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Reading and non-reading among male juvenile Norwegians

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Abstract

During the last decade, there has been concerns about the decreasing rate of boys who read books.

A project in the rural small town Brekstad, has confirmed the general finding that boys read less than girls. However, the project report underlines that boys don't want their reading to be organized, or a part in a programme.

If your library want boys to read more, they recommend you to disguise your activities as a "unisex reading programme", with special consideration to genres and approaches enjoyed by boys.

Dear colleagues,

As a Norwegian librarian, I'm delighted to introduce you to a matter that has been highly focused on in our country over the last decade.

I will use most of my time to present our reflections and recommendations, as I have presented them to Norwegian audiences previously. Perhaps the gender or tutorial traditions in your country differ from ours to such an extent that my recommendations seem irrelevant. If so, please think of this as a presentation of Norwegian aspects and customs. I would be delighted if at least something will seem relevant to your own practice.

1. The library
2. The concerns
3. The attempts to establish a boys reading programme
4. The reflections on male reading - after we'd failed
5. The recommendations

THE LIBRARY

Ørland public library serves a municipality¹ of 5 140 inhabitants, with a staff of 3 persons sharing 1,1 positions, offering a stack of 34 000 volumes, including new media. Our annual lending rate is about 24 000 volumes. All these figures are 15-25% lower than the average for a Norwegian public library of our size.

(In short: We have a decentralized structure of municipal authorities in Norway: 434 independent public library systems, one in each municipality, and about 50% of the small Norwegian municipalities have libraries with between 1 and 2 positions)

Our inhabitants make their living from agriculture, some fishing, commerce and a Royal Norwegian Air force Air Base.

THE CONCERNS

Hilde Rudlang of Statistics Norway was one of the first to sum up the concern about non-reading boys. In an article in their bimonthly magazine **Samfunnsspeilet** [A mirror of the society] No 4, 1998² she wrote

There has been a decrease in the reading of books over the last 20 years, especially among young boys. Girls now read far more books than boys do, and young girls read more than any. Gender differences in reading arose in the 1980s, and are most significant among the youngest. Gender differences are increasing, as boys tend to read less.

The large international reading literacy surveys, PISA for fifteen-year-olds and PIRLS for ten-year-olds, have strengthened this concern, and have served as a danger warning for the Norwegian government,³ and have turned concerns about male juvenile non-reading into a political issue.

¹ [www.orland.no/?itemid=500005164 - Municipality home page – only a few contributions in English]

² [www.ssb.no/samfunnsspeilet/utg/9804/3.shtml – in Norwegian – my translation]

³ Kristin Clemet, the Norwegian minister of education and research, have said that *Both these studies show that Norwegian students have average reading skills, which indicates that we have room for improvement. The need for improvement is underlined by the fact that the difference between poor readers and good readers is too large. The two international surveys also indicate that there are substantial differences in the reading abilities of girls and boys, and that we have reason to worry about the performances of the low achieving boys. The good news is that compared to other countries Norway did well on literacy related activities in the home and on early literacy activities before starting school. In addition, we see that Norwegian pupils, in general, are well adapted and enjoy attending school.*

It was within this concerns that we applied for a project funds from the Norwegian library authorities. They gave us a grant of 25,000 Norwegian kroner (worth approx £ 2,500), and we received similar funding from The freedom of Expression Foundation, Oslo [www.frittord.no] and 10,000 kroner from Biblioteksentralen. Larger projects were established in larger [city] libraries, and I suppose that our sponsors expected us to have a rural community and small scale library approach to the matter.

THE ATTEMPTS

In hindsight – we were embarrassingly ambitious. Our project description outlined great ambitions trying to establish a kind of authorized standard model on “how to talk to teenage boys about reading”.

This is what we tried:

- We carried out an informal reading survey in the local secondary school
- We tried to establish read-and-review-groups in the youth club
- We tried to establish user cooperation in collection development
- We made some changes to our collection development profile – increased our profile on graphic novels, horror, fantasy
- We developed our reading encouragement profile (For a library as small as ours, book promotion is a matter of three levels: the first level is collection development; secondly, exhibitions, displays etc; and book talk is the third level of promoting books)

In short: We failed to establish reading groups and an individual relationship with boys about reading. This failure what the breakthrough for our realization that : **Boys don't want their reading to be organized.**

THE REFLECTIONS ON MALE READING

1. Reading and socialization

Reading does not seem to be a natural part of the main stream male role in Norwegian society today. Men tend to read tabloid newspapers, car and sports magazines and comics, but hardly ever books. In the light of this, **few boys would deliberately choose reading as a means or a goal in their personal development from boy to man.**

In rural and small town Norway the male stereotype is nice, slightly polite, and unfamiliar with emotions and fine arts. Men are traditionally distant to literature and reading. And, Yes, I know that there are lighter shades to this picture, and we all know some examples, but my point is this: When a young boy is trying to identify a male role model, he will normally see the big patterns, and these are described as above in our project report, with reference to other reading studies and to “boys to men” sociology.

The government has, during the entire period we have been in office, focused on improving the quality of our educational system. In line with this policy, we have recently presented a plan with a time scope from now until 2007. The plan is named "Make Room for Reading!"

[From a speech in English May 21st 2003; <http://odin.dep.no/ufd/norsk/aktuelt/taler/minister/045071-090029/dok-bn.html>]

2. Reading and confidence

Reading boys are an invisible subculture, and most of the boys would like it to stay that way. **They will probably see it as a betrayal if librarians or teachers exposed them in an attempt to “use them” as agents in a reading programme.** The author Arne Svingen said that in his classroom readings, he often meets boys (and girls) who never admitted in class that they enjoyed reading, but came to him – like Nicodemus – after the lesson. When we published our report, this experience was confirmed by colleagues: “When I was young, it was stigmatizing to be exposed as a reader.”

3. Reading and independence

Reading is more widespread among young boys than one might believe from the danger signs. This was our finding, and it is confirmed by newer reports⁴ We concluded that: **boys don’t mind reading, when they have an interesting book, and nobody makes it a sensation, landmark or result of some silly project.** This is in my opinion a matter of respect, and this is why we named our report “Don’t disturb their reading”.

In Norwegian: La gutta lese i fred!

We describe the gender difference like this: Girls look for something to read when they want to read. Boys want to read when they have found something worth reading.

OUR RECOMMENDATIONS

Then, how should we promote reading to an audience of teenage boys? We obviously want to, don’t we?

- Boys’ reading is a legitimate public concern, but we might turn our worries into a self-confirming prophecy if it is repeated too often. Thus, it is smarter to encourage boys within ordinary reading programmes than to establish specific boys’ programmes. If we need a boys’ reading programme, it should be masked as a general reading programme, with special attention to the next point:
- Boys do not read the same books as girls do, and they don’t have the same strategies choosing what or when to read. Thus, it is important to ensure that we offer a wide range of books and other material that traditionally has been interesting to boys: humour and grotesque; horror; fantasy, sf and other heroic literature; non-fiction – on concrete matters as nature, science, skills and history;
- Treat them as individuals, and over-estimate their judgement (as flattery). Boys aged 13 don’t trust adults who tell them “this book is nice, I know of another boy your age who liked it”. Let them chose freely from the books available. Use tact, gentleness, and make room for a variety of texts.
- Make books available in class-rooms through exchangeable classroom collections, combined with a book talk.

When we make the right books available for young readers, we’ll increase the potential moments of truth; those blessed moments when someone is caught by the magic of words, imagination and enthusiasm.

⁴ (<http://www.nettbiblioteket.no/prosjekter/frittvalg.html> - Norwegian only)
<http://tinyurl.com/7ktam> (Univ of Stavanger, report by Trude Hoel “I always read, but I never read” - Norwegian)