deeply aware of the possibility of being challenged for one's literary choices and beliefs, while no one can or should impose value judgment, the teacher must maintain and genuinely support his or her beliefs with a view to inspiring students and passing on the joy of reading.

As for computer literacy and the effect of other media, it is our contention that abandoning this battleground will not win the war for our students' minds. Instead, teachers should attempt to view alternative media as opportunities that can actually be seized, taken ownership of without even succumbing to the pleasure principle and becoming its advocates. Indeed, it is possible to engage in coherent interpretation and analysis of all visual narratives that students are already familiar to and, by integrating them in our syllabus, to gradually encourage a more critical approach to such content, thus truly doing our job of preparing students for the life ahead of them.

Finally, one should be weary of overgeneralisations or essentialising gender. The complexity of young minds is bound to surprise even the most educated mind, which is why teachers need to prepare to show openness and flexibility when it comes to reading preferences, bearing in mind that a certain literary canon cannot be an end in itself, though neither a mere whim of our predecessors.

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