

International ELINET Symposium 2018
“Literacy in the 21st Century: Participation – Inclusion – Equity”.

July 23-24, 2018, Cologne, Germany



Section IV The gender gap in literacy: How to engage boys?

Chairs: Christine Garbe, University of Cologne, Germany & William G. Brozo, George Mason University, USA

Monday, July 23, at 16.00–17.30 **Location:** Seminar Building/ Room S 21

LITERACY CHANGES LIVES.

Words Matter! Reading engagement of boys in vocational schools in Finland

Presenter

Ilmi Villacís, Executive Director
Finnish Reading Centre (Lukukeskus)
Correspondence: ilmi.villacis@lukukeskus.fi

Abstract:

The Finnish Reading Centre, founded in 1972, is a well-established literacy NGO that promotes literacy, reading and reading motivation among children and youth in Finland. The centre gathers information, produces materials and provides services and expertise for schools, libraries, the general public, media and policy makers. It takes into account the most vulnerable groups and considers literacy a basic right to which everyone must have equal access. The attention to the most vulnerable groups has led to one of its flagship programs, funded by a private company UPM: the ‘*Words Matter*’ project (2016-2017) targeted vocational school students, especially in tech sector, and helped them improve their reading skills primarily through rap music. Boys make up 80 percent of all students in technical fields at vocational schools. As a number of boys do not find reading motivating, one of the aims of the project was also to boost reading enthusiasm and recreational reading.

Literacy development in vocational schools is poor in comparison with the development of those graduated from upper secondary school (PIAAC 2013). Furthermore, vocational schools have recently cut back their Finnish and general knowledge syllabus while it is known that literacy is closely linked to mathematical and other skills, essential for success in professional life and society in general. Additionally, the international PISA study (2016) shows that during the last 10 years the literacy gap between girls and boys is growing in Finland, and boys also achieve below-average results in international literacy comparisons.

The *Words Matter!* project consisted of 100 functional literacy workshops instructed by literary and art critic Aleksis Salusjärvi and rapper Mikko Sarjanen, and reached around 3000 students in 24 vocational schools all over Finland. In most of the workshops, familiar rap lyrics were analyzed. There were also several media workshops where participants discussed trolling and clickbait headlines with the aim of recognizing hidden meanings. The lessons learned and the materials compiled throughout the project will become a resource for all vocational schools.

The instructors provided reading role models for the students, making them think about the value of good reading skills. The positive impact of the workshops was reflected in the feedback of the students. The Finnish Reading Centre actively influences policies of literacy and reading on the basis of its

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expertise and research. It is also a member of the recently established and government-funded National Literacy Forum, aiming at establishing national strategies for tackling declining literacy. Best practices learnt from the *'Words Matter!'* project could be applied to the new strategies striving for better equity and inclusion in reading and literacy. It gives also useful tools to enhance corporate funding for literacy-programs.

References:

OECD 2016. PISA 2015 Results (Volume I): Excellence and Equity in Education. Paris: OECD Publishing. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1787/9789264266490-en>

OECD (2013), OECD Skills Outlook 2013: First Results from the Survey of Adult Skills, OECD Publishing. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1787/9789264204256-en>

Bio Note:

Ilmi Villacís is an experienced director with a demonstrated history of working in the non-profit organization management and for the Finnish Government. Skilled in non profit organizations, culture management, intercultural communication, corporate social responsibility, political science, and government. Professional graduated from Univeristy of Helsinki and Helsinki Business College.