School Libraries Worldwide – Volume 14, Number 2, July 2008, 68-82

Popular Culture in the School Library: Enhancing Literacies Traditional and New

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In an evolving landscape of traditional and new literacies, the roles of the school library and teacher librarian are changing. In order to support instruction in multiple literacies, teacher librarians must rethink both collections and services. Materials featuring popular culture influences are explored for their relevance to several types of literacy instruction. The inclusion of popular culture materials in school library collections can support achievement in traditional literacy while facilitating connection with everyday literacy practices. Popular culture materials also provide instructional opportunities for critical media literacy as well as information literacy. Popular culture texts are worthy of inclusion in school library collections for reasons enhancing both pedagogy and enjoyment.

Who are 21st century learners? In the United States and around the world, teacher librarians are seeking to understand 21st century learners and their unique needs and challenges. While the nature of information and the introduction of collaborative technologies have added new responsibilities to the teacher librarian's job, the need for literacy achievement remains constant. Teacher librarians and school library programs are two of the primary supporters of literacy in schools. However, we cannot assume that 20th century literacy instruction will serve the needs of 21st century learners effectively. As a teacher librarian studying children's language and literacy education, I have learned that the notion of literacy is changing. This generation of learners coupled with the evolving modes of text encourages questions about literacy in today's world. What does literacy mean in the 21st century? How do changing notions of literacy impact school libraries? What impact do the "new literacies" have on school library collections and programs? There is no simple answer to these questions. Each topic could easily fill books, or endless screens of blogs and wikis, as the case may be.

Although 21st century learners are diverse, they, like many other generations, love popular culture and the media. Americans watch roughly four hours of television per day (Nielsen Company, 2006b). Four of the top ten grossing movies of 2006 in the United States were animated films geared toward children and two others featured superheroes (Nielsen Company, 2006a). The United States is not alone in these trends. Children's television channels span much of the globe. A scan of recent top movies in many countries will likely include several that are appropriate for or made specifically for children. Beyond television and film, students engage with popular culture through music, video games, websites, and many other

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outlets. Whether they enjoy Asterix, Hannah Montana, Sonic the Hedgehog, Pokémon, or any of the numerous other global and local icons, today's learners are avid fans of popular culture. In the past, popular culture has often been left outside the American classroom in favor of more traditional modes and topics of study. As teacher librarians renew the vision for our profession in a new century, the question arises: Should characters from popular culture be included in our collections?

For the purposes of this discussion, I will define popular culture characters narrowly, including those characters that either started out or gained much of their popularity in the world outside of traditional print literature, through such media as television, video games, movies, toys and comics, often entering the world of books later as a franchise of their fame. In addition to the examples mentioned above, SpongeBob SquarePants, Barbie, and the range of Disney characters are some notable figures in this category, as are many superheroes and other comic characters. These characters are featured on everything from bed linen and breakfast cereal boxes to action figures and office supplies. Books are also commonplace in the merchandising of characters. These books, when compared to what is considered by some scholars as "the finest" in children's literature such as the winners of the Caldecott Medal, the Newbery Medal and other awards, may appear on the surface to be marginal in both quality and content. In addition, some argue that they are produced simply for profit with little focus on the literature itself, and that reading these books is more an act of consumerism than engagement with literary text (Hade & Edmondson, 2003). Do these books belong in our school libraries, or are teacher librarians simply stocking the shelves with advertisements by purchasing them? If these books do belong in collections, what purposes do they serve?

I'll admit, when I first started considering these questions personally, I would have never entertained spending money to put these characters on the shelves of a school library. As a student and aficionado of children's literature, I much prefer collecting and reading rich examples of artistically written and presented fiction, informational literature, and poetry. In informal discussion with several teacher librarian colleagues working in schools with students ages 5-12, I discovered I was not alone in this sentiment. Two teacher librarians I spoke with admitted to having tiny numbers of books featuring popular culture characters in their collections, although there was almost a touch of shame in any defense of these books as reading motivators. One teacher librarian weeded these items from her collection, while another simply did not replace them when they fell into disrepair. When questioned why they made these decisions, most expressed the sense that collections should be havens for the "best" in literature and informational books. When there are more books of renowned literary merit on the market than even the most generous budget can accommodate, why spend money on these books simply because the main character is a popular culture celebrity?

The belief that libraries are repositories for the finest of culture and knowledge is not new. Luke and Kapitzke (1999), in a brief tracing of the evolution of the library, state that "librarians throughout the last century have often been trained to see their role as 'custodians'… to select and catalogue the 'best that has been thought and written'" (p. 472). While this attitude is still prevalent in some professional communities, Luke and Kapitzke argue that such factors as the proliferation of knowledge into formats beyond print text and a number of other shifts in knowledge and culture have "put all this up for grabs" (p. 473). In response to this, both the role

of the teacher librarian and the library are evolving, along with library collections. One candidate for moving beyond the canon in school libraries is the inclusion of popular culture texts.

Six Reasons Popular Culture Should Be on the School Library Shelf

In this paper, I highlight six reasons that both defend the place and suggest the benefits of including materials featuring popular culture characters and stories in school library collections. The first examines the role of popular culture materials in relation to today's learners. Popular culture plays a significant role in the lives and identities of many students. To engage these learners, school librarians should reach out to them in every possible medium, including books that feature their popular culture icons. The inclusion of popular culture materials shows students that the school library is a place for them by acknowledging their identities as fans.

The second and third reasons focus on traditional alphabetic or print literacy, and how popular culture materials might be used to enhance traditional literacy achievement through connections with readers' advisory services and comprehension skills. Perhaps this seems out of place in an issue focused on "new literacies." However, as literacy researcher Ros Fisher (2005) writes, "'New' in the context of literacy study recognizes recent and novel forms of literacy but also implies new ways of looking at the familiar" (p. 149). While school libraries are changing to include and address digital and other new literacies, traditional print literacy still has a place of primary importance in our schools and society, and school libraries play a pivotal role in the promotion of traditional literacy and the provision of materials. When compared with new and exciting digital tools, print materials can at times seem lacklustre and irrelevant. However, this does not mean that we should abandon the support of achievement in traditional literacy as a part of our mission. Instead, while evolving to meet the emerging demands of digital and other new literacies, teacher librarians must also reconceptualize print collections and their place in developing students with abilities in a wide range of literacies, including traditional print literacy (Jenkins, 2006). Print collections may be used in combination with digital tools, to create cohesion between traditional literacy and digital age skills.

The remaining three reasons focus primarily on literacies that go beyond the traditional print-related definition. I explore the concept of "everyday" or "out-of-school" literacies, and how popular culture materials connect to those literacies, potentially enhancing learning in many curricular areas. I then discuss the importance of critical media literacy, the appropriateness of popular culture materials for instruction in this topic, and the necessity of critical media literacy in the lives of today's media engaged learners. Finally, I address information literacy. The inclusion of popular culture materials in school libraries allows students the opportunity to select and use information in a wide variety of topics and formats, a key element in information literacy. This inclusive approach is one way to facilitate development of the skills students will need as information literate citizens beyond the school walls, throughout their lives.

Reason 1: The School Library as "A Place for Me." Perhaps the basis for the first reason to include popular culture materials in a school library collection is obvious: these characters can motivate students to read. For students who, for a wide variety of reasons, can read but would

rather not, or for students who struggle to read and may lose interest as a result, these books can provide a "hook" into student interest. Stephen Krashen (2004), in his book *The Power of Reading: Insights from the Research*, argues that "light reading" such as comics and magazines connects both to motivation and development of literacy skills for many young readers. He also argues that these materials can act as a springboard to more advanced texts. Certainly, many of the materials featuring popular culture characters would fall into the "light reading" category.

A number of surveys of student reading preferences attest to student enjoyment of "light reading," such as graphic novels, magazines and comics (Boltz, 2007; Hall & Coles, 1999; Krashen, 2004), although with a few notable exceptions, most surveys do not separate materials featuring popular culture characters as a distinct category. There is no clear reason why such a category is not included in surveys, but the belief that these materials are not worthwhile reading is one possibility. Still, when students have a chance to respond freely about their reading choices instead of expressing preferences in predetermined categories, popular culture materials are often mentioned as favorites. In a study of the reading preferences of 31 special needs students from Ohio ages 12-14, when asked for reasons why they might choose a particular book "eleven of the students selected books because there was a movie or television show either about a particular book or that somehow related to a book" (Swartz & Hendricks, 2000, p. 615). While students were allowed to provide more than one reason for selecting a book, this is still a significant number.

In a study of nearly 8,000 students ages 10-14 from the United Kingdom, there was once again no separate category for popular culture materials as a favourite reading category. However, an analysis of the titles students mentioned as top reading choices showed that approximately one in every seven books in the *Children's Reading Choices* book list of the most popular titles had some sort of media connection (Hall & Coles, 1999). This media tie-in was most often a recent film, film adaptation or television show. In some cases, the media tie-in brought interest in a "classic" book such as *Little Women* (Alcott, 1868/1995), which shows the power of television and media to generate interest and connect with reading. It is important to note that this "one in seven" statistic does not include children's mentions of comic books and other series, such as Asterix, Beano and Sonic, which were also cited frequently by students as favourite titles. In addition, students indicated in several reading preference studies that increased availability of engaging materials had a positive effect on their motivation to read (e.g., Boltz, 2007; Ivey & Broaddus, 2001).

And yet, "light reading" materials may be missing from school library collections. Worthy, Moorman and Turner (1999) studied 419 socioeconomically and ethnically diverse sixth grade students from nine schools in Austin, Texas, surveying their reading preferences, as well as the holdings in classroom libraries and centralized school libraries. Results showed that comics and cartoons consistently rated among the most desired materials for reading, crossing gender, income, attitude, and achievement groups. In the same study, these highly desired materials were found to be among the least available in school and classroom libraries. While other specific collection studies are difficult to find, as noted above, libraries have a long history of collecting the "best" in literature and informational books. Recent interest in graphic novels is a positive step, but access to popular culture materials is likely still an issue in many schools. This difference in access is particularly pronounced for students of lower income households,

who rely more heavily on school sources for reading material than more affluent peers (Worthy et al., 1999). If, as Krashen (2004) contends, these "light reading" materials can benefit students in their literacy development, lack of access to these materials in schools may negatively impact reading progress for some students.

In addition to simply providing access to highly desired material for young readers, the presence of these books in collections also sends a wider message to students about the purpose and priorities of a school library program. Many teacher librarians do amazing work in their efforts to promote books and reading in their school libraries. They engage in booktalks and execute effective reading promotions. But these approaches can't always reach the students who don't see the school library as a place for them. Even with all the wonderful multicultural literature, science books, mysteries, biographies of fascinating lives and other selections, there are students who see the shelves as filled with things that are unfamiliar, or important to someone else. How can teacher librarians begin to reach out to these students, who may be among those who most need to hear the message of reading's importance?

One way to start is by asking the students themselves. As noted above, materials connecting to popular culture, such as comics, cartoons and magazines, are favourite reading choices for a wide variety of students. They provide a source of enjoyment and a common language, which can in turn lead to self-initiated literacy practices such as discussions and critiques of the text (Norton, 2003). Another way to reach out is to ask: what are students fans of? What particular characters, stories, and media captivate them? The answers will differ from country to country, even from school to school. Xu, Perkins and Zunich (2005) offer numerous ideas for investigating these interests on a practical level, including observing and documenting student engagement with popular culture, and using "show and tell" as a method to uncover student popular culture interests. Interests can also be detected using reading questionnaires, gathering detailed stories of how students learned to read, and examining student work (Marsh & Millard, 2000). Turning a keen eye and an open ear to the school environment may itself reveal student interests (Morrell, 2004). Noticing hallway discussions, characters on student backpacks, and other outward expressions of student fandom are simple starting points.

There will likely be certain characters or television shows that a number of students will gravitate toward. If students engage in discussions of their popular culture delights, or otherwise participate in activities that involve that particular popular culture interest such as online discussions, they are part of what Gee terms an "affinity group" (2001, p. 105). To belong to an affinity group, one must share an "allegiance to, access to, and participation in specific practices" (Gee 2001, p. 105). Many of these practices will occur outside of classrooms, where students can watch, discuss, and participate in the group in different ways than are often allowed in school. The key point for school libraries is that belonging to these groups and engagement with the influences that create them, whether based in popular culture or otherwise, is one way students constitute and express their identities. As an example, "High School Musical" is currently an enormous popular culture influence for American children. Fans of "High School Musical" likely know all of the songs and often sing them together as a way of expressing their identity as fans. This is a small local example, and the particulars will vary in every context. The power of affinity groups and the engagement they create may present interesting possibilities for school libraries and literacy.

When teacher librarians tap into affinity groups, offering materials that reflect these central interests and potentially support these identity-constituting practices, we visibly recognize student identities and interests as worthy of investment. Seeing favorite characters on the shelves can be a signal that tells students "the school library is a place for me." Collections should be developed to meet local needs, and the reading preferences of the school population should be counted among those needs (Cart, 2007; Sanacore, 2006). Once students understand that the school library belongs to them, communicated through the collection, teacher librarians can continue to open students up to the worlds all kinds of books can offer.

Reason 2: A Starting Point for Readers' Advisory. The second reason for purchasing books featuring popular culture materials is a natural extension of the first. These books present powerful possibilities for readers' advisory services. Librarians practiced the art of readers' advisory long before Amazon and other online services used purchasing preferences to connect readers with similar books. Readers' advisory uses patron interests and preferences as a starting point for suggesting reading materials. With both a wide knowledge of children's and youth literature and awareness of more sophisticated readers' advisory resources, teacher librarians are prepared to consider many more factors than can be calculated by a computer program. Often, these services start with a book a given student enjoyed, which connects to books that share the same subject matter, tone, or writing style. However, these services should not be limited to enthusiastic readers. All students should be encouraged to use readers' advisory services, whether they are currently spending much time reading or not. In fact, the students who aren't reading much may be most in need of the benefits that effective readers' advisory services can provide.

More indirect readers' advisory techniques, such as attractive displays clustered around popular culture topics, can be useful (Armstrong, 2001; Booth, 2007). For example, with the success of the "Pirates of the Caribbean" movie franchise in recent years, I have seen several displays in public and school libraries for students over age 13 with the message "If you like 'Pirates,' you might also like…" The displays were filled with all kinds of books from many disciplines, including other pirate stories, books about ships, folklore, scary stories, nonfiction about knots, parrots, and the like. For younger students, commercial princess stories might be the central theme, which would lead to a showcase with selections such as folklore princess stories and fairy tales, biographies of royals, historical fiction, books about jewels, knights, and so on. Asterix has natural connections with numerous aspects of history, geography, and sports. SpongeBob SquarePants opens up to all kinds of books about the sea, starfish, snails and crabs as well as karate, squirrels, even cooking. Once these displays are created, capturing the group of titles and listing them on a bookmark, a library webpage, or a more formal bibliography provides both a record of the titles for future reference and either a "take away" for readers or an access point for advisory resources when school is not in session.

While personal investigation of the latest popular culture interests of students is desirable, Internet resources and Web 2.0 tools can assist teacher librarians with the development of readers' advisory services based on the popular culture passions of the students in their schools. Reading communities featuring interactive social elements are a developing presence on the Web. Examples such as LibraryThing and Shelfari, while not always appropriate for children's independent browsing, can generate interesting suggestions through

browsing the bookshelves of other members with similar tastes. Online recommendation and read-alike sites such as What Should I Read Next? contain a significant proportion of adult titles, but a number of bestselling children's books are also included. Individual libraries also may have readers' advisory resources linked to their webpages. For example, Mid-Continent Public Library features a site devoted to Juvenile Series and Sequels, many of which are drawn from popular culture, while Kent District Library's What's Next? Books In Series search engine encompasses series fiction for all ages. Overbooked, which includes its own compiled book lists, offers a lengthy list of additional Internet readers' advisory resources. All of these tools, in addition to the wide variety of print and subscription readers' advisory services currently available, can be used to connect books with readers, and inform selection and collection development.

More importantly, these engaging tools can also be connected or adapted to a local setting, using the power of peer recommendations as an engine for reading engagement. Student preferences and reviews of materials could be posted on a bulletin board, wiki, or library blog along with other online readers' advisory resources. Social bookmarking sites such as del.icio.us and mybookmarks.com could be used to centralize readers' advisory links and blogs from the Internet, as well as other sites relevant to the school library program and student interests of all kinds, including popular culture.

Another way to combine popular culture and readers' advisory might involve using texts to create a game or contest. Gaming of all kinds, from simple board games to Massive Multiplayer Online Role-Playing Games (or MMORPGs), is an emerging trend in librarianship, inspiring blogs such as the Library Gamer and research projects including the Library Game Lab of Syracuse. Games are being used as a way to attract young patrons to all kinds of libraries with some success. To build from student interest in gaming, teacher librarians might create a game or contest using physical displays or visual webs posted on a blog. Students could "decipher" a display, explaining how a wide variety of books connect to a popular culture text. Or the teacher librarian could capitalize on student expertise and let them create the display, emphasizing the use of a variety of genres and connection points. These approaches show students how to make connections between texts on a basic level while uncovering the possibilities hidden deeper in school library collections. Using popular culture characters and stories as a point of departure, readers' advisory can represent the wide range of materials school libraries offer.

Reason 3: Building on Background Knowledge. The third reason texts featuring popular culture characters belong in school library collections begins with a principle of reading comprehension. In order for students to become effective and efficient at comprehending texts, they need to draw on a wide range of background knowledge and experience (Coatney, 2006; Pressley, 2001; Reutzel & Cooter, 2005). This background knowledge gives students an important foundation in vocabulary and facilitates comprehension. Unfortunately, there are students who arrive in classrooms without the background knowledge essential to success in contemporary schools. There are many ways educators can build this knowledge, and books are one effective way to do this. For example, if a student has never seen the ocean, educators can read, share and discuss informational books to build understanding of what an ocean looks like, what animals live there, and so on. Reading these texts before starting a study of oceans can

provide an important foundation for vocabulary and comprehension. The power of books to provide these vicarious essential experiences is one reason why teacher librarians select materials on so many different topics, written to appeal to a wide range of student abilities and interests. The background knowledge students lack can, to some extent, be gained through the resources school libraries provide (Coatney, 2006).

On the other hand, it is important to consider that these popular characters and their imaginary worlds often constitute some of the key background knowledge that students possess when they enter classrooms. Perhaps some students have not been to zoos, museums and other cultural venues, or enjoyed the music and literature of "high culture." French theorist Pierre Bourdieu names these kinds of experiences and their importance to conventional educational success a particular kind of "cultural capital" that students bring to the classroom in varying degrees (2007, p. 85). These specific "high" cultural experiences, the attitudes they encourage and the knowledge they provide arm students with resources for classroom success.

Consider an example of two students of the same age, Lisa and Myra, each with different backgrounds and experiences. Lisa has been exposed to what many would consider rich cultural experiences with music, art, and the like. She enters the classroom with skills, content knowledge and dispositions that set her up for success. She has the cultural capital necessary for school achievement. Myra, who has not been exposed to these cultural institutions and experiences, will likely have struggles in school because of this lack of background. She has cultural capital, just not the variety that is prized in the school curriculum as it stands. Many of the linchpins of Western thought and experience that form the basis of American school curricula may be unfamiliar to her. Lisa, who has the advantage of coming from a family with cultural capital well aligned with school achievement to begin with, has been receiving the content and messages since birth (Bourdieu, 2007). How can Myra catch up?

Perhaps, instead of interpreting Myra as a student with deficits who needs to catch up with her peers, we look at what Myra does bring to the classroom when she arrives. She may not have grown up visiting museums, listening to certain types of music, or engaging in any of the other activities that many educational institutions value. But, instead, she may be able to discuss at length details about SpongeBob, Barbie or Pokémon, which gives her valuable background knowledge that can be used to her benefit. Simply because she does not have the apparent knowledge of or appreciation for culture prized in schools does not mean she comes to school "empty." Educators must search for the knowledge students do have when they arrive at the school doors, and use it as a gateway to achievement. These accumulated experiences and activities are termed "funds of knowledge" (Gonzalez, Moll, & Amanti, 2005).

In developing the concept of funds of knowledge, Gonzalez and her colleagues, a group of researchers and teachers, took an ethnographic approach into the lives of the students they worked with in an effort to better connect the curriculum with their everyday lives. Through an inquiry process of home visits and making connections between resources and activities in the home and the school curriculum, students, families and the community were often able to see a benefit. Teachers worked together to integrate and align school curricula and the students' everyday knowledge. It is easy to imagine the role of the teacher librarian in a project such as this, working with teachers to shape collections so that they reflect and build upon students' funds of knowledge. While the funds of knowledge Gonzalez and her colleagues targeted for

thematic units in the classroom were often larger dynamic elements in the home, the popular culture of students and families played a role in the investigations and would be important extensions into the school library.

For students whose cultural capital is derived from popular culture instead of the "high culture" of Western society, reading a beginning reader book about a favourite character will presumably be easier to connect with than reading a book about a completely unfamiliar topic. If a student arrives at school without a wide range of background experience, there is knowledge to draw on in order to keep reading achievement moving forward if we seek it. Popular culture is one potential source for this knowledge.

Reason 4: The Possibilities of Everyday Literacies. "But these books are so terrible! The stories are so flimsy and full of clichés!" When compared with more traditional celebrated texts, this opinion may appear to be well-founded. But when examined more closely, texts featuring popular culture characters and the activities surrounding them may be more sophisticated than first imagined. The fourth reason for purchasing popular culture texts emerges from a closer look at the activities students engage in due to reading them, both school-sanctioned and personally initiated.

According to Vasquez (2003), "the term 'literacy/literacies' is used to represent a variety of skills and strategies used by learners including reading, writing, drawing and so forth when negotiating and constructing meaning" (p. 118). Generally, the term "literacy" is applied to traditional school-managed reading and writing activities. While literacy education used to be the charge of the schools, the notion of literacy is changing to encompass literate activities that students engage in outside of school settings. By the traditional yardstick, many students cannot perform certain school-sanctioned literacy activities competently. However, upon closer examination, often many students are engaging in literacy practices in their out-of-school lives. "Everyday literacies" are those literacy activities that are based in, surround, or emerge from students' everyday experiences and interests. They differ from and expand upon traditional school literacy practices in interesting ways. Examining and extending students' everyday literacies can engage students in "powerful and creative learning" (Vasquez, 2003, p. 118) while employing popular culture texts that are both familiar and motivating.

One example of a motivating force for everyday literacies is Pokémon. Pokémon has been studied numerous times, encompassing a wide range of perspectives and conclusions. Pokémon, short for "pocket monsters," is a story that involves Pokémon with different skills and capabilities and the humans, often children, who collect them. The Pokémon engage in battles using their varying skills and abilities. Pokémon is a multimodal phenomenon, including a card game, a television show, video games, books, movies, and other licensed merchandise. A simple Internet search using the word "Pokémon" exposes the excitement and fervour of Pokémon fans. There are hundreds of fansites including discussion forums and other opportunities for engagement with fellow members of the fan group (Vasquez, 2003).

Pokémon and the intense engagement that often accompanies it have caused it to be banned in certain schools (Marsh, 2006; Vasquez, 2005). But is the content of Pokémon opposed to what is being studied in schools? When observed closely, the content and structure of Pokémon texts and cards actually coordinate with many goals of school studies. The cards and the game involve opportunities for engagement in reading and writing, mathematics, science,

and social studies (Buchanan & Burts, 2007; White & Basile, 2003). To understand the game and the stories surrounding it requires extended attention and knowledge, as well as interactions with other players that may involve peer teaching. While expressing some concern about the commercial aspects of Pokémon, Buckingham and Sefton-Green note that instead of detracting from school goals, "in participating in the culture of Pokémon, children are *learning how to learn"* (2004, p. 30). Examining student-produced texts and exchanges based on Pokémon can reveal engagement with a number of literacies, such as acquisition of specific vocabulary, understanding of the complex workings of the game, and negotiating meaning with peers (for examples of these student-produced texts, see Vasquez, 2003, 2005). While Pokémon has been studied extensively, other popular culture interests will likely reveal everyday literacies as well. Instead of dismissing student interests out of hand, educators should take time to look deeply into the worlds they represent. While these characters are clearly motivating, they also encourage engagement in a wide range of literacies beyond school-variety reading and writing. When we allow these texts and stories into collections and curriculum, we open up possibilities for student literate expressions.

Reason 5: Critical Media Literacy. The fifth reason for including popular culture texts in school library collections is the prime opportunity they present for instruction in critical media literacy. Critical media literacy "has to do with providing individuals access to understanding how the print and nonprint texts that are part of everyday life help to construct their knowledge of the world" (Alvermann, Moon & Hagood, 1999, p.1). Although texts featuring popular culture characters may enhance and enrich many literacies, students must also learn to engage with these texts critically. This is especially important in light of the highly engaging nature of the texts, as well as the amount that students use and view them. What role do teacher librarians play in critical media literacy, and what does critical media literacy instruction entail?

Once materials featuring characters from popular culture are on school library shelves, they become objects of enjoyment as well as critique, just as any other text in school libraries should be. To engage in critical media literacy, teacher librarians must teach students the power of texts, and how those texts position readers. In her investigations of a second grade urban classroom, Anne Haas Dyson (1997) observed that stories of the X-Men and other superheroes became narratives for play and social engagement. Instead of excluding these stories from the classroom, the teacher used the texts as an opportunity to engage students in critical literacy. Superheroes and their stories typically center on males. Dyson noted that, while the idea of male dominance was integrated into some of the classroom adaptations of these superhero stories, the presence of popular culture texts, coupled with an effective teacher, prompted discussions about the texts, gender roles and other understandings. These discussions opened up new possibilities for discussion of gender and the roles that popular culture can often dictate. In the end, students were able to renegotiate the meanings that the text presented, allowing females to take on roles and actions that the original text rendered atypical to impossible. No longer were the gender roles presented by the text passively accepted by the readers. These texts were a precursor to opening up possibilities for discussion of popular culture and media messages.

This type of critical media literacy addresses the idea that children are simply passive when it comes to media texts and the messages they carry. The belief that students are unable to

negotiate and resist the images and messages of popular culture may be one reason behind the historical exclusion of these materials from many school libraries. While some may find cause for concern in these texts, it is important to remember that "students are not passive dupes in this process; they have considerable agency in the consumption of these products" (Marsh, 2008, p. 529). In addition to being consumers, students are also active producers of popular culture texts (Marsh, 2008; Morrell; 2004). With guidance and support, students are capable of both experiencing pleasure from and engaging in critique of these texts, although these skills are not mastered spontaneously. As MIT Comparative Media Studies scholar Henry Jenkins points out:

> Some defenders of the new digital cultures have acted as though youth can simply acquire these [media literacy] skills on their own without adult intervention or supervision. Children and youth do know more about these new media environments than most parents and teachers. In fact, we do not need to protect them so much as engage them in critical dialogues that help them to articulate more fully their intuitive understandings of these experiences. To say that children are not victims of media is not to say that they, any more than anyone else, have fully mastered what are, after all, complex and still emerging social practices (Jenkins, 2006, p. 12).

Jenkins goes on to provide a number of essential skills and dispositions necessary for developing new media literacies. In her classroom, Dyson found that "open-ended composing activities…regular classroom sharing of children's texts…and class discussions of those shared texts" (1997, p. 180) were effective basic elements of pedagogy for critical literacy using popular culture texts. The school library is an ideal environment to engage in these activities. The school library is filled with a wide variety of texts, and ideally popular culture texts are among them. The teacher librarian is the primary information literacy professional in the school, and opening up discussions about information and intent are commonplace in school libraries as a part of the information literacy curriculum. The emphasis on inquiry learning in school libraries leads to the opportunity for students to think about these texts using authentic questions. What remains to be developed is the teacher librarian as an effective facilitator of these discussions.

A critical media literacy lesson might begin with the reading of a popular culture text that students enjoy. This may be a comic book, a hero story, a princess story (to identify some archetypal favourites) or another familiar text. After sharing the text, teacher librarians can lead students through inquiry about who is included in the text, and who is left out. Who are the characters in the text? How are different genders and cultures represented? Are genders limited in their activities or stereotyped in their attitudes? Are there culturally diverse people with primary and active roles? Who is absent in the text? And furthermore, how do the portrayals in the text connect and compare with the realities of the local and global community?

Alvermann and Xu (2003) recommend other kinds of comparisons as a pathway to critical media literacy as well. One example is to examine superhero comics featuring male and female superheroes, comparing and contrasting the texts. How are the activities different in each text? Does heroism mean different things for different genders? Examples of several comics can be used for these investigations. An extension of that discussion might then include comparisons with texts featuring "real life" heroes. Examining these different portrayals of

heroism allows students to reflect on "how the media portrays heroic deeds, both mythically and in reality" (Alvermann and Xu, 2003, p. 153). The emphasis in these and many other lessons in critical media literacy is that students realize that there are different ways to position oneself in regards to a text. One does not have to passively accept what the text presents. Texts are for questioning.

In the midst of these critiques, it must be pointed out that the aim is not to persuade students that these characters and shows are not worth reading and watching, so much as to teach them to approach these materials with an understanding of how they work. The point should not be to degrade the popular culture characters, so much as to examine the possibilities and limitations of different kinds of books and stories. To completely disparage these characters is to risk alienating students and the reconstruction of the barriers that inclusion of these materials seeks to dismantle. It is at this point where the binary between literate acts and consumerism, a criticism of these texts pointed out earlier in this piece, breaks down. Yes, these books are part of consumer culture. They are created as a part of a brand. But this does not mean that they should be excluded from school libraries categorically. Literacy learning can emerge from their use. Popular culture texts are powerful for both their potential for pleasure and their potential for pedagogy. When these books and characters function as part of lessons on evaluating information at multiple levels, we are giving students tools not just for reading words and images but for negotiating the complex world of multimodal information and texts.

Reason 6: School Library as Microcosm. The sixth and final reason to include popular culture materials in school library collections is that they support the mission of our programs to create readers and learners with the skills to discern the materials they need to accomplish their tasks successfully. It is a primary goal for school library programs to develop lifelong readers and learners. Teacher librarians strive to develop avid readers who enjoy books and reading in large quantities across formats. The question persists, aren't we most effectively serving both our goals and our patrons by only providing the "best" in literature? Certainly, selecting heralded books is a safe, and some would say wise, philosophy of collection development, especially in an age of book challenges and the concern over the "tax dollars at work" in our collections. However, this approach is shortsighted. Can students become informed selectors in what they read if school libraries don't provide them a full range of choices?

An analogy comes from the world of nutrition. We want our children to eat healthy and balanced diets. To teach them this skill, should we completely exclude certain foods and snacks from our homes and schools? And if we do, how does this help them once they are independent, faced with a store full of different foods, some of which have been forbidden to them? Isn't it more effective to teach them how to find balance from the full range of nutritional choices? If an athlete is preparing for a big race, she eats different kinds of foods than if she is in the "off season." She looks at her plans for the day and chooses foods that help her accomplish tasks successfully.

The same may be said for libraries. If a student is writing a research paper, they need to choose sources that will enable them to accomplish that task successfully. Different resources would be selected if a student were reading for pleasure, for personal information, or for any other reason. If teacher librarians can't teach students how to manage, approach, and choose

from a wide ranging set of resources and information available to them inside the school library, can we be sure they will know how to select appropriately when they are faced with that choice outside of the confines of the school library? This ability to select appropriate resources for a task is a core information literacy skill. Teacher librarians serve students most responsibly and authentically when we approximate the world outside the school's walls to the greatest extent possible. Teacher librarians can prepare students to be responsible consumers of information throughout their lives, not just in libraries, by encouraging them to engage with a wide variety of texts, formats, and ideas. This analogy is not meant to imply that popular culture texts are the literary equivalent of "junk food." The arguments in this paper suggest that these texts can nourish any number of valuable literacies, and that their inclusion in a collection is beneficial. If students learn from the teacher librarian that there is room for many kinds of reading and reading material, that some materials are more appropriate in certain situations, and that reading, in general, is worthwhile and adds a lot to life, we have done our jobs well.

Conclusion

This paper has described several possible benefits of including popular culture texts in school library collections. Not only do these materials have the potential to increase student motivation to read, they create an image for school libraries as responsive to student needs and interests. Popular culture texts also provide opportunities for instruction and support of both traditional and new literacies. These texts connect with the cultural capital that many students bring to the classroom, and when student engagement with these texts is examined, important everyday literacy practices are revealed. When we include popular culture texts in collections, they become materials for teaching critical media literacy and information literacy skills. The school library, with a combination of a wide variety of texts and tools and skilled professionals, is an ideal environment for instruction in and enhancement of many literacies (Luke & Kapitzke, 1999).

There is a need for research and further thinking about how school libraries can become classrooms that effectively support multiple literacies, both in terms of how support of traditional literacy should be involved, and how new literacies can be incorporated into all aspects of the school library program. This paper is an attempt to contribute to that discussion, using a specific kind of text as a way of discussing the possibilities of literacies, both traditional and new, and their place in the school library. Materials featuring popular culture characters offer an opportunity to facilitate literacy learning of several kinds. It is difficult to meet the needs of students who won't come in the door, or students that do come in but don't engage with school library offerings. Once these materials are in collections, teacher librarians can promote them, scrutinize them, allow students to enjoy them, and capitalize on them as an entry point into a wide variety of literacies, lifelong learning, critical reading, and enjoyment.

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