

Alternative Texts and Practices to Engage Male Readers

I suggest that the only books that influence us are those for which we are ready, and which have gone a little farther down our particular path than we have yet got ourselves.

—E.M. Forster, *Two Cheers for Democracy*

The overarching theme of this book is that boys will become more engaged readers if they're exposed to and have engaging literacy experiences around texts of interest. I've made the case that texts with positive male archetypes can capture boys' unique imaginations, sustain attention, and lead to more thoughtful reading. And yet, we know that every day, in classrooms across the United States and elsewhere, teachers are using a variety of texts and strategies in creative ways that contribute to successful and enjoyable reading and writing events for boys. This chapter, therefore, is devoted to alternative texts and practices that, while not specifically focused on archetypes, are motivating boys to read and learn all the same. These alternative texts include digital media, graphic novels and comic books, and other youth literacy sources.

Simply stated, alternatives to traditionally formatted print texts have an important place in any language curriculum for boys because that's what they enjoy interacting with outside of school. If boys are ever to develop the skill and will to master the demands of academic literacy and become lifelong readers of diverse texts, teachers will need to find ways of bridging boys' outside-of-school and inside-of-school literate practices. Whatever teachers do to eliminate barriers between boys' competencies with outside-of-school texts and classroom practices will increase their engagement in learning and expand literacy abilities (Sturtevant et al., 2006).

Recognizing Boys' Out-of-School Literate Practices

If understanding teen and preteen boys in today's society requires a large degree of openness the same might be said about coming to know and

learning to value boys' literate practices beyond the school walls (National Literacy Trust, 2001). These practices pose new challenges for teachers, especially those who hold to traditional notions about reading and writing. What it means to be literate is undergoing perpetual revision in this age of digitized media, rapidly evolving vernacular, language hybrids, and global communication. And adolescent boys are inveterate purveyors of these new literacies, including but not limited to (a) playing and reading about computer and video games, (b) reading comic books and graphic novels, (c) interacting on websites devoted to their hobbies (skateboarding, collecting, sports), and (d) listening to or playing music and reading/writing song lyrics.

Teachers who recognize and understand these new literate practices and who have crafted successful language and literacy curriculum for male youth also understand how the boundaries of literacy have been stretched. For instance, Hawkins (2004) asserts that

“literacy” is not simply the ability to encode and decode print. [It is] the requisite knowledge and skills to send and interpret messages through multiple media and modes in local and global contexts...[C]hanges in communication design, function, and mode in our rapidly changing world...[require] constant re-design of our means and methods of local and distance communications, [and] re-think[ing] what communicative skills it will take to participate successfully in that world. (p. 19)

My call for schools to honor the literacies and discourses of boys derives from the realization that they, like all of us, now live in a “mediasphere” (O'Brien, 2001), “a world saturated by inescapable, ever-evolving, and competing media that both flow through us and are altered and created by us” (Brozo, 2005, p. 534).

Adolescent boys may be the most active participants in the mediasphere, using and creating forms of discourse that could be acknowledged and appreciated in school settings. School is where youths' multiple literacies could be exploited and allowed to find expression to help them grow as readers and thinkers. To do so, teachers need to find ways of exploiting the multiple literacy competencies adolescent boys bring to school (Knobel, 1998), such as the ability to communicate through digital means and social networking (e.g., texting, Facebook, blogging, twittering); create hypertext documents; and interpret and think critically about music CDs and videos, video/computer games, and websites. Within traditional reading and language arts programs room will need to be made for boys' out-of-school literacies in order for teachers to build on their strengths, develop academic knowledge and skills, and promote

lifelong independent reading and learning (Coles & Hall, 2001; Hinchman, Alvermann, Boyd, Brozo, & Vacca, 2003; Hull & Schultz, 2002).

In addition to digital media, boys are also drawn to alternatively formatted text, such as graphic novels and comic books (Bitz, 2004; Hatfield, 2005; Jacobs, 2007). In the United States, Hughes-Hassell and Rodge (2007) report on the leisure reading habits of 1,340 students in grades 5 through 8 at an urban middle school in a large northeastern city. In their findings, 54% of male students ranked comics as the favorite leisure reading choice.

Recently, I brought this point home to a skeptical freelance writer who contacted me while researching an article about boys and reading. What are they reading?, she wondered. I told her to go to her nearest bookstore on a Saturday afternoon and conduct an informal observational survey to find out. I suggested she first position herself near the young adult book section for an hour, and document the number of adolescent boys who browsed there. Then, I had her reposition herself near the graphic novel/ comic book stacks and do the same thing. "Call me back and let me know what you find," I asked. But I knew what her observations would reveal before she told me how surprised she was to discover only one or two boys in the young adult section but piles of boys in the graphic novel section, sprawled on the floor, leaning against the shelves, talking excitedly with buddies about the newest discovery.

As with other youth media, comic books have traditionally been spurned by teachers and librarians. Perhaps because adults tend to hold these texts in such low regard, boys have spent a considerable amount of their outside-of-school leisure time reading nothing but comics. When in 1992, Art Spiegelman's (1986) *Maus I: A Survivor's Tale* was awarded a Pulitzer Prize, comic books and graphic novels gained newfound respect (Brozo & Simpson, 2007). They now come in numerous genres and are quickly becoming recognized as an engaging resource for classrooms and libraries (Chandler-Olcott & Mahar, 2003; Mui, 2004; Weiner, 2002). Many teachers are now supplementing lessons on the Holocaust with graphic novels like *Maus* and teaching about the current state of Arab-Israeli relations with Joe Sacco's (2001) *Palestine*.

Furthermore, it has been shown that graphic novels and comic books are excellent resources for motivating reluctant readers (Cho, Choi, & Krashen, 2005; Schwarz, 2002; White, 2005). The illustrations can provide the needed contextual clues to the meaning of the written narrative, especially for struggling and visual learners (Chun, 2009; Gorman, 2003; Norton & Vanderheyden, 2004). These features may be particularly

attractive to boys, who have demonstrated higher competencies with text formatted in nontraditional ways (Brozo et al., 2007).

Bridge-Building Texts

In most classrooms a core textbook continues to be the primary source for reading and learning. Yet, unless boys are able to relate to these texts on an engaging and meaningful level, they may not take from them as much as we know they should. Thus, even if these required texts are “readable,” they may turn boys off to reading. Teachers, therefore, need to recognize the value of connecting text sources from boys’ everyday worlds to required course readings and topics (Brozo & Brozo, 2009; Larimer & Schleicher, 1999).

The goal of this bridge-building process is to take advantage of boys’ relative strengths with language and literacy outside of school by transitioning them into challenging academic texts. Another goal is to motivate reluctant and disinterested male youth to read required academic texts. Bridge texts are not only more interesting to boys but also help put knowledge bases in place for academic tasks. Furthermore, alternative sources, when linked to academic texts and given legitimacy in school settings, are likely to engage boys in meaningful reading and learning that can lead to elevated achievement (Brozo, 2006; Bushman & Haas, 2006).

Teachers who learn to use sources from the everyday worlds of boys as embellishment to core text sources will find their male students reading with greater interest and enjoyment (Guthrie & Wigfield, 2000; A.J. Martin, 2003). Consider, for instance, the science teacher who prepared her class for a study of the laws of physics by first exploring the website Skateboard Science (www.exploratorium.edu/skateboarding/) as a bridge to reading and studying laws of physics. Boys’ reading comprehension is likely to be greater with high-interest materials because interesting material maintains students’ attention more effectively (McDaniel, Waddill, Finstad, & Bourq, 2000).

Teaching Shakespeare With Manga

Ursula’s male students in her ninth-grade general English class could only groan when she said they would begin Shakespeare’s *Romeo and Juliet* at the start of the new grading period. Their expressions of displeasure turned to curiosity, however, when she told them they would prepare for the play by first reading the manga version (Shakespeare, Appignanesi,

& Leong, 2007). The art in manga graphic novels is highly stylized, originating in Japan, and the books are widely read by teens. This version of the play offers students a unique and highly readable complement to the one in their literature anthology.

Set in modern-day Tokyo, the authors combine *manga*-style art and abridged dialogue to re-create the themes of the play. Although the richness of Shakespeare's original language may be sacrificed, the script preserves the spirit of the story, including all the major speeches. The layout and characters are well-rendered in the typical gray-scale art of manga texts. By situating the play in modern Tokyo among rival *yakuza*, or organized-crime families, the authors present adolescent boys with a world they will recognize. And these features along with the engaging illustrations help boys comprehend the story, which prepares them for the original Shakespeare.

Ursula employed a kind of impromptu Readers Theater to read the manga text. Groups of students went to the front of the room with their books and read parts. A new group took over after 5–10 pages. Students were expected to use simple gestures and actions to accompany their readings. In between groups, Ursula engaged the class in discussion about the plot, characters, and theme, and then helped her class make connections between the 21st-century storyline from Japan and its original setting in Renaissance Italy. The boys were especially enthusiastic about this approach, because the illustrations and modern context made the story much more accessible than if they had launched the unit with Shakespeare's original heartbreaking tragedy. With the manga version, the boys were able to understand and follow the storyline, making it easier to appreciate the teenage heroes, the scheming and villainous adults, and the overarching theme of star-crossed lovers.

When the time came to break open the literature anthology and begin reading *Romeo and Juliet*, Ursula's entire class, especially the male contingent, was much more enthusiastic about taking on the Bard. Her students now had an appreciation for the drama and excitement of the play. They took full advantage of the compelling illustrations in the manga version to envision scenes of teenage romance; family feuding; fights over honor between Tybalt, Benvolio, Mercutio, and Romeo; and even suicide. With each scene, students were asked to compare the Shakespeare text, events, and characters with the manga version. Ursula had students rewrite scenes using everyday language, create their own cartoon panels, and perform impromptu dramatic interpretations, which they did with greater competence and accuracy as a result of the bridging experiences with manga.

Youth Media

As demonstrated by the work of Ursula, creative teachers find ways to honor youths' outside-of-school media while bridging them to the concepts and information in the classroom. An obvious source for enlivening school-based learning for boys is popular media and music (Knabb, 2003; Pailliotet, 2003). Because today's male youth live in the mediasphere, it makes good sense to find as many linkages as possible between the images and music with which they are familiar and topics under study in the classroom.

Music, as a medium of identity construction for boys, is a viable alternative text form that is underused by most teachers (Newman, 2005; William, 2001). Scaffolding for new understandings means working with what boys bring to the classroom, including their interest in and knowledge of popular music (Morrell & Duncan-Andrade, 2002).

Teaching Word Families With Rap Music

Derrick, an eighth-grade special education teacher with mostly boys in his self-contained English class, had been frustrated by his students' lack of engagement in the lessons and readings, until he began tapping into their media and music for teaching aspects of language and composition.

For instance, when preparing his class for a study of word families, he first found out what his male students had programmed on their iPods, MP3 players, and other portable music devices. He then tracked down the lyrics from some of these songs and raps and found they possess a variety of words that could be studied as families and then could be used as models for other similar words in school texts and in their own writing. With his students' own music as the text for learning word families, Derrick noted the boys in class were eager to participate in the lessons, remembered more content, and gave more thoughtful responses.

When studying the /ch/ and /ck/ digraphs, Derrick invited students to bring in lyrics with these elements. As long as the song or rap lyrics met acceptable school standards (no profanity, excessive violence, or degrading messages about women and girls), students were allowed to work with them in their analysis. With a partner, first students were to create a t-chart listing all the words that had either the /ch/ or /ck/ element. One pair of African American boys brought in and analyzed the rap lyric "I Love to Give You Light" by Snoop Dogg. The boys found many words with the word family elements (see Figure 13).

Derrick then directed the students to generate new words with the /ch/ and /ck/ sounds and add these to their t-chart. The pair with Snoop

Figure 13. Words from “I Love to Give You Light” With /ch/ and /ck/ Sounds

ch	ck
such	background
preach	jackers
church	glock
teachin’	block
watchin’	locked
each	black
preachin’	
reach	
beach	
child	

Dogg’s rap lyrics added *catch*, *match*, *reach*, and *bunch* to the left column and *socks*, *locker*, *backpack*, and *stick* to the right column words. Each pair of students completed activities with the song lyrics they had brought to class to analyze.

With their new words, students were then asked to write lyrics based on the genre of music they analyzed. The lyrics had to contain the new words they generated to match the /ch/ and /ck/ sounds. Thus, the boys working with the Snoop Dogg rap wrote their own. While one kept rhythm on his desk top, the other one read the rap:

I put my *socks* in my *backpack* when I go to school.
 I put my *backpack* in my *locker* or I look like a fool.
 I get my *socks* from my *backpack* when I go to gym.
 Where I *catch* the ball then *stick* it in the rim.

Derrick witnessed a new level of enthusiasm for learning among his students, especially the boys, doing word study work with their own song lyrics. The best result, however, was that his students’ enthusiasm translated into genuine learning. Derrick noticed their ability to recognize many of the same words and those with the same word family elements in their own and their classmates’ compositions, and as they read stories and other texts. This level of application and transfer occurred because Derrick eliminated barriers between outside-of-school interests and literacies of his students and classroom practices. And his male students were the

special beneficiaries, as their engagement in reading and learning as well as their language competencies increased.

Teaching Business Contracts With Tejano Music

The eight boys in Marta's fifth-period business class were the toughest to keep on task, and she was always on the lookout for approaches that would be especially appealing to them. So one day when she observed her male students enter the classroom, she became inspired by an obvious way the topic of writing business contracts could be linked to their real-world interests and desires. Many had Tejano music pulsing from their earbuds, which led Marta to consider how her students' love of this Mexican American musical hybrid could form the basis of a fun and meaningful lesson.

Marta formed pairs of students, one to represent a recording artist and another a record company. Each pair was asked to create a fictitious name for both the company and the artist. For example, two students created the Tejano singer, Lil' Mario, and recording company, Sanchez Records. Marta sent students to the computer lab with links to access required Internet sites. At these sites students obtained background on the language and format of contracts in the music recording business, as well as actual business contract templates for recording artists. Students had to download templates of recording contracts and negotiate the details from the perspectives of recording artists and record companies. Marta provided the class with a series of questions they would need to address to satisfactorily complete the contracts; these included such matters as the effective dates of the contract, the deliverables by the artist and the company, compensation, and contingencies.

Student pairs completed their contracts in preparation for a fishbowl discussion activity. With this technique, a small group of students goes into the "fishbowl" to discuss an issue or problem while the other students look on. The outside group must listen but not contribute to the deliberations of the students in the fishbowl. When the fishbowl discussants conclude, students looking in can ask questions and react to the discussion they observed. When finished, another group of discussants can enter the fishbowl to start the process over again.

While one pair of Marta's students demonstrated how they hammered out a contract, her other students looked on; then the roles were switched. At regular intervals, student observers were given the opportunity to share reactions to and ask questions of the pair of negotiators they were observing. Contract contingencies seemed to bring out the most animated

discussion. For instance, Lil' Mario wondered what would happen if just before a big concert he broke his fingers and couldn't play his guitar or lost his voice due to a cold and couldn't sing.

Once Marta's students completed the business contract activity, she held a small reception in class, with Tejano music on the CD player, fruit juice, and pan dulce (traditional sweet breads), before continuing to explore information in the textbook on business contracts. The boys in her class were very enthusiastic about this activity and performed well on her unit test.

Teaching Allusion With Digital Media

Alejandro decided to administer a questionnaire to his 10th graders at the beginning of the school year to try to gain insights into ways of structuring learning that would be more appealing to them. One of the strongest suggestions came from most of his male students who were univocal in asking for more choices and options, particularly in the ways they are assessed. Another recommendation that came mostly from the boys in his class was being able to use the computer and Internet for class assignments. Using this information as a guide, Alejandro created a range of different ways students could demonstrate understanding of newly learned content with digital media.

One striking example of how Alejandro took advantage of his male students' input was the approach he used to teach about allusion in literature. Allusion is a difficult literary device for students to appreciate, because it's a reference in a literary work to a person, place, or thing in history or another work of literature. Allusions are often indirect or brief references to characters or events, but if readers don't know the events and characters to which an author alludes, then the allusion loses its impact.

To help sensitize his students to this literary device and bring them to appreciate its significance, Alejandro gave the class its initial exposure to allusion through a YouTube video clip from *Shrek 2*, a popular animated film for youth. The three minute clip includes several visual allusions to other films and film characters, both real and animated, with the song "My Boy Lollypop" as the soundtrack. As the clip played, Alejandro asked students to note any images that referenced other movies or movie characters, and then held a discussion afterward. This visual approach, using media from his students' everyday lives, proved quite successful, as they were able to identify several allusions in the video. Alejandro was especially pleased with the involvement and participation of his male students in this activity.

Next, Alejandro guided his students through a class blog he had established. He indicated where they were to make entries and respond to their classmates. His assignment to them was to find examples of allusion in their own media—books, films, games, music, etc.—and post it on the blog with an explanation of the allusion. Each student was required to post two examples on the blog and write two entries in response to their classmates.

Alejandro was overjoyed to find the range and depth of student responses to his assignment when he checked the site a couple of days later. What pleased him the most were the contributions from his boys. They were at a level of sophistication and reflected a level of involvement he was sure he wouldn't have seen if the assignment had been framed in a more traditional way, as these examples attest.

“Evan”

The avant garde music group Mr. Bungle modified the Warner Brothers' logo into their own creation. By simply flipping and turning their record's label (Warner Brothers), they made an already existing logo into something brand spanking new. This is an allusion to the band's label, so it is kind of like a self-promoting allusion.

“Jung-Hee”

My allusion is from the anime *Lucky Star* (which no one has probably heard of, but is the only one I can think of at the moment). In one of the episodes, the main character, Konata, cosplays (dresses up) as a character from another anime, Haruhi from *The Melancholy of Haruhi Suzumiya* at a cosplay café. The function of this allusion, in a way, is self-promotion because the writers of *Lucky Star* also wrote *The Melancholy of Haruhi Suzumiya*.

“Fareed”

In a *Jimmy Neutron—Boy Genius* episode, Jimmy goes to find out why the Bermuda triangle has so many problems. On his way into the ocean to search for an underwater entrance, the viewers see a small pineapple. As all Nickelodeon viewers know, Spongebob Squarepants lives in that pineapple. This was the producers' way of saying “Hi” to the cast of Spongebob.

“Carlos”

I found one from *Family Guy*: This is an allusion to *The Ring*, like how when you watch the cursed video in the movie *The Ring*, you'll die. In *Family Guy*, the cursed video is *The Simpsons*, which is their rival. And if you watch it, they're basically [saying] *The Simpsons* is bad for you.

From here, Alejandro transitioned his class into looking for and uncovering allusions in traditional print texts, which they did with far greater success than his students had in previous years. With this assignment, Alejandro was able to take advantage of his students' competencies with media and literacies outside of school to achieve his goal of motivating reluctant and disinterested male youth to read and respond on a more thoughtful level to required texts in his classroom. Of course, the most pervasive popular medium in youth's lives is the computer, so it's a natural entry point.

Teaching Science Vocabulary With Video Games

One of Becky's sixth-grade science students, Ubikway, was a daydreamer. She would catch him during class staring out the window, blissfully disengaged from the flow of instruction. When confronted, he would apologize and refocus, only to fall back into his private reverie at the next available moment. Although the school year was new, Becky sensed that Ubikway was a bright young man, capable of accurate and thoughtful work, but wondered what it was that distracted him during her lessons.

Becky decided to talk with Ubikway after class. She asked for an honest response when she questioned him about how she could make her science class more interesting to him. Without hesitation, Ubikway said he was thinking about his new Star Wars video game, and if he could use video games like that or others, he would pay much closer attention in class. To Ubikway's delight, Becky asked him to bring the video game to school to show her how it's played.

Becky discovered as Ubikway helped her move through the game, talking strategy and using terminology animatedly, that science concepts and vocabulary were plentiful. After a more thorough review of the game, Becky decided to incorporate it into an approaching unit on space exploration. She knew this approach would be enthusiastically received by Ubikway and the other boys in his class.

Becky gave each student a chart with keywords to be studied during the unit (see Figure 14). She directed students to fill in definitions of the vocabulary terms based on their contextualized definitions within the Star Wars video game. She then projected the game on the screen and allowed different students to come up and play it while the class looked on. Becky would pause periodically when the game narrator, intoning like Darth Vader, uttered a term from their chart. Using the visual information, students were to write what they thought the word meant. This process was repeated for each of the terms from their charts.

Figure 14. Keywords for Space Explanation Unit

Star Wars Words	Your Definition	Textbook/Glossary Definition
Galaxy	the stars and planets	a cluster of stars, nebulae, planets
Meteor	a rock from space	small matter in the solar system
Planets	like the earth	a body that revolves around the sun
Space station	a station that floats in space	
Booster rockets	help the ship go faster	

Afterward, Becky discussed the same terms as they appeared in the class textbook, helping students use context and the glossary to determine word meanings. She then asked students to fill in the third and final column of the chart.

To reinforce the acquisition of the new science vocabulary, Becky next had students work with a partner to write their own Star Wars story using the words in context. One pair of her male students wrote,

Luke Skywalker sat in a space station. It was in our galaxy. He was going to set off the booster rockets so he could travel to a planet. The planet was going to be hit by a meteor and Luke had to save it.

Throughout the unit, when students earned free time, Becky allowed groups of two to three to play the Stars Wars game she had set up in a computer carrel in the classroom. Thanks to Ubikway and his video game, Becky’s class remained actively involved in learning the content and vocabulary of the unit on space exploration and demonstrated their heightened understanding on the unit test. This positive outcome for learning and memory as a result of playing video games requiring strategic thinking has been confirmed in recent research (Gathercole & Alloway, 2008). Noticing that her boys were especially engaged by this approach to learning, Becky has continued to find ways of incorporating their interests in alternative texts and media into her science lessons.

Boys’ Book Clubs

Book clubs and book discussion groups designed to increase reading engagement and time for boys are occurring in schools, classrooms,

and libraries around the country. Greater critical discourse about books (Geraci, 2003), improvement in reading and writing skills of linguistically diverse learners (Kong & Fitch, 2003; R. Martin, 2003), elevation of self-esteem (Jaeger & Demetriadis, 2002), greater leadership and independence (Bond, 2001), and tolerance of diversity (Raphael, Florio-Ruane, & George, 2001) are just some of the important benefits of book club membership documented in the literature.

In addition to these benefits, the opportunities afforded boys for structured, group conversation in book clubs should not be diminished. Schwarzschild (2000) points out that family mealtime talk, which he has shown promotes important conversational skills, more extensive vocabularies, superior ability to conceptualize, and adeptness at articulating meaning in spoken and written language, is a rare occurrence in the lives of many struggling readers and learners today. Book clubs might serve as surrogates for this family ritual that was once taken for granted.

Book Club as Reading Curriculum

Middle school teacher, Jeanne, had become frustrated with the growing number of male students entering her remedial reading classes. She noticed in her classes a trend that has been occurring nationwide—boys are three to five times more likely than girls to have a learning or reading disabilities placement (Zambo & Brozo, 2009). She was convinced their reluctance to participate, disinterest in the stories and books offered, and even hostility toward her would only be reversed if big changes were made.

During Jeanne's search for ideas and suggestions that would help her improve boys' reading skills and attitudes, she came upon a couple of articles I had written (Brozo & Schmelzer, 1997; Brozo, Walter, & Placker, 2002) and the first edition of this book, *To Be a Boy, To Be a Reader* (Brozo, 2002). Before long, I found myself exchanging e-mails with her to answer questions about my research into literacy and masculinity, and share strategies that might improve her male students' literacy.

In the end, Jeanne decided to organize a book club comprised of seven seventh-grade boys, whom she selected based on her experiences with them in sixth grade. Each was reading two or more years below grade level and had negative attitudes toward reading. With the help of the guidance counselor, Jeanne managed to place all seven boys into her second period remedial reading class. Nara, Colin, Ricardo, Jaimi, Michael, Renard, and

Esteban represented a similar ethnic mix to the overall school population: 46% Hispanic, 22% African American, 22% Caucasian, and 9% Asian.

Jeanne then invited me to participate in the club as a cyber member. From over 600 miles away in another state, I read the books the boys read, contributed my responses to the books, and engaged in electronic discussions with the boys in the club. My participation in the book club taught me three important lessons: focus on boys' interests, give boys options for responding to books, and have fun with books.

Link Book Club Selections to Members' Interests. Student book clubs should determine selection of reading material solely on the basis of what club members like. The quickest way to undermine enthusiasm is to assume the book club serves as a mere proxy for the regular reading curriculum. The material really does matter and can make or break a successful book club experience. Students who are disaffected readers in part because of the kinds of books and other print material they're required to read in reading class will need "free rein" (Bond, 2001) on all matters related to what will be read in a book club context.

To ensure she was making the most interesting possible books available to her boys, Jeanne gave them a questionnaire to determine their outside-of-school interests. The most popular activities were (a) playing on the computer, (b) playing sports, (c) watching TV, (d) making things, and (e) telling jokes. Along with this questionnaire, Jeanne also asked the boys what they would like to read, and their responses were (a) books that are funny, (b) books that are action-packed, (c) mysteries, (d) books about "boys like us," and (e) books that tell you how to do things. These patterns of interest are not unlike those for similar young men documented in other research (Chance, 2000; Doiron, 2003).

Armed with this knowledge, Jeanne and I were able to identify various books that would match the interests and book genres the boys revealed through the questionnaires. For example, to connect with the strong interest the boys had in computers, we introduced them to and had enjoyable reading experiences with *ChaseR: A Novel in E-Mails* (Rosen, 2002). In it, Chase's family moves to the country, but he remains in touch with his friends back in Columbus, Ohio, USA, by exchanging funny e-mails. Chase learns to create pictographs through the clever combination of various keyboard symbols. The boys in book club had fun reproducing these interesting keyboard figures while conversing with me via e-mail. Esteban wrote to tell me about *ChaseR* and the book club:

I'm very happy to be in this class. The thing about a class full of boys is a good thing because we talk about our things, like girls and basketball and

stuff. Not saying having Ms. C [Jeanne] is a bad thing but it is hard to like talk about boy stuff. I like the computer so my favorite book was *ChaseR* by Michael J. Rosen. It's about a boy who moved from the city to the country. He lived 60 miles from the city. The book is about e-mail messages that Chase writes to his new and old friends. Chase has a sense of humor because he expresses it in his e-mails because of his signs, and Jokes. When he writes he writes about what's happening in the country and what he hates about the country. My favorite part is when he makes signs. Here are some examples. \0/ > that's a Cicada. It's weird. He says cicadas are very loud and annoying. They make a lot of noise with there wings by pushing them together. At the end of the book Chase writes about what he likes about the country. So he changes. But he keeps his friends by writing to them on e-mail. I miss my friends in Mexico but they don't have computers. If they did I would write e-mails to them.

Allow Book Club Members Multiple Modes of Expression. Typically, students are allowed a limited range of response options based on what they read. Answering the teacher's or the anthology's questions is most common. To help reluctant male readers become more engaged with text, creative response formats should be made available to them. These might include drama, electronic presentations, art, and making real-world connections.

Michael wrote to tell me how much he had enjoyed *Death Walk* (Morey, 1993), the book the club just completed, and to get my reaction to an idea he had for a project.

Death Walk is my favorite book so far. Do you like it? I thought it was so weird how Joel gets into a fight at school. Then because he was so afraid of his father, he ran away from home and ended up in Alaska. Then he has the snowmobile accident. Did the book make you feel helpless like Joel who is stuck up there because it snows all the time and the planes can't fly. That's how I felt. I thought Donovan was a cool trapper. He saved Joel. But Joel has to walk all those miles in the snow to that house where the guy has a radio. This book made me think if I could survive a long trip by myself. It is the coolest adventure.

Mrs. C. [Jeanne] says we have to talk about the book in some interesting way. I'm glad because last year all we could do were book reports. I'm thinking about doing this project on *Death Walk* using the computer. I want to show the route Joel takes from Seattle to Alaska and then to the cabin of the radio operator. I was going to read a little bit from the book that describes the places Joel goes. What do you think?

In subsequent e-mail exchanges with Michael I offered suggestions for his project, such as useful websites and downloadable software, to enhance the presentation. Jeanne told me she had never seen him more

enthusiastic in reading class than while preparing for and delivering his book project. One obvious explanation for Michael's enthusiasm is choice—choice of books to read and choice in deciding how to respond to gratifying books (Turner, 1995). This holds true for most reluctant and struggling readers, boys and girls.

Make Having Fun With Books a High Priority in Book Clubs. When reading is difficult and unappealing for boys one of the best antidotes is to immerse them in experiences with simply told stories that are very funny (Scieszka, 2003). To make sure the boys never grew too weary of the selections for the book club, even when they were related to their interests, Jeanne made humorous books available throughout the year. After reading the first in the series of Jon Scieszka's Time Warp Trio books, the boys couldn't get enough of them. During conversation about the Trio books we read in the club, Colin, a low-achieving reader, effused,

Hi, Dr. B. How do you like the Time Trio series books? I read three already. That's really good for me because I don't finish many books. There really exciting, aren't they? My favorite book is *Viking It Liking It*. I can't read fast like Nara but I don't care if books are long when there [sic] good. The Time Trio books make me think about how fun it would be to travel in time. I like to dream about neat things like that.

Nara, who began reading books from the series on his own, wrote to tell me,

I have read another book written by Jon Scieszka. The book's name was *2095*. It was funny. The Time Warp Trio meet their great-grandchildren. I like the part when they didn't have the number to pass the robot. His books are good. I really like his books. They are also funny.

Humorous books helped Jeanne's book club members sustain their efforts to read, discuss, and respond to all selections. Exposure to this genre also impelled some of the boys to seek similarly zany books to read on their own.

This book club experience reinforced my convictions about the kinds of books adolescent boys will read and why, when given the prerogative and support. When Renard, a genuine nonreader at the outset of the year, wrote me in May to say, *It's like okay to read even if other kids don't because reading is only one thing you do*, I realized just how successful the boys book club had been. The book club, as an alternative to the traditional remedial reading context, offered Jeanne a way of honoring boys' unique literacy needs. And when her boys found entry points to literacy because

their interests were matched with pleasurable books, their reading skills improved, too. Five out of the seven boys passed the state test for reading that year. Jeanne was disappointed she couldn't take all seven over the top but was cheered by the very real hope that her boys will remain engaged readers throughout their lives.

Boys in Literacy Initiative

In Northern Virginia two teachers, Rob and Jodie, have established a highly successful boys' book club called Club BILI or Boys in Literacy Initiative. Targeting middle school boys, the club is unique in that it's fluid, accepting any young man who would like to participate, regardless of achievement level or school success. The founders explain this policy by stressing that all male youth, whether academically successful or not, need to develop the reading habit now if they are ever to become lifelong readers.

Another unique feature of Club BILI is that it's organized around monthly topics, genres, authors, and themes that the club members themselves agree are interesting to them. To find out boys' interests, a simple interest inventory is distributed at the start of the year to all the boys in the school. Boys identify their top five areas from a long and ever-growing list of topics and genres that include such perennial favorites as sports/athletes, supernatural stories, humor and funny stories, how-to books, and spy stories, as well as topics like gaming, computers and technology, art and artists, and music and musicians. This information is compiled with the most popular areas of interest rank ordered and used to inform the club's monthly themes and reading selections. Successful themes have been science fiction month, Cirque du Freak month, and sports month.

The Cirque Du Freak month was particularly exciting for the boys in Club BILI. Darren Shan's Cirque du Freak series is the compelling saga of a young boy's journey into a dark world of vampires. The first of now 12 books, *A Living Nightmare* (Shan, 2002), begins with Darren, who is the narrator and main character, sitting in the toilet and concludes with a wild and hair-raising graveyard crescendo. This proved to be prime pre-teen fare, according to BILI organizers Rob and Jodie.

Survival was another BILI theme that was a real hit. The boys read two books during that month, *The Boys' Book of Survival: How to Survive Anything, Anywhere* (Campbell, 2009) and *Born Survivor: Survival Techniques From the Most Dangerous Places on Earth* (Grylls, 2007).

The Boys' Book of Survival, in style and format a throwback to yesteryear, deals with every manner of important survival challenges for boys from pimples to zombie invasions. Filled with useful practical information such as orienteering without a compass and taking care of an injury in the wild, the guide also covers those rare but just-in-case situations, such as escaping from quicksand or keeping zombies at bay.

Born Survivor is the firsthand account of Bear Grylls's putting himself in the most unforgiving conditions on Earth and showing the reader how to stay alive. The boys learned how to cross a piranha-infested river, find fresh food in any environment, build a bush fire, and fend off grizzly bears. From a desert island in the Pacific to the snowpack of Greenland, Grylls taught the boys how to beat the elements and survive the wild.

The culminating event was a "Survival Night" in the school cafeteria, where survivalist food was served and the boys could watch nonstop TV episodes of *Man vs. Wild*, in which Bear Grylls demonstrates for the camera how to stay alive under extreme and threatening conditions, most of which are described in his book.

Rob and Jodie attributed the success of BILI to its focus on members' interests and to reading experiences in the club that encouraged social engagement and active learning. For these reasons, book club meetings do not resemble most other classrooms with strict seating arrangements and formal rules of behavior. Instead, the boys are reading and talking, but often walking around from group to group, identifying their favorite parts of the book, or re-enacting a particular section. Club meetings are often busy and loud but are always productive and focused on reading.

Cross-Age Reading Buddies

Since the start of 11th grade, Elton wanted to quit school. His older brother had dropped out, and his 17-year-old sister was receiving homebound instruction after having a baby. Ruby, the literacy coach at Elton's school, saw another possible future for this young man. She took particular notice of him while observing his history class one mid-September morning.

The class had been reading and learning about civil rights in America, and the history teacher had asked his students to find articles that dealt with some aspect of civil rights either in the United States or anywhere around the world. Students went to the long table in the back of the room which was stacked with newspapers and current events magazines and rummaged through them. Ruby watched as Elton spent more time than the others looking carefully for something that interested him. Back at his seat, Elton was reading very closely an article from *Jet* magazine as Ruby

stopped by to visit with him. He explained to her in animated terms how the article was about white people who now believe that because Barack Obama is president African Americans no longer have to struggle for civil rights. The author, Elton went on to say, was warning that blacks should not let down their guard or stop fighting for civil rights that are still being denied or infringed upon because of race. Ruby was impressed with Elton's passion for the topic and his sensitive, critical reading of the article. When it was his turn to give an oral encapsulation of his article for the class, he did so with the same level of enthusiasm he had exhibited when sharing his reactions with Ruby.

Elton was just the type of young man Ruby was hoping to recruit for a new cross-age tutoring program she was instituting, which targeted students at risk of dropping out due to poor academic performance, low ability levels, or difficult home circumstances. The overall goal of the program was to improve reading skills for struggling students and keep them in school by tapping into their sense of responsibility to younger students. Keeping boys like Elton in school and raising his academic performance and self-esteem were her highest priorities. She had made arrangements with the neighborhood elementary school, which was only a short walk away from the high school, to host tutorial sessions twice weekly involving second and third graders and high school reading buddies.

Ruby spoke with Elton and several other boys individually about participating in the program, and when she had commitments from eight of them, began preparing them for their roles. The students were all members of the same third-block English class, so Ruby was able to use that time for group training sessions. More important, the English teacher agreed to allow the tutoring activity to count toward students' grades. This would be an important recruitment incentive for Ruby. Elton and the other tutors learned techniques for finding out the children's interests. They were taught simple read-aloud and vocabulary strategies. They learned how to facilitate writing in response to reading, and how to make books. And reinforced throughout was the expectation that these male youth would be encouraging of their younger buddies' reading and writing efforts and would help them see that these activities can be enjoyable. Above all, Ruby hoped that by developing literacy strategies for helping younger male readers less able than themselves, these adolescent boys would, in fact, expand their own reading and writing skills. The literature, at least, left open this expectation (Boyd, 2000; Brozo & Hargis, 2005; Fisher, 2001; Jacobson et al., 2001).

Elton's reading buddy was Angelo, a second grader, who was already experiencing difficulties with grade-appropriate reading materials. Elton

was an ideal reading buddy for Angelo because it has been shown that gender- and culture-matched role models have the strongest positive effect on educational outcomes for their mentees (Zirkel, 2002).

In their first meeting, Elton discovered that Angelo lived in an adjacent apartment complex to his own building. He also learned that Angelo “loved” football and, because his father lived in New York, wanted to play for the New York Giants when he grew up. Angelo also told Elton what he wanted most was a computer so he could play “cool games.” Elton made sure to tell Angelo about his interest in football, too. After getting to know each other a little while longer, Elton read some pages he had practiced from a short biography about LeBron James. Before long it was time to walk back to the high school. Elton reassured his new younger buddy that he would return in a couple of days. It was a hopeful start of what was to become a significant experience for the two of them.

Over the next few months, the tutoring program experienced attrition of three boys who couldn’t keep up the commitment. They became impatient or didn’t want to plan reading and writing activities for their elementary partners or, in the case of two of the students, eventually dropped out. Elton didn’t give up, however, and came to enjoy his newfound status as a role model and “expert” reader for Angelo.

Because Elton and Angelo both had a strong interest in football, much of what they read and wrote about was on that topic. Ruby helped Elton find appropriately difficult, high-interest reading material. They enjoyed biographies of great New York Giants players from the past, such as Harry Carson, Frank Gifford, and Lawrence Taylor. They kept a scrapbook of the Giants’ performance that season, reading newspaper stories and cutting out pictures of their favorite players. Along with these, they wrote captions, statistics, and bits of trivia from players’ records.

While cutting out a magazine photo of the Giants’ premier running back, Brandon Jacobs, also known to fans as The Beast, Angelo seemed in awe about his powerful 6’4” 265-pound physique, wondering out loud how he got so big. Using the Internet, Elton looked for more information on that topic. Because the cross-age tutoring sessions were held in the elementary school’s media center, computers were available throughout the large open room. Ruby helped get their search started using descriptors such as “football players training,” and they found pages of sites concerned with body-building and fitness. What caught Elton’s eye, however, were references to performance enhancement drugs. Ruby helped them locate sites with straightforward, objective information about these supplements, which they printed for reading later.

Ruby made suggestions to Elton about the best way to share this information with Angelo. Her concern was that it wasn't presented in a way that could unintentionally glorify drug use. Elton assured her he was going to "set him straight about that junk." Under Ruby's watchful eye, Elton planned how he would read, write, and talk about performance-enhancement drugs in the next few sessions. Her own research yielded a book on the topic for young adolescents titled *Dunks, Doubles, Doping: How Steroids are Killing American Athletics* (Jendricks, 2006), which she found in the high school's library. The information in Jendricks's book is presented in a colorful, easy-to-understand format, with many illustrative photographs. She helped Elton develop strategies for sharing selected content from the book that would help Angelo begin to appreciate the drug-free ways of building muscle and stamina for athletic competition.

It was Elton, however, who came up with the idea of a digital activity related to the topic. Aware of Angelo's keen interest in computers, he developed a plan for taking a closer look at the characters from popular computer games. His plan was inspired by reading that one of the most common pastimes among many American football players when on the road or during the off-season was playing such games as *True Crime: Streets of LA* (Activision) and *WWF Wrestlemania* (THQ). Typically, the heroes and villains in these games are exaggeratedly muscled in ways that football players and body builders must envy and, perhaps, strive to resemble. Demonstrating once again for Ruby his ability to reason critically, Elton saw how these images might influence certain athletes to do whatever it takes, including using drugs, to achieve unusual physiques.

With Ruby's help and assistance from the elementary school media specialist, Elton and Angelo used the Internet to find pictures of popular computer game figures from *Take No Prisoners* (Red Orb), *The Hulk* (Vivendi-Universal), *Army Men: Sarge's Heroes* (3DO), and *X-Men: Mutant Academy* (Activision). These pictures were then downloaded and altered using popular image-modification software. Elton and Angelo learned how to rework the main characters' physiques, reshaping them in ways that were more proportional to normal muscle development. They displayed their work in a slideshow presentation with "before" slides, accompanied by captions warning of the dangers of steroids and other illegal substances for building muscle, and "after" slides with statements about good health, diet, and fitness. Proud of the brief slideshow they had created, Elton and Angelo were given special opportunities to share the slides with other students in the cross-age tutoring program. The elementary school's principal was so impressed she made sure the slides were shown to the children during drug awareness events that year.

Ruby was pleased that the reading buddy relationship was a confirmed success for both Elton and Angelo. For Angelo, he gained valuable print experiences around purposeful, meaningful uses of literacy. In addition, he benefited from regular interaction with an older boy who as a role model helped Angelo recognize that reading and writing can be naturally integrated into a boy's male identity. At the same time, for Elton, agency and efficacy as a reader increased, factors that contributed to an overall improvement in his academic performance and his decision to remain in school that year. And in an interview with Ruby at the conclusion of the program, Elton even expressed possible interest in becoming a teacher—something unthinkable before his experiences as a reading buddy.

It has been shown that when boys' preferences for alternatives to traditionally formatted print texts are honored within the classroom, their engagement and achievement increases. Additionally, teachers have explored alternative ways of delivering literacy curricula to boys. Teachers can discover the literate practices male youth engage in with alternative texts beyond the classroom walls and weave boys' interest in and use of these texts into their instructional routines. Youth media, such as music, interactive websites, computer and video games, and graphic novels or comic books can be bridges to academic literacy and learning. As a result, boys are more eager to read and respond to these texts.

BOY TALK

Dane, 15, Looks Into an Ethological Mirror in the Pages of *Incognegro* by Mat Johnson and Warren Pleece

I'm the kind of kid who would rather play basketball than read. It's not that I really don't like to read. I read a lot when I was young. Books just don't seem interesting anymore compared with the other stuff I like to do. But *Incognegro* (Johnson & Pleece, 2009) was different.

This was an amazing book. My history teacher gave it to me. He said he thought I would like it. He was right. We have been learning about how blacks in the south were lynched all the time. They would be taken out of their houses at night. Some were even taken from jail. My teacher told us that some blacks with real light skin who worked for newspapers in the North risked their lives to go South and write articles about lynchings. They called this going "incognegro."

The main character is a real light colored black guy named Zane Pinchback. So am I. My mother is white and my father is from Ethiopia. Some kids with tans look darker than me. My hair is curly but not kinky. Some say I'm not really an African American. Maybe they're right, but I feel like one. My parents are cool about who I hang out with. My friends are all black.

I also like this book because it's a graphic novel. For me, these kinds of books are a lot easier to read. I can read the words and if I'm not sure what's going on or if the dialogue isn't too interesting, I can also look at the illustrations. The illustrations in this book are awesome. They really help you get into the story.

Zane is a reporter for a newspaper in Harlem. He decides to go incognito or as the book calls it "incognegro" to Mississippi before civil rights to investigate the murder of a white woman. His own brother is accused of the murder. Zane uses his light skin to sneak down South. Whites want to lynch Zane's brother. Zane has to do everything he can to find out the truth and save his brother.

I have a lot of respect for blacks who fought for civil rights. They risked their lives. Zane is afraid whites will figure out he's black, but he does what he can for his brother anyway. Reading about Zane and looking at the drawings of him, his brother, the angry whites, and the other people made the book so real.

Could I ever show the kind of courage Zane does or all those people who fought for their rights? I don't know. But I think I am strong enough and proud enough. There's one part of the book where Zane is looking right into your eyes. He is in Mississippi and he has found out who really killed the white woman. When I look into Zane's eyes in that picture, it's like I can see myself. He's scared but confident that he must do the right thing.