

# WHERE THE BOYS ARE: Using the School Library Media Center To Teach Good Citizenship

by  
Kim Tyo-Dickerson  
Dryden, NY

*Their eyes gleamed while I unpacked the first carton of graphic novels for our school library media center. There was a bit of good-natured shoving as they maneuvered for position at the table, "Let me see. No, let me see. Dude, you're on my foot." The boys peered into the box as I checked the packing slip and I heard them whispering to each other, "Man, this is so cool." I unwrapped the plastic and handed the first title to Brandon, an eighth-grader, who smiled and said, "Ultimate Spiderman." Sweet. Can I check this out now?" A chorus of "Can I check this one out" followed, and before I knew it I had boys grades 6 through 12 reading in the library every period, every day.*

## *The Challenge*

**T**eachers in public schools are taught and expected to address common academic problems with their students. Whether boosting student performance on standardized tests, preparing rubrics for projects to assess different students' learning styles, or outlining classroom behavioral expectations, teachers have their hands full simply dealing with the business of educating young people. School Library Media Specialists are specifically trained to be curriculum experts and

collaborators with classroom teachers to promote the educational mission and achievement of learning for students in all curriculum areas. These are huge tasks in and of themselves.

However, some of the most challenging work in public education is dealing with the core concerns of fostering the habits of good citizenship, promoting a sense of local connections to a truly global world, and getting students to motivate themselves to value key skills such as reading and writing. Particularly in the school library media setting, the two-fold goals of supporting both curricular learning and advancing the broader goal of literacy for life-long learning is a daunting, yet absolutely necessary mission. And this mission is possible to address only if students see school library media specialists as adults they can talk to and school library media centers as places where they want to be and choose to spend time.

This year when I came to work for the Dryden Central School District as the secondary level library media specialist, I knew that getting Dryden boys to voluntarily read and use the library media program would be a challenge. Dryden is a small town in rural, upstate New York, and although there are a number of colleges and universities in the area, including Cornell University in nearby Ithaca, the majority of our male students continue to focus their interests and careers locally. The bigger global picture of the world and their place in it barely impacts them in any meaningful way. Their lives are full of their families, girls, sports, four-wheelers, and their jobs on the local farms or construction crews. Many of them plan to enlist in a branch of the military or attend the local two-year college before beginning their careers in blue-collar fields. Graduation from high school is viewed as the necessary hurdle to overcome and survive prior to starting their adult working lives. Reading books, either for pleasure or especially for “school”, is neither a routine nor a priority for them.

## *Motivating Boys to Read*

Nationwide there is a growing awareness that educational institutions, public libraries, and school library media programs need to address the literacy gap between male and female readers. As the linkages continue to be made between teenage boys' underachievement in schools and the widely held perception among educators and parents that

boys just don't like to read (Braxton 2003), school library media specialists need to take action on behalf of our school communities. We need to recognize that we spend most of our budgets supporting our curricular areas and what money we have left we allocate for books of high literary value, award-winning "problem novels" (novels focused on teenage issues such as divorce, eating disorders, peer pressures, etc.) that boys just don't want to read (Jones, Fiorelli, & Bowen 2003). In our quest to create the highest quality collections that represent the best in traditional literature, we are often under-representing our students' actual reading interests.

Investing taxpayer money in pleasure reading texts for boys such as graphic novels, high interest non-fiction titles, and popular magazines like *ESPN*, *Rolling Stone*, and *PC Gamer* for many of us is a risky proposition given our tough budgetary situations, even though there is current research that suggests that boys who read such "soft" literature go on to branch out and read other types of literature as well (Cox & Collins 2002). There is still a lot of prejudice in educational circles about any perceived "dumbing down" of the reading selections for students in school libraries. However, the choice to promote or discourage the reading lives of boys has significant reverberations throughout the nation in our criminal justice system. Consider these statistics:

One in 32 people in the United States according to the Justice Department is currently in jail, in prison, on probation, on parole or has been one of these things. The majority of these people were male. The majority of the male prison population has limited education; many are high school dropouts. The limits of education are almost always related to reading problems. If we want young men to have their hands clutching a graduation diploma rather than the bars of a cell, then it is time to start overcoming the obstacles we've set up in school and public libraries in order to ensure that guys read (Jones, Fiorelli, & Bowen 2003).

The correlation between illiteracy and crime is clear, as should be the agenda for school library media specialists and our programs. It is critical to the success of our literacy efforts and our schools' educational missions to step outside our comfort zones full of curricular texts and "great books" and go where the boys are. We need to support their learning both in and out of the classroom and the only way to do this

effectively is to read what boys are reading and learn to value the kinds of literacy that boys value in their private lives. As Wilhelm writes, “We can only teach students to become something more than they already are by starting with what they already are” (Wilhelm 2003).

## *Taking Action*

This year I decided to act on my observations of Dryden boys’ lackluster interest in the media center collection and my research into the reading and non-reading habits of boys and established one of our region’s only graphic novel collections. I drew inspiration and confidence for my decision from Lora Bruggeman’s 1997 article in *School Library Journal*, ‘Zap! Whoosh! Kerplow!, where she chronicles her experiences in bringing graphic novels (novel length comic books) to the forefront of young adult services in her library. Bruggeman believes “that by having graphic novels in your library, you help create lifelong readers” (Bruggeman 1997) by capitalizing on the visual impact and high interest level comics have with teenage boys.

Recent research on the reading habits of boys supports Bruggeman’s work. According to Jeffrey D. Wilhelm, who with Michael W. Smith co-authored the book “Reading *Don’t Fix No Chevy’s*”: *Literacy in the Lives of Young Men*, boys are attracted to the types of texts that have strong visual elements like graphic novels, with the list also including newspapers, magazines, web sites, movies, and even video games (Smith & Wilhelm 2002). And it doesn’t decrease the impact of graphic novels on the reading habits of boys to note that graphic novels often showcase plotlines and characters that exemplify themes of teamwork, acceptance of difference, and multicultural appreciation such as in the *X-Men* and *The New Teen Titans* series where superhero team members come from various countries and races to fight injustice. Indeed, far from “dumbing down” the reading choices for guys in school libraries, the best graphic novel collections “present alternative views of culture, history, and human life in general in accessible ways, giving voice to minorities and those with diverse viewpoints” (Schwarz 2002).

Another strong argument for investing in graphic novels collections is that they not only have the potential to teach valuable lessons about respecting diversity, but they can also simultaneously support curricular objectives. In her article for the *Journal for Adolescent and Adult*

*Literacy*, “Graphic Novels for Multiple Literacies”, Gretchen Schwarz points out specific ways graphic novels can be used in schools:

Graphic novels offer value, variety, and a new medium for literacy that acknowledges the impact of visuals. These novels appeal to young people, are useful across the curriculum, and offer diverse alternatives to traditional texts as well as other mass media (2002).

For example, “Graphic novels can introduce students to literature they might never otherwise encounter” (Schwarz 2002), much like the Classics Illustrated series did for the Gen Xers when we were growing up. I read the *Count of Monte Cristo*, *The Three Musketeers*, and *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur’s Court* in those illustrated volumes long before I would have tackled the unabridged novels, and the illustrations still inform my memory of those characters and plots. Imagine the interest level students could have in comparing and contrasting the teams of the French Musketeers and the multiethnic mutants from the X-Men. English teachers can use graphic novels to teach lessons on effective dialogue and plot development, provide prompts for writing assignments, and can serve as models for graphic novel projects where students could develop graphic novels based on famous people, members of their families, or their own short stories (Schwarz 2002).

Social Studies is another curriculum area that can benefit from incorporating graphic novels into instruction. History has the potential to come alive through visual representations of the human condition. Schwartz describes the powerful addition the graphic novels *9-11: Artists Respond, Volumes I and II* can make to U.S. History and Global Studies curricula. These graphic novels were written in the aftermath of 9-11 by a group of well-known comic book illustrators who worked together using comic book illustrations and formats to deal with the terrorist attack on the World Trade Center. I purchased these titles and used them to supplement and enhance our collection of non-fiction titles dealing with terrorism in my library media center. The novels deal with the human face of the terrorist attacks, with spreads depicting “the heroics of the rescuers, the fears of children, reflections on hate” (Schwarz 2002). These texts used in pre-lesson activities or in conjunction with standard textbooks, periodical articles, and primary

source documents help kids make connections with topics that often seem larger than life and too big to handle. Bringing an issue as complex as terrorism to the student level creates a moment where Social Studies teachers and their students share an experience in a non-threatening format and are potentially more comfortable discussing difficult topics and themes.

## *Conclusion*

Getting teenage boys to discuss their fears, feelings, and ideas about their school subjects, their communities, and the larger world context is important for all our futures, and these conversations can begin with adults who are willing to meet them in the “here and now” of visually arresting texts that “interest and engage them” (Wilhelm, 2003). Out-dated rationales for excluding comics as literacy tools need to be interrogated. In “Comics with Class”, *Better Homes and Gardens* writer Stephen George argues that *BHG* readers and parents should overcome the view that comics are “the lowest form of entertainment” and use their childhood heroes and love of comics to “help connect with your kids” in reading together (George, 2003). He asserts that superheroes can be role models for boys, teaching “valuable lessons about power and responsibility” (George, 2003). It’s too early to predict whether or not the steadily improving reading habits of the Dryden boys will result in building better global citizens. However, there are signs that the graphic novels in my library media center are making a difference in their lives and creating reading relationships among their peer groups. These are the first steps to building literate citizens and building bridges from the local concerns of Dryden boys to the global community. And as research studies continue to point to the disturbing connections between low levels of literacy in boys and increased numbers of young men becoming involved in crime and violence, I believe school media centers’ graphic novel collections have the potential to create opportunities for boys to spend more time in libraries and less time “doing time”.

---

Kim Tyo-Dickerson is the School Library Media Specialist for the Dryden Middle School/High School Library Media Center in Dryden, NY. She is currently working on her Masters in Library Science from Syracuse University.

## References

- Braxton, B. (2003). Bait the boys and hook them into reading. Teacher Librarian 30 (3), 43 - 44.
- Bruggeman, L. 'Zap! Whoosh! Kerplow!' School Library Journal 43 (1), 22 - 27.
- Cox, R. & Collins, C. From boy's life to thrasher: Boys and magazines. Teacher Librarian 30 (3), 25 - 26.
- George, S. Comics with class. Better Homes and Gardens June 2003, 200 - 206.
- Jones, P., Fiorelli, D., & Bowen, M. (2003). Overcoming the obstacle course: Teenage boys and reading. Teacher Librarian 30 (3), 9 - 13.
- Schwarz, G. Graphic novels for multiple literacies. Journal of Adolescent & Adult Literacy 46 (3), 262 - 265.
- Smith, M. & Wilhelm, J. (2002). Reading don't fix no Chevy's: Literacy in the lives of young men. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.
- Wilhelm, J. (2003). The evolution of literacy. Voices From the Middle 10 (3), 48.