

Reading a gendered affair—study

Differences in reading levels between boys and girls has more to do with reading interests and different media than straightforward biological gaps

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Senior News Editor

Girls continue to outperform boys in literacy testing, according to Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) statistics. However, University of Alberta researchers want to make sure this trend doesn't become a hard-and-fast rule.

U of A Elementary Education doctoral student Brenda Kelly explained that while girls are excelling in literacy testing, boys are excelling in the sciences.

"If boys are outperforming girls in the sciences, they still have to read; and they have to have a high level of reading to achieve well in the science testing. So that tells me that boys are reading—it just might be that they're reading differently or that different texts appeal to them," Kelly said.

Kelly and her doctoral advisor—Heather Blair, who currently teaches Elementary Education for the Faculty

of Education—have focused their studies on examining what boys are typically interested in reading and how these materials might be used to improve their literacy results.

"[The research is] not on how people learn to read because the process of reading is a universal one; and we all read in the same way. It's on what we choose to read or write, and [it has to do with] what we're inclined to like about it that I think the differences are, and I believe they start very early," Blair said.

Blair, who has done a study with a group of Edmonton boys, explained that they were often very literate in digital media that are not yet fully represented in standard literacy testing.

"These kinds of [digital] literacies are something that we're just beginning to think of how we could teach them in schools, and these are something that the boys, certainly in my project, have kind of taught themselves and are ahead of the game," she explained.

According to Blair, modern curricula need to be updated not only to include conventional literacy mediums, but also to encourage boys and girls to explore a broad range of reading materials. She noted that digital competence is highly advantageous in modern society.

"I'm not saying we need to be playing digital games in class, but these kinds of expertise that they're gaining lead to other kinds of things," she said.

"I have a feeling that boys are very literate and have very literate lives out of school, but it's just not being recognized," Kelly added.

But despite the results of international literacy testing thus far, Blair said that it was unnecessary to corner girls and boys into fixed categories.

"We need to continue to broadly explore gender and literacy and not allow ourselves to kind of fall into tight, small little categories of 'boys are like this, and girls are like that.'"

Geometric shapes help fish find their way

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Fish have an innate ability to use geometric prompts to navigate, according to a study by University of Alberta graduate Alisha Brown.

Brown, who graduated last spring with a Masters in Psychology, wanted to see whether exposure to geometry during rearing would impact a fish's ability to use the shapes.

"The idea that I had was to look at how the shape of their rearing environment would alter their ability to learn and use geometric cues for navigation."

Brown and her colleagues raised two groups of fish, one in a standard rectangular laboratory tank and one in an opaque circular tank devoid of angular forms. They then trained the two groups of fish to swim through an

open door in a particular corner of a white rectangular-shaped tank, using the geometric cues of the enclosure as their guide.

They found that even the fish reared in the circular tank were able to use the geometry of the environment to solve the task.

"That was the first really important thing because we weren't sure whether it was all of this salient exposure in rearing that was causing all kinds of animals to be able to learn how to use geometry or whether it really was something about the brain that [was] there before we even started," Brown explained.

However, when one of the walls of the rectangular-shaped tank was coloured blue, fish reared in the absence of geometric cues would depend on this feature for navigation instead of the geometric cues—even if it meant

choosing the incorrect corner.

"The second important thing was to show that the shape of the rearing environment determines to what extent you use geometry versus features for navigation," she said.

Her study was published in the July issue of *Psychological Science*, and Brown said its significance lies in the fact that it challenges previous assumptions about the ability of animals to learn particular things.

"Up until now, everyone thought that, whether or not they were exposed to the geometric cues, they'll all do the exact same thing, which we're just finding is not the case," Brown said.

"If we can find that there are these clear distinctions between [animals which are] laboratory-reared and [those reared] with a lack of exposure to geometric cues, then that opens up an entirely new line of research."

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► A full year's notice is required for condo conversions or major renovations

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