Focusing the library on the reader: Special education students

Elizabeth A. Lee
Faculty of Education, Queen's University, Kingston, Canada.
elizabeth.lee@queensu.ca

Abstract
This study examined the effect of orientating library programming around the reading of manga by special education students in a secondary school. Data was collected through observation, student and teacher interviews, and videotaping student discussions of two novels. A social community of readers was established that altered student behaviour and views of reading.

Purpose of the study
This qualitative study examined the library use of secondary school special education students. The research questions were: How can a librarian meet the reading needs of special education high school students? What approaches are effective with these students? What are the students' views of the library? How do they view reading?

Literature review
Secondary school students who struggle academically are not always well served by the school library. Special education and academically weak students typically read considerably below grade level and dislike reading (Greenwood, 1991).The challenge for the school librarian is to develop programs that will appeal to these students. These programs need to foster student engagement with reading by using books that address their current interests, drawing upon popular adolescent culture. The texts selected also need to be accessible, mapping onto their reading level while providing content suited to their age level. Additionally, if one of the goals of the program is to improve students' reading skills then large quantities of highly engaging books are needed. This is a tall bill to fit. Manga encapsulates these various features. Developing programming around manga is ideal for engaging special education students with the library.

Manga
Manga, which means 'playful sketches' in Japanese, are widely read throughout Asia in translations from Japanese texts as well locally written texts. Manga have a distinct artistic style, are usually produced in black and white and follow Japanese book conventions being read right to left, top to bottom. In Japan manga are written for all ages and are read equally by males and females (Ito, 2005). By 1996 manga made up 40% of the magazines and books published in Japan (Brienza, 2009). There are different genres of manga for different audiences as Miyake (2008) states "Manga are now ubiquitous in Japan, used to illustrate instructions for accessing banking services, to clarify sewer estimates..." p. 359. Manga were first introduced to North American audiences through anime-the animated version of manga. Japanese anime, such as Sailor Moon, were popular children's cartoons on TV in the 1980s (Brienza, 2009). In the 1990s manga began to be translated for the North American market. These translations are identical to the Japanese original with only the text being translated. Manga sales in the US grew 350% between 2002 and 2007 (Brienza, 2009). By 2007 manga was two-thirds of the graphic novel market in the US (Goldstein & Phelan, 2009). The production and availability of anime and manga fuel each other.

Educational use in North America
There are two differing positions of the use of graphic novels and manga in education in North America. One perspective views them as a form of popular fiction akin to comic books, books that lack substance and are of little benefit for literacy. It is considered worthwhile to have some available for independent voluntary reading. The other position argues that this book format successfully addressees and meets the needs of the changing nature of literacy in the 21st century. Labelled as a multimodal text (Schwartz & Rubinstein-Avila, 2006), visual text (Burn, 2005), or graphic text (Goldstein & Phelan, 2009) manga by combining image and text is described as drawing upon a wider range of literacy capacities. In addition, they are viewed as an aspect of popular youth culture that can be utilized by teachers to develop literacy and critical reading (Alvermann & Xu, 2003; Fry & Fisher, 2004).

Benefits
In North American educational writing, graphic novels and manga are frequently combined in discussions of the educational benefits, with no clear distinction being made between the two. Graphic novels or manga are seen as potential solutions to a number of current problems in literacy, such as declining reading scores-especially in boys. It has been argued that manga encourage reading on the part of boys and that they are a way to build lifelong readers (Weiner, 2002). Graphic novels have been portrayed as a route into literacy for struggling and reluctant readers (Mooney, 2002). Knop (2008,) on the other hand, stated that the reading of graphic novels benefits the reading skills of all students. Lavin (1998) argued that reading graphic novels requires more complex cognitive skills than reading regular novels. Leckbee (2005) argued that the combination of visual and textual clues could improve literary analysis on the part of all students. Schwarz (2002) suggests that graphic novels serve as a useful tool for integrating media literacy in subject area classes.

Engagement in Reading
In becoming a skilled and avid reader the first step is engagement with reading (Guthrie & Humenick, 2004). Across all skill levels and types of readers choice over what to read is the key factor in producing engaged readers (Guthrie & Humenick, 2004; Morrow, 2002). A strong predictor of reading performance and academic success is the amount of independent voluntary reading for pleasure on the part of the student (Fielding, Wilson & Anderson, 1986). Weaker readers choose to read little, because it has been a negative experience for them and as a result of this they increasingly fall further behind their peers who choose to read for pleasure. Social comparison with more successful readers causes some to reject reading and to view themselves as non-readers. Though offered the high-interest low reading ability books in school they are aware that these books are not equivalent to the books read by their peers. One telling difference is size. Low reading, high-interest books tend to have fewer pages than regular novels.

One of the challenges in motivating weaker readers is to find engaging texts with compelling stories. The symbiotic relationship between anime and manga results in manga's narratives having being refined through initial publication in Japanese manga magazines. Only those that are successful in magazine format end up being produced as books. As well, having the same story available in anime also supports student interest and success with manga. Students can build a schema of the story through anime that may enable them to sustain any difficulty with reading the text. The lighter textual load in combination with the support from the illustrations and story schema means manga are not only easy to read but are a "thick book" that can be completed in a short time. Access to books correlates with better reading scores, the greater the number and variety of books the better the reading scores of students. All of these factors highlight how essential it is that school library programs are designed to engage special education students in reading.

Methodology
The study took place over two years. Sixteen students were each individually interviewed twice, once each year. As a voluntary program in the school, there was a limited opportunity to interview students as no school class time could be used. The teacher librarian was interviewed four times. Three full days were spent observing the operation of the library program. Students were videotaped three times, the first an hour of which was a literature discussion group on the graphic novel Pride of Baghdad. The second taping was of a student-led club in which the students participated in a student-designed quiz about manga. The third taping was of a literature discussion group of the manga Aion. Document data was also collected (circulation figures, student writing,library documents).

Setting
The study took place in a vocational secondary school with an enrollment of 500 students, 73% of whom are male. The school is one of 117 secondary schools in the largest school board in Canada located in a city with a multiethnic population of five million. The school is located in an area that has a high crime rate, substance abuse problems and low socioeconomic status. The school offers applied and locally developed courses, such as, hairdressing, auto mechanics, woodworking, and food preparation. Regular secondary schools offer province-wide college and academic courses that prepare students for college or university. Students at this secondary school have reading, writing, mathematics and social skills at a grade 5 to 6 level (these are elementary school grades for 10 year olds). Of the students attending the school 41% have formal Special Education identification. At the end of high school 65% go directly to the workplace.

Results

Library use

Since the arrival of the current librarian the circulation figures have increased dramatically. Seven years ago 2, 450 books circulated. Unless a teacher brought the class to the library for instruction students rarely came to the library. It was a quiet empty place. The current teacher librarian sought for programs that would encourage the students to use the library. By talking and listening to the few students who frequented the library she recognized that the small number of manga in the collection were what drew them to the library. From asking herself the question, "What do these students want to read?" she started to increase the number of manga in the collection. Today the manga collection totals 4, 075 books. Circulations figures have steadily risen. In 2010 a total of 25,110 books circulated. This school library now has the highest circulation rate in the school board, higher than academic schools with advanced programs. Last year the average borrowing rate for the district's high schools was 0.5 books per student, while at this school it was 4.4 books per student.

Teacher librarian interviews

The teacher librarian's approach to the library and the programming reflects her educational philosophy. She described it as the FISH philosophy of 'play', 'make their day' 'be present' and 'choose your attitude'. Her interactions with students reflect this. She opens an hour before school, is open many lunch hours and stays open two hours after school. At 7:40 in the morning there are adolescents waiting for the library to be open-something that is not a common situation in secondary school libraries. The library is a welcoming place where up to 30 students may congregate and chat before or after school. The teacher librarian makes a point of being at the circulation desk to warmly welcome each student individually –she is truly present for that student. In fact most of her day is spent at the circulation desk where she is available for that personal contact. Her interactions are low-key and positive. She views the library as belonging to the students and has shaped the program to meet their interests. In the interviews the librarian stated her views on book selection: "My mandate as a teacher-librarian is to give my students the skill of lifelong reading, it's not my job to choose what they read. My job is to make it available, give them educated choices, and enable them to decide whether or not they want to read it." As a consequent of this belief there has been an intentional increase in the size of the manga collection. She continues to add to the collection in other areas but has developed a number of fund-raising activities to support the growth of the manga collection.

Program Elements

The overarching goal of the library program for these special education students is encouraging reading engagement. A number of components are directed at recognizing student success. She keeps monthly totals of the number of books read by the students in this school as well as the totals for other schools. This is posted as a chart and a large wall thermometer is updated monthly. Beside the entrance to the library is a 'Wall of Fame' bulletin board with the pictures of those students who have read more than a 100 books. Another part of the bulletin board is a yearly chart that lists the number of books read to date. This list is rank ordered with the position of each reader for each for each month listed.

Graphic Novel Club

The strongest element in encouraging students to visit the library has been establishing a club. While known as GNC (Graphic Novel Club) the majority of the books read by the members are manga. This club is organized and run by the students. As the librarian stated "I just have to ask them what they are doing on Friday and they come up with their own activities. They understand that it must be related to manga or anime." Twenty to thirty students meet at lunchtime and may bring their lunch to the library. As a result of being informal and student-led there is a strong social component, with students forming a cohesive social group. One of the interesting consequences of this club has been the elimination of grade boundaries. Unlike most social groups in secondary schools that tend to be students associating by grade level, the GNC has fostered friendships between entering and senior students. Activities range from informal discussions of manga, to competitions designed and run by the students. As one student said, "The library is our second home."

This was reflected in student traffic in the library. Observing what happened across a day, I saw members of the GNC who were in and out of the library multiple times. Before school they were returning books that they had read overnight, selecting new ones, socializing with other students. Some of these same students would come in during class change (a five-minute period) to get another book, and over lunch hour browsing and spending time with friends was the main activity. Then they might well be there after school. Along with the socializing there would be students sitting and reading on the couch in the manga corner complete with a "fireplace" (an electric set of fireplace logs).

The librarian stated that another benefit of the GNC was the opportunity for students to develop leadership skills. The club really was run by the students, not directed by a teacher, as can occur in some school clubs. There was no purpose other than what the members decided, and when, as on occasion, someone complained, her response was to say "it's your club perhaps you should call a meeting of the club to decide." Usually, a student or two would step forward and plan an activity. The library was open, the teacher librarian was

present and she was interested, but she did not step in and direct or plan. Instead, she constantly reiterated, "it's your library, and it's your club, they're your books."

The GNC is involved in selecting the new books to be purchased. To be truly responsive to students' reading interests the librarian keeps a database at the circulation desk of student requests for purchases. Those that have had the most requests formed a short list. The books on the short list were supplied to the library by the two local manga bookstores for preview. A sub-group of the club met and selected the new purchases using a set of criteria developed by them with the teacher librarian. Selection criteria were: 1) no nudity, 2) durable binding, 3) quality of drawing (e.g., Naruto). A small group of students then went on a shopping expedition to the two specialized bookstores. Inclusion on a shopping trip was considered a privilege. The shopping trip was organized and planned by the students. This was full day trip and the librarian uses it as an opportunity to develop additional life skills. Each year there are students who have never been out of their immediate neighbourhood or taken the subway. So planning, involved map-reading, charting the route, reading timetables, selecting a restaurant, and figuring out how much money would be needed for the trip, and for the purchases, all of this was managed by the students. At the stores the students browsed for the books and selected the ones for purchase. These were verified by the students against the database list. After the students brought the books back they organize them by title alphabetically for processing.

Manga art
The teacher librarian maintained a bulletin board of manga drawings by students and during on one year of the study was able to bring in a local manga artist to give a workshop on drawing for interested students. This provided another way of publically recognizing students.

Certificates
As part of fostering student success, at the end of the year assembly all the members of the GNC receive an attractive certificate which states the total number of books read by them in the year. The ten students with the highest numbers are individually congratulated on stage.

Contests
The librarian ran a monthly contest called "Guess How Many Books Read." Every student who signs out a book on the first day of the month was given a ballot. The student who had the closest guess of the number of books read during the previous month wins a prize. The prize awarded is specific to the winner, perhaps a manga poster, manga stickers, Yu-Gi-Oh! cards, etc. This contest highlights the number of books being read by students, and is another way of valuing their reading and participation. She had other contests at the circulation desk, for example when a new issue of Sonen Jump came in it was featured with a question posed about some aspect of manga. The winner was able to read the new issue first.

Other contests were developed by the students: one student created a Jeopardy game for manga which was eagerly played at a GNC meeting. When asked what things she thought of when creating the questions she said, "I though about categories and then both girl and guy questions and questions for the books we have read." The questions were comprehensive involving characters, events, information learned from manga, (for example the seven deadly sins), facts about manga and anime, music from anime, and if certain books had been released in North America. Another student created a scavenger hunt of matching characters, books and authors. Two other students developed a crossword puzzle on manga.

Size of the manga collection
The library received the standard acquisitions budget that is based on the total number of students. The librarian had several approaches to increasing the size of the manga collection. All of the new manga were covered with laminate before they were shelved. For high school graduation in Ontario students must complete 40 hours of community service. Each year she has had several students who obtained their community service credit by working in the library and who spend most of the time on lamination. This activity combined with an emphasis on taking good care of the books, which was fostered by the ownership of the library and collection on the part of the students, led to almost no lost or damaged books. The librarian did not have to replace books but could add to the collection.

The librarian also ran two garage sales a year at the school to raise money. These were open to the public and were dependent upon contributions from the school staff and parents. The GNC helped organize and run the

sales that took place after school in the evenings and on a Saturday. These sales involved a considerable amount of work on the librarian's part. As she said, "I have to do it as the budget is so small and given our community the parent council isn't able to raise funds." One year she ran a manga book sale of new books from one of her suppliers of overstocked books. It was open to other librarians in the board and the books were in the price range of students at her school. She was able to add to the school's collection of manga at low cost and provided another experience around books and reading for the school's students. The neighbourhood in which the school is located does not have bookstores. She exercised considerable ingenuity in creating different activities to keep interest in the library ongoing and fresh. Her purpose for all of the programs was to involve and encourage student participation.

Additional borrowing
Members of the GNC often would read several books overnight and expressed a wish to have more books available to read for holiday breaks. For those students who had established a good record of returning books on time and in good condition more borrowing was allowed over holidays and over the summer. Students would collect bins of books during the week leading up to the break. As well, students who had graduated from the school were welcome to come back to visit and to borrow books, as alumni. These were past regular and reliable users of the library who had an expressed anxiety of being away from their favourite books. They often stayed and read for the afternoon. The only rule was to return books on time. The librarian felt an additional benefit beyond continuing to encourage reading from providing this service to them was the role models they provided for current students. They had made the transition into a community college program and could chat with younger students about life beyond high school.

Student interviews and videotapes
In the interviews students spoke of themselves as avid readers. One said "Last year I never read any books but Aisha told me I had to read Naruto and I started reading like crazy." The students read widely within the form and had preferences for particular authors and illustrators and genre: "I like the characters and their personalities and I can relate to some of the situations", "I like the cooking ones", "I read everything except the romance." As one student said when asked why she came to the library: "Everyone's friendly, you meet everyone, we can talk about things. It's fun to come here." In the literature discussion group students debated the style of illustration and the relative merit of the realistic style of graphic novels as opposed to the manga style of illustration. They were able to defend their analysis of authorial motivation and spoke of inter-textual references between various manga. They argued over interpretations of specific events and the character's internal states. The hour-long discussion of these special education students resembled that found in an advanced academic English class. They were focused and engaged. The texts mattered to them.
When asked if they thought reading manga had improved their reading, one student said "yes, I read way better." while another said "I got an A in English." Asked for advice to give to teacher librarians who were hesitant about having manga in their library they said "Take a look at one, you'll see they're not that bad.", "Don't knock it if you haven't tried it."

Conclusions
Manga offered these readers a rewarding reading experience in which they experienced success. As a part of popular culture manga provided a place for students to see their interests being valued. They were motivated and came to view themselves as readers. Manga, with its strong narrative line aligned with pictures, resulted in books with lower textual demands, allowing these special education students to comprehend and so experience reading success. For these students, the ability to quickly read a 'thick' book helped build motivation for reading and a self-perception of themselves as readers. Reading many books with the associated public acknowledgement of quantity also supported this construct. It is difficult to think of yourself as a poor reader when you have read fifty books in a month. These special education students not only were readers but also came to see themselves as readers.
Most importantly, building a social community around reading manga underpinned student engagement and created the space for reading success. This was the result of the librarian's non-judgemental attitude toward students' interests and contributed to building the community of readers. Her attitude towards to students through empowering them as self-directed readers, capable of planning and organizing activities helped foster a strong identification with the library. The librarian's openness to respecting the reading interests of the students has brought about a transformation of the library and created an environment in which these students can flourish.

Three key learnings:
- Building social community essential
- Seeking and respecting student choice
- Empowering students.

References

Alvermann, Donna, E., & Xu, Shelly H. (2003). Children's everyday literacies: Intersections of popular cultural and language arts instruction. *Language Arts, 81*, 145-154.

Brienza, Casey E. (2009). Books, not comics: Publishing fields, globalization and Japanese manga in the United States. *Publishing Research Quarterly,25*,101-117. doi:10.1007/s12109-009-9114-2/

Burn, Andrew. (2005). English and the visual: From montage to manga. *English Teaching: Practice and Critique, 4*(1), 1-5.

Fielding, L.G., Wilson, P.T. & Anderson, R.C. (1986). A new focus on free reading: The role of trade books in reading instruction. In T.E. Raphael (Ed.). *The context of school-based literacy*. (pp. 149-160), New York: Random House.

Fry, Nancy, & Fisher, Douglas (2004). Using graphic novels, anime, and the Internet in an urban high school. *English Journal, 93*(3), 19-25.

Goldstein, Lisa, & Phelan, Molly (2009). Are you there God? It's me, Manga. *Young Adult Library Services Association*, 32-38.

Greenwood, Charles, R, (1991), Longitudinal analysis of time, engagement, and achievement in at-risk versus non-risk students. *Exceptional Children, 57,* 521-535.

Guthrie, J. T., & Humenick, N. M. (2004). Motivating Students to Read: Evidence for Classroom Practices That Increase Reading Motivation and Achievement. In P. McCardle & V. Chhabra (Eds.), *The Voice of Evidence in Reading Research* (pp.329-354). Baltimore: Paul H. Brooks.

Ito, Kinko. (2005). A history of manga in the context of Japanese culture and society. *Journal of Popular Culture, 38,* 456-475.

Knop, Kathi. (2008). Graphic novels-join the club. *Library Media Connection, 2*(7)*,* 40-41.

Lavin, Michael R. (1998). Comic books and graphic novels for libraries: What to buy. *Serials Review, 24*(2), 31-46.

Leckbee, Jodi, (2005). I got graphic! *Young Adult Library Services, 3*(4), 30-31.

Miyake, Lynne, K. (2008). Graphically speaking manga versions of the Tale of the Genji. *Monumenta Nipponica, 63*(2), 359-92.

Mooney, Maureen, (2002). Graphic novels: How they can work in libraries. *Book Report, 21*(3), 18-19. Retrieved Dec. 2009 from www.publishersweekly.com

Morrow, L. M. (2002). Motivating Lifelong Volunteer Readers. In J. Flood, D. Lapp, J.R. Squire, & J. M. Jensen (Eds.), *Handbook of Research on Teaching the English Language Arts* (2nd ed., pp. 857-867). New York: Macmillan.

Schwartz, Adam, & Rubinstein-Avila, Eliane. (2006). Understanding the manga hype: Uncovering the multimodality of comic-book literacies. *Journal of Adolescent & Adult Literacy, 50*(1), 40-48. doi:10-1598

Schwarz, Gretchen E. (2002). Graphic novels for multiple literacies. *Journal of Adolescent & Adult Literacy*, *46*(3), 262-265.

Weiner, Stephen (2002). Beyond superheroes: Comics get serious. *Library Journal, 127*(2), 55-58.

Statement of Originality

This statement certifies that the paper above is based upon original research undertaken by the author and that the paper was conceived and written by the author(s) alone and has not been published elsewhere. All information and ideas from others is referenced.