Boys and Criminal Justice in Teen Fiction:  
A Review of Current Adolescent Literature

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As the definition of multicultural children’s literature expands, more life experiences are being shared by authors and illustrators. However, not every minority group receives equal treatment from publishers. This article focuses on young adolescent fiction with themes of criminal justice. This study is comprehensive and current, looking at a sample of books concerning this topic, the possible responses of students, and how to incorporate these books into the school curriculum.

Introduction

Boys are different readers than girls. As a former classroom teacher, I would witness this phenomenon each week during check-out time in the library. My female students were asked to return books to the shelves because they had reached their check-out limit of five books. On the other hand, my male students were waiting by the library door with empty arms. I would ask those students why they did not have any books and get the same answers each week: ‘I don’t like to read’; ‘Reading is for girls’; or ‘There’re no good books in this library.’

These comments reflect the challenges teachers around the world face with male students. To break the stereotype of reading being for girls, boys need to be exposed to stories that both capture their imagination and reflect their lives (Zambo & Brozo, 2009; Flake, 2008). These stories can inspire boys to read more and they can also teach boys about positive male values (Zambo & Brozo, 2009).

A specific population of boys that I wanted to examine was boys with incarcerated parents. The U.S. Bureau of Justice reports that 54% of our nation’s prisoners are parents of minor children, who are under the age of eighteen (Glaze & Maruschak, 2009). These parents reported having approximately 1,706,600 children, which works out to be 2.3% of the U.S. resident population under the age of eighteen (Glaze & Maruschak, 2009). Out of fifty school-age kids, it is likely that one student has an incarcerated parent.

Certain populations of students, specifically African Americans, are also more likely to have these experiences. When boys have this experience, they need to be able to talk
about it with teachers and their peers. Children’s literature that addresses topics of criminal justice can be an excellent way to start conversations for these students in classrooms.

**Analysis of Books**

Finding books with male characters who had incarcerated parents was difficult. First, I expanded my search criteria to include stories of boys who had older siblings in prison (usually it was an older brother who was incarcerated). Then I searched for books about boys who faced their own incarceration or who had already faced punishment for breaking the law. These expansions gave me a few more novels to examine, but I still feel that the selection is extremely limited. The table (Figure 1) below categorizes the books about criminal justice according to their major theme.

**Figure 1: Categories of books**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Incarcerated family members</th>
<th>Facing incarceration</th>
<th>Life after punishment</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><em>The Same Stuff as Stars</em> (dad)</td>
<td><em>Hole in My Life</em></td>
<td><em>Touching Spirit Bear</em></td>
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<tr>
<td><em>Scorpions</em> (older brother)</td>
<td><em>Black &amp; White</em></td>
<td><em>The Ghost of Spirit Bear</em></td>
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<tr>
<td><em>Forged by Fire</em> (mom, step-dad)</td>
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<td><em>Twisted</em></td>
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<td><em>Surviving the Applewhites</em> (mom &amp; dad)</td>
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<tr>
<td><em>After Tupac &amp; D Foster</em> (older brother)</td>
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**Incarcerated family members:**

The books about incarcerated family members address many issues. When the incarcerated family member is a parent, the issue of where does the child live now arises. In *Surviving the Applewhites*, Jake’s parents are both arrested and sent to jail for growing and selling marijuana. Different sets of grandparents try to take him in, but Jake’s anger and frustration directed at them and at his schools, causes him to be sent to an alternative school at the home of the Applewhite family. It is with this family that Jake discovers his talents in science and singing and becomes passionate about education.

A great aunt becomes the caregiver in *Forged by Fire*. Gerald’s junkie mother leaves him alone in their apartment at only three years-old. Curious about the light that comes from a stick, Gerald starts playing with his mother’s lighter and accidentally sets the apartment on fire. He is saved by his neighbor, who smelled the smoke, and taken to the hospital before his mother even returns to the ruined apartment. Aunt Queen takes Gerald in and shows him real care and love while his mom goes to jail for child abandonment charges.

In *The Same Stuff as Stars*, Angel and Bernie are first being cared for by their mother while their father is in jail. When their mother finds a new boyfriend, however, she decides to take the children to live with their father’s grandmother. Angel and Bernie must
learn how to take care of themselves and the woman they call grandma, even though she is their great-grandmother.

In the books about incarcerated older siblings, the concerns of visitation and appealing prison sentences are addressed. Both families in the books, *Scorpions* and *After Tupac and D Foster*, visit the oldest sons in prison. While this might seem like a very natural thing to do, usually it is much harder because prisoners are often incarcerated far away from their homes. Over 60% of parents in State prisons and almost 85% of those in Federal prisons are incarcerated more than 100 miles from their last residence (Clopton & East, 2008). Both authors touch on the difficulty of visitation by writing about the different trains and buses needed to get to each boy’s prison.

The other concern that arises in the books about incarcerated older brothers is appealing their prison sentences. In *After Tupac and D Foster*, Tash is in jail for being in the wrong place at the wrong time with the wrong group of people. He has done nothing illegal, but the elderly man that his so-called friends beat up is not able to testify to his innocence at the trial. Tash’s family appeals his sentence when the man recovers from his injuries and contacts the police.

In *Scorpions*, Jamal’s older brother, Randy, has done something illegal. With two other gang members, Randy holds up a convenience store clerk. In the process of the hold-up, the clerk is shot and dies. It is not certain whether Randy shot the clerk or another gang member did, but Randy is the one who is tried for murder because he is legally considered an adult at eighteen. The other gang members try to convince Jamal’s mother to hire a lawyer to appeal the sentence, but the cost is too great. There is also the feeling that the appeal will not be successful.

**Facing Incarceration**

In books where the main male character is facing incarceration, the reader gets a detailed account of how the criminal justice system works. *Black and White* is the story of two best friends in high school who decide to rob people for extra money. Marcus is black and Eddie is white, but race does not affect their relationship at first. The boys get away with two robberies, but then accidentally shoot their third victim, who survives and recognizes Marcus from the bus.

This book goes through the police investigation of Marcus and the search for the shooter, Eddie. Marcus’ trial is detailed, as is Eddie’s indictment. The reader also sees the differences in justice that each boy receives. Eddie’s family has the power and money to fight the indictment, while Marcus’ single mother is convinced to take a plea by the court-appointed attorney. The story ends with Marcus being sent to jail for robbery and Eddie awaiting his trial, but being confident of his acquittal.

Jack Gantos’ personal account of his experience of facing incarceration is the subject of *Hole in My Life*. He writes about getting caught smuggling marijuana from St. Croix to New York City by a sailboat. He thinks he can evade the authorities by sneaking out of his New York hotel room and taking a train to a former residence in Florida, but a phone call to his father confirms that the law will catch him. Gantos stands trial for
smuggling and is under the false hope that because of his age and clean record, he might just be put on probation. The prosecutor, however, shares a line from Gantos’ journal onboard ship that seals his fate: “Hamilton had read my mind—I’m not doing anything wrong. I’m just afraid of the punishment.” (Gantos, 2002: 144).

This thought is examined again and again as Gantos spends almost two years in prison. At first, he really feels that smuggling drugs and then selling them is an appropriate area of business. It is only after he sees the suffering of the drug-users’ families that he begins to feel the consequences of his actions. He is lucky that he becomes an x-ray technician for the on-site hospital and therefore, has separate quarters from the other prisoners. Even his appeals for parole are documented in this book. Applying to a small college with a creative writing program is how he eventually receives parole.

**Life after punishment**

The main theme of books about males who have endured the consequences of their actions is perseverance. This is especially important for boys to read about because they make up the majority of offenders in the juvenile justice system (Zambo & Brozo, 2009). In *Twisted*, Tyler is a high school junior who is looking for a way to stand out among his peers. He decides to spray paint his school building right before the end of the year, but makes several mistakes that lead to his almost immediate arrest.

His summer is spent doing community service and working to pay back his father for lawyer fees. Throughout his senior year, Tyler is faced with many challenges and he knows that one mistake at school or home could now send him to jail. He struggles to stand up for himself against bullies without resorting to physical violence.

The two novels, *Touching Spirit Bear* and *Ghost of Spirit Bear*, follow the same character, Cole during the course of two years. In the first book, *Touching Spirit Bear*, Cole is offered Circle Justice, which is based on Native American customs, after he severely beats up another student.

This type of criminal justice is different from the normal system because its goal is to provide healing for the criminal offender, the victim, and the community members (family, teachers, and other students). Cole’s sentence is a year-long banishment to a remote Alaskan island, where he must learn to deal with his anger and grief. In order to survive on that island, Cole learns to stop blaming others for his mistakes and finally takes responsibility for his actions.

In the sequel, *Ghost of Spirit Bear*, Cole returns to his home and school. He struggles to live the way he did on the island and to control his reactions to bullies and teachers without sympathy. Cole perseveres and makes a positive change for the whole student body when he convinces the school board to change their mascot from an angry bulldog to a spirit bear.
Possible Responses to Books

Books about boys and the criminal justice system need to be read and discussed in the classroom. Possible responses could be oral, written, or artistic in nature. One way for students to respond orally to these books would be with literature circles. These are a discussion procedure where students can talk about books in a group setting. In them, students are asked to read with a purpose and then discuss what they read, determining for themselves what is important and why.

Literature circles are student-centered and student-directed, but facilitated by a teacher. In this setting, students might feel safe enough to share their personal experiences with the criminal justice system. Another oral response could be done as role play. Students could take situations from the book they are reading and act them out. In some cases, it might be beneficial for students to re-enact how the main character faces a situation (e.g. Cole controlling his reactions to bullies). It could also be helpful for students to perform alternatives to what the main characters did (e.g. Marcus feeling pressured to carry out robberies with Eddie). In both instances, students can use words and actions to respond to these books.

Students can respond to books about criminal justice through writing in many ways. One example would be to keep a journal of their reactions to actions of the main characters. Students could ask questions of the characters such as: Are these characters making the right choices? What challenges do these characters face? What are the consequences for certain actions? Students could also make personal connections to the different texts. In three of these books, the main characters were forced to live with someone who was not their parent. Many kids in the classroom have also had that same experience. First reading about someone else in a similar situation and then writing about this connection helps validate a student’s own experience.

Drawing is another way for students to respond to books about criminal justice. For some students, responding artistically may be much easier than talking or writing (Jacobs, 2006). Leland and Harste write about using sketches as a way for students to symbolize what a book means to them (Leland & Harste, 2001).

Their process is called Sketch to Stretch and it has four levels of involvement. This strategy could be beneficial for all students, but especially for boys, because of its focus on art. Boys will also enjoy flexibility in their sketches because “boys are more likely to draw more active pictures or verbs” (Zambo & Brozo, 2009: 32). The first level is called taking stock. Students start by drawing summaries of the books they read. The second level is called inquiry.

The sketches represent questions students have about the whole story or about the specific actions of characters. The third level is called interrogation. Here the sketches start to explore the power relations between the characters. In all of these books, students could ask, “Who gets justice and who deserves justice?” The fourth and final level is called social action. The sketches start to symbolize students’ thoughts about how to change social situations.
Using these Books in the Curriculum:

Books about criminal justice can easily be added into the language arts curriculum. A genre study of realistic fiction would include all of these novels. Teachers could focus on particular aspects of that genre while discussing the relevant subject matter. The books could also be introduced under large themes for the year.

One theme could be survival; each character in these ten books learns how to survive a personal experience with the criminal justice system. In addition, the characters learn to survive other obstacles such as abuse, problems controlling anger, neglect, and peer pressure.

Another theme for the language arts class could be consequences. Students can examine literature throughout the year to determine causes of actions and then the results of those actions. (This could also be extended into other disciplines in school.) The books themselves could also be taught in ways that focus on literary elements. For example, the books about those who faced incarceration and endured punishment show dynamic characters. Students can plot the drastic ways that a character changed from the beginning of a book to its end.

Another way to use these books in the classroom would be during a unit on social justice. Issues of race, gender, and wealth arise in how the different characters experienced criminal justice. After reading several books on this subject, students can start to ask questions about how the characters are treated. If Tyler had been black, would he have received the same sentence of community service for vandalizing his school? (Or if Tyler’s family had not had money for an attorney, would he still receive the same sentence?) The Stretch to Sketch strategy could be helpful in this unit to motivate students to ask questions about fairness and justice in terms of race, gender, and wealth.

In the social studies classroom, these books could be used to illustrate the criminal justice process. Some students have the misconception that police officers hand out sentences and deliver criminals to prison. It is important to study the three main areas of criminal justice: police, courts, and corrections. A fictionalized account of this process may help students understand it better.

While these books have a place in the classroom, I think they also deserve to be discussed outside of the classroom. Counselors and social workers need to expose the students they work with to these books. This could be done in small groups that are either heterogeneous or homogeneous. It could also be an activity that is done with individual students. In some cases, the extra training that a counselor or social worker might have could be extremely beneficial to a student dealing with the criminal justice system.

Final Thoughts

The population of students who have very personal experiences with the criminal justice system is growing. The number of parents of minor children who are held in the nation’s prisons increased by 79% between 1991 and 2007 (Glaze & Maruschak, 2009). Teachers have a duty to address the needs of these students, especially the boys, by
exposing them to literature that reminds them of their lives. All students will benefit from the opportunities that literature affords to change them with new ideas, sympathies, and understandings. These encounters with print can enlarge a boy’s sense of self (Zambo & Brozo, 2009). While I was able to find ten exceptional novels on this topic, it is unfortunate that there were not more. Teachers then have the extra duty of encouraging the purchase of these books in school and community libraries.

References

Novels


Resources

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