

A Space for Boys and Books

Guys Read Book Clubs

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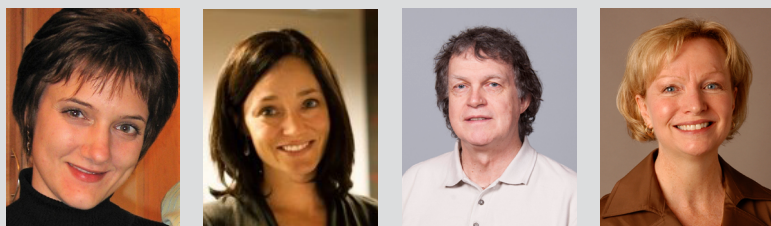
The well-documented gender achievement gap continues to receive popular as well as scholarly attention.¹ Fueling this attention are international and national test scores that continue to illustrate that boys, regardless of age, income, race, or ethnicity, trail girls in reading assessments.²

While we acknowledge that there is a gender gap in reading achievement between males and females, we remain unconvinced that gender is the only factor; gender is a social and cultural construction, and these considerations must be included in understanding this phenomenon.³ We were extended a unique opportunity to experience and evaluate a literacy initiative that was created in response to the perceived “crisis” in boys’ literacy—Guys Read book clubs.⁴ This article offers an inside glimpse into the out-of-school world of boys and books, which can inform in-school reading practices for both boys and girls.

Literature Review

Guys Read (GR) is a web-based literacy initiative (www.guysread.com) designed by children’s author and former national ambassador for children’s literature Jon Scieszka to help boys find reading material of interest to them. GR was designed to raise public awareness of the concerns surrounding boys’ literacy.

Based on Scieszka’s vision for GR, Hennepin County Library (HCL) offers a GR program that includes book clubs geared for boys in grades four through six facilitated by males of various ages in which the participants read books chosen by librarians and facilitators. Founded in 2004, HCL’s GR program continues to grow in popularity. In summer 2016, seventeen libraries in the system offered GR book clubs.⁵ In addition, HCL also offers mixed-gender book clubs and genre-based mixed-gender book clubs.⁶



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In summer 2006, university researchers partnered with HCL staff to evaluate the effectiveness of their summer GR book club program. Over that summer, the clubs met weekly at seventeen different library sites. The purpose of this study was to document what clientele the program attracted; what the book clubs looked like in action; when and how the book clubs operated in particular settings; and the impact of the program on boys' attitudes, perspectives about themselves as readers, and reading practices.⁷

In contrast to the evaluation study's macro perspective, the study shared in this article offers a deeper microanalysis of book-club activities in two different programs in an effort to understand the complexity and success of these boys-only clubs within the HCL system.

Book Clubs

Both schools and community libraries share a common goal of encouraging voluntary reading. Deborah Appleman and Jeffrey D. Wilhelm suggest that, for young people, book clubs can help foster pleasurable reading,⁸ an activity that is often missing in school contexts. Appleman notes that book clubs help children "negotiate the border[s] between school-sponsored reading and adult reading in hopes of increasing out-of-school reading."⁹

In the most recent *Handbook of Reading Research*, the authors advocate for the first time in the handbook's history that "after school [is] a domain of reading research and practice . . . Out-of-school programs and organizations [including libraries] . . . sometimes complement, sometimes extend, and sometimes diverge from understandings of and ways of participating around texts typically promoted through formal education systems."¹⁰ However, the empirical research on out-of-school book clubs geared toward younger readers is limited,¹¹ and the research on library-based book clubs for youth is scarce. One notable highlight in the research is a study by Alvermann et al. that focused on four adolescent Read and Talk clubs (R&T) situated in a public library.¹² These authors were interested in exploring how the young adults negotiated social and literacy practices within the institution of a public library. The discourse of these book clubs was found to be communal, with the adult book club leaders and adolescents creating and negotiating together literacy, institutional, and societal discourses within the context of the library-situated book clubs. The space of the library turned out to be important to how these R&T clubs functioned and the freedom they afforded the book club participants. The researchers concluded that the library "afforded a relatively safe niche in which both adolescents and adults felt free to experiment with alternative ways of doing discussion" and "a climate of acceptance . . . in which adolescents who liked to read could experience both the welcoming of other readers like themselves and the shutting out of those who would taunt them for being avid readers."¹³

The research presented in this paper corroborates and extends Alvermann et al.'s findings as well as provides insights for supporting in-school book discussions.¹⁴ Our study of fourth through sixth grade GR library book clubs illustrates the power of an accepting space for boys to be excited about reading.

Methods

Theoretical Perspectives

This interpretive case study is grounded in the theoretical concept of third space and utilizes critical discourse analysis to understand more deeply the practices and discourses employed within two GR book clubs.¹⁵

We adopt the theory of third space as defined by Moje et al. for use in literacy education contexts: "Our ultimate goal is to work toward third space that brings the texts framed by everyday discourses and knowledges into classrooms in ways that challenge, destabilize, and, ultimately, expand the literacy practices that are typically valued in school and in the everyday world."¹⁶ In light of this definition, the GR book clubs at HCL are viewed as a third space where boys meet in an institution (the library) to participate in a school activity (discussing literature) but with books picked for their enjoyment to read during the summer (vacation and not school), with no assessments and no girls.

In envisioning third space, Moje et al. examine "funds of knowledge and discourse" available to the middle-school students in their study.¹⁷ They grouped these funds into four categories: family, community, peer groups, and popular culture. We were also interested in examining funds of knowledge and discourses, and after our analysis, our categories include institution (school and library), peer groups, and GR book clubs. We focus on the GR book clubs as a third space in which two main discourses intersect (institution and peer group) to form the third discourse (GR book club). To analyze our data for evidence of institutional (school and library) discourse, peer-group discourse, and GR discourse, we used critical discourse analysis.¹⁸

From a sociocultural perspective,¹⁹ literacy development needs to be understood as occurring within and shaped by social contexts in which participants acquire and use social practices and literacies. In other words, the physical context, book club members, and the texts work together to co-construct the GR book club spaces. Critical discourse analysis allows researchers to understand more clearly the connections and relationships among language in use, identity, and power in situated contexts.

Gee offers the "thinking device" of discourses to help researchers and educators understand how they work in social settings in order to create and sustain identities and power relations: "Discourses are ways of combining and integrating language, actions, and interactions . . . to enact

a particular sort of socially recognizable identity.”²⁰ For this study, Gee’s concept of discourse was used as an analysis tool in order to help the researchers uncover and better understand what was at play in GR book club discussions. Our goal was to better understand how book club participants and facilitators drew from, used, and were affected by multiple discourses occurring within the book club discussions held at community libraries.

Participants and Settings

In this study, participants included boys in grades four through six who were attending the GR book clubs and the facilitators who were leading the GR book clubs at two library sites, Plumb and Sugar Grove (pseudonyms used at libraries’ request), during summer 2006.

Plumb Library is located in a suburb of Minneapolis. At this library, thirteen to fourteen upper elementary school boys met three times for an hour each time, and discussions were led by a male high-school student named Peter, who had former experience facilitating book clubs at the library. For each meeting, a different book focused the discussion; the books included *The Lost Years of Merlin* by T. A. Barron, *Gregor and the Prophecy of Bane* by Suzanne Collins, and *Chew on This: Everything You Don’t Want to Know about Fast Food* by Eric Schlosser and Charles Wilson.

Sugar Grove Library is nestled in a community that serves a middle- to upper-class first-ring suburb of Minneapolis. The GR book club at this library met five times during the summer. Seven to twelve boys participated in each of the book-club meetings facilitated by Frank, a middle-aged male librarian and veteran facilitator of adult and adolescent book clubs; this was his first time facilitating a book club for elementary-aged children. At each of the five meetings, Frank selected a different book, including *Midnight for Charlie Bone* by Jenny Nimmo, *Truckers* by Terry Pratchett, *The Gadget* by Paul Zindel, *The Lost Years of Merlin* by T. A. Barron, and *The Last Book in the Universe* by Rodman Philbrick.

Data Sources

Several sources of data, collected during the evaluation of the GR program at HCL, were used in this analysis.²¹ Boys were asked to complete online surveys and participate in two focus groups. Additionally, some boys were interviewed, and several book clubs were observed by members of the evaluation team. All book-club meetings, focus groups, and interviews were recorded and transcribed. Additionally, the researchers took notes during their observations of the book-club meetings. The researchers’ notes supplemented with the transcriptions of the book-club meetings constitute field notes.

Specifically for this article, we worked with a sample of data that was collected at Plumb and Sugar Grove Libraries. For

each book club, we analyzed field notes from one randomly chosen book-club meeting, pre- and post-club focus groups conducted with book-club members, interviews with individual boys, and interviews with each book club facilitator. The field notes are the primary data source considered in this analysis. We used the focus group and interview data as secondary data to support and/or complicate what we observed in the field-note data.

Analysis

To analyze our field notes, transcripts of interviews, and transcripts of focus groups, we used critical discourse analysis.²² On the first read-through, the researchers focused on the field notes, each marking events, interactions, and discussions of interest. Then we shared our observations and read through the notes for the second time together, marking instances of discourses.

This second collective visit through the data was recursive so that we made sure our ideas and interpretations were, for the most part, aligned. Three discourses emerged during our second meeting: institution (school and library), peer group (social), and GR book club. Our third and fourth read-throughs, both collective and individual, solidified the presence of these three main discourses, which we use in our case descriptions.

Case Studies of Two HCL GR Programs

Plumb Library Book-Club Discussion

At the second of three meetings of the book discussion at Plumb Library, Peter had the boys introduce themselves and share their favorite movie. All thirteen boys were seated around a large table in the library meeting room. The doors were closed, so the room—large, windowless, and framed with posters about reading—became a space removed from the main library; the table was loaded with snacks, and the boys were constantly eating.

Before beginning the discussion, Peter told the boys the three club rules: “Don’t make fun of each other. Don’t interrupt. Say something positive about the book before saying something negative.” Then he explained the format for discussing *Gregor and the Prophecy of Bane*: He passed around a bucket of questions that he and the librarian had created; each boy drew out a question, read it, and had the first chance to respond; then the other boys had the opportunity to respond. The discussion lasted for about an hour.

Institutional Discourse

The dominant discourse at this meeting was institutional. The book club was held in the library, an institution traditionally recognized as a quiet space. Taking into consideration

that the facilitator chose the reading material, the format and questions for the discussion, and the rules for this club, Peter seemed to become a teacher, and the meeting room at the library became a school classroom.

Even though the boys were told that they did not need to raise their hands, and even though the questions were read by the other boys, most raised their hands to answer the questions, waited for Peter to acknowledge them, and then gave their answers to Peter. Rarely did they acknowledge other boys' answers to the same questions.

In addition, there was very little verbal interaction between boys. For example, in the middle of the hour when one of the boys read the question, "If you were going on an adventure, what would you bring?" many boys raised their hands. When they were acknowledged by Peter, one boy talked about bringing weapons and another talked about bringing a spotlight. There was no back and forth between the boys; each gave his answer directly to Peter.

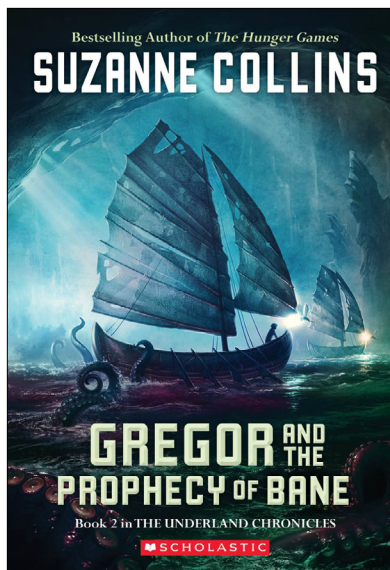
Though Peter viewed himself as a mentor who kept things organized and encouraged reading, he recognized that the boys saw him in the role of teacher (facilitator interview), and he did take on that identity. He responded to the boys by calling on them and replying to their answers with verbal feedback, such as "OK," "You're right," and "That about covers it." In addition, at various points in the discussion, he used teacher moves to stop the side conversations that had taken over the book discussion: he raised his voice to ask a question and to get everyone's attention; he responded to an "off-task" conversation by saying, "Anyway, back to the question"; and he started calling on boys who had not volunteered.

While the boys participated in the institutional discourse by accepting Peter as the teacher and raising their hands to speak like they do in school, they also resisted this discourse. When asked, "Did you learn anything from this book?" most of the boys said no, and others did not respond at all.

Learn is a term associated with school, and while the book club did have a schoolish tone, the boys knew that it was not school and that they were not required to learn. In addition, during the post-club focus-group discussion, one boy mentioned that he thought "they would have more discussions" during the book club; another boy was surprised that they had a bucket of questions: "I thought that it would be just comments, like random comments, what you liked, what you didn't like, that stuff." These boys indicated that they enjoyed being in the book club but were a bit dissatisfied with the discussions.

Peer Discourse

Though the institutional discourse dominated the GR book-club discussions, a peer discourse was also evident. Most importantly, the presence of food created a social atmosphere that could not be suppressed. Even when all the boys appeared to be paying attention, the noises and activity around the snacks interrupted the institutional discourse.



Many times during the discussion, the boys were not quietly paying attention. Instead, they engaged in side conversations—some about the book and others about topics unrelated to the book. In fact, during the hour-long discussion, the researcher noted at least five instances of multiple side conversations occurring at once during this discussion. The boys also occasionally told stories from their lives in response to the questions, and these stories were acceptable in this setting.

Book-Club Discourse

On rare but notable occasions, discussion occurred in which the boys conversed with one another as a large group about the book without constant direction and feedback from the facilitator. For instance, in recalling a section of the book where the protagonist confronts a giant cockroach, the boys discussed in depth whether or not they would be scared of this cockroach.

In another instance, one boy added to another boy's answer to a question. These instances were few and far between during the hour-long discussion, but they seem to be what the boys remember. In a post-club interview, one boy said the best thing about the club was, "We got to, like, discuss the book." Another said, "I liked how we discussed so that I knew how other people thought about the book" (boy interviews).

Sugar Grove Library Book-Club Discussion

The Sugar Grove GR book club met in the afternoons five times over the summer. The transcript analyzed for this manuscript consisted of the field notes taken during the club's fourth book discussion focused on *The Lost Years of Merlin*. Seven boys attended this discussion, which lasted forty-five minutes.

The club met in one of the library's meeting rooms. "Guys Read" police tape covered the entrance to the room, and the door was propped open prior to the discussion. The meeting room was bright with no windows, and "READ" posters lined the pale blue walls. Fluffy chairs were arranged in a horseshoe, and there was an LCD projector on a table toward the U of it. Another table held drink boxes and a bowl full of snacks.

When the boys arrived for the discussion, they greeted each other and beelined for the snack bowl.

Similar to all of Sugar Grove's discussions, this discussion was filled with facilitator-created activities. The book club began with a question from the facilitator, Frank: "Who liked the book?" After a few responses, Frank turned down the lights and projected the author's website onto the wall. The boys and Frank worked together on a quiz about Barron's books.

Frank asked a few other questions about the book, and there were some responses and conversations that occurred. Next, Frank showed the boys a map of constellations and started telling a story from Greek mythology because he believed the author got his ideas from mythology. Then, after showing boys how to locate texts in the library using the online catalog, Frank segued into a preview of the book to be discussed at the next meeting, *The Last Book in the Universe*.

The boys orally generated a list of books to consider saving as "the last book in the universe." After several votes on which book to save, a book collection of *Garfield* comics ended up as the winner. Frank closed with a plug for signing up for GR in the fall and complimented the boys on their "smarts with Greek things." Frank high-fived each boy at the end of the discussion.

Institutional Discourse

The institutional discourse of school and library permeated this book-club discussion. Physically, the book club was held within a library, so simply by entering the building, the discourse of institution was invoked. There was an attempt to break down the institutional discourse of the space, though, by hosting the book club in a private meeting room with doors to physically and symbolically shut out the library as institution.

In analyzing the field notes for this discussion, we identified that institutional discourses are taken up by both boys and facilitator throughout the discussion. The moment the book club got underway, boys responded to Frank's questions by raising their hands and waiting to be called on. This hand raising was noted explicitly four times in the field notes. In addition, Frank asked all the questions about the book, similar to what one sees in school with traditional teacher-driven text discussions. The boys responded to the questions, but they rarely responded to each other's responses. Furthermore, the book club discussion and associated activities were facilitator created and implemented, which again is reminiscent of traditional school structures and norms.

Although institutional discourses were omnipresent during this book-club meeting, they were overlapped with peer and/or book-club discourses. For example, immediately after the "quiz" activity, Frank asked a question about the book: "What do you think of the hawk? Were you bummed when it dies?" He then projected a map of the imaginary land featured in the book on the wall. He asked the boys if floating across the sea on kelp is believable (something that happened in the book). In response, two of the boys said, "It's a book."

We think this moment is interesting because Frank is clearly situated in the role of teacher, asking the questions, trying to get the boys to think deeply about the believability of the book. However, despite Frank's efforts, the boys seemed to reject the second question for its "schoolness," for its violation of the discourse model they as young boys in a book club hold:

"Books don't have to be believable/real, duh." The boys challenge Frank's authority in this moment, which is more typical in a book-club setting where members are on more equal footing than in a traditional school setting.

It is also interesting how Frank chose to frame his questions throughout the discussion. For example, Frank asked, "What did you think of the hawk? Were you bummed when it dies?" If this question were asked in a traditional school-based book discussion, a teacher question would be something like, "What were your responses to the hawk as a character? What did the hawk's death symbolize in the story?" In the GR book club, Frank chose to use you as a personal pronoun and the word bummed. These words are those used with friends, with buddies.

Frank also focused on eliciting opinion and emotion from the boys rather than factual information and literary critique. And although the structure of this moment appears to have a school foundation, the language with which Frank and the boys chose to "do" this conversation are more reminiscent of peer and book-club discourses.

So, the underlying setting and activities at Sugar Grove were infused with institution, but the ways in which Frank and the boys moved and existed in this book-club space—through their subtle invocation and use of social and book-club discourses—disrupted the prominence and power of the underlying institutional discourses of school and library.

Peer Discourse

Although not as dominant as the institutional discourses, the peer discourses are what sets this book club apart, what makes it "Guys Read." In his interview, Frank explained, "it makes sense to have just a group of guys together. We talk



about different stuff [than female and mixed-gender clubs]; basically the same stuff that adult guys talk about together, actually, just with smaller words. That never seems to change.”

The peer discourses present in this book-club discussion are reflected in both the boys’ and Frank’s language. The boys laughed and seemed excited and engaged during this meeting—talking was not quiet as is usual in schools and libraries. The boys also bonded over the snacks, and there was constant side chatter about the status of the snacks (what is left) in addition to many individual trips to the snack bowl by book-club participants. Food is frequently noted in the observation notes and seems to be a powerful element boys are able to draw upon as a peer discourse during the book club—munching on chips while talking about books with a bunch of guys does not feel very much like school.

As noted previously, Frank used informal slang words and phrases in his role as book-club facilitator. At the end of this observation, Frank announced a teacher-like compliment to the boys as they were leaving: “Very impressed with your smarts with Greek things.” Teachers do compliment their students, but this does not feel like a teacher comment due to its discourse—“Your smarts with Greek things”—and the fact Frank coupled the compliment with a high five.

In addition, Frank is a joke teller and a talented noise maker (e.g., the bugle noise in the transcript), which makes him seem at times like “one of the guys.” Elliot said in an individual interview that his favorite part about being in the book club was “being with Frank.” Again, the peer discourses present during this GR book-club discussion appear to inject an informal peer tone to the book-club discussions, making them not so much like school.

Book-Club Discourse

In the Sugar Grove transcript, there are five separate moments labeled as book-club discourses or as “moving toward book-club discourses.” For example, at the very beginning of the discussion, Frank asked the boys if they liked the book and shared that he “was not hot on it.”

In response, one boy said, “I don’t know why. I liked it.” This single statement was marked as “moving toward book-club discourse” because the boy challenged Frank’s authority opinion. Another moment of book-club discourse occurred when the boys and Frank had a conversation about a particular battle scene in the text. This one-minute moment was a conversation rather than a question/answer session that was sprinkled with laughter, jokes, and storytelling. The moment was over when Frank closed down the storytelling with a teacher-move by loudly demanding, “Attention!”

The instances of book-club discourse in the Sugar Grove book club are brief, but the boys’ increased enthusiasm during these moments suggests their preference for this type of discussion.

Summary of Plumb and Sugar Grove GR Book Clubs

Though the GR book-club discussions at Plumb and Sugar Grove had different facilitators who led with different activities, the institutional discourse dominated at both sites. Because the book clubs met in the library (an institution), and because the focus of the book clubs was on discussing books (a school activity), the facilitators took on a teacher role and the boys responded to them as teachers.

However, at both book clubs, the infusion of peer, or social, discourse within the book-club meetings disrupted or challenged the institutional setting and norms for these book-club discussions. The disruptions of the institutional discourse with the peer discourse created space for the GR book-club discourse; these instances of book-club discourse were sparse but present, more so at Sugar Grove but also at Plumb. The use of language by both boys and facilitators and the presence of food was what seemed to undercut or resist the institutional discourse of setting and discussion formats and create space for the GR book-club discourse.

Discussion and Implications

Despite the dominant discourse being institutional at the book clubs, there were tensions between and across all three discourses (institutional, peer, and GR book club). The tensions between institutional and peer discourses created the space for the GR book-club discourse. The facilitators mentioned on more than one occasion that the book club “isn’t school,” but their words and actions and the boys’ actions and reactions often positioned the facilitators in the role of teacher. In the discussions, the facilitators made all the decisions for what would occur—they picked the book, they designed the questions, and they determined the format for the discussions and/or activities that would take place.

The boys responded by frequently raising their hands to answer questions, staying in their seats most of the time, and generally taking a passive stance during the discussions. It makes sense that boys would draw upon institutional discourses in this setting due to the fact that the discussions took place in the library, and they were there to discuss books.

However, throughout all of these activities, the boys ate a lot of food. The food was present immediately when they walked in the room, a symbol of the social discourse and not the institution. In addition, many side conversations happened throughout the discussions, something that is considered off-task behavior in most classrooms.

The institutional discourse and the peer discourse operated separately in the GR book clubs. During these moments in the discussion, the boys talked to and with each other. They stopped relying on the facilitator as teacher. These moments of third space seem to be what is desirable for book-club discussions in that they are focused on the book and enjoyable

for all participants. Two boys offered these anecdotes about their experiences in the GR program at HCL:

You know how in school they have AR [Accelerated Reader] classes? Guys Reading is better. Because when you're reading in school, you can't have fun, you have to sit down and read a book, and if you say one word, the teacher's like, "Quiet down, read it in your head."

I wanted more meetings because there were only five, and I wanted seventy billion.

Based on our analysis, it is clear that most boys who participated in these GR clubs liked them,²³ which will encourage further reading in and out of school.

Research shows that young people understand the difference between "serious reading, the reading that seems to count in school, and reading for pleasure."²⁴ The investigation of GR at HCL helps inform and extend research on gender and literacy practices, contributing to research on outside-of-school book clubs and also suggesting ways to encourage this third space in schools. Through juxtaposing "serious reading" and "reading for pleasure," in-school book clubs can be spaces for students and books to thrive together.²⁵

These authentic book clubs don't just happen, but, thankfully, research provides suggestions for creating such book clubs.²⁶ Smith suggests three themes that adult book-club discussants value: the social aspect, equality among members, and a spirit of cooperation.²⁷ In the GR book clubs, the social element was encouraged via the snacks, and it was evident in the boys' side conversations during the facilitated book discussions. Cooperation occurred very few times during these two observations, and it was in the form of building responses to facilitator questions together. The equality among members was not evident—the facilitators at both sites were clearly in charge of the discussions, and the boys had no input into the text selection or how time was spent in the book club. If the facilitator would take on a less dominant teacher role and the boys would be empowered with a more active role in the book club, we believe that the GR book club would become a more powerful third space instead of a space where institutionalized book discussions that contain only moments of third space take place.

Based on our research of the GR book clubs, we see positive implications for creating "third space" book clubs in school that utilize the themes of a social aspect, equality, and cooperation. These would be student-led book discussions with students choosing the texts and the questions for discussion. We acknowledge that literature circles can create a useful structure for student-led discussions, but third space book clubs include less structure to give students a sense of autonomy to discuss what they want to discuss.

The social aspect is encouraged by having students from the same class choose their books and form a group. Though

some of the conversations the students discuss during their book clubs may seem to be off topic, the opportunity to socialize around and about a book nurtures readers and draws them in. Cooperation is likely to occur because all students in the group have the opportunity to contribute and are equal members of the group. Equality among members happens by having students share the responsibility of bringing questions to consider and leading discussion. Of course, to be successful, this type of discussion must be modeled. Given the opportunity, though, students will discuss books together and enjoy doing so. We saw it happen.


Update

In October 2017, we learned that HCL will discontinue its GR program, as well as other gendered book clubs, by the summer of 2018. Bernie Farrell, youth services coordinator at HCL, said,

When we started the Guys Read program back in 2004, gender issues weren't being talked about or understood in the same way they are now. Part of the purpose of Guys Read was to welcome boys and help them feel comfortable as readers. Your research showed us that we didn't quite meet that goal, as 70 percent of participants liked to read before participating and 40 percent had attended book clubs before.

We learned a lot about best practices for book clubs through participating in the Guys Read research and in our subsequent work on improving quality in all our programming for kids and youth. However, we ultimately did not reach boys who were struggling with reading. I think that this is an area where we can still grow.

As we continue to develop, my goal is that we foster all those elements that made Guys Read book clubs successful:

- Kids identifying reading as a social activity
- Kids experiencing a wide range of facilitation styles and benefiting from experienced facilitators who bring more depth to the experience
- Kids finding more books to read and trying new books
- Kids reading more for pleasure and interest.²⁸ 

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