



THE BOYS ARE BACK AND THEY'RE LOOKING FOR DRAMA

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ABSTRACT

In this article, the authors describe some recent research on Readers Theater in the elementary classroom that examined gender differences and achievement. In one particular study, boys who participated in Readers Theater significantly outperformed their peers in reading comprehension. Elementary school boys reported enjoying Readers Theater because it is different from the norm, and it is a collaborative and social activity. In order to look beyond numbers and survey responses, the authors observed second graders in action. Indeed, the boys were actively engaged, smiling, laughing, reading, and appeared to enjoy participating in Readers Theater. The following narrative was constructed to help illustrate the potential for Readers Theater to engage young boys in reading.

We recently observed a classroom and were elated to see second grade boys falling out of their chairs, using their “outside voices,” and laughing uncontrollably. Some of the boys even spoke sassily, some gruffly, others sounded angry, and believe it or not, some intentionally spoke with British accents, despite being born and raised in rural Texas. Amidst this craziness, one boy yelled, “Oh poo,” and the others laughed themselves right down to the floor. But the boys quickly regained their seats, put their eyes back on the text, and continued reading along intently. We know what you might be thinking: It’s a classroom riot! It’s pandemonium! No, it’s Readers Theater.

WHAT IS READERS THEATER AND HOW DOES IT BENEFIT STUDENTS?

Readers Theater is an instructional activity that essentially requires students to rehearse a text as a class or in small groups in preparation for a performance. It is similar to a play, but props, costumes, and memorization of the scripts are not required (Griffith & Rasinski, 2004). Teachers often implement Readers theater using a five-day format that helps students rehearse their parts, gain an overall understanding of the text, and perform the scripts with appropriate expression on Fridays (Young & Rasinski, 2018). Typically, students choose their scripts on Mondays, and Tuesday through Thursday, students focus on accurate and automatic word recognition, expressive



reading, and practice the performance. Readers Theater was conceptualized as an authentic form of repeated readings, a method with a strong and positive research-base (Lee & Yoon, 2017; Mercer, Campbell, Miller, Mercer, & Lane, 2000; Samuels, 1979; Vadasy & Sanders, 2008).

Research on Readers Theater suggests that the activity benefits students in many ways, especially at the elementary level (Griffith & Rasinski, 2004). At the turn of the century, several studies examined Readers Theater's influence on attitude and motivation, and found that it tends to motivate students to read (Worthy & Prater, 2002) and builds readers' confidence (Clark, Morrison, & Wilcox, 2009). In addition, researchers saw students develop a more positive view of reading, especially regarding students who historically found reading difficult (Martinez, Roser, & Strecker, 1998). In one article, Young and Rasinski (2009) claimed they saw readers shift from striving to thriving.

Research has shown that participating in Readers Theater improved overall reading achievement (Garrett & O'Conner, 2010; Millin & Reinhart, 1999; Vasinda & McLeod, 2011) and various aspects of the reading process, including word recognition automaticity (Millin & Reinhart, 1999) and reading expression prosody (Keehn, Harmon, & Shoho, 2008). In addition to aspects of reading fluency, studies have also found that Readers Theater can positively impact students' reading comprehension (Garrett & O'Connor, 2010; Griffith & Rasinski, 2004; Keehn, Harmon, & Shoho, 2008).

However impressive the findings regarding Readers Theater, it is our intent in this article is to provide a narrative account based on the more recent studies of Readers Theater that have found the activity to benefit young boys in the elementary classroom. In a recent research effort, second grade boys participated in a Readers Theater format that targeted reading comprehension and word study (see Young, Stokes, & Rasinski, 2017). Results of the study (Young, Mohr, & Landreth, in press) indicated that boys in the Readers Theater treatment group outperformed boys in a matched comparison group on a standardized measure of reading comprehension, the *Gates MacGinitie Reading Test 4th Edition* (MacGinitie, MacGinitie, Maria, & Dreyer, 2002). Using descriptive statistics, the boys and girls in the treatment and comparison groups were compared. In the treatment, boys pretest scores on decoding skills, word knowledge, and reading comprehension were below the girls' scores. However, at posttest, the boys outperformed the girls on all three measures. Conversely, in the comparison, while all students made gains, the girls outscored the boys on the pretest and posttest for all three measures.

We wanted to know more about this phenomenon. This prompted us to survey the students on why they liked Readers Theater. Through a qualitative analysis (Durham, Young, & Miller, 2019) it became evident that boys tended to like Readers Theater because of the collaborative aspect of dramatic performance as well as the ability for the boys to sustain, strengthen, and develop their reader identity through comedy. The boys reportedly enjoyed performing and entertaining



audiences and found readers theater to be different from the norm, which also apparently led to the illusion that it was less work. One boy claimed, “I like Readers Theater because I like to make people laugh.” Another noted, “I love Readers Theater because I like to read, act, and talk.” One boy summed up the experience by stating, “It was a good way to have fun.”

THE ELEMENTARY GENDER LITERACY GAP

Aspiring to help all students attain high levels of achievement, we reflect, evaluate, and search for solutions to challenges faced while trying to reach maximum levels of growth with each student. We progress monitor, apply best practices, and make every effort to differentiate instruction. However, in the process of exhausting all measures to close learning gaps by analyzing data and clarifying misconceptions, one gap remaining unnoticed and neglected is the elementary gender gap. According to the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES, 2005), compounding effects accrue over time in both the state and nation as trends reveal girls outperform boys in reading accuracy, rate, and fluency. Unfortunately, even though boys and girls begin elementary school with similar perceptions of ability for language arts, boys’ perceptions rapidly decline to the point of significant differences by the time they reach middle school (Meece, Glienke, & Burg, 2006). Consequently, we question and search for factors that hinder boys’ progression of reading gains in comparison to girls. Are we able to anticipate potential influences on the deficit of boys’ reading development and deter gender gaps before they emerge? Interestingly, Gurian and Stevens (2004) share how the brain differs with gender, and considering these differences could help educators teach boys more effectively. One such difference involves a latency of verbal skills when comparing girls to boys during elementary school years. Additionally, boys need more opportunities involving gross motor movement and rely on more spatial mechanical stimulation in the brain with learning experiences (Gurian, 2007). Ultimately, allowing students to move while learning can enhance the learning process (Jensen, 2000).

Researchers posit other disadvantageous educational conditions for boys as compared to girls such as the feminisation of schools, where the learning styles of girls are favored more than boys. Notably, girls are more apt to use verbal skills, sit quietly, and attend to instruction for a longer duration than boys. Furthermore, as a result of an overabundance of female teachers implementing expectations and pedagogical practices that cater to girls, the concern with feminisation of schools and neglect of educational needs of boys poses a valid issue to address (Gurian & Stevens, 2004; Gurian, 2007; Skelton, 2002; Wilsenach & Makaure, 2018). For instance, boys’ choice of reading topics often include non-fiction, comics, horror, fighting fantasy, and sports which typically differs from girls. Compounding the issue, female teachers’ preferences generally do not match boys’ topics of interest when choosing texts (Gambell & Hunter, 2000). However, research does show that sometimes female teachers appear to favor boys, evidenced by teachers interacting more frequently with boys than girls (Measor & Sykes, 1992), yet the reasons for this are unclear. Still, an awareness of these existing differences in how boys and girls learn differently could be a great asset



as educators consider materials and instructional practices to implement in addition to creating a classroom culture that includes boys' preferences in learning. Concerning boys, a positive and inviting learning environment especially holds true when providing activities that involve physical movement, interest, and motivation; of course, these aspects also likely contribute to girls' engagement.

Equivalent to creating an appealing classroom environment for boys, topics of interest could also be beneficial for educators to consider when choosing texts, materials, and activities (Gambell & Hunter, 1999). Literacy educators need to learn more about boys' reading preferences and examine the availability of texts that would interest and encourage boys to read (Farris, Werderich, Nelson, & Fuhler, 2009). As a result of such considerations, motivation for boys to read could increase as texts provided match their interest. Moreover, studies reveal differences between girls and boys in terms of interest in reading topics as well as cognitive performance in relation to boys' level of interest (Farris et al., 2009; Oakhill & Petrides, 2007; Wilsenach & Makaure, 2018). Furthermore, an examination of third graders' self-concepts as readers in addition to their value of reading was conducted, and no difference in self-concept was found between boys and girls. However, the findings of boys placing a lower motivation to read strongly relates to the value they place on reading activities (Marinak & Gambrell, 2010). In essence, when reading assignments and activities are not ones preferred by boys, the purpose for reading negatively impacts boys' value of reading.

Conversely, providing both inviting learning environments and purposes for reading, we are more apt to open doors for students' development of meaningful connections and experiences with reading. Consequently, when positive connections coincide with active learning experiences, students begin to enjoy and take ownership of their learning. Seemingly for boys, choice and method of response are especially important when preferences of interacting with text are afforded. As a result of these choices and favorable approaches, reading experiences become more meaningful and purposeful for boys.

Attempting to differentiate and meet the needs of our students, well intended efforts are made in regard to increasing motivation for students to take ownership in their learning which might include choice boards, inquiry research, and technology integration in addition to other popular approaches. However, we question if these choices are enough to make up the lost ground for boys as compared to girls in reading. As highly effective as these practices might be in terms of providing students with a positive approach to reading and learning, questions of concern regarding boys' lower reading progress remain at the forefront in the minds of parents and educators. As we search for solutions of more effective approaches for boys, we take into consideration their learning needs and preferences. In addition to the previously mentioned choices, we contemplate the possibility of incorporating the opportunity of physical movement for students during the learning process. Could we differentiate and enhance boys' progress in reading by integrating activities that allow for movement? Could integrating



opportunities of movement and engagement set the stage of success for an increase in reading progress for boys?

Theoretically, Howard Gardner's multiple intelligences theory supports the positive impact of differentiation in meeting the needs and strengths of students (Gardner, 1983). Bodily-kinesthetic intelligence is one of seven multiple intelligences that can work in congruence with others such as linguistic, musical, or spatial and allow students to synthesize and express knowledge in favorable ways suited for their needs and strengths. Readers theater, through the lens of engagement theory (Guthrie, 2004), offers the reader an additional opportunity to mentally engage with the meaning-making process of reading. As the reader becomes fluent and automatic through repeated readings, the reading process eases, leading to opportunities for increased motivation and engaged reading. Others have used the lens of engagement theory to ground their research for Readers Theater and word study (vocabulary development) with positive results (Mraz et al., 2013; Aria & Tracey, 2003). As with transactional theory (Rosenblatt, 1968), Guthrie (2004) attributes the engagement 'with' the text for a deeper understanding of the text. Engagement theory describes "*engaged readers*" [as] those who are intrinsically motivated to read and who therefore read frequently" (Tracy & Morrow, 2012, p.75). Additionally, they practice and apply skills needed to succeed when presented with obstacles related to reading achievement, socio-economics, and demographics (Guthrie, 2004). Aligning with engagement theory criteria, Readers Theater creates *relevance* for the reading process by using a performance incentive, offers *choice* when selecting scripts, *assures success* through repeated reading, and encourages *social interaction* through collaboration regarding part selection, performance planning, and peer feedback. While searching for solutions to increase progress in reading for boys and provide these optimal learning experiences, we find one literacy approach to take center stage. We offer Readers Theater as an effective interactive approach that may help narrow the gender gap in reading progress.

CLASSROOM VIGNETTE:

IT'S TIME TO GET READY FOR THAT SONG AND DANCE

In light of this research, we wanted to see Readers Theater in action, especially because of the historical discrepancy in literacy development favoring girls (Davila & Patrick, 2010; Warner-Griffin, Liu, Tadler, Herget, & Dalton, 2017). So, we decided to observe some second graders, particularly boys, participating in Readers Theater and attempt to tell their story.

The teacher passed out their Readers Theater script for the week, *The Three Little Pigs*, and immediately a boy we call Murphy (pseudonym) grumpily stated, "I already know that story." He then slumped down in his chair and hid in jacket (interestingly, it was 80 degrees outside). The teacher let him sulk, and continued to pass out the scripts.



After the scripts were passed out, the teacher began the first-day (Monday) Readers Theater routine, and she read the script aloud with great expression while the students followed along. Naturally, they chimed in during familiar parts, even Murphy. In fact, moments into the read aloud, we checked in on Murphy, who was bouncing in his seat, smiling, and following along. He chimed in (loudly) during the huff and puff parts. Of course, Murphy was one of eight boys in the class of 16. Rest assured, the other seven boys had their faces buried in the script, and randomly joined the impromptu choral reading.

The teacher guided the engaged group of second-graders through the entire story. She stopped frequently to model her thinking, discuss vocabulary, evaluate her expressive reading, or ask questions. For example, she asked, “What’s a sow?” Immediately, students blurted out the answer (pig, in case you are second-guessing yourself). The teacher also talked about how the students might read, “Gobbled up the little pig.” One boy, was a bit louder than the others, and the teacher dubbed his voice, sassy. Thus, as one might expect, everyone repeatedly read the phrase, each time sassier than before. It got perfectly loud.

Just as the teacher reeled the students back in, something disastrous happened. One of the characters said, “Oh poo.” The class erupted. They were in hysterics, laughing uncontrollably. There were boys rolling on the floor, some pounding their desks, and turning purple from lack of oxygen. It was, in our eyes, a beautiful moment--a beautiful, literate moment.

The pandemonium subsided, and the class moved further into the text. The teacher stopped to discuss idioms, such as “blue in the face,” to help the students better understand the story and author’s craft. The boy in blue eventually developed a very scary, deep wolf voice. The other kids were so impressed, they adopted the voice themselves. He seemed flattered, but we are not quite sure exactly what flattery looks like on an 8-year-old boy. The teacher continued to support students by discussing vocabulary words like shimmied--she even had the class stand up and act out “shimmied.” Naturally, the boys seemed to love it--they clearly do not take getting out of their seats for granted. They shimmied like maniacs, and clearly demonstrated their understanding of the word. As the class neared the end of the script, we checked back with Murphy. I (first author) looked at him, and he looked back. Immediately it was on. I would not lose this staring contest. It was intense and it was well-fought, but I knew it could not last forever. So, I did the one thing that always gets me the win -- a fake nose pick. Just like that, Murphy’s face went from stoic to shocked, to unfettered laughter. However, I was not the only person who won that day. The teacher did an excellent job of engaging her students in a pleasurable literate experience. In fact, they wanted to read it again, but it was time for lunch.

For the remainder of the week, the students followed a specific Readers Theater framework (Table 1) modified from a recently developed approach to Readers Theater that targeted reading comprehension and word study (Young, Stokes, & Rasinski, 2017). Monday, as we



described, the teacher read the script (or scripts) aloud to the students, stopping to support comprehension. On Tuesday, the students chose and highlighted their parts, and did a choral reading of the script. After reading, the students discussed any unknown words and used their available resources to determine a correct definition. The students wrote the definitions on the bottom of their script.

On Wednesday, students assumed their roles and followed along, reading only when it was their turn. The teacher roved the room, coaching when necessary. Thursday was dedicated to a “dress rehearsal.” However, in Readers Theater, there are no costumes or props, so really it is simply a last rehearsal. The teacher ensures that the students are ready for the performance. Part of the reason Readers Theater builds confidence and increases motivation, is the fact that students can read a challenging text aloud accurately and with good expression that matches the meaning of the story. For comprehension, students partner up, and retell the script in their own words. After a week of rehearsal and digging deeply into the script, it is finally time for the performance.

Table 1. *Readers Theater Framework*

Day	Building Fluency with Gradual Release	Comprehension	Word Study
Monday	Teacher models texts to be performed on Friday Students follow along and discuss the quality of the teacher’s reading	Teacher reads the script aloud, stopping to support comprehension through questioning, modeling, and discussions Students choose scripts and do a quick read-through while completing the word study	Circle unknown words to be discussed in small group on Tuesday
Tuesday	Choral reading of script	Students choose their scripts and teacher helps students generate a summary of their respective scripts	Discuss unknown words in Readers Theater group and write down definitions on the bottom or back of script
Wednesday	Small group rehearsal, teacher coaches	Students assign parts and rehearse in their assigned groups. Teacher goes from group to group, coaching and giving	Put a box around interesting words while rehearsing and discuss them after the rehearsal



		encouragement and talking about meaning of the script	
Thursday	Practice – dress rehearsal	Class does a run-through of the scripts and texts to be performed; afterward, students retell the script in their own words to a partner from a different group	
Friday	Grand Performance; Students perform for an authentic and supportive audience of classmates	After the performance, students discuss what they liked most about their script and what could have been done to make the script even better	Before the performance, share/teach definitions of previously unknown and interesting words

LET’S GO MY FRIENDS, IT’S TIME TO TAKE A CHANCE

3-2-1 Action! Confident second grade readers captivated their audience from the start as they took center stage outdoors during recess. Emerging from the playground equipment, third graders quickly assembled into an anticipating crowd of onlookers and formed a semblance of an outdoor amphitheater on a grassy hillside. As students creatively took on the role of their character, the audience was swept into the story of *The Three Little Pigs*. With clear inviting enunciation, narrators led us into the woods to listen and watch interactions between the big bad wolf and the three little pigs. Taken by surprise, we heard, “Little pig, little pig, let me come in,” spoken in a low gruff voice from Liam (pseudonym), a small second grade boy, as he emanated the command of the big bad wolf. Laughter and giggles immediately erupted from the audience and other cast members as they were all fascinated with Liam’s prosody portraying the role of the big bad wolf. Enthralled by the growling demands of the big bad wolf, other cast members also embraced the favored role of the wolf by mimicking the grimacing expressions and words, “...and I’ll blow your house in...”. Student engagement and creativity was clearly evident as they intuitively added gestures in the little pig’s tenacious reply.

Entertainment was at an all-time high as audience and performers reciprocating giggles, laughter, and smiles. Amazingly, a great amount of literacy gains occurred while students were immersed in all of this fun. For instance, emphasizing actions with newly acquired words such as loitering, dazzling, shimmied, and colossal, students enhanced the vocabulary and comprehension of all present during the performance. Furthermore, between the wolf’s ferocious huffing and puffing



attempts of demolition and the clever evasiveness of the third little pig's escape, suspense intrigued the young audience sustaining their attention as well as increasing stamina. Overall, a new kind of fun at recess set the stage for successful learning experiences. On this particular occasion, Readers Theater took center stage on the playground and provided a fun time of play and learning for all.

DISCUSSION: IT'S BEEN A LONG TIME COMING

What else can one get out of that intentionally crafted twilight 'zone of chaotic development' session called Readers Theater? A nicely bundled package of engagement, motivation, and metacognitive factors. Readers Theater has been reported to successfully engage readers through the dramatic aspect found in the performance component of the approach (Mraz et al., 2013; Tompkins, 2014; Young & Rasinski, 2009). Becoming aware of specific attributes of reading such as which types of reading they enjoy or how to navigate an oral reading of a script, theoretically creates a transaction with the text developing appreciation, opinions, motivation, and ownership of the relationship (Rosenblatt, 1968). Through an emotional engagement with reading during Readers Theater (i.e., creating expression, adding pitch and volume, and personality), reading becomes more than simply taking the symbols off the page. This type of engagement allows readers to develop ownership and a sense of success as a reader (Gambrell, 2015). Based on our observations of these second-grade boys, many appeared eager to participate, perform collaboratively with animation, and continue with readers Theater contributing to creating relevance for the reading process and aligning to the theoretical lens of bodily-kinesthetic intelligences (Gardner, 1983), transactional theory (Rosenblatt, 1968), and engagement theory (Guthrie & Wigfield, 2000; Tracy & Morrow, 2012). The transaction with the reader during readers Theater may seem camouflaged by the resulting playfulness with the script, however creating personal meaningfulness through experiences with the text allows the student to grow and mature as a reader (Gambrell, 2015; Rosenblatt, 1968, 1978, 2001; Tracy & Morrow, 2012). Incidentally, the playfulness found both in lively performance and humorous scripts are components we think attribute to a solution for increasing progress in reading for boys. While a 'spoonful of sugar helps the medicine go down', humor connected with reading practice helps the reading process go up (Aria & Tracey, 2003). As with the script *The Three Little Pigs*, scripts for Readers Theater are frequently humorous poems (see www.thebestclass.org).

Metacognitive skill development may play another role in Readers Theater as it relates to engagement theory. In defining engagement theory, Tracey and Morrow (2012) state, "Engaged readers are also mentally active, using metacognitive strategies to build their understanding of the conceptual content of texts . . . Engagement theory contains the central elements of metacognition theory, but also emphasizes motivational, conceptual, and social aspects of learning" (p.75). Throughout the week of practicing to perform *The Three Little Pigs*, students had the opportunity to strengthen metacognitive strategies for many reading tasks. By implementing repeated reading, the complexity of the text gradually lifts to potentially allow for metacognitive strategies to be applied



in relation to decision-making for oral reading tasks. For example, early in the week of this observed Readers Theater practice, students had the opportunity to become aware of various areas of the script that would require decision-making for rate of reading, intonation, and expression followed later in the week with reflective practices for adjusting reading and performance. Guthrie (2004) indicated that when readers are motivated and engaged they practice and apply skills needed to succeed when presented with obstacles. Specifically, participants in Readers Theater will often participate in individual or collaborative brainstorming sessions that rely on their schema to generate ideas related to the various components of prosody (i.e., How and when will they use expression or humor, appropriate intonation such as pitch, volume, or pace?). So why not come to know for yourself all these advantages to Readers Theater and take that step into the twilight 'zone of chaotic development' called Readers Theater? It only looks like a crazy-madhouse on the outside, but filled with so many possibilities on the inside. Especially for those boys!

IMPLICATIONS: THE BOYS ARE BACK

A classroom filled with laughter, accents, and engagement in reading is just one side effect of Readers Theater. Not only will students become more motivated from the inviting learning environment, they will also strengthen their metacognitive strategies as readers across increasingly complex texts. Readers Theater positively benefits a student's attitude, motivation, and confidence in reading (Clark, Morrison, & Wilcox, 2009; Worthy & Prater, 2002) as well as overall student reading achievement (Garrett & O'Conner, 2010, Millin & Reinhart, 1999; Vasinda & McLeod, 2011).

Perhaps because of the natural collaborative and interactive nature of Readers Theater, groups of boys were more engaged throughout the activity, and subsequently, outperformed girls on three measures of the Gates MacGinitie Reading Tests (Young, Durham, Miler, Rasinski, & Lane, 2019). Readers Theater provides opportunities for active learning and meaningful experience with reading, which is critical to the learning process for boys. This article offers a narrative account of the benefits of cultivating environments where learners can become more motivated, engaged, and confident through the use of Readers Theater. The observations from this experience are consistent with prior research but begin to theorize how Readers Theater has the potential to narrow the elementary gender gap in reading progress (Young, Mohr, & Landreth, in press).



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RESOURCES

- Complimentary Readers Theater scripts available here: <http://www.thebestclass.org/rtscripts.html>
- Readers Theater lesson plan examples:
 - <http://www.readwritethink.org/classroom-resources/lesson-plans/readers-theatre-a-172.html>
 - <http://www.readwritethink.org/professional-development/strategy-guides/readers-theatre-a-30703.html>

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