Reversing the "Decline by Nine": Engaging Reluctant Readers with Graphic Novels in the Elementary SLLC
By Ian Bates

Introduction

There are many stages on the path to students becoming accomplished readers. Early readers progress through these stages at different rates. Below is the continuum for reading development in the primary grades. The approximate grade levels do not always correspond to the target reading level. However, it is expected that by the end of grade 2 students are moving toward fluency when reading level and age-appropriate texts.

Reading Development K-2

Launching into Reading	**Emergent Reader**	**Early Reader**	**Moving towards fluency**
• Pretends to read • Names some letters • Recognizes some signs • Beginning to print own name • Plays with books, pencils, paper • Understand 1000s of words that are heard but is not yet reading any • Makes simple predictions and inferences about spoken stories and events • Engages in conversations with peers and adults easily	• Learns that spoken words can be broken into syllables, sounds • Learns that speech sounds can be represented by letters • Reads some high frequency words • Begins to read and write phonetically regular words by sounding out using sound by sound reading • Can understand around 4000 spoken words • Understands and is beginning to use curricular words orally	• When reading, solves unfamiliar words using decoding strategies • Is becoming faster at segmenting words into sounds using this knowledge to spell words • Sight word recognition is beginning to develop at a faster pace • Begins to read and write phonetically regular words using continuous blending • Begins to read and write simple texts with more accuracy • Oral language skills continue to surpass reading and writing skills	• Reads simple, familiar stories with increasing fluency • Consolidates basic decoding elements, sight vocabulary and meaning context • Is beginning to write in connected sentences • Understands over 9000 words when spoken • Listening comprehension continues to be stronger than reading comprehension.
K -Beginning Grade 1 **Level A - 6**	**Mid Grade 1** **Level 8 -10**	**End Grade 1** **Level 12-16**	**Grade 2** **Level 16+**

https://sites.google.com/tdsb.on.ca/tdsb-early-reading/early-reading-development

Fig 1. *Stages of reading development K-2* (Adapted from Chall, 1983)

Once students are on the path to fluency, it opens up a much larger breadth of literature they can engage with. Paradoxically, it is around this stage of reading development that some students start to lose interest in reading.

Early reading development is marked by significant oral language practice and exposure to read-alouds. It is also marked by a rapid improvement in sound, word, and sentence development which is exciting and engaging. Once these skills are consolidated and rapid improvement slows, interest in reading can begin to wane. What can we, as educators and librarians, do to prevent this "decline by nine"? We must

engage young readers and motivate them to continue reading for enjoyment. As well, reading engagement is critical for lifelong academic and economic success.

One way to engage young readers, especially at this crucial age, is to provide them with engaging literature. Graphic novels and hybrid books are highly engaging forms of literature that motivate young readers to continue developing their reading skills while helping them understand more complex ideas in a more approachable format. An intentionally collected and curated selection of graphic novels and hybrid books increases both reading engagement and enjoyment. As such, they should be prioritized in any K-5 SLLC.

Definition of Terms:

Collection Development: The process of examining the materials in the library for the purpose of purchasing, and the process of purchasing the materials.

Curation: The process of choosing how to organize and display the library collection to maximize ease of access and patron engagement.

Graphic Novels: A graphic novel is a story (either fiction or nonfiction) told through a combination of images and words. It often contains the same literary features and conventions as a traditional novel. Graphic novels differ from comic books in that they are not serialized and tell a continuous story. Examples of graphic novels are *Dog Man* (Pilkey, 2021); *Smile* (Telgemeier, 2020)*; I Survived* (Tarshis, 2020); *Amulet* (Kibuishi, 2008); *Investigators* (Green, 2020).

Hybrid Books: Hybrid Books are novels in which graphic devices like photographs, drawings and experimental typography are integrated into the written text. Essentially, hybrid books are less visual and comic-inspired but rely on many visual elements. Examples include *Captain Underpants* (Pilkey, 2013)*, Dork Diaries* (Russell, 2009)*, Diary of a Wimpy Kid* (Kinney, 2017).

Reading Engagement: Reading engagement can be defined as the desire to read for one's own enjoyment or knowledge attainment and to be deeply immersed in the text.

Reluctant Reader: A reluctant reader is someone who has the ability to read but does not do so willingly, regularly or enthusiastically and/or does not engage deeply with the text due to lack of interest.

Literature and Data Review

There is a noticeable and well-documented phenomenon pertaining to children's reading engagement. Once children have the basics of reading established, typically by the end of grade two for most children, there is a noticeable drop in reading engagement.   According to Scholastic's *Kids & Family Reading Report* (Scholastic, 2019), only 35 percent of 9-year-olds report reading five to seven days a week compared to 57 percent of 8-year-olds. Attitudes toward reading change as well, the number of kids who say they love reading drops significantly from 40 percent among 8-year-olds to 28 percent among 9-year-olds. The *Kids & Family Reading Report* has shown a child's attitude towards reading enjoyment and importance is a predictor of reading frequency.
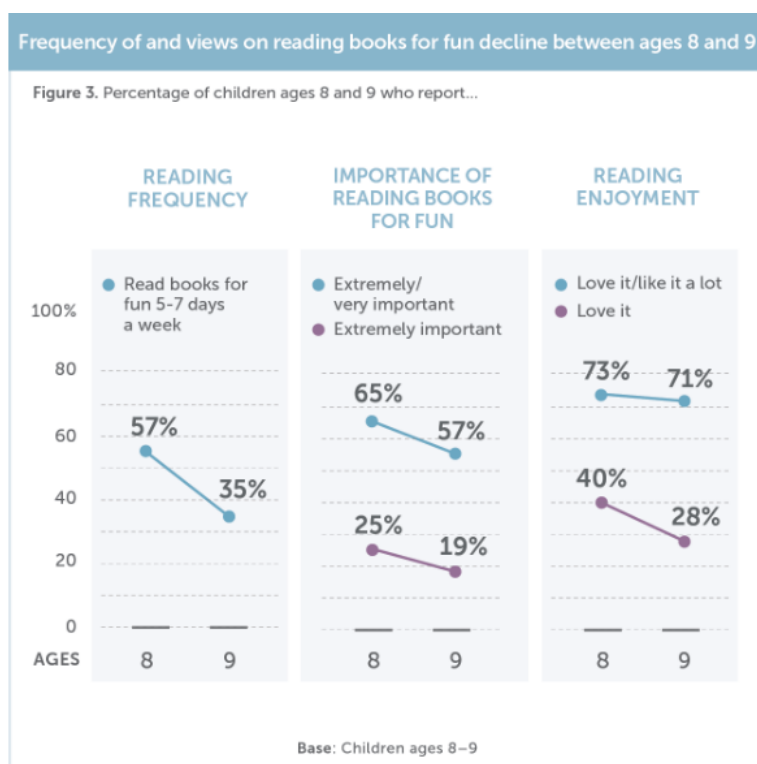

Fig. 2 *Kids & Family Reading Report* (Scholastic, 2019)

We know that reading engagement and reading success are reciprocally linked. Reading success leads to reading engagement and reading engagement leads to success. This was studied by Morgan and Fuchs (2007), in their longitudinal study "Is there a bidirectional relationship between children's reading skills and reading motivation?". This study concluded that there was a reciprocal relationship between student reading motivation and attainment of reading skills. Ultimately, Morgan and Fuchs concluded, "The interaction between poor reading and low motivation may 'snowball,' or increasingly influence each other in such a way as to lead to long-term reading failure" (Morgan & Fuchs, 2007, p.178).

Graphic novels and hybrid books have been shown to increase reading engagement, especially in this vulnerable age group. Michele Gorman, author of *Getting Graphic: Using Graphic Novels to Promote Literacy with Preteens and Teens* argued that ". . . research done by professionals in the field and real-life experience of librarians have shown that there is one format that covers a variety of genres, addresses current and relative issue for children, stimulates the young people's imagination, and engages reluctant readers: graphic novels" (Gorman, 2003, p. xi).

According to Paul Gravett, graphic novels "can encourage even the most reluctant reader" (Gravett, 2005). The format of graphic novels appeals to reluctant readers because they are often less voluminous and because of their typically shorter length, they can be seen as more easily readable. Kylene Beers notes "Thin books suggest that students don't have to invest a huge amount of time to finish them" (Beers, 2003, p. 285).

Graphic novels contain many of the same literary elements as traditional novels such as plot, characters, setting, problems and solutions. However, graphics provide a scaffold to help readers notice these elements. These visual scaffolds "offer reluctant readers the assistance it takes to hook them into an enjoyable reading experience" (Lesesne, 2007, p. 61). Graphic novels tend to progress through the plot more quickly than traditional novels so readers stay engaged with more frequent action. A problem that teachers face with reluctant readers is that "if they have to work through pages of character description before they find any action, then they probably will put the book away" (Beers, 2003, p. 286). Since the action is displayed visually, reluctant readers can quickly evaluate where the action begins before they decide to abandon a book. Gorman contends that graphic novels, through their use of visuals and text, ensure the reader is truly engaged because in order to comprehend, the reader must interact with both visuals and text. This ensures visual learners are "able to connect with graphic novels in a way that they cannot with text-only books" (Gorman, 2003, p. 9). This observation is echoed by bestselling graphic novelist, Raina Telgemeier. She says, "being able to draw visual information from the pictures helps so many readers…Context, environment, feeling, emotion: it's all there. If you're a reader who struggles with big blocks of text—and I have met many—this can be a revelation" (Maughan, 2016).

In the study, "Comprehension Strategies in Practice Through a Graphic Novel Study", the authors focused on students with average intellectual functioning in an elementary reading program. When reading graphic novels those students who were described as reluctant readers "identified this work as fun" (Sloboda, et al., 2014, p.19).

Lina Sun's wrote "Overall, the literature concerning graphic novels establishes that graphic novels can provide motivation and/or alternative manner for students to improve comprehension, take an active role in the interpretation of the content, learn about subjects that only had a fragmentary existence in the traditional curriculum, and engage in critical thinking and reading" (Sun, 2017, p. 24). Diana Maliszewski, a teacher-librarian, author, and researcher in the Toronto District School Board, has been a proponent for the inclusion of graphic novels as a means to engage both reluctant and struggling readers for over 20 years. It is her belief that "the combination of word and image can help reluctant readers who have short attention spans or problems visualizing…Comics are great for so many different areas in which people have struggled with literacy issues…They're the great equalizer because they're enjoyed by kids who are not strong readers as well as kids who are strong readers" (Mar, 2011).

The role of graphic novels, hybrid books and manga in student reading engagement and motivation is evident in School Library Journal's 2023 "Graphic Novels Survey". This survey was completed by 861 U.S. libraries (531 schools and 330 public libraries). The study concluded that "Graphic novels (including manga) have exploded in popularity with children and teens over the last few years… with 69% of elementary libraries have seen a significant increase in interest in the last few years, with 25% seeing a moderate increase, for a total interest increase of 96%. Middle schools show a 60% and 38% increase" (Cockcroft, 2023, p. 8). Manga, a Japanese form of comic or graphic novel, is a particular area of future growth. Despite its soaring popularity among young people, only 39% of elementary school libraries in the study shelved manga books compared to 95% that shelved graphic adaptations of novels. To further emphasize the draw these books have on the young reader, the survey concluded that in elementary school libraries 32% of readers exclusively read graphic novels, manga or hybrid books, and read no other genre. This number rises to 51% of middle school readers. (Cockcroft, 2023, p. 9)

The most popular graphic novel titles in the elementary school library in the study include *Dog Man*; *Babysitters Club* (Martin & Telegemier, 2025); Raina Telegemier series (e.g., *Smile* 2020, *Drama, 2012*); *Amulet*; Big Nate (Peirce, 2010*); Wings of Fire* (Sutherland, 2013). Among manga titles, *Naruto* (Kishimoto, 2003); *My Hero Academia* (Horikoshi, 2015); *Demon Slayer* (Gotouge, 2018); *Pokemon* (Kusaka, 2009); and *Dragonball Z* (Toriyama, 2009), were the five most popular series cited.

Despite this "school librarians estimate that 12 percent of their 2022-23 materials spending was dedicated to graphic novels" (Cockcroft, 2023, p.2). Additionally, only 7%

of classroom teachers use graphic novels as part of their teaching (Cockcroft, 2023, p.12). Clearly, there is much room to grow to meet demand.

Examining local primary source data

Since I took over the Westway JS LLC in 2020 I have prioritized a revitalization of the graphic novel section. The few graphic novels or hybrid books that were in the collection were shelved alphabetically within the fiction and non-fiction sections. When students asked for graphic novels I would have to scan the collection to pull titles that fit the request. I pulled all the graphic novel and hybrid books and searched the circulation data to determine if they were worth keeping. I underwent a deselection process of the out-of-date, damaged, or unpopular titles. I shelved the remaining titles in a dedicated section. Next, I prioritized purchasing titles in the graphic novel, hybrid, and manga categories. I made my purchasing decisions by analyzing data, surveying students, and researching the most recommended titles. I significantly expanded the collection with a particular lens to culturally relevant and responsive representation. I made sure to purchase titles that appealed to students from grades 1-5 at various reading levels.
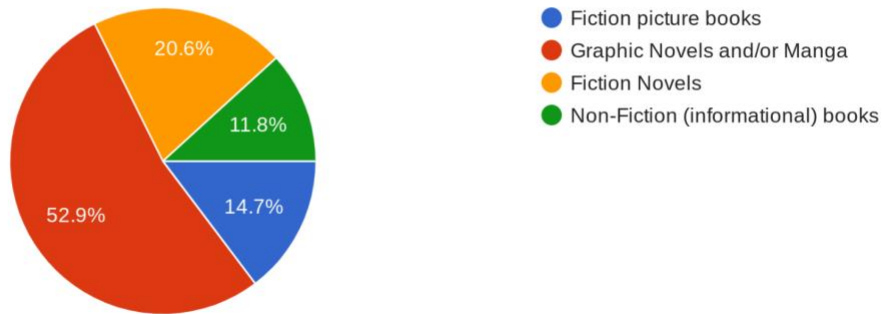
This past school year, the library was renovated. The renovation involved packing up the entire collection and installing new shelving. In consultation with the library services team, we decided to dedicate a lot more shelving space to the graphic novel, manga and hybrid section to accommodate expected future growth. This section is further divided into a graphic novel/hybrid section and a manga section, the latter showing tremendous and growing interest, beyond even that of graphic novels. Students gravitate to this section and there is always a flurry of excitement when I purchase new titles. Students rifle through the return bin to take out the book a classmate has just returned.

To illustrate student engagement with graphic novels, manga and hybrid books, I analyzed the 2023/24 collection data from my own school library. The five most circulated titles in the Westway JS LLC were *Dog Man* titles (not a surprise to any elementary school librarian). The next five most circulated titles were books from the *Who Would Win* series (Pallotta, 2021). This non-fiction series uses many of the visual elements of graphic novels and hybrid books and thus can be classified as hybrid books. Other titles heavily represented in the top 100 most circulated are the *Babysitter's Club* series of graphic novels, the *Bad Guys* series (Blabey, 2016), classified as a hybrid book, and the series of graphic novels by Raina Telgemeier. Of the 100 most circulated titles in the Westway JS LLC, 89 of them fit under the graphic novel, hybrid book, or manga category. See Most Circulated Items.pdf.

To further reveal student reading engagement, I analyzed the results of a survey I conducted in November, 2024. It was completed by students in grade 3-5, between the ages 8-11 at Westway JS. I chose this age range because it encompasses the age group most prone to the "decline by nine" phenomenon. Thirty-four students responded to the question, "What category of book do you like to read the most?" Eighteen students responded by noting manga, hybrid books or graphic novels as their most preferred genre of book. This represents 53% of the students surveyed. Of note, some of the responses that indicated fiction as the preferred genre might include graphic novels under that umbrella. Thus, the results might be an underrepresentation of the popularity of these genres.

What category of book in the Westway library do you like to read the most?
34 responses

- Fiction picture books
- Graphic Novels and/or Manga
- Fiction Novels
- Non-Fiction (informational) books

Thirty-one students responded to the question, "What is your favourite book that you've read in the Westway library?" Twenty-three students responded with a title that fit the graphic novel, hybrid or manga categories. These results show that approximately 74% of students identify graphic novels, hybrid books or manga as their genre and title of preference. The next closest genre of preference was fiction, with 7 of the 31 students

preferring that category of book.

Do you have a favourite book you've read in the Westway Library? What is it?
31 responses
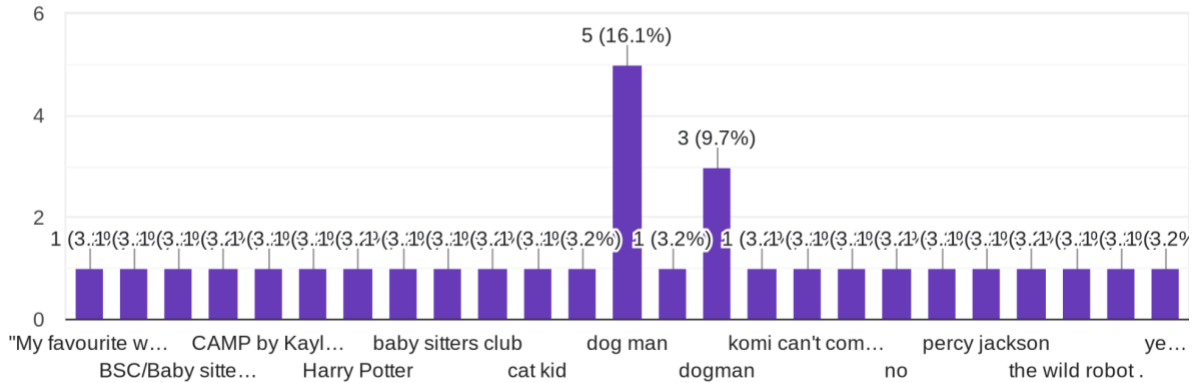
When students were asked why they preferred one category of book over the other, those who chose manga, graphic novels or hybrid books offered the following explanations. One student who chose *Thea Stilton* (Stilton, 2009), as their favourite book said, "They are fun creative and involve cool things, places and people". Another student who mentioned *Clash* (Miller, 2021), as their favourite book remarked, "Because they are more visual and I find them more interesting." A student who loves *Dog Man* (among many other students) explained this way, "i like graphic novels because it avecheris (adventurous) and the books are fun".

Conclusion

A school library learning commons is an integral part of a young person's burgeoning literacy experience. It is where they can find the type of reading material that they can get excited about and spark a lifelong interest in reading for pleasure. It is incumbent upon teacher-librarians to ensure that the materials in the SLLC stoke this excitement. Teacher-librarians can do this by listening to the preferences and requests of their students and keeping current on what the academic literature reveals about student reading interests. Both the primary source data from the students themselves and the academic literature point to the importance of a large, diverse, intentionally collected and curated collection of graphic novels, hybrid books and manga titles to enhance reading engagement. It is especially crucial that the collection of an elementary LLC include many titles in these categories to limit the documented phenomenon of "the decline at nine", which refers to children starting to lose reading interest and engagement in the middle primary junior years. Every school librarian should evaluate their collection data to determine if the supply of these texts meet the demands of the readers they cater to. If we can create early engaged readers we know academic and career success tend to follow.

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