

## **CHOOSING TO BELONG: INCREASING ADOLESCENT MALE ENGAGEMENT IN THE ELA CLASSROOM**

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Growing up, I loved nothing more than to read. In grade school, I felt much excitement when the Troll book club forms were passed out by my homeroom teacher. I would rush home at the end of the day and flip through the colorful pages and counting the change and dollar bills I had collected from my measly allowance. I budgeted my money and figured out how to buy the most books with the least amount of money. (A skill that is useful now as a teacher!) I put my money and my order form in an envelope every month and waited impatiently for the new books. I loved the local library and bookstore just as much.

When I entered high school, I was in Honors English classes and took AP Literature during my senior year. These were my favorite classes and I excelled at them. I wrote stories in my free time and longed to be a published author. I continued to buy books and read them in my free time. I became obsessed with the horror and mystery writer Dean Koontz. My desire to be a writer continued and because of Koontz became specific to wanting to be a mystery writer. I began to also buy books for mystery writers, wanting to know everything I could about writing the stories.

My story is not unique – but it is uncommon in boys. I did not dream of sports and while I did play video games with my brother, they were not the focus of my life. I did well in other subjects in school, and even performed better on the Math portions of standardized tests. My passion was reading and writing and for a boy – then and now – this is not typical.

Now, as an English teacher, I teach 9<sup>th</sup> grade ELA at Thurgood Marshall Academy in Harlem, NY. My students are 90% African American and 10% Latino; 40% are boys. Three-fourths of the total population qualifies for free lunch. Many score at grade level on their 8th grade exams, but still more fall below that standard. As a teacher, I see the same things I saw as a student. The students who typically do well in an English class and are most passionate about the work are female. My own male students are interested in roughly the same things that my male classmates were interested in – sports, music (my peers liked hard rock, my students hip-hop), and cars. Most think reading is stupid and will only do the minimum amount of writing they can.

If a student is sleeping in my class, all bets are that it is a boy. If a student does not have the homework, chances are it is a boy. When I look at the number of students failing my class, there are twice or three times as many boys than girls. When I look at the number of students who receive A's, only a quarter are boys. I refer more boys to the Dean than girls.

This is the state of things not just in my classroom, but across my school, the city, and the nation. Boys are engaged at lower levels than girls in all subjects, but most of all in the English Language Arts. My class is different now. What follows is my story of change. It grew out of an action research study I did and it has changed my classroom, my teaching, and my sense of what is possible in terms of boys' engagement and learning.

### **“An Ode to My Pen (Written During Science Class)”**

Last year, I was approached by a male 11<sup>th</sup> grade student whom I did not know. A teacher had referred him to me. He told me that since the 9<sup>th</sup> grade he had been trying to start a poetry club in the school, but could never find a faculty member to serve as an

adviser. I was the new teacher in the school and he had decided to ask me – just in case. Eager to find an after-school activity to get involved in, I said yes. I spoke with the principal and scheduled the first meeting for a Friday afternoon. I told the student that the club was on and I was putting him in charge of finding members. He told me that would not be a problem.

The first meeting approached and a small group of students showed up. I had been surprised that a boy had requested a poetry club. I was even more surprised to find that all five students in my room were boys. The club, in its second year, is still dominated by boys who read and write verse that speaks of their struggles and dreams. This is not Shakespeare or Keats. It is Mos Def and Kanye West. It is not the kind of poetry I learned about or that is frequently studied in an English classroom. But it is poetry nonetheless and it is seen as being masculine.

This got me thinking. These boys had notebooks and notebooks filled with writing. They wrote odes to their pens but would often skip English class. They spoke about how they would write poetry when they were bored in class. I began to notice similar situations with my own students -- boys reading sports pages and video game manuals during class. Technically, they were reading and writing – activities they wanted them to be doing. They just weren't reading and writing what I asked of them.

This is not a new phenomenon nor is it particular to my class or my school. Michael Smith and Jeffrey Wilhelm (2002) studied 24 adolescent boys of all academic levels and found that all the boys in their study – even the lower performers – read and wrote outside of school. This, though, did not translate into engagement in ELA instruction. “Even though the boys believed in the importance of school literacy in theory .... they often rejected and resisted it in actual practice because it was not related to

immediate interests and needs” (page 94). Here, the importance lies in the word “immediate”. As teachers, we would like our students to see the big picture of how an education can help them throughout their lives. But, they are looking to see how education can help them in the here and now. David Booth (2002) recognizes the same idea: “[Boys] need to feel that they own the reading, that the experience was worthwhile, and that it is now part of their world knowledge and their personal literacy life”(page 43). The literacy activities that will engage adolescent boys the most are activities that have immediate implications for their present interests.

One could argue that this is true of all students regardless of their gender. In other words, don't adolescent girls want the same thing as boys? Most would say yes. So, why is it that girls are getting this desire fulfilled and they are engaged? We cannot ignore the fact that most ELA teachers are female and those of us who are male are those men who succeeded in classrooms dominated by female literacy. The problem begins to feed in on itself – those who become ELA teachers are those who succeed in female literacy dominated classrooms and they model their classroom after the classrooms of their own experience. Adolescent males who are most engaged by male literacy dominated texts and activities are left out of these classroom perhaps because it does not interest them or they fear being labeled for being engaged in feminine activities. “In English classes, adolescent males must handle a curriculum where the focus is on narrative genre, and emotional and creative responses. Because traditional male roles downplay the expressing and sharing of feelings, emotions, and experience of others, boys may be unwilling to discuss some kinds of texts”(Booth, 2002, page 17). What's worse is that the literacy activities and texts that they boys do value can be demeaned in their ELA classrooms (Booth, 2002).

William G. Brozo (2002) cites a 1995 study by Bugel and Buunk which suggests that texts are easier to comprehend when they match up with our gender-specific literacies. “Passages with traditional male topics were reported by males as being easier to read than passages with traditional female topics. In addition males had superior reading comprehension of male-oriented text versus the female-oriented text; the opposite was true for females” (page 19). When students do not comprehend, they are not engaged.

### **The Promise of Choice**

It turns out that boys are engaged in literacy activities – but not the ones in our classrooms. So, how do we include them? How do we get adolescent boys engaged in the ELA classroom in the same way that the adolescent girls are? Most importantly, how do we do this while maintaining the engagement of the girls?

The idea of throwing in a male-oriented book in between the female-oriented books was not good enough for me. If we are to believe the research, doing this would then mean that boys are engaged for one unit of study while girls are engaged with another. My goal was the most engagement from both boys and girls at the same time. My focus on engagement was preceding my focus on achievement, because engagement leads to achievement. Perhaps the real reason that my students did not succeed in their school experiences was that they were not engaged in them. When engaged, my students succeeded and improved their skills at great levels.

I was convinced that engaging them meant including their interests as much as possible in the curriculum. But, with 25 distinct students in each class, incorporating so many interests proved a challenge. It was then that I decided it should not be up to me to

incorporate their interests, but rather to *provide opportunities for them to do so*. It would require me to rethink how I structured the activities and assignments in my classroom, but allowing more room for choice both in the reading and writing activities my students engaged in, I believed, would help all students – especially the boys – be engaged in my classroom. I would have to leave behind the model of an ELA classroom that I had succeeded in so that I could help all my students find success.

The idea of enabling students – especially males – to choose their own paths in an ELA classroom is supported by recent research and thought. Encouraging students to make choices in what they read and write is essential to keeping them motivated (Brozo, 2002) and it is “an exercise of freedom and possibility” (Smith and Wilhelm, 2002, page 109). Smith and Wilhelm also note that many boys have received the message that being a “man” means controlling your own destiny and making your own choices. Practicing making choices gives them the opportunity to feel more masculine in a subject they may feel is too feminine for them. My own students put forth a sense of toughness and independence (“No one tells me what to do”) that is essential for their social interactions. Giving them the power over themselves and their learning could make them feel more powerful when they might feel powerless in an education setting. They might be less likely to rebel against and reject what the teacher is making them do if the teacher is giving them more power in the activities.

In order to incorporate more choice in my teaching, I would have to focus on finding methods of including it in both what we read as well as what they wrote. The year became a journey for me in identifying opportunities for choice, figuring out how I would incorporate it, and learning from the students' reactions.

## Measuring Our Progress

As I found more and more ways to incorporate choice, I had to find ways to keep track of how they were working. I relied on students self-reporting, as well as my own observations. I held off examining any kind of grades or scores, because I was most interested in how my students were engaged with what they were doing. To me, engagement would mean that students were not only doing the work, they were also putting sincere effort into doing it and were interested in doing it well and doing it better. I was looking for more than students to do the work or have the conversations while I was standing over them; I was looking for them to take enough ownership of the activities that they would do them even if I wasn't pressuring them. Would I see them make progress on writing activities outside of class time? Would they ask to take books we were reading home with them? When I stood back in the corner of the room, would I see student groups working well and on task?

My method of measuring progress included:

1. *Student reflections/surveys.* Students were periodically asked to reflect on their own reading and writing activities.
2. *Tallies of student choices.* Throughout the process of incorporating choice into the curriculum, when possible, I tabulated which choices the students selected. My purpose for this was to truly see if boys and girls chose different activities or tasks, as well as to see what types of choices I should continue offering.
3. *My own observations.* Measuring engagement depends so much observing student behavior. Throughout the year, I took notes on how students were engaged in what they were doing.

## **Engaged in Reading Whether They Like It or Not!**

I had already been having students read independently for 20 minutes each day; they could choose books from the classroom library or bring in books of their own, as well as magazines, newspapers, or comic books. Students usually started off a little hesitant, but quickly found their reading niche. Boys most often read magazines about cars, hip-hop culture, or video games, the sports section of the local newspaper, or comic books. Those who read books were the boys who most often were successful in the traditional ELA structure.

But, this was not enough. First, this had little impact on the instructional time in class - I was still the one choosing which books or texts to read as a class. Second, there were still some boys who did not read during independent reading. They might have a book or a magazine open in front of them, but they were staring off into space. Many would begin the independent reading time by going to the classroom library and putting their hands on whichever book they found first. They would take it back to their seat, open it, and stare into space. These boys, I surmised, needed more direction and structure from me.

Since my teacher preparation program, I had heard about literature circles and felt this was the appropriate time to try them out. My classroom library was extensive and had 5 or more of many books. Many of the books were not ideal for my student population, but I figured that I could collect several that might work.

During the first cycle of the literature circles, the books I selected were mostly books that I would be interested in. I forgot that my purpose was to offer books that matched the immediate interests of my students. So, during the second cycle of literature circles, I focused on offering a menu of books that matched the diverse interests of my



students, as well as their diverse reading levels. I gave students the menu of books and they gave letter grades to the books according to their interests.

When I looked at the books that my students choose, I thought about the books as being male or female centered, according to the gender of the protagonist. What I found was that girls were pretty evenly split between selecting male or female centered books, while the boys were four times more likely to pick a male centered book.

Once per week, I focused my mini-lesson on a reading or analysis skill I wanted my students to focus on. I used short common texts during the mini lessons so that we could discuss the text as a class. In a subsequent lesson, the literature circle groups met together and practiced the skill using their literature circle books. At this point, after practicing together on a common text, I felt more comfortable arranging for more student independence in completing the work.

Boys performed magnificently during these meetings. I was pleased when students read in class and began to see the boys actually reading the books and talking with each other about them - even when they weren't required to. I was even more pleased to see groups of boys engaging in actual conversations about the books. Frequently, these conversations happened when the boys weren't even aware that I was observing them.

One literature circle meeting comes to mind. On this particular day, I was standing across the room from a group of 5 boys reading Walter Dean Myers' memoir of his youth in Harlem called *Bad Boy*. My students come mainly from the Harlem community, so this book really hits home with many of them. While I was speaking with another group, this group of boys became really rowdy - laughing and giving each other high fives. I began to walk over to them and I started to hear what they were talking

about. They were talking about the book. But, they weren't just talking about the book, they were talking about the main character as if he were one of them -- they spoke of his antics and his problems in the same way they spoke of their own experiences. And they were doing the work! They were not just engaged with the book, they were engrossed by it.

When I surveyed the students to see if they reported being as engaged as I was observing, 44% of the boys reported preferring reading whole class novels and 56% preferred literature circles. Frankly, I expected more preference to literature circles, so I began to look at the reasons for their choices. Those who chose literature circles said that they liked that they could choose, read at their own pace, and liked working in groups. Those who preferred whole class novels overwhelmingly said that they liked it because it was less pressure for them to do the reading or participate in the class discussions or activities. In other words, those who liked whole class novels liked them because they didn't have to be engaged in the work.

I decided that if I couldn't have students be engaged in the work because they intrinsically liked it, I would also accept them being engaged because they felt like they had to.

### **"I Want to Write a Beginning Like His"**

Beginning to feel successful in helping the boys be more engaged in the reading we were doing in class, I turned my attention to the writing. I had always believed in giving students some choice in their writing assignments, but I wanted to go beyond giving them a choice of a few topics. Again, my purpose was to provide choice in such a way that students could take an assignment and incorporate their outside interests into

what they were doing. The idea would be to find writing assignments that were open enough for the students - especially the boys - to have as much choice as possible.

I experimented with three writing assignments that offered this kind of choice. First was a how-to article - students were to select something that they felt they knew how to do better than anyone else and write articles on how others could improve their own skills. Second was an object of personal significance essay in which students brought in an object that had personal meaning to them and brainstormed on it until they found a way to write about it. The third experiment was a zine, a small four page magazine in which students could write about whatever they wanted. With each of these writing assignments, instruction was focused on a specific skill: for the how-to articles, students worked on more sophisticated transitions; for the object of personal significance essay, students worked on writing truly engaging beginnings; and for the zine, students worked on coming up with viable topics and planning.

When I looked at the topics that students chose, the topics conformed to gender stereotypes. The boys wrote about sports, video games, and rap music. Girls wrote about friendships and popular culture. They too wrote about sports - but different sports. Boys wrote about basketball, football, and baseball and girls wrote about squash, volleyball, and double dutch.

Overwhelmingly, boys preferred having free reign to choose whatever topic they wanted. Sixty-nine percent said they preferred to have complete control over the topic. Most remarkably was one of their main reasons: because it gave them the opportunity to express themselves. One boy in my class used all three writing assignments to write about his favorite out-of-school topic -- football. His how-to article was on how to through a better pass, his object of personal significance essay was on a football trophy he

won, and his zine profiled his favorite football teams and players. Before incorporating choice into the writing assignments, this student rarely finished his papers.

Another story comes to mind that goes beyond any wish I had. This story involves two boys: one a very talented writer who did not often connect with what was going on in the classroom and thus acted out and got into trouble more often than he succeeded and the other was a boy who struggled with his skills and took longer and more effort to complete his assignments, if he completed them at all. During the lessons helping students write better beginnings for their object of personal significance essays, students shared their work with each other. The first boy showed his paper to the second. Later in the period as students were working, the second boy looked agitated and was getting off-task. I went over to him and engaged him in a discussion about his work. He admitted that he had read the first boy's paper and admired his beginning. "I want to write a beginning like his," he told me. I had read the first boy's paper and, indeed, the beginning was interesting and engaging. I told him to go ask his friend how he wrote the beginning. He did so and the final product reflected a beginning that he modeled after his friend's.

### **Choice Means Learning and Engagement**

Not only were the boys doing the work now, they cared about how they did it and shared their work with each other. They were having conversations that were literate and full of learning. The boys completed more work in class and many reported actually liking it. There were fewer and fewer behavior problems and boys told me that they enjoyed coming to my class (with a hint of surprise in their voices).

I attribute this improvement to incorporating choice into my curriculum. It required that I give up the model ELA classroom where I found my success. I still look at some books fondly and wish to teach them to the whole class. Then I remember what it was like to do that - I remember having the attention of half the class (the girls) and wondering why they didn't seem to be having as much fun as I.

Besides learning that choice can be valuable in the classroom for boys and girls, I learned that all choice is not equal. Just because a student can choose between two books, doesn't mean that he or she will like either of those books. It took a lot of time and consideration to offer a selection of books that truly reflected choices my students would make. Writing assignments also needed to have choice that meant something. Giving students choices of five topics that I liked, but they hated would do nothing to engage them.

Incorporating choice into the curriculum can work in other ELA classrooms across the grades. But, in order for this to happen, teachers must have more power over what happens in their classrooms. In order to offer a menu of books that actually interest their students, teachers must have the budgetary resources to buy books directly based on the assessment of their students' interests. Teachers need to also be able to exercise freedom in the curriculum and make professional choices in what happens in the classroom. Top-down mandates about what book to teach on what day or what genre of writing to teach during which month are not based on student interests and thus will not offer viable choices to the students.

## References

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