

Reading is a “Girl Thing”—NOT!

Does having a male reading teacher increase boys’ reading performance? How about bringing more technology to the classroom? What about giving boys a choice in their reading materials?

These are the strategies that were investigated by Laura Sokal, her research partner Herb Katz, and her 18 student research assistants at the University of Winnipeg. They worked with 180 struggling male readers in Grades 3 and 4 for 20 weeks each year over a two-year period. The project, funded by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada, examined whether changing boys’ experiences with reading could change their reading performance, their self-perceptions as readers, or their view that reading is feminine. What they found may surprise you.

Despite claims that boys are behind girls in reading, we all know some boys who read very well and some girls who struggle with reading. Furthermore, boys who struggle with reading do so for a variety of reasons—they may have learning disabilities, may find the sedentary nature of reading boring, or may simply prefer other activities. One of the main reasons that people think some boys do not excel at reading is that the boys view reading as feminine. Hence, they have proposed “boy-friendly” strategies such as those mentioned at the beginning of this article in order to “masculinize” reading. Do they work? In short, the answer is yes and no. The project showed that addressing boys’ reading needs is a complex process. Sokal’s research produced several findings:

- The gender of the reading teacher makes no difference to boys’ reading performance or to their view that reading is feminine.

- The use of computer-based books makes no difference to boys’ reading performance or to their self-perceptions as readers.
- Choice of reading material is not associated with greater gains in boys’ reading performance, their self-perceptions, or their view that reading is feminine as long as the texts are interesting to the boys.
- Boys who read from computers with male reading teachers but not with female reading teachers decrease their view that reading is feminine.
- Boys who read with female reading teachers are more likely to develop positive self-perceptions as readers than boys who read with male teachers.
- Only 24% of Grade 2 typical male readers and 9% of Grades 3 and 4 struggling male readers view reading as feminine, suggesting that

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gender-based interventions will only work with a minority of struggling readers.

Sokal is now conducting a three-year research project in northern Manitoba schools in partnership with other University of Winnipeg researchers, the Aboriginal Education Directorate, Manitoba Education, Citizenship and Youth, University College of the North, and Mystery Lake School District. This project, funded by the Canadian Language and Literacy Research Network, is looking at the effects of working with families to disseminate “best reading practices” in homes and schools of Grades 1 and 2 boys and girls.

Sokal views her research as having three important benefits. First, she has the privilege of working with pre-service teachers and in-service teachers as part of a skilled team who investigate ways to help children achieve in school. Second, her student research assistants provide real assistance to students and teachers by working with the boys each week in the schools. Third, all books used in the research are left in the classrooms. Sokal and her team have donated over \$16,000 in books to Manitoba schools over the course of several research projects.

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Profile

Dr. Sokal is an associate professor at the University of Winnipeg. She completed her B.Ed., M.Ed., and Ph.D. and Certificate in Higher Education Teaching at the University of Manitoba.

Dr. Sokal’s research interests include risk and resilience in children, and gender



development in boys and its implications for school outcomes. In 2004, she was presented with the Clifford J. Robson Memorial Award for Excellence in Teaching.

Laura has been invited to take a one-year sabbatical as a visiting scholar to James Cook University in Australia in 2008. While there, she will be studying their national curriculum, which is aimed at addressing boys’ learning needs. When she returns to Canada, Laura will take up the duties of her new role as Associate Dean of Education at the University of Winnipeg.