

Ralph Fletcher Boy Writers

Reclaiming Their Voices



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The Trouble with Boys

Many boys have never seen writing as a viable option for them. Some are not “good students” in the traditional sense, so teachers figured if they produced anything it was a miracle . . . Many of these boys get teachers who instead of seeing the inherent good in a piece of writing see only the deficits and ways to make it “better” . . . For the boys, every assigned piece can be a nightmare because it is never good enough. The road is too long so they give up before they even start.

Fourth-grade literacy teacher

There was a problem. I didn't recognize it at first, although for years I had the vague sense that something was wrong when I spent time in writing workshops at various schools across the United States. I couldn't quite bring the issue into focus, too caught up in my role as a coach charged with helping teachers get the mechanics of the workshop (mini-lesson, conferences, classroom management, etc.) working properly. It's hard to be much of a researcher when you're usually brought into schools as an advocate for a particular way of teaching writing.

Still, it was there. It was like noticing something out of the corner of your eye; you're too focused on what's happening in front of you to bring total attention to events at the periphery of your vision.

If pressed to explain further I would describe a certain lack of energy, a spiritless, ho-hum, *do-we-really-have-to-do-this?* attitude I perceived in some of the classrooms. Maybe I was naïve, but it surprised me to find such lethargy in an active, hands-on structure like the writing workshop.

My breakthrough in understanding came a few years ago when I stumbled onto Tom Newkirk's book *Misreading Masculinity: Boys, Literacy, and Popular Culture* (2002). In his book Newkirk draws upon various pools of knowledge to construct a critique that I found both fascinating and devastating. Newkirk argues that we don't really understand the boys in our classrooms. We misunderstand their crude humor. Especially after the tragic shootings at Columbine High School, we fear their apparent thirst for violence, which is reflected in what they choose to read and write. Instead of trying to understand these boys we treat them as a problem to be managed. *Misreading Masculinity* rocked my world and would not allow me to return to my old way of seeing it.

I care a great deal about young writers and the teachers who work hard to nourish them. I have staked my professional reputation on the power of the writer's workshop. If there's a better structure for helping students learn to write, well, I'd like to see it. For twenty years I have worked as a consultant in classrooms across the country, helping teachers fine-tune their writing workshops. After reading *Misreading Masculinity* I turned my eyes toward the boys in those workshops, watching as they leaned forward to write poems, reports, narratives, persuasive essays.

Something seemed . . . off.

In any group of students you'll find a range of affect, ability, and attitude. In general, you find boys at the extremes—their ability range tends to be wider than the range for girls. In writing classrooms the same thing seemed to hold true. I noticed boy writers who were very enthusiastic and accomplished; I also noticed those who were resistant or disruptive. A few of the guys were writing with gusto, but the general demeanor of those boys troubled me. The boys seemed:

Turned off.

Checked out.

Disengaged.

Disenfranchised.

I observed most boys dutifully putting pencil to the paper, but many seemed to be merely going through the motions. Their scrunched-up body language was painful to see.

When I started interviewing boys, in person and through written surveys, I was struck by the pervasive lack of enthusiasm they showed for writing in school. Again, there was a wide range, but many boys told me they disliked writing; a few admitted that they despised it. Some of their comments reflected a sad realism about the mismatch between boys and school. Matt, a fifth grader, put it like this: “Boys want to just get the writing done fast so they can go outside and play sports.”

It was disheartening to hear that these boys viewed writing as just another boring subject to be endured until you could finally get to the fun stuff. I found it even more dismaying when I realized that most of those boys were writing in a workshop setting. To me, the writing workshop resembles an industrial arts or gym class, a dynamic structure that celebrates choice and puts a premium on action. The workshop values learning by *doing* as opposed to talking about it, and is the very definition of constructivism in practice. As basketball announcer Dick Vitale might put it: “This is hands-on action, baby!” The writing workshop would seem to be a perfect arena for boys, tailor-made to their eclectic interests and boisterous energy.

What went wrong? (And why had it taken me so long to notice?) Boy writers were floundering; at least they seemed to be. I needed a reality check, and started talking with teachers around the country. My conversations and interviews confirmed my initial perception.

“I see a night-and-day difference between boy and girl writers,” says Bruce Morgan, a fourth-grade teacher in Colorado and author of *Writing Through the Tween Years: Supporting Writers, Grades 3–6*. “As a rule, the boys do not like writing as much as the girls. Even with all the things I do to entice boys to write and bring their interests into the classroom, they still would avoid writing if they had the choice. I do writing in various genres to hopefully engage my male writers and that seems to help. But I still struggle on a daily basis to get the same quality from them that I get from the girls.”

I created a written questionnaire designed to uncover teachers’ perceptions of the boy writers with whom they work. I sent these surveys to roughly one hundred teachers around the United States and abroad and received seventy-one responses. Although seventy-one responses certainly does not represent a scientific sampling, I want

to emphasize that these teachers were handpicked because I consider them to be among the strongest writing teachers around. These are individuals conversant with current theory who run a writer's workshop and work hard to motivate their boys. In the questionnaire I asked them to complete this sentence: "In general my (boys/girls) tend to enjoy writing more." The results are striking:

Girls: 49

Boys: 1

Both (equal): 21

My gut feeling tells me that these results would be skewed even more sharply in favor of the girls if you looked at a larger sampling of writing teachers. As you'll see in the next chapter, empirical data supports the idea that boy writers are struggling in relation to girl writers.

Widening the Circle

Newkirk ends *Misreading Masculinity* with a chapter titled "A Big Enough Room," in which he argues that we need to "widen the circle" when it comes to boys' reading and writing in schools. At this point I saw an opening. Rather than a broad look at boys' literacy, I wanted to write a book that would focus on boys' writing. Rather than looking only at the *why* I wanted to move to the *what*, and suggest practical ways we can widen the circle for our boy writers.

Writing teachers draw on three distinct pools of knowledge:

- ✘ What we know about teaching
- ✘ What we know about our students
- ✘ What we know about the craft of writing itself.

Most readers would associate me primarily with the third pool of knowledge—craft lessons, qualities of writing, and so forth. In this book I concentrate on the first two arenas, and suggest realistic ways we might create writing classrooms that are friendlier to our boys.

Revision is more than a strategy used in the writing process; it's also a metaphor for personal and professional growth. There comes a time when every reflective practitioner needs to step back, take an honest look at what is and is not working, and revise his or her teaching accordingly. Cultured pearls start when a bit of grit gets inserted into the oyster; I'm happy to be that grit.

Maureen Barbieri wrote a fine book, *Sounds from the Heart: Learning to Listen to Girls*. I once attended a workshop she gave on this topic. Halfway through the workshop a teacher raised her hand and angrily confronted Maureen.

“You’re saying all this stuff about the girls, but what about the boys?” the woman demanded. “Don’t the boys matter?”

“Of course they do!” Maureen smiled patiently. “All I’m saying here is that girls are important, and they’ve got unique issues. They deserve our attention. Give me one hour to talk about the girls. That’s all I ask.”

This exchange suggests the strong tendency to polarize in our culture, pitting one group against the other.

“Many times a week, a reporter or other media person will ask me: ‘Why should we care so much about boys when men still run everything?’” says Michael Gurian (2005a, p. B1), author of *The Minds of Boys: Saving Our Sons from Falling Behind in School and Life* (2005b).

Tom Newkirk makes a similar point in *Misreading Masculinity*. “The focus on ‘gaps’ tends to pit boys against the girls, to emphasize either/or,” he points out. “Yet surely it is possible to emphasize boys’ difficulty in school without rejecting claims that girls may experience difficulties or inequities” (2002, p. 20).

Amen. I don’t want to pull attention or yank funding away from the girls. The very last thing I want to do is to push the girls down in order to pull the boys up. But boy writers have unique strengths, quirks, and weaknesses that every thoughtful practitioner or parent will want to be aware of. What I want is only a slight variation of what Maureen Barbieri requested when I attended her workshop: Give me one book to talk about the boys.

I wanted this book to have a boy flavor; to that end I have inserted one boy writing sample between each chapter. Some teachers will find it difficult to embrace boy writing in all its grit and glory. The writing samples have been included to make the various ideas put forth in this book as concrete and tangible as possible. I hope these pieces will have a practical use in the classroom. I urge teachers to use them, in whole or in part, to model craft elements and to give students an image of strong boy writing.

Appendix E includes a story, “The Follower,” written by Jack Gantos for *Guys Write for Guys Read* (Scieszka 2005). If boy writing is a genre unto itself, then “The Follower” is a classic example. As a

father of boys this story alarmed me when I read it; as a guy myself it made me laugh out loud a half dozen times. Whether you find it funny or outrageous will depend upon your perspective.

Boy Writers is a piece of persuasive writing. I aim to convince you that although every boy writer is unique, as a group boys possess particular strengths and weaknesses. I'm well aware that any book that explores distinctions along gender lines will provide excellent fodder for intense discussion and even argument.

Nevertheless, the thrust of this book is practical, not political. To that end you'll find a section at the end of most chapters titled "What Can I Do in My Classroom?" where I make specific recommendations for ways you might rethink and revise classroom practice. I don't expect readers to agree with every suggestion offered in this book, but I hope it might serve as a catalyst for teachers to think deeply about what concrete steps we can take to do a better job of teaching boys to write.

We must begin by coming to grips with the qualities boys bring to the table. To the extent that we really understand them we can become more skilled, more complete writing teachers.