

# Literacy Studies

Volume 15

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While language defines humanity, literacy defines civilization. Understandably, illiteracy or difficulties in acquiring literacy skills have become a major concern of our technological society. A conservative estimate of the prevalence of literacy problems would put the figure at more than a billion people in the world. Because of the seriousness of the problem, research in literacy acquisition and its breakdown is pursued with enormous vigor and persistence by experts from diverse backgrounds such as cognitive psychology, neuroscience, linguistics and education. This, of course, has resulted in a plethora of data, and consequently it has become difficult to integrate this abundance of information into a coherent body because of the artificial barriers that exist among different professional specialties.

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Pelusa Orellana García • Paula Baldwin Lind  
Editors

# Reading Achievement and Motivation in Boys and Girls

Field Studies and Methodological  
Approaches

 Springer

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# Foreword

Reading is important, because if you can read, you can learn  
anything about everything and everything about anything

Tomie dePaola<sup>1</sup>

At the end of the year 2014, the Research Department at Universidad de los Andes (Chile) launched a call for grant proposals called *Fondo de ayuda a la investigación (FAI)* in priority areas that the university was interested in addressing. At that time, all the project proposals had to deal with the study of gender differences from an interdisciplinary perspective. It was then that we – the editors of this book, Dr. Pelusa Orellana and Dr. Paula Baldwin – decided to apply to this fund, considering previous research that we had developed on reading motivation in boys and girls, but mainly because we wanted to contribute to this field of education by publishing studies carried out in Chile, as well as in different parts of the world. Our project was selected and finally awarded funding for two years (2015–2016), during which we worked at three different levels: doing field work and data collection in sixteen schools in Santiago de Chile where we observed reading lessons and administered part of the Motivation to Read Profile (MRP; Gambrell et al. 1996) to 1290 pupils from the third, fourth, and fifth grade (from 9 to 11 years old) from nine of these schools. The data collected was useful not only for our research, but also because we could validate Gambrell et al. questionnaire in Spanish. We also organized meetings and seminars with national and international experts to analyze and discuss yet unresolved issues regarding gender as a variable that could have an impact on reading motivation and achievement, and presented papers at international conferences. Finally, we invited scholars and researchers to publish their studies in a book that could be distributed worldwide. This volume is one of the results of our work and was made possible thanks to the Springer Education team and the Research Department at our university. It aims to address the question of whether gender is a

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<sup>1</sup>Tomie de Paola, “Why Reading Is Important?”, available at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7epT0qUaaX4>

significant variable in the constructs of reading motivation and achievement; thus, whether this should be addressed when planning and designing teaching methodologies. This publication also shows relevant findings at different levels and countries, which shed light for further research on the areas already mentioned.

Much of the research on children's reading has focused on cognitive processes; however, reading is an activity that also requires interest and motivation. These attitudes are generally defined as readers' affect toward reading, and their consequence is that children with more positive attitudes are more motivated to read. Researchers report that girls hold more positive views than boys toward reading; they have also found that girls often have stronger competence beliefs in reading than do boys, and they value it more (Marsh 1989; Wigfield et al. 1997). In addition, Wigfield and Guthrie (1997) report that girls do not only provide more social reasons for reading, but also give more importance to two specific dimensions of reading motivation: self-efficacy and importance associated with reading. On the contrary, boys have higher mean scores on the competition dimension (McKenna et al. 1995).

Taking into account the variability that exists within the notion of gender and age, the studies presented in this book aim to examine and scrutinize previous research on the topic, as well as to test theories on how the different dimensions of reading motivation vary with gender in relation to cultural issues, motivational constructs such as engagement and classroom climate, the role of emotions, interests, and attitudes toward reading, among others.

This volume shows our specific interest in the link between theoretical and instructional approaches, particularly on how reading is motivated and assessed, as well as on how much variation in reading can be accounted for by motivation when language and cognitive factors have been controlled.

The list of authors/contributors (included after the Table of Contents) shows the variety of backgrounds and expertise of the academics involved in this project. We strongly believe that the different types of studies presented by the researchers whose chapters are the result of a completed project, or whose work is at an initial state of a current investigation, contributes to strengthen and widen both the scope of the study and the book's readership, as this volume will interest scholars, researchers, schoolteachers, and postgraduate students working in the areas of literacy, reading motivation and engagement, reading achievement, and gender differences.

The book is divided into three sections, which are introduced by a theoretical analysis on motivation from a psychological perspective, although the author of this chapter also deals with the influence that both biological and environmental factors may have on motivation. The main objective of this introduction is to summarize research on the development of motivation from infancy to adolescence, which can help understand the developmental trajectories for this attitude and its relation to learning. In the first section – Theoretical Approaches: Current Issues on Boys' and Girls' Reading Motivation and Achievement – the authors discuss issues and problems regarding divergent, and sometimes contradictory, conclusions that studies as far back as the nineteenth century have reached with respect to the differences between boys and girls in reading achievement.

In the first chapter, “The Consequential Effects of Misinterpretations and Misrepresentations on Boys’ and Girls’ Reading Achievement and Motivation,” the authors show that there are two tendencies regarding reading achievement in boys and girls: those who claim that girls are superior to boys in reading comprehension, and those who claim no differences. Apart from the fact that a boy/girl gap varies depending on which skill related to reading is tested, when the focus is put exclusively on the underachievement of boys in reading (in general), or, on the contrary, on well-achieving girls, these beliefs may affect pupils’ enthusiasm and commitment, thus erode their motivation to read.

The second chapter, “Contextual Influences on Girls’ and Boys’ Motivation and Reading Achievement: Family, Peers, and Society,” examines how family, peer, and cultural contexts may influence children’s motivation (e.g., Chiu et al. 2012). The author argues that children in families with higher socioeconomic status (SES) often have more capital (human, financial, cultural, and social) that provide for more learning opportunities and greater motivation, on which they can capitalize to learn more (Chiu 2015). However, some aspects of family capital benefit boys more while other aspects benefit girls more. For example, higher SES families yield greater increases in educational resources and reading achievement for boys than for girls (Chiu and McBride-Chang 2010). On the other hand, greater cultural possessions or cultural communication at home increases the reading interest and reading achievement of girls more than that of boys (Chiu and Chow 2010). This chapter also addresses the influence of peers and cultural context on reading motivation and its relationship to reading enjoyment, more reading, and more discussion of books.

In “The Influence of Instruction on Reading Motivation in Finland,” the third chapter of this book, the author explains gender differences in the development of interest in reading which starts at the very beginning of schooling. She argues that teachers and their instruction – especially high-quality classroom interactions – provide an important environment for children’s learning and motivation. For example, educational contexts that allow children autonomy to initiate tasks and complete them, without applying strict performance criteria, have shown to strengthen children’s interest in reading; conversely, a stricter and more didactic approach, emphasizing correct answers and particular modes of learning, may lead to a waning of the children’s intrinsic motivation and interest in learning situations (Guay et al. 2001; Guthrie et al. 2000; Lerkkanen et al. 2012; Stipek et al. 1995). The chapter as a whole describes the extent to how teaching practices and the quality of teacher-child interaction observed in classrooms influence children’s motivation in reading, particularly with boys and children at-risk in highly transparent Finnish language context.

The fourth chapter in this section, “To What Extent Is Reading Motivation a Significant Predictor of Reading Achievement When Controlling for Language and Cognitive Ability? A Systematic Review,” deals with cognitive and emotional factors that impact reading ability and explores how much variation can be accounted for by motivation, when cognitive and linguistic aspects can be controlled. The author argues that the wide spectrum of factors theoretically associated with motivation and the variety of methods used to assess it make it difficult to generalize on

the impact of reading motivation on reading ability. Studies show that the amount of variation which is attributed to motivation is contingent on several individual, cultural, linguistic, and emotional factors, among which are age, gender, and verbal ability. In order to find evidence regarding the extent to which motivation can, in fact, be a strong predictor of reading performance, the researcher examines recent literature (i.e., from 2000 to the present) about studies in which motivation has been acknowledged as a significant contributor to reading ability, and discusses these findings, in an attempt to better understand the variability of such impact when linguistic and cognitive ability predictors have been controlled.

The second section, which is dedicated to field studies, presents four chapters dealing with reading motivation in pupils from a wide variety of backgrounds. In “Young Children’s Motivation to Engage in Social Aspects of Reading,” the authors present findings from several decades of research which underscore the importance of motivation in the literacy development of students in grades three and beyond (Guthrie et al. 1996; Wang et al. 2011). However, they claim that relatively little attention has been devoted to exploring motivation to read for students in kindergarten through second grade, particularly struggling readers, and to possible gender differences in young children’s reading motivation. This chapter is the result of a research study that was completed in 2015 when the investigators administered the “Me and My Reading Profile” (Marinak et al. 2014) to 50 students in the United States who were struggling readers in grades K-2; they also interviewed 6 children at each grade level, using matched pairs of boys and girls. Based on this data, the investigators go beyond prior research on factors related to the reading motivation of children in grades K-2, which confirmed the importance of self-concept and the appreciation of the value of reading (Eccles 1983; Wigfield et al. 2007). They argue that a more recent study revealed a third factor of importance: Literacy Out loud (Marinak et al. 2014). This factor was related to more social aspects of reading such as reading out loud to others and talking with others about books, elements that seem to be relevant in the case of boys who appear to be more sensitive to the social dimensions of reading than girls.

The behavior of Chilean students with respect to reading motivation is approached in the sixth chapter: “Reading Motivation and Achievement Among Chilean Boys and Girls in Grades 3, 4, and 5: An Exploration of Results and Pedagogical Implications” in which the two researchers show the results of a study carried out from 2015 to 2016. They analyzed the motivation and reading achievement performance of 1290 pupils in grades 3, 4, and 5 at two time periods, in order to explore both their reading ability and motivation. In the first case, they applied a silent reading comprehension assessment tool that takes into consideration reading ability to provide Lexile measures for individual students; to measure the second variable they administered part of Gambrell et al.’s (1996) Motivation to Read Profile to determine group differences in readers’ self-concept and value of reading across gender, socioeconomic status, and grade levels. Findings showed that reading motivation decreases in the case of boys (both for the construct of self-concept and value of reading), whereas for girls it only decreases for value of reading and slightly increases for self-concept, particularly in fifth grade.

The seventh chapter is set in a very different background and it is called “Chinese Middle Schools’ Reading Motivation.” Having as an objective to explore the role reading motivation plays in Chinese middle school students as compared to those in the West, in terms of their cultural frame, this study employs a mixed-methods approach to investigate reading motivation of these students in Taiwan. A total of 88 ninth-grade students (47 boys and 41 girls) participated voluntarily by completing the Chinese Motivation for Reading Questionnaire (CMRQ). In addition, six teachers and five parents were selected for the interviews. The descriptive statistics showed the mean scores for self-efficacy, intrinsic motivation, extrinsic motivation, and social motivation were 2.81, 2.89, 2.60, and 2.41, respectively. A multiple linear regression, a zero-order correlation statistical analysis, showed that Chinese students placed greater value on grades and social recognition. Content analyses showed that teachers and parents’ expectations and beliefs, and instructional practices, as well as social/educational contexts, influenced Chinese students’ reading motivation. In particular, the hierarchical testing system is still strongly ingrained in Chinese middle schools where reading for social recognition and competition appear to have a primary role in Chinese students’ motivation to read. Gender differences in reading were found in this study.

The second section ends with the eighth chapter, “Boys’ Reading Skills and Attitudes During the First Six School Years,” in which the authors analyze primary school pupils’ reading skills and attitudes toward reading in Finland, thus concluding that girls have better reading skills and more positive attitudes than boys. However, they point out that boys’ confidence in their reading skills is high and that they assess their skills better than they actually are. Boys have negative opinions on reading, especially while on-task during literacy lessons and homework. Therefore, teachers should consider the kind of tasks and reading materials that would interest them. The researchers argue that today textbooks are still a central source of information in content area classes. Reading comprehension tests in both history and natural sciences show that, in sixth grade, boys have special difficulties in understanding these contents. They suggest that it would be necessary to use other types of reading materials and to teach reading comprehension strategies that help pupils understand the contents of the textbooks. Finally, they show that there is a strong correlation between pupils’ self-esteem, reading attitudes, and reading comprehension skills; furthermore, pupils who have good self-esteem have a positive attitude toward reading and good reading comprehension skills.

The third and final section in this volume – Methodological Approaches to Reading Motivation – includes three chapters that provide ideas on methodologies and strategies that can enhance reading motivation and achievement in boys and girls. The ninth chapter, “Literacy Achievement and Motivation Reconsidered: Linking Home and School Literate Practices for Struggling Adolescent Males,” focuses on a case study that shows literate practices a low-achieving male adolescent reader – a biracial urban 10th grader with a history of academic failure and an active participant in the “mediasphere” (O’Brien 2001). The author argues that male youth, like this boy, are using and creating forms of discourse that could be acknowledged and appreciated in school settings. He asserts that when room is made in

school for boys' out-of-school interests and literacies, numerous opportunities arise for engaged reading (Brozo 2010; Brozo and Gaskins 2009; Coles and Hall 2001). Moreover, because engagement is a critical variable in the reading and academic lives of boys (Brozo and Gaskins 2009; Tatum 2006), lack of engagement with literacy is one of the most significant factors in accounting for boys' lower attainment in relation to girls (Brozo et al 2014; Lietz 2006a, b). Finally, the author concludes that there are texts and practices capable of reaching disengaged and struggling male readers, and that teachers can discover the literate practices male youth engage in with alternative texts and media beyond the classroom walls, such as music and graphic novels, and weave these texts and practices into their instructional routines.

The tenth chapter, "Motivation and Comprehension Instruction: The Case of the Roadrunner Reader Inquiry Kits," reviews studies on children's motivation to read and its relations to children's reading comprehension. They discuss an instructional approach focused on inquiry (Fairbanks 2000) to address the needs of students who struggle with learning to read. The authors describe the process they used to design dubbed "inquiry kits," which are curricular materials that provide teachers instructional spaces to engage students and meet their basic needs related to autonomy, competence, and relatedness (Ryan and Deci 2009). This development process involved the consideration of an instructional model that was oriented around a "big idea" (topic) connected to a message of social justice (Freire 1971). They conclude the chapter with examples of the ways in which these kits have been used to support the instruction of students who struggle with learning to read.

According to the eleventh chapter, "Teaching Today the Readers of Tomorrow," effective literacy instruction is the result of the strategic combination of relevant research contributions from diverse fields of education. Neuroscience has shed light to understand how the brain learns so that we can develop teaching practices aligned to brain-based learning. Cognitive psychology allows us to explain gender differences that explain why boys and girls think, communicate, and behave differently. She argues that significant studies completed by the Early Literacy Reading Panel, the National Research Council, and the National Reading Panel inform us about the essential components of literacy instruction and when these should be taught. In addition, she suggests that the compilation of these solid research findings inform the how, why, what, and when of effective literacy instruction so that we can design early intervention programs and a variety of instructional approaches that can successfully address reading motivation and literacy achievement in boys and girls. Therefore, she concludes that at the twilight of the twenty-first century, it is a moral imperative and an educational challenge to use this research-based information to teach today the readers of tomorrow.

Conclusions in each chapter show the wide scope and impact of the research carried out by each author or group of authors on the development and improvement of reading motivation and achievement in boys and girls worldwide. Most studies provide new evidence that sheds light, questions, and at the same time, reassesses previous research and data on the relevance of defining the variables and determining the specific skills involved in reading performance and comprehension that may

cause more or less difficulty to boys and girls. Almost every study refers in one way or another to the importance of avoiding general and non-evidence-based statements regarding the boy/girl gap in reading achievement, or focusing exclusively on the underachievement of boys or on well-achieving girls because, as demonstrated in many of the chapters, these beliefs may not only hinder reading motivation, but also ignore that the gap between boys and girls will vary depending on which skill related to reading is tested.

Readers of the twenty-first century are confronted with yet another challenge, which is the access to multimodal texts. Most children are engaged in online reading on a permanent basis. Research has shown that specific reading skills are necessary for reading and understanding these kinds of texts, which usually are highly interactive. Research findings about the extent to which online reading improves intrinsic motivation are mixed. We do not yet know the long-term effects of online reading on a child's desire to continue reading beyond the school years. On the other hand, some studies have demonstrated no significant differences on reading motivation when reading ebooks versus reading printed text (e.g., Long and Szabo 2016). However, reading on the web is a dynamic process in which readers interact with multiple text sources, genres, pictures, audio, and activities (Lewis 2000, p.3). Online reading not only challenges one's capacity to focus but may also demand other behaviors such as persistence and perseverance, which are strongly related to intrinsic motivation. While none of the chapters addresses multimodal reading and motivation directly, some authors remind us of the importance of looking at reading motivation in the context of the digital world. Findings about how reading motivation changes in digital contexts can help better understand the instructional implications that must be considered for intrinsic motivation to flourish.

Findings from recent studies indicate that many readers tend to choose not to read because they find it difficult, or because they have a low level of confidence in their reading ability (Nielen et al. 2017). This is in line with what is reported in some of the chapters of the current volume. Having a strong positive self-concept helps students avoid giving up when texts become challenging or when reading tasks are boring. Students, especially young readers, need the support and affective encouragement that teachers, other adults, or even digital pedagogical agents, as Nielen et al. suggest, "to foster sustained effort during reading" (2017, p. 2).

Reading properly and understanding what we read opens the door to knowledge and experience of the world, and paves the professional future of our children. If, as dePaola states, we want our students to "learn anything about everything and everything about anything" (WeGiveBooks) through reading, we need to provide them with the best reading environment and opportunities we can, so that they have a positive concept of themselves as readers and value this ability; thus, they will be intrinsically moved to read more and better books.

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The editors

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