

IBSC ACTION RESEARCH PROJECT 2005/2006 MIDDLE SCHOOL TEAM REPORT

How might graphic novels engage boys in school reading?

The Team:

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As the Annual Conference of the IBSC in Johannesburg fast approaches, the Middle School team are at the electronic equivalent of dotting the 'i's and crossing the 't's on their research reports. Across four research sites, members of the team have explored the research question: How might graphic novels engage boys in school reading? Peter, Alan and Di conducted their research within the English curriculum using a total of five classes, whilst Anita used two classes to focus on graphic novel use in History. In four of the English classes, a graphic novel was used to study Shakespeare. Both quantitative and qualitative research methods were employed in the project; the emphasis being on the latter. These methods included surveys, journals, key informant interviews, focus groups, classroom observation, field notes and photography.

Consistent with the caveat that accompanied our research regarding the danger of treating 'boys' as a homogenous group, our baseline data showed that the boys participating in the project were a mix of the engaged reader and the disengaged reader; the struggling reader and the competent reader; the reluctant reader and the avid reader. However, as team members shared and discussed their findings, it became apparent that, despite differences between and within samples regarding the reading interests of boys, the selected graphic novels generally engaged boys in reading. Across all sites, the visual dimension of the graphic novel enhanced boys' comprehension of texts and facilitated the development of higher-order thinking, visual literacy and critical thinking. These research results are compatible with other current research that indicates boys' engagement with reading can be enhanced when teachers recognise, value and incorporate boys' out-of-school reading interests into the curriculum.

It is important to note however, that as well as highlighting the obvious benefits of using graphic novels in the classroom, the research findings also indicated that graphic novels should not be considered a blanket solution to the disengagement of boys from school reading. Whilst graphic novels had the power to engage boys, they were not necessarily enjoyed by all boys. Reasons cited by some for their lack of enjoyment focused on the artistic style of specific graphic novels, the diminished opportunity to read imaginatively, and the inappropriateness of using an appropriated text such as a graphic novel to study Shakespeare. The research also highlighted the need for

teachers to be familiar and confident in teaching a format that may be relatively new to them.

As each team member undertook the analysis and discussion of their research results, it became obvious that a common research report to the IBSC would not be the best way to present our results. Finding common ground would 'waterdown' each researcher's findings and diminish the importance of the unique nature of each research site and sample. Therefore, the final report to the IBSC will consist of a common introduction, in which the issue of boys and reading is discussed, followed by the team members' individual research reports. We consider that the provision of individual reports by four researchers, at four sites and employing different methodologies enhances the rigour of this action research project.

The opportunity to participate in this international research project has been a valuable experience for all the team and many thanks must go to the IBSC, and especially to our research co-ordinator, Mary Gauthier, for making this research happen. The project has offered us an opportunity to reflect upon our individual and collective teaching practices and has provided us with the skills and confidence to undertake and facilitate future research.

As valuable as it has been however, the project has not been without its challenges. The imposition of a research regime on top of the everyday professional responsibilities of team members has been demanding. In addition, the international make-up of the team created its own unique problems. Communication was made more difficult by time differences and the 'out-of-sync' nature of the school year between the northern and southern hemispheres. Difficulties were also created by the limitations of the communication technologies in team members' schools that prevented synchronous communication. Fortunately, a good dose of understanding and humour ensured that none of these challenges proved insurmountable.

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