

# Give Us a Cheer, Mr. Hurley!

By Sharon Delgado, T-C, '81, [sdelgado@bcps.org](mailto:sdelgado@bcps.org)



Sharon Delgado

Do boys and girls have different literary preferences and attitudes toward reading? Many investigators of text preference say yes. They report that boys favor nonfiction content that includes short passages, graphics and other text features. Boys also prefer shorter novels with stronger plots. Girls, on the other hand, are said to enjoy longer novels where characters solve problems, establish relationships and/or learn life lessons. It also is said that male and female students may even have different purposes for reading. “Boys read with an eye to finding out new information, even from fiction; girls enjoy the dissection of relationships.” (Millard, 1997)

Some researchers say that boys and girls have different learning styles. For example, “a competitive approach may enhance learning in many boys and impair learning in some girls.” (Sax, 2005) To foster “responsible, caring citizens” teachers often accentuate cooperation over competition. One might wonder: should teachers reconsider this idea?

Last spring I wrote a grant proposal to support a study designed to investigate the issues related to gender differences and reading. Good news arrived in November. Our school was awarded a \$5,000 NEA Learning & Leadership Grant. Now a group of Jacksonville teachers and I are examining the reading

preferences and learning styles of boys and girls.

Our research is being done after school with small groups of students. Because the clubs meet outside of regular school hours we are free to “think and teach outside of the box.” We can divide the students into single gender groups. We can employ both cooperative and competitive learning activities. We can choose whatever literary genres we think might appeal to our boys and girls. No prescribed reading text, no workbook pages and no “test awareness” activities required!

The third and fourth grade students who are a part of our project attend weekly after-school “Guys Read/Gals Read Fun Clubs.” The children read the selected books independently on their own time at home. On club meeting day the students first go to an empty classroom where they have snacks and do some enjoyable physical exercises. Then it’s time for their one-hour book club meeting.

During the actual club meeting boys are with boys and girls are with girls. The children talk about the book chapters they read independently the week before. We are trying a variety of discussion approaches—sometimes discussions are teacher-led; other times discussions are student-led. We are also experimenting with a variety of activities: individual vs. group;

cooperative vs. competitive; timed vs. untimed; prizes vs. no prizes; pencil/paper tasks vs. manipulative.

Teachers work in pairs. While one teacher guides the discussion and leads the activities, the other teacher monitors and records student responses on an observation instrument. Students also record on a survey sheet their individual reactions to each experience. At the end of each meeting students rank the activities from least favorite to favorite.

Although we are only halfway through the study, some patterns seem to be emerging. Most of our boys seem to enjoy timed competitive tasks with clear winners and losers. Our girls were not as enthused—at least not at first.

For example, one afternoon the “guys” slipped effortlessly into a “sports” mode upon hearing that the “gals” had read well past them to a certain point in the novel both groups were reading. They were indignant. They formed a circle. Hands were extended into the center; each boy’s hand placed upon the other until all hands were in. At one point they implored their teacher to lead them in a cheer. “Chapter Eight! Chapter Eight! Chapter Eight!” yelled the boys as they left the room. They were really motivated to read that day!

In contrast, several of the girls reacted negatively to timed

competitive games. Some girls felt that only winners receiving prizes was definitely “not OK.” A few girls cried when time ran out before they had completed a task. This result was probably harder on the teachers than on the students. At our school “Everyone is a winner” and “Compete against your own best effort” are words to live by. Cooperation is a key value. However, we did not eliminate the games for the girls, and over time most of them grew to appreciate that competition can be fun and exciting as long as it’s fairly applied.

We adults are learning a lot about ourselves and about teaching. We’ve become especially interested in dif-

ferent discussion strategies. Some of us do a great job at rapid didactic recitations which seem to stimulate the boys. Others of us are more skilled at pulling back and letting the students take over the conversation. Girls seem to open up best in that style of discussion.

Whatever the final results of our study turn out to be, our 10-member teacher-research team has already accomplished some important things. We have become a great support group for one another. We have done a “whole lotta” meta-cogitating about our individual teaching styles. We have had some really insightful discussions about discussion. In fact, we’ve begun to realize that the best

resource available to us is US!

If you would like to learn more about how boy brains differ from girl brains and become acquainted with the work of educators and scientists who are studying how the brain learns, contact Sharon Delgado. She would like to form a T-C study group which would investigate recent brain research and consider how it can be applied to a teacher’s everyday practice. One goal of the study group would be to develop MWP presentations that reference this new research. Interested T-Cs should e-mail Sharon at: [sdelgado@bcps.org](mailto:sdelgado@bcps.org)

## Inspired By Adolescents

By Cheryl Foreman, T-C '02  
[cheryl844@comcast.net](mailto:cheryl844@comcast.net)

For me inspiration comes not from the sound bite names tossed around the media or those that have been selected by past accomplishments. For me, those that stir my consciousness into a new state, walk a bit unsteady, laugh too loud, too long, or not enough. They bump into their lives instead of forming them and then are often so confused by the encounter that they end up responding emotionally instead of cerebrally. I’m inspired by the middle school students that walk the halls with me. They come every day to



Cheryl Foreman

face a world they know so little about yet need to learn to manipulate for survival, growth and strength. They are appropriately somewhat untrusting and are yet willing to put their futures in someone else’s hands. They come from various backgrounds, live in a country that still struggles with the value of diversity, and take a chance that the place they are forced to be in for better than 33 hours a week will be a

haven instead of a hell. I am awed by the numbers that try to learn in classrooms too small, overcrowded, under-equipped, or under-supported. And I’m brought to tears by those that have to fight their way to and from school, live in homes that don’t support educational pursuits, and still come with the will to do better than some of those given the charge of raising them. These adolescents, who are going through the most tumultuous time in their lives and yet reaching for the stars, inspire me to do better tomorrow than I did for them today.