"Reading Don’t Fix No Chevys": Literacy in the Lives of Young Men

Written by Michael W. Smith and Jeffrey D. Wilhelm

Reviewed by Bob Sizoo

Breaking the Rules: Liberating Writers Through Innovative Grammar Instruction

Written by Edgar H. Schuster

Reviewed by Jack Caswell

In the First Few Years: Reflections of a Beginning Teacher

Written by Tina Humphrey

Reviewed by Liz Stephens

down the audience have the time to investigate the research on their own. The new curricula mandated by states and No Child Left Behind are all allegedly so perfectly aligned with "scientifically based" research that we teachers needn't concern ourselves with the research itself. In some cases, we need only to follow a script—validated by the double-blind experiments of scientists with training in medicine or physics and no K-12 teaching experience. If we are to reclaim the authority in our classrooms, we have to both be familiar with and participate in research that directly informs our practice. "Reading Don’t Fix No Chevys": Literacy in the Lives of Young Men is just such a study.

In "Reading Don’t Fix No Chevys," Michael Smith and Jeff Wilhelm, two former high school and now university teachers, demonstrate authentic teacher inquiry. Their teaching experience taught them (and statistics verify) that boys in secondary classrooms often disengage with school literacy. They wondered if taking a detailed look over time at the literacy habits of forty-nine boys would provide them and the student teachers they teach with any information that could contribute to engaging boys in schoolish literacy. Though the math/science gap between girls and boys is closing, girls still greatly outperform boys in language arts. Smith and Wilhelm state at the outset that this book is "not a critique of the impact of feminism" on schools, nor an argument that girls get too much attention at the expense of boys. Likewise, Chevys doesn't fall in line with the spate of books published in recent years about boys' struggles in schools. Smith and Wilhelm found evidence that runs contrary to
conjecture promulgated by many of those authors. For example, they found no evidence in their work with these forty-nine boys of a universal “boy code” as reported by William Pollack in his best-selling 1998 book, Real Boys: Rescuing Our Sons from the Myths of Boyhood. This book provides no ammunition for anyone’s gender wars.

Wilhelm and Smith remain committed throughout the study to maintaining a sense of intimacy with the student subjects. They include Bodey, a low-performing European-American seventh-grader in a rural school; Chris, a high-performing African-American tenth-grader in an urban school; Bambino, a Puerto Rican eleventh-grader of average performance in an urban school; and forty-six other boys of several races from rural, suburban, and urban schools. The boys kept literacy logs, interviewed with the authors, and, near the end of the study, read stories aloud using think-aloud protocols during which they were instructed to “read a story into a microphone and say aloud any responses you have while you are reading.” Grad students then coded the remarks into nineteen categories such as “making local inferences,” “monitoring,” and “reacting.”

Between each chapter is a “Meet the Crew” section profiling four of the boys and revealing a snapshot of their interests and school experiences. Any point that is made about student beliefs and attitudes is demonstrated through extensive student quotes, usually in conversation with one of the authors. On the inside front and back covers are tables that list each boy’s name, school/grade, race/ethnicity, and relative success in school. Though the authors are ultimately searching for generalizable strategies we can use to improve our teaching, throughout the book they never lose touch with the individuals in the study, and neither does the reader. We know these teachers don’t just cover material but teach kids. Their tone throughout is respectful of
the students and their interests. This is just as true when they talk about the kids as when they talk with the kids. In one transcribed conversation, Michael Smith is talking with Mick, a low-achieving Puerto Rican tenth-grader in an urban school, about Mick’s favorite avocation, professional wrestling.

Mick: It’s fun.

Mick: What makes it so much fun? I know, I can see your face light up when you talk about wrestling.

Mick: The people in there. They’re legends. It’s fun to watch. You get into it. (146)

You don’t hear Michael saying, “How can you watch that garbage when you haven’t read Shakespeare?” Instead you smell a lesson in character development based on Mick’s interest in the “legendary” wrestlers he knows so much about.

Mihalyi Csikszentmihalyi, in his 1990 book *Flow: The Psychology of Optimal Experience*, postulates that humans seek happiness through “flow” experiences, those in which we “are so involved in an activity that nothing else seems to matter” (4). The four main principles of flow experiences as Smith and Wilhelm state them are: “a sense of competence and control; a challenge that requires an appropriate level of skill; clear goals and feedback; and a focus on the immediate experience” (28-30). In chapter two, the authors interview students about their favorite activities—cooking, rapping, hockey, snowboarding, mountain biking—in which they were likely to experience these principles of flow. They also inquired as to if and when these principles have been evident in the students’ school experiences. Rarely have these students experienced flow in school. For example, of the forty-nine boys, only one linked increasing competence to school experiences. The authors suggest that in addition to asking the future-oriented question, “What am I preparing my students for?” teachers must ask, “What is the quality of experience I want them to have today?”

There is good news from these boys for teachers. Even though they felt school was a mostly inauthentic experience, one divorced from their own interests, all recognized the importance of reading and the utility of school success. Unfortunately, they saw success in school as something that would be useful in a distant future. After telling one of the authors that he didn’t like school, Mick said, “Yeah, but you need it anyway. I need to graduate to get to my goal. Even my mom told me that.” Given the tendency of adolescents to live in the moment, it’s no surprise that seeing school as a stepping-stone to success in some nebulous future is not a viewpoint that provokes immediate engagement. However, these boys are not illiterate. They read books and magazines, rented videos, watched educational television, and scoured the Web in pursuit of their own interests. The authors contend that if they and students like them are to be successful in school, their teachers must employ curricula and instructional methods that encourage and extend engagement in the present.

The sixth and final chapter of “Reading Don’t Fix No Chevys” outlines this study’s implications for classroom practice, the most important of which is to create contexts for problem solving. Students need to be engaged in the inquiry process. The authors found that in “every case where true inquiry environments were introduced in school in place of asking students to report on what the teacher already knew, they were embraced.” For example, “Huey and Guy, two of the more disengaged students, spoke at great length about their interest in and enjoyment of their bridge-building project, in which they experimented with and tested different bridge designs.” Also, “The inquiry-oriented history class at one of the high schools was identified as their most engaging class by the students who had taken it” (189). The remainder of chapter 6 suggests methods a teacher can use to create an environment of inquiry, and provides suggestions of other important ways teachers can encourage students to experience flow in their schooling.

The engaging title of this book hints that it isn’t just any research. Save this book until you have some time to sit down and digest it. Don’t just skip to chapter 6 in order to get straight to Smith and Wilhelm’s summary of the classroom strategies implied by this research. By reading the background information, the thinking of the authors, and, most importantly, the words of the students, the recommended instructional strategies will gain an authenticity and validity that reading them alone won’t provide. It’s the difference between teaching from a script and gathering input from many sources to inform and then rely on your professional judgment. Our teaching can be a flow experience too—but only when we have a sense of competence and control.

**References**


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