Annotated Bibliography

**Smith, M. W., & Wilhelm, J. D. (2002). *Reading don’t fix no Chevys: Literacy in the lives of young men*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.**

**Key words:**

Boys and reading, flow experiences, social interaction, challenge, competence, control, immediate feedback, attitudes.

**Objectives**

The goal of this study and book was to gather insight into how boys can learn through reading and find success in our school system that often does not take into account the different strengths and interests of boys. The authors hope that the information will help themselves and their teacher colleagues to improve in engaging male students.

**Resume**

In “Reading Don’t Fix No Chevys”, Smith and Wilhelm (2002) provide invaluable insight into how boys view literacy. What teachers often label as reading difficulties are sometimes just a symptom of the wrong kind of text being present or an issue with the activity or teaching style. Smith & Wilhelm (2002) view learning through the lens of Vygotsky’s theories of social development and the principles of flow experience presented by Csikszentmihalyi (1990) They describe the principles of Csikszentmihalyi’s flow experience under four headings:

1. Sense of control and competence

* Boys greatly admire competence and are reluctant to undertake a task for which they do not feel competent. They want to be in control of their learning and feel capable of achieving the goal. The boys in this study expressed the feeling that schools do not give them any control over nor choice in their learning.

1. Challenge that requires an appropriate level of skill

* Boys learn best through activities where they bring their interest and basic skills and gain new skills and knowledge through interaction with materials, their peers, and the teacher. The challenge must be enough to motivate the learning but not so far that it is out of reach. Smith and Wilhelm (2002) point out that this reflects Vygotsky’s Zone of Proximal Development, where the learner grows closer and closer to the desired competency through interactions with a knowledgeable mentor.

1. Clear goals and feedback

* Boys want to clearly understand what they are supposed to do in an activity and a rationale for doing so. Activities should have a clear purpose such as to figure things out, to fix or make things, and to keep track of events or items. Games or service oriented activities are very good. Feedback must be clear with solid indication of how to improve. The boys in this study expressed frustration at the ambiguity of how to improve.

1. Focus on the immediate experience

* Boys have more success learning outside of school at jobs and in leisure activities. This is because learning in these contexts have a specific, immediately applicable purpose. The benefits are real and relevant. If learning in the classroom has these qualities, it will be more attractive to boys. Unfortunately curricula and lessons focus on the future: future schooling, future jobs and future experiences. Smith and Wilhelm note that the boys in their study realize the importance of learning for their future. This extrinsic motivation will give boys the drive to complete what is necessary, but not the passion that will drive them to a state of flow, where the use of the language skills is in itself a motivator.

**Teacher Qualities**

Boys respond best to a teacher who

* Is passionate about the subject area
* Wants to get to know the students personally, caring about their interests.
* Cares about the learning of the student
* Gives assistance when needed
* Only assigns work for learning, never ‘busywork’.
* Considers student preferences when assigning reading

**Implications for Teaching**

Smith & Wilhelm (2002) discuss implications for the classroom by means of inquiry:

1. Why do we teach? Is the goal to provide content or life skills? Do we want to entertain or instill a passion for learning? Do we care about each student, or merely the subject that we teach?

2. What do we teach? Problem solving skills or facts? Do we provide opportunities for flow experience?

3. How do we select texts for the classroom? Do we give choice? Do we consider the interest of the students? Reading to achieve a task or goal

* informational texts (girls prefer narratives)
* magazine and newspaper articles
* graphic novels and comic strips
* hobbies and sports
* humour
* science fiction

4. How do we teach? Do we front load material before assigning reading? Do we provide opportunities for social interaction?

**Methodology**

Smith & Wilhelm (2002) conducted stratified random trials in four different secondary schools. The book does not give explicit details about sample sizes, but it does show the anecdotal reports and quotations from the interviews.

Qualitative data was gathered through questionnaires and reoccurring interviews with the boys who participated.

1. Preliminary questionnaires asked boys to rank preferences of activities.

2. Follow-up interviews with each boy were based on discussed these rankings.

3. Repeated interviews collected anecdotal evidence of

* attitudes about the value of reading
* types of things read
* features of texts that are important to them
* Responses to male vs protagonists

**Pertinence**

This book is an invaluable tool for high school teachers of all subjects, particularly language arts, be it English or French. I like how Smith & Wilhelm (2002) discuss the importance of the state of flow in creating intrinsic motivation. They also confirm the relevance of the major themes that I have discovered in my reading of other researchers, and these are the themes that I wish to highlight in my presentation.

References

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