

Teenage boys, teenage girls and books: Re-viewing some assumptions about gender and adolescents' reading practices

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ABSTRACT: In the 1980s Jack Thomson's research on teenagers' reading provided critical insights for teachers into the reading preferences and practices of adolescents. This article reports on the findings of a pilot project and the interim findings of a large-scale project currently underway investigating Australian adolescents' reading choices. What are adolescents choosing to read? How do they evaluate the role of reading and literature in English classrooms? Do they enjoy reading in English? What are the implications of this knowledge for English teachers and the teaching profession more broadly? The article examines adolescents' responses to these critical questions and discusses the ways in which secondary English pedagogy may benefit from the findings. The findings of this study contribute to existing research that stresses the need for English teachers to consider the role of gender as one of a number of factors influencing teenagers' achievements in and attitudes towards reading. Key findings from the research highlight the ongoing need for teachers of English at secondary level to plan and implement a reading programme that caters for the diverse needs, interests, tastes and capacities of individuals within their class, acknowledging at all times the powerful role of student choice and enjoyment in teenagers' reading achievement.

KEYWORDS: adolescent reading, boys and literacy, reading choices, wider reading.

INTRODUCTION

It is not enough to simply teach children to read. We have to give them something worth reading...something that will stretch their imaginations – something that will help them make sense of their won lives and encourage them to reach out toward people whose lives are quite different from their own.

Katherine Paterson

The context

At a recent parent information session at a local primary school, one of the few male teachers on staff was fielding questions from concerned mums and dads about the reading progress of their offspring. Unsettled by recent media reports suggesting that boys were underachieving in literacy compared to girls, one parent voiced the concern, no doubt of many, when she asked about practical strategies to encourage her son in reading and writing. The male teacher responded by advising parents not to

worry about boys reading books – “it’s not their thing”. Boys are “more interested in doing active things like sport and other physical activity.”

During the past decade, considerable research and scholarship has examined the role and significance of gender as a determinant in student achievement in English. It is sobering to consider, then, the extent to which limiting assumptions about boys, girls, and literacy practices persist in public and even professional constructions of gender and literacy. The important work by researchers such as, for example, Alloway and Gilbert (1997), Teese and Davies (1995), Connell (1996), Martino (2001), Coles (1995), and Alvermann (2001), has consistently highlighted the complexities of gender as a variable in any analysis of literacy achievement, and academic performance in English or in school contexts more generally. Research to date has indeed underlined the crucial need to avoid treating girls and boys as “supposedly consistent, monolithic categories.” (Alloway & Gilbert, 1997, p. 52) In addition, Connell’s apposite notion of the “gendering of knowledge” (Connell, 1996, p. 214) and its implications for the ways in which boys and girls perceive the status of subject English in relation to other subjects in a hierarchised curriculum, reminds us that any study of boys, girls, and literacy practices must also acknowledge the powerful and changing role of culture, institutionalized literacy practices, day-to-day classroom pedagogy, and the so-called “hidden curriculum” on the development or otherwise of students’ literacy:

The possibility that as a culture we are making struggling readers out of some adolescents who for any number of reasons have turned their backs on a version of literacy called school literacy is a sobering thought (Alvermann, 2001, p. 680).

The research study

This paper reports on the findings of a recent research project that set out to explore the reading choices and practices of adolescent males and females. Part of the research has yielded data that is of particular significance to teachers, parents and other educators who have an eye on the role of gender in student achievement in English and, more broadly, the significance of gender in teenagers’ reading and leisure choices. The research also set out to examine more closely some of the taken-for-granted assumptions about gender and English, such as the one articulated by the primary school teacher advising parents about their sons’ reading.

The research study was conducted with a survey instrument completed by a random sample of adolescents between the ages of 12 and 15 years in one metropolitan and one regional co-educational secondary school in New South Wales. The survey asked students to respond to a range of questions about their reading choices and habits. These questions asked students to identify their reading practices and preferences, not only in the context of school reading and that required of them in subject English, but also reading practices and preferences beyond school requirements. The data analysed in this paper considers 69 fully completed survey responses. Of these total responses, 35 were completed by female students and 34 were completed by male students.

THE FINDINGS

Assumption 1: Teenage boys don't read as much as teenage girls

A number of studies have pointed to differences in the amount of time adolescent boys spend reading compared to girls. The findings of one large Australian study by Bunbury (1995), for example, corroborated the findings of similar international studies when it identified that more boys were reluctant or non-readers than girls in the adolescent years. Our research asked participants to indicate the number of hours they spent reading each day. The responses are presented the following table.

Table 1. Average time spent reading per day (boys and girls)

No of Hours per day	% Boys	% Girls
0	5.8	5.71
0-1	47.05	54.29
2-3	35.29	31.43
3-4	2.94	8.57
>4	8.82	0

Only a small percentage of both boys and girls in this sample may be considered “non-readers”, a figure significantly lower than some other studies have found (Martino, 2001). Indeed, around the same percentage of boys as girls indicated that they did not read at all on an average day. While there is little gender difference when it comes to non-readers, around three per cent more girls engage in reading for up to three hours per day. On the other hand, more than three per cent more boys read in excess of three hours per day, and most of these boys are reading for more than four hours per day; no girls are reading for more than four hours per day.

The committed boy readers would appear to be more dedicated in terms of time devoted to reading than the committed girl readers, with the committed boys constituting 11.6% of the total group of boys. In Bunbury's study the boys who rated themselves as “good” readers were reading as much as girls (Bunbury, 1995). Our study, in fact, demonstrates that for this group, the committed boys are spending significantly more time on reading than girls. This finding once again highlights “a more complex picture of boys reading than the rather one-dimensional portrait represented in deficit-oriented studies of boys and reading” (Love & Hamston, 2001, p. 32).

Key finding: Almost 50% of boys in the sample read for more than two hours per day. Only around 40% of girls in the sample indicated a reading time of more than two hours per day. While over 8% of boys were reading for more than four hours per day, no girls were reading for more than four hours per day.

Assumption 2: Teenage boys don't like books

A number of studies (Bushman, 1997; Benton, 1995; Bintz, 1993;) have examined the reading preferences of boys and girls and have concluded that, very often, these preferences reveal a clear adherence to “basic gender stereotypes” (Benton, 1995, p. 464), with boys reporting a preference for magazines about computers, sport, and

video games, and girls reporting a preference for fashion, romance, and celebrity magazines. A number of studies have also reported on the tendency for boys to rate fiction more poorly as preferred reading in comparison to girls who rate fiction more highly (eg. Benton, 1995).

When asked to indicate preferred kinds of reading, the results of our study identifies some common areas of preference across the genders, but also some marked disparities along gender lines.

When asked to rate various categories of reading from 1-6 in order of preference, with 1 indicating most preferred. The results were as follows.

Table 2. Reading preferences for boys and girls

Category	%Boys Rated 1	% Boys Rated 6	%Girls Rated 1	% Girls Rated 6
Fiction	41.18	0	45.71	0
Non-fiction	11.76	14.71	8.57	17.14
Poetry	2.94	41.18	5.71	25.71
Magazines	35.29	5.88	37.14	2.86
Newspapers	0	8.82	5.71	8.57
Internet/Multimedia	5.88	11.76	2.86	37.14

Fiction is the overwhelming favourite genre for both boys and girls in this study. Over 40% of both boys and girls nominated fiction – reading books – as their most preferred kind of reading. No-one rated fiction as their least preferred kind of reading.

Magazines emerge as the second choice for both boys and girls, although more boys rated magazines as least preferred reading than did girls. Non-fiction is not popular with either gender group but is much less favoured by girls. It is astonishing that more boys will choose to read poetry than newspapers, while girls rate both equally. Nevertheless, similar numbers (fewer than 10%) really dislike newspapers, while boys really dislike poetry. Girls do not rate it very highly either, but around 15% more boys really dislike it. This compares interestingly with the rating of internet/multimedia use, where there are almost as many girls who rate it poorly as there are boys rejecting poetry (more than three times as many girls as boys). Neither boys or girls rate internet/multimedia highly, but the girls give it a much lower ranking on the list of preferred reading.

Key finding: More than 40% of all boys and girls in the study rated the reading of fiction as their most preferred leisure reading activity, challenging the assumption that most boys do not willingly choose to read fiction in their spare time.

Assumption 3: Girls' preference in fiction is the romance genre

That girls rate romance fiction highly is a common, popular perception. Our study asked boys and girls to identify what kinds of books they like to read in their leisure

time, as distinct from reading required by school subjects. We also asked students to nominate their favourite books and their preferred kind of reading in English classes.

Our findings demonstrate that there are three genres that are the most popular with boys when it comes to leisure reading of fiction. These are:

- Action/Adventure – 58% of boys rate this as a 1st preference
- Mystery – 32% rate this as a 1st preference
- Fantasy – 29% rate this as a 1st preference

Importantly, these three genres are also the most popular choices for girls, although the responses from girls reveal a different rank order of these three genres:

- Fantasy – 48% rate this as a 1st preference
- Action/Adventure – 42% rate this as a 1st preference
- Mystery – 31% rate this as a 1st preference

These figures confirm the research that Coles (1995) conducted in the united Kingdom during the 1990s, where the most popular genres of fiction for *both boys and girls* were action/adventure, fantasy, and mystery. In our study, it is clear that while both genders are similarly tepid in their interest in non-fiction (only 17% of boys and 14% of girls rating it as preferred leisure reading), there are wide disparities in their respective levels of interest in other generic categories. Students could identify more than one genre as a preferred genre for leisure reading. The following table provides a comparison between boys' and girls' preferred genres apart from those given above. The range of genres to choose from in this survey question was extensive. The table includes the most significant genres in terms of student responses.

Table 3. Preferred genres for boys and girls

Genre	%Boys Rated 1	%Girls Rated 1
Detective/Crime	20.59	11.43
(Auto)biography	17.65	11.43
Science-fiction	17.65	0
Classics	5.88	25.71
Romance	2.94	22.86
Travel	2.94	11.43

These figures highlight some of the individual differences and gender biases evident between girls and boys in this sample. The figures reinforce the difficulty of finding a book that will meet with the approval of a whole class, for example, even if the teacher selects from the most popular categories.

This difficulty is compounded by the overwhelming preference of girls for books chosen by themselves, unassisted by a teacher or another adult. Over 70% of girls prefer to select their own fiction independently; boys are less decisive, but well over half of them share the same view, with over 58% preferring to select their own fiction

unassisted by a teacher or another adult. When it comes to what teachers select for students to read, girls appear to be more accepting of the kind of fiction chosen by their teacher, with 34% of girls agreeing that fiction selected by the teacher is to their liking. Boys, however, demonstrate a strong antipathy to the selection of fiction by the teacher, with only 8.8% of the sample indicating that teacher-selected material is to their liking. Indeed, this figure may well provide us with further insights into the gender differences when it comes to students' preferences for the "classics". It may well be the case that girls' significantly stronger preference for the classics in comparison to boys aligns with the higher percentage of girls who positively accept fiction that is chosen for them as compulsory reading by a teacher. Typically, the so-called "classics" would be chosen and/or encountered more frequently in an English classroom as required, teacher-selected reading.

Boys and girls show a similar preference for silent reading, with 41% of boys and 45% of girls rating this activity highly. There is little agreement, however, between boys and girls as to their most popular book; there is wide diversity *within* the gender groups, once again underlining the importance of considering gender as *one* of many other factors in reading achievement. *Harry Potter*, either as the series of through individual books is, for example, the overall favourite for both genders, but not to the same extent. 32% of boys rate this as their favourite book, while 54% of girls rate it as their favourite book. Apart from *Harry Potter*, the results of the study demonstrate that there is a great breadth and variety in the responses to this question about a favourite book.

Interestingly, over 55% of boys had read their favourite book more than once, with an astonishing 32% having read their favourite book four or more times. For girls, 60% had read their favourite book only once, with 40% having read their favourite book two or more times, and 26% having read their favourite book 4 or more times.

Significantly, 73.5% of boys chose what ended up being their "favourite" book because of the influence of family, friends or a movie. Only 11% of boys said that their "favourite" book had been recommended by a teacher or emerged from compulsory school reading.

Girls' responses showed that in 43% of cases their "favourite" book was recommended to them by family, friends, television advertising and movies. Interestingly, 31% of girls said that their "favourite" book had been discovered through a teacher or through compulsory school reading.

When we compare this to the results for boys, it may be the case that teachers' recommendations and compulsory school reading in English classes generate overwhelmingly more "favourite" book experiences for girls than for boys. This may point to the nature of what is being selected by teachers for compulsory school reading and its differential appeal to boys and girls.

Among the worst books read by males are titles such as *Beauty and the Beast*, *Bridge to Terabithia*, *Tomorrow When the War Began*, *Goosebumps* and *The Gizmo*. For girls, the worst books included the *Harry Potter* series, *Baby Sitters' Club*, *Wind in the Willows*, *The Champion*, *The Machine Gunners*, *Goosebumps*, and *Picnic at Hanging Rock*. When asked why they read what they considered to be their worst

book, **17% of girls compared with 32% of boys** said it was compulsory reading in English.

A total of 43% students persisted with the worst book they had ever read and reported completing it. This reasonably high figure may be partially accounted for because in 24.6% of cases the book was compulsory reading. It also has implications for the choices teachers make if such large numbers of students not only do not enjoy but actively dislike what they have been asked to read.

Table 4. Favourite Books for Adolescent Males and Females – Not in Rank Order

Favourites for Males	Favourites for Females
<i>Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire</i>	<i>Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone</i>
<i>Lord of the Rings series</i>	<i>Lockie Leonard Human Torpedo</i>
<i>The Gizmo</i>	<i>Harry Potter series</i>
<i>The Hobbit</i>	<i>Aussie Angels series</i>
<i>The Power of One</i>	<i>Tomorrow When the War Began</i>
<i>Harry Potter series</i>	<i>Came Back to Show You I Could Fly</i>
<i>The Eye of the World</i>	<i>The House that was Eureka</i>
<i>The Hurricane</i>	<i>Whistle and I'll Come</i>
<i>The Wave</i>	<i>The Witches</i>
<i>Tomorrow When the War Began</i>	<i>Diary Z</i>
<i>The Third Day the Frost</i>	<i>The Dollhouse Murders</i>
<i>Lockie Leonard Human Torpedo</i>	<i>Winter</i>
<i>Sprocket and Aly</i>	<i>Blue</i>
<i>Fantastic Mr Fox</i>	<i>Two Weeks with the Queen</i>
<i>The Journey</i>	<i>Lord of the Rings</i>
<i>Out Walked Mel</i>	<i>Blue</i>

These results point to the counterproductive process of prescribing inappropriate texts for class reading.

Key finding: Both genders rate the genres of action/adventure, mystery, and fantasy as their favourite genres. These genres are almost twice as popular with girls than the traditional romance genre.

Assumption 4: Girls' use of the computer and the internet is significantly less than that of boys.

Neither the boys nor the girls in this study indicated that they spend a very great amount of time at the computer. The figures from this survey suggest that overall more boys spend slightly more time each day on the computer than do girls.

Table 5. Computer usage as a preferred leisure activity for boys and girls

	%Boys Rated 1	% Boys Rated 6	%Girls Rated 1	% Girls Rated 6
Computer use	35.29	2.94	20	25.72
Internet use	38.24	5.88	31.43	28.57

From these results, it is clear that there is far more antipathy to computer use by girls than there is by boys, with nine times more girls than boys rating computer use as a least preferred leisure activity. Yet, interestingly, both boys and girls rate computer and internet use reasonably well as a most preferred leisure activity. Part of the reason why there is such a clear disparity between girls and boys when it comes to ranking the use of the computer and the internet as a least preferred activity, may be that the students do not equate the use of the computer or the internet with leisure reading as such. They could well be using the computer to play games, to seek information for school work, or to word process. In any case, the antipathy of some girls is marked.

When it comes to average time spent on the computer each day, the results are as follows.

Table 6. Time spent each day on the computer

Hours per day	%Boys	%Girls
0	17.65	28.57
0-1	50	57.14
2-3	11.76	11.43
3-4	5.88	0
>4	14.71	2.86

Around 50% of **both** boys and girls are spending at least one hour each day on the computer. Around 11% of **both** boys and girls spend up to three hours each day on the computer. The clear difference between boys and girls in computer use comes at the upper end of the time category, with over 20% of boys spending more than four hours each day on the computer compared to only 2.86% of girls: seven times as many boys as girls spend upwards of three hours each day on the computer.

Key finding: Around half of all boys and girls in the survey use the computer for at least one hour per day. It is only when we consider four or more hours of use per day that the percentage of boys far outweighs that of girls.

Assumption 5: Adolescent boys have a poorer self-image as readers than do adolescent girls.

The survey asked students to rate themselves as readers. Over two-thirds of **both** boys and girls rate themselves as good, very good, or excellent readers. Only 20% of girls rate themselves as “average” readers, with 17% of boys considering that they are average readers. No girls rated themselves as poor readers, whereas just over 5% of the sample of boys considered that they were poor readers.

When asked to identify the ways in which they may improve their reading skills, neither group was in any doubt as to what is necessary: over 80% of boys and over 94% of girls believe that they must read more if they are to improve their reading.

Key finding: An overwhelming majority of both boys and girls in this survey rated themselves as better than average readers.

IMPLICATIONS OF THE FINDINGS FOR CLASSROOM PRACTICE

Research has suggested that “fifty percent of what is natural in our view of how the world works is in place by the time we are four: a further 30 percent is in place by age eight” (Dryden & Voss, 1994, p. 223). In short, much of what is constructed about being male and being female, and as a consequence, how we position ourselves in terms of learning in English, may well be embedded in our behaviours and attitudes, and in our responses to schooling, by the time we reach adolescence. By the teenage years, many boys and girls have developed strong ideas about how they should behave in a range of social contexts. They have chosen, consciously or otherwise, certain forms of behaviour in order to be affirmed in their sense of masculinity or femininity, respectively. It can be argued, however, that because our notions of masculinity and femininity are “constructed” by a complex of social and cultural forces, it is therefore possible and even desirable to intervene to change, modify and alter such notions if they are too narrowly restrictive or problematic (Alloway & Gilbert, 1997, p. 42).

Such a view has profound implications for teachers and parents. Although there is much that is well embedded by adolescence, there are still considerable opportunities for teachers and parents to make a profound difference – to challenge limiting notions of gender and propose alternatives through modeling and effective pedagogy. Conversely, there is the danger that poor pedagogy will “act as a disabler among adolescent readers” (Alvermann, 2001, p. 679).

The findings of this study contribute to existing research that stresses the need for English teachers to consider the role of gender as *one of a number* of factors influencing teenagers’ achievements in and attitudes towards reading. The implications of the research for enabling and effective classroom practice include the following:

1. The need to avoid assumptions that teenage boys do not read and do not choose to read for leisure.

There is an unfounded fear that teenage boys (by implication “all teenage boys”) do not read by choice, or do not choose fiction as a preferred leisure activity. Our study unequivocally affirms that reading, and reading fiction, is a preferred leisure activity for a significant proportion of BOTH boys and girls in this sample.

What emerges, however, is the fundamental role of **choice** in students’ enjoyment of and motivation for reading. The more say students, particularly boys, are given in the reading matter selected for classroom reading, the more likely it is that the reading experience will be a positive one. Girls tend to be more compliant with teacher choice than are boys, who are far more likely to have a negative experience of reading as a direct consequence of being forced to read inappropriate teacher-selected materials.

Allowing for, and celebrating, choice in English classroom reading, and beyond, is a key factor in reading achievement.

2. *Recognition that boys' and girls' reading preferences are diverse and cannot be categorized along simplistic gender lines.*

By the time students reach adolescence they have well-established tastes when it comes to reading preferences (Coles, et al, 1995). This is not to say that teachers must simply cater for students' tastes when it comes to reading. Indeed, part of the role of the teacher is to extend and challenge students and inspire them to explore and experience that which they would not otherwise have the opportunity to explore and experience. What is important to consider, in the light of this research, is the need for teachers to provide for a range and diversity of reading experiences in the classroom. Class texts can be read alongside student-selected texts as part of literature circles or interest groups, as well as allowing core times for individual reading and non-assessable reading experiences.

Both boys and girls prefer action and adventure, mystery, and fantasy fiction but within these broad generic preferences, individual taste, as distinct from gender, is a significant factor in students' reading choices.

3. *Awareness that there is a strong antipathy, felt by both boys and girls, towards reading poetry, non-fiction, and newspapers.*

Since most syllabus documents mandate the reading of and response to poetry, non-fiction, and newspapers, it is a timely moment to re-consider the extent to which the students in this sample indicate a strong aversion to these kinds of texts. Implementing effective pedagogy to engage students in meaningful, purposeful, and enjoyable ways with these texts seems to be a necessary step in addressing this finding. There exists a vast array of research and practical resources dedicated to the teaching of these particular texts. Yet despite this knowledge and resources, the teaching of poetry, in particular, continues to be plagued by the worksheet/ fill-in-the-blanks approach that has a serious deleterious impact on students' appreciation and enjoyment.

Selection of appropriate poetry, non-fiction and a range of newspapers, together with effective pedagogy to enable engagement with and meaningful response to these types of texts, is critical is we are to address this antipathy in students' reading preferences.

CONCLUSION

It is evident from this research that within our sample of teenage boys and teenage girls, significant numbers are reading fiction as a preferred reading leisure activity. The choices that teenagers in this study are making for their leisure reading include "good" quality writing across a range of genres. Eight times as many boys as girls are reading for more than four hours each day. At the upper end of what may be termed "committed" readers, committed boy readers far outnumber committed girl readers in this study. Such findings are good news for teachers and parents with worries about an "inevitable decline" in reading for all boys during adolescence, but perhaps a source of concern in terms of committed girl readers who read for more than four

hours per day. It is still troubling, however, that more boys than girls rate themselves as poor readers. We know from other research that up to 25% of all adolescents struggle with the literacy demands of the secondary school curriculum, and of these, a high proportion are boys who are non-readers, reluctant readers, or inexperienced readers (Alvermann, 2001; Rivalland & House, 2000).

The purpose of our study was not to identify students with literacy difficulties across the curriculum, but to map the reading practices and preferences of teenagers in the context of subject English. To this end, our study provides further insights into the challenge of enabling *both* boys and girls to fulfill their potential as capable, responsive, critical and imaginative readers. Teachers of adolescents in English are still teachers of reading, despite the perception that the task of teaching reading remains confined to the junior or primary school realm. Key findings from our research highlight the ongoing need for teachers of English at secondary level to plan and implement a reading programme that caters for the diverse needs, interests, tastes, and capacities of individuals within their class, acknowledging at all times the powerful role of student choice and enjoyment in teenagers' reading achievement.

This study constitutes part of a larger, ongoing research project: The Australian Adolescent Reading Choices Project (AARC). More information may be obtained by visiting the AARC website at: <http://www.edfac.usyd.edu.au/projects/aarc>

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