

WELCOME – by Jeff Wilhelm



There's a shared understanding that boys are generally resistant when it comes to school, to literacy in general, and to reading in particular. If a teacher comes into the staff room and says, "Last period was a disaster . . . that's the class with the 23 boys," everyone else will just nod. No further explanation is necessary.

This understanding is supported by some very stubborn data. In 42 countries where data is available, including every province in Canada, every state in the United States, and in Australia, boys underachieve girls in nearly every area and facet of literacy. The data is compelling in its accumulated detail. It's also been well established that boys develop a bit more slowly than girls throughout childhood, and this only serves to exacerbate the challenges boys face.

All of this means that when it comes to cultivating motivation and accomplishment in terms of boys' literacy, we need to take great care and provide many encouraging and assistive opportunities for both engagement and accomplishment.

However, it's worth remembering that all of these data are quantitative (taken as they are from huge standardized data sets) and therefore describe averages. As teachers, we don't teach standardized or average children; we teach specific human beings who are unique individuals. Even though on average boys underachieve girls, and even though on average boys are not likely to read for pleasure, we all know and teach boys who are highly engaged and accomplished readers.

What is it that explains engagement in reading and what is it that explains competence? The research, as will be revealed in the following pages, has a lot to say about engagement and motivation, and about literate competence and how to achieve it.

The good news is that though there are powerful biological differences between boys and girls, there is much about gender and literacy that is socio-cultural, i.e., socially and culturally constructed and therefore under our power to adapt and transform. Certainly, when it comes to classroom practices and to providing motivating and assistive contexts for developing literacy, the classroom teacher has an important role to play in addressing the challenges facing boys. Several research studies have shown that some fairly simple instructional interventions and re-orientations can have huge positive effects on boys.

This Guide sets out to help teachers provide the kinds of experiences and assistance boys need so that they can become the readers and writers they are capable of becoming. Let's get started!

