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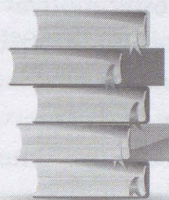
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Enhancing Your Classroom Library to Engage the Adolescent Male Reader

by Stacie Bittikofer
and Kalyn Willis

Janelle and Joshua are in the same classroom and have been assigned the task of reading as many books as possible during “March is Reading Month.” For Janelle, this is no task at all. However, Joshua would rather write countless essays than select multiple books for his independent reading assignment. Joshua’s interests center on informational texts in which he can explore and make new discoveries about the world around him. He also enjoys reading magazines and biographies about professional athletes, as well as creative comics that add a hint of humor. Joshua is typically motivated to read when he has the opportunity to choose the text. In addition, he enjoys a culminating literacy activity in which he can interact with the text and make connections to his prior knowledge and personal experiences. The problem that Joshua faces, however, is the lack of availability of these different genres of texts at school. The classroom library does not offer a wide variety of books that meet his interests. This scenario may sound familiar to many classroom teachers who struggle to get their male students motivated to read.

While working on our master’s degrees in literacy, we became interested in this challenge ourselves. We learned that a gender gap in reading has existed for decades (Fisher, 2012), and we were troubled to observe that some of our male students seemed disinterested in the texts we had available in our classroom libraries. As a result, we felt compelled to explore the research on disengaged male readers in order to generate practical ideas for fostering more interactive literacy experiences in our classrooms. We began by reviewing the professional literature on this topic in order to increase our understanding of why these male readers might be



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disengaged and to explore research-supported ways of approaching this issue.

In this article, we will share some of what we learned from the research literature on disengaged male readers. In addition, we offer suggestions from our research and experience to help teachers improve their classroom reading selections in order to better motivate male readers.

What Research Reveals

As we began reading about adolescent male readers, we learned that boys who are average readers are typically less motivated to read and value reading than girls who are average readers (Marinak, 2010). According to Pecjak and Kosir (2008), interest is a crucial factor in motivating readers to deeply engage in a text. Their interest in the reading material influences pupils’ processing of the text, use of learning strategies, and quality of learning experiences. The interests and attitudes that

boys maintain towards reading are considered to be the most important factor in their reading achievement. Not surprisingly, given their lower motivation to read in school, by high school almost 50% of males consider themselves to be nonreaders (Hebert, 2010) and the resulting gender-based reading achievement gap has persisted across time (Fisher, 2012). The effects of boys' disengagement from reading in school are clearly far-reaching.

Research also demonstrates some possible reasons for this disengagement. Below, Skinner, Fearington and Sorrell (2010) found that boys enjoy informational material over fictional. Often in schools, nonfiction reading is limited to textbooks, and boys may feel dissatisfied in reading due to a lack of exposure to nonfiction outside of these textbooks.

Thus, it is important to have a balanced classroom library that includes both narrative and expository texts. The argument has been that, although reading informational text is beneficial for all children, it is especially critical to boys' motivation to read (Chapman, 2007) because they tend to benefit from reading with authentic, communicative purposes in mind and often hope to acquire new or additional information from their reading (Fisher, 2012). To address this, teachers need to provide more opportunities to read and interact with nonfiction texts, especially in the early years of literacy development.

Research has also demonstrated that boys may be selective about what they read (Merisuo-Storm, 2006) and, consequently, need a large selection of reading material to choose from. Being able to choose their own texts also supports male readers' motivation (Blair & Sanford, 2004; Turner & Paris, 1995). On the whole, teachers should offer a wide range of diverse texts representing a variety of authors, genres, topics, and titles so students can choose texts that are of interest to them. The following sections offer insight and suggestions for teachers based on what we have done in our

classrooms that can guide teachers in broadening the range of texts they make available to students in their classrooms. While our suggestions are guided by our research on engaging male readers, these ideas may support a wide range of students by offering texts that reflect diverse interests and identities. The purpose of these sections is to raise teachers' awareness so that they may be able to support reading motivation for all of their students, but especially for disengaged male readers.

Digital Literacies

Although engagement in reading may be supported by graphic novels, war stories, and murder mysteries, just to name a few, young male readers can also become engaged through media and technology. Boys naturally use reading as a way to find out about the world, and digital literacies are particularly well-suited to pursuing these interests (Hebert, 2010). Modern literacy resources such as books on CD, e-readers, reading pens, kindles, or podcasts should be considered by school districts and classroom teachers in order to maximize their efforts of drawing males into the reading world. Making technology more available in the classroom can also give boys a variety of ways to express their feelings about the books they are reading (Farris, 2011), and can encourage students to not only assume diverse responsibilities but also engage in effective learning experiences. For example, encouraging readers to create a comic meme, wiki, or blog for a specific character incorporates modern media techniques that include engaging literacy components beyond printed texts (Bozack, 2011). These literacy activities help readers find the intrinsic motivation needed to become engaged and lose themselves in books (Fisher, 2012). Email correspondences, Skype conversations, Twitter tweets, or instant messages also serve as communicative vehicles that can support male students in participating in book discussions or sharing reading recommendations. Likewise, electronically archived materials or online museums can further their literacy experience and investigation.

Boys' Concepts of Masculinity

Boys' book choices and the ways they relate to texts in the classroom reveal their views of masculinity and of the relationship between masculinity and femininity (Dutro, 2003). Reading practices can provide a lens through which boys can learn to see the often invisible ways that masculinity is performed in their lives (Dutro, 2003). Boys often feel they can't read anything feminine because that's not who they are. What boys read and how they interpret it is affected by their understanding of who they are and what is acceptable in a masculine environment. By expanding boys' concepts of acceptable masculinity, it is possible to help them increase and improve engagement with literacy. Boys should be given more opportunities to develop critical literacy through engaging in discussion and debate on the topic of masculinity as present in all forms of literature (Harison, 2010). Research demonstrates that for boys who hold traditional concepts of masculinity, literature can help to broaden their thinking to include diverse masculinities (Dutro, 2003). Text titles such as *The Man Who Kept House* (Harcourt, 1988), or *Sam Johnson and the Blue Ribbon Quilt* (Harper Collins, 1992) tackle the stereotypes that only women can do specific jobs or participate in certain activities. These are just a couple of the titles offered by Allen County's Public Library website, which offers an abundance of books on their *Non-Traditional Gender Roles* booklist. By engaging boys in books that continue to present topics of interest while introducing influential counterparts, their concepts of manhood could begin to take on alternative meanings and grow to be stretched and shaped through literature.

Graphic Novels/Comic Books

Boys often prefer books with adventure and action, and these books should be made available to them (Farris 2009). Many graphic novels and comic books would fit into these categories. Comic books are narrative artwork with pictures to tell a story, and graphic novels are fictional stories that are

delivered in a comic strip format and presented as a book. This form of text tends to attract male readers because they get pleasure through entertainment (Hussain 2011). Moeller (2011) found that boys who were exposed to a fictional graphic novel enjoyed reading it and expressed interest in reading other similar texts. Educators should look beyond graphic novels that are commercially successful, seeking out additional ideas through booklists of recommended titles (Moeller 2011). For example, *Alan's War* (First Second, 2008), by Emmanuel Guibert, is a memoir about a young American discovering Europe during WWII. High school aged boys who are interested in gaming may be drawn to the historical information and the concept of war (X-Box, DS, etc.). *Babe Ruth (Before They Were Famous)*, (Aladdin, 2009) is a biography, written by Vito Delsante and Andres Vera Martinez, in which younger readers can acquire countless pieces of knowledge about Babe Ruth's childhood and accomplishments as a male sports role model. In addition, *The Bluecoats Vol. 1: Robertsonville Prison* (Cinebook, Ltd, 2009) is a humorous historical fiction comic book series about the Civil War. Boys may be drawn to the humor found in this book while enjoying the historical information as well.

Conclusion

In conclusion, addressing a lack of engagement in reading, especially for boys, should be a concern to educators. Teachers need to always be aware of what their students are interested in and make different books and literacy activities available to them. In addition, encouraging students to select their own texts can encourage them to engage in textual interactions that will then foster their construction of knowledge. An important factor in reading motivation is allowing students to have choice in their reading selections (Turner & Paris, 1995). If we want our adolescent male readers to have a higher motivation in reading, we need to offer them a wider variety of texts than what has traditionally been available in classrooms—texts

that can grab and hold their interests. Although the suggestions in this piece were specifically drawn from our research on engaging adolescent male readers, the ideas we provide for broadening the texts available in your classroom are likely to be motivating for *all* readers.

While fulfilling our commitment to pinpoint engaging books and activities that would attract young males, we also compiled our research findings to create a checklist that educators can use to enhance the book selections within their own classroom, bookroom, or library. The checklist consists of different genres that are appealing and of high interest to many readers. We have also included two columns for teachers' use. The first is for teachers to record examples of these genres found in their classrooms. The second column allows for note-taking, such as jotting down book titles to add to the classroom or ideas for engaging male students in different literacy activities pertaining to these genres.

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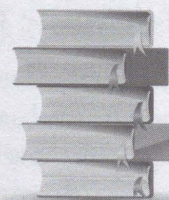
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***Are the following genres available
for male readers?***

Evidence of:

Notes/Ideas

Action/Adventure

- 🍏 Survival Tales
- 🍏 Texts that include heroes, villains, explosions, and daring deeds
- 🍏 Spy Stories

Graphic Novels

- 🍏 Comic Books

Humor

- 🍏 Vivid imagination
- 🍏 Jokes & Riddles

Informational Text

- 🍏 Biographies (that include popular celebrities)
- 🍏 Historical Fiction (wartime stories or memoirs & major worldwide events)
- 🍏 Magazines/Newspapers
- 🍏 "How-To" books

Sports

- 🍏 A diverse range of sports representing many countries and cultures

Science Fiction

- 🍏 Futuristic World
- 🍏 Space Exploration
- 🍏 Books that support media online sharing or gaming

Fiction

- 🍏 Stories that have a male protagonist
- 🍏 Adventures
- 🍏 Media-connected

Digital Literacies

- 🍏 Websites bookmarked on the computer that include:
 - GuysRead.com
 - Various blogging or Wiki discussion sites