Bank Street College of Education

Educate

Spring 4-10-2018

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Recommended Citation

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Childhood General Education and Teaching Literacy

Mentor:
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Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements of the degree of
Master of Science in Education
Bank Street College of Education
2018

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Abstract

This paper will explore the use of graphic novels in the context of the classroom, ultimately arguing that graphic novels not only deserve a place in elementary through high school classrooms, but are an effective and successful learning tool. The paper is divided into four central arguments utilizing a review of relevant literature to support each section's argument. It will begin with an examination of the motivation for the paper's creation, detailing the circumstance unto which the author of this paper decided to write it. The paper will then move into the four central parts. Part one will examine research findings linking motivation with reading attainment. It will then relate this link to subsequent research conducted utilizing graphic novels as a motivator for students across grade levels. Then, the paper's second section will draw upon the emerging importance of multimodal literacy within the context of the 21st century and will detail graphic novels' role as a multimodal medium in preparing children to analyze and synthesize information delivered through multimodalities. Next, the paper's third section will address a variety of literacy skills and strategies that students encounter and gain mastery of throughout their schooling. The section will subsequently utilize research that tracked student attainment and use of these skills and strategies through classroom use of graphic novels. Finally, the paper's fourth section will detail content subjects, including math, science and social studies. It will explore research conducted to use graphic novels in these areas to support and extend student learning. Ultimately, the paper will conclude that graphic novels are a valuable learning tool for the classroom.

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<u>Introduction</u>

In 2016 I sat in a Bank Street graduate class on children's literature. A debate had broken out amongst the class. Teachers were torn over the merits of including graphic novels in the classroom. While a few voices spoke out strongly in favor of their inclusion, the vast majority spoke of how these texts were banned in their classrooms. Several teachers lamented that many students gravitated toward graphic novels and in feeling that this medium of story telling did not provide the same quality of literacy development, forced students to put the books away in favor of more traditional texts. What abounded was an overall belief that graphic novels did not carry the same academic merits as traditional texts.

Listening to a classroom full of well-meaning educators discuss preventing children from reading, on the basis that it was not "real reading," I began to consider the world we currently live in and what message we may be sending to children when we devalue texts they engage with. In an attempt to better understand the potential place graphic novels could occupy within the classroom I began to engage in the research process. As I did, I was struck by a recurring sentiment that researchers encountered. While "graphic novels have become mainstream and are gaining increasing acceptance in the academy," (Downey, 2009, p.186), in classrooms children are often still being sent the message by adults in their lives that graphic novels do not occupy the same level of merit as traditional chapter books.

Again and again, researchers found that graphic novels were being devalued in the classroom. In a study of middle school students reading graphic novels, Lina Sun (2017) found that before beginning the study, "even those students who had read graphic novels tended to believe that no pictorial representation can capture the complexity and truth of events as well as purely written text. They believed that comic books, even the extended

ones, are for children, juveniles at best," (p. 26). Similarly, when Bonny Norton conducted a 2003 study of children who read Archie comics, she found that "when [she] asked children if they thought Archie comics should be permitted during silent reading at school, the children responded with a host of insightful comments, most of them suggesting that teachers preferred 'chapter books' to comic books," (p. 145). While academia may be conducting research exploring the value of graphic novels, on the ground, teachers and parents are still sending the message to children that this medium is of lesser quality than traditional chapter books.

In "The Case for Graphic Novels" Steven Hoover (2012) claims,"treating graphic novels as a format or medium, on par with more established and respected media such as print-only texts and film, is a good first step towards unlocking their full potential and opening possibilities for integration into educational efforts," (p. 176). However, in order for this medium to be seen as "on par" with print-only texts, educators must first be aware of the benefits this medium provides students. Therefore, this paper will seek to engage educators in the potential value in bringing graphic novels into the classroom. Utilizing a review of recent literature, the paper will be divided into four sections detailing the value that graphic novels hold in the classroom across grade levels. This paper will argue the following: 1. that there is a link between graphic novels and reading motivation which is supported by the positive link between reading motivation and reading success; 2. graphic novels act as a form of multimodal literacy, which is crucial to preparing students for a world that increasingly requires the ability to function with multimodal literacy; 3. that research supports graphic novels' use to teach reading comprehension and reading skills; 4. graphic novels can be used as a meaningful way to support student engagement in content areas.

Part 1: Motivation

Reading skills play a crucial role in student success. From an early age, emphasis is put on teaching children to read, as eventually they will hit a point in which they are no longer learning to read, but reading to learn. However, in order for students to develop as readers, they must engage with reading. This lynchpin is motivation or students' willingness and desire to engage in reading activities.

By and large, research has supported the correlation between reading motivation and reading attainment. According to a 2015 study entitled, "Exploring the Relationship Between Adolescent's Reading Skills, Reading Motivation and Reading Habits," researchers Sarah P. McGeown, Lynne G. Duncan, Yvonne M. Griffiths, and Sue E. Stothard (2015), found that "adolescents' reading skills (word reading, comprehension, summarisation and text reading speed) correlated significantly with their reading motivation," (p. 555). Their research concluded that motivation predicted reading outcomes. "In general, reading motivation and fiction book reading were significant predictors of adolescents' reading comprehension and summarisation skills...and text reading speed," (McGeown et al., 2015, p. 563). In other words, students who were found to be motivated to read were more likely to reach reading attainment.

Similarly, in the longitudinal study of research looking at the link between motivation and reading skills, "Is there a bidirectional relationship between children's reading skills and reading motivation?" Paul L. Morgan and Douglas Fuchs (2007) found that there was a reciprocal relationship between student reading motivation and attainment of reading skills. Ultimately, Morgan and Fuchs (2007) 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," (p. 178). Just as for students who were motivated to read could achieve reading attainment, students who were unmotivated found themselves in a reciprocal spiral downward.

Moreover, when researchers looked specifically at reading comprehension among elementary school students, reading success and reading motivation appeared to be correlated. In "A Longitudinal Study of the Role of Reading Motivation in Primary Students' Reading Comprehension: Implications for a Less Simple View of Reading," Kelly B. Cartwright, Timothy R. Marshall and Erica Wray (2015) noted, "Students who perceive themselves to be successful readers and value reading will exhibit higher motivation to read, engage in reading more frequently, and develop better reading skills," (p. 59). The snowball effect, as posited by Morgan and Fuchs holds here. The relationship between motivation and attainment appears reciprocal in nature. For their study, Cartwright et al., (2015), enlisted 68 first and second graders in an urban, Mid-Atlantic public school district in order "to determine whether motivation contributes to primary students' reading comprehension as has been found consistently with upper elementary students," (p. 81). As stated, Cartwright et al.'s (2015) research uncovered that, "even in primary school, children who are more motivated are already reporting reading more than their less motivated peers," (p. 81).

This is significant as the importance of reading skills and comprehension only becomes more crucial as students get older. If children in first and second grade already lack motivation, the gap will only grow as time passes. Not surprisingly, Cartwright et al. (2015) found just that. "Reading motivation in first and second grades accounted for an even greater amount of significant variance in students' reading comprehension growth over two years than the amount of variance accounted for in reading comprehension at initial testing," (p.

83). It appears then, that motivation early on creates a gap that only grows as students continue on in school.

This link between motivation and ability, then spirals out into student views of themselves as readers. In a 2001 study conducted by Sarah J. McCarthey entitled, "Identity Construction in Elementary Readers and Writers," McCarthey (2001) found that when studying fifth graders "students had a sense of who they were as readers and writers and of the value they placed on those activities. They saw themselves in relation to classroom norms," (p. 143). In the classroom, students created subidentities for themselves as literacy learners. Ultimately, this would suggest that motivation early on that creates gaps in reading skill level will then spiral out to influence general views of students as readers as part of their identities. The "social view of literacy suggests that success and interest in literacy may be dynamic and dependent upon various contexts rather than individual and fixed in nature. Further, perceptions by students and others close to them may influence students' performance in classrooms," (McCarthey, 2001, p. 122). Students become who they and those around them perceive them to be.If motivation and interest play such a critical role in students' ability to not only see themselves as readers, but to actually achieve reading skills, teachers must look to mediums that research has shown to impact motivation.

Considering long term implications for students who have already become reluctant readers it is important to note that in context, when motivation creates a gap in attainment, which widens as the years of school continue, students who already do not see themselves as readers have been found to be even more acutely aware of the level of books being presented to them. In the study, "Comprehension Strategies in Practice Through a Graphic Novel Study" Maureen A. Sloboda, Beverley A. Brenna and Cheryl Kosowan-Kirk (2014)

conducted a "qualitative exploratory case study [which] explored particular points of connection between comprehension strategies and graphic novels for a population of students with average intellectual ability who were enrolled in an elementary reading program," (p. 17). As they conducted their research, Sloboda et al. (2014) found that "this study also illuminated how sensitive these struggling readers were to ideas about age-appropriate reading," (Sloboda et al., 2014, p. 19). When considering reluctant readers, educators must be mindful of how motivation and subidentities as readers are further impacted by the reading these students are presented. In this way, graphic novels can present a means of engagement for otherwise unmotivated or reluctant readers.

Graphic novels' format can then be used as a way to create a more equitable reading experiences and potentially increase motivation for reluctant readers. While conducting their study, Sloboda et al. (2014), found that "participants described as reluctant readers identified this work as fun" (p. 19). Feelings that working with graphic novels is a fun and an engaging activity is crucial when considering that these students were identified as reluctant readers.

Additionally, Sloboda et al. (2014) note that for these students, "as their knowledge about graphic novels increased during the study, and they perceived other students coming into the resource room to borrow particular graphic novels...participants' respect increased for this textual form along with their willingness to explore it" (p. 19). When students saw the value in graphic novels and the perceived value of the medium by those around them, it impacted their motivation. If teachers are willing to engage with graphic novels as a legitimate form, students will engage as well. "It became clear that a platform for reading on which everyone can stand - struggling readers and fluent readers alike - is particularly engaging for struggling readers and that self-awareness in this regard affects motivation,"

(Sloboda et al., 2014, p. 19). When teachers are willing to engage in a medium in which all students can feel competent, motivation increases for all students.

> "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).

Across the board, student motivation and reciprocally, attainment, increases with the inclusion of graphic novels.

In a 2013 study entitled, "Social Studies Content Reading about the American Revolution Enhanced with Graphic Novels" Kari Bosma, Audrey C. Rule, & Karla S. Krueger found that "graphic novels engage a variety of readers because of their highly visual format," (p. 62). The visual format brings readers into the content in a way that print-only books do not, creating greater motivation to continue reading. "The high level of reader involvement brings enjoyment, maintaining interest in the story," (Bosma et al., 2013, p. 62). If students remain interested they can in turn take more away from their reading and even alter previously held beliefs about reading. Thinking back to Sloboda et al.'s study,

> "participants in this current study evolved in their approach to the treatment of reading situations, at first indicating that words are the thing that makes them good or poor reader - words are the 'bad guy' in reading situations where they struggle to comprehend...As students' focus on the interpretation of visuals increase, word work became more of a creative problem solving activity, not just as science previously unattainable," (Sloboda et al., 2014, p. 19).

Sloboda et al., found that when students were able to engage with the additional visuals provided in graphic novels the once arduous task of word work took on new meaning and was no longer seen as out of their reach.

Moreover, in studies in which graphic novels were introduced as part of a book group, researchers found that "students who had dutifully read only required books in the past, continued to return to the school library well after the elective was finished to check out prose fiction for recreational reading. The elective confirms the impact of Graphic Novels Book Group on reading motivation," (Seyfried, 2008, p. 45). When students were given opportunities to actively engage with graphic novels they continued to grow and engage with the medium. Similar to the students who had once viewed word work as the "bad guy" students who had once only read because they were told to, engaged independently with graphic novels. Similarly, in Edward (2009) found that "students in this study commented that they had found graphic novels fun to read and had even purchased personal copies to read at home," (p. 58). They had taken the work into their own hands and continued their exploration. "Teachers said that students in all classes, even those who were not officially participating in the study, were choosing to read graphic novels during free time and continued to do so after the study concluded," (Edwards, 2009, p. 58). Graphic novels effectively create an equitable playing field of motivation.

This is particularly encouraging when one considers struggling readers and motivation. For such students, it is important to note the accessibility of graphic novels. "Struggling readers, often unengaged with literacy in general, need a corrective approach to reading intervention - their ability to improve has to be based on building confidence with positive successful reading experiences," (McVicker, 2007, p. 86). For struggling readers the

motivation for traditional texts is often not there. Alternatively graphic novels allow for a platform in which students can stand In "Comic Strips as a Text Structure for Learning to Reader," Claudia J. McVicker (2007) found that "the visual representation of the text provides the reader with a deeper comprehension of the author's intended message," (p. 87). When the initial barrier of text-only print is removed, struggling readers are able to gain access to and engage with deeper content. "Comics, through the use of visual literacy, can open the door to reading for the challenged student because they offer a visual element for comprehending the text. In some cases, this may offer a turning point for those struggling readers who have lost the hope for success," (McVicker, 2007, p. 87). If one continues to acknowledge the link between motivation and reading attainment, then this open door through visual literacy may as, McVicker states, offer a turning point for students.

Similarly, such a turning point can be seen particularly in struggling male students. Citing Karen Gavigan (2011), Robin a. Moeller (2013) notes, "those struggling male adolescent readers who engaged with graphic novels felt more confident as readers, and were encouraged and motivated to read more often," (p. 15). Moeller (2013) continues, "I have found that male and female high school students enjoyed reading graphic novels...with male students expressing more enjoyment in understanding the author and illustrator's full intention through text and visuals," (p. 15). If one considers the need to engage struggling male students, graphic novels have proven to be an effective way to do so. The combination of text and visuals provides new motivation, not seen in traditional texts.

The visual literacy offered to struggling readers through graphic novels has been shown to motivate and support students across studies. Elizabeth M. Downey (2009) found in her study, "Graphic Novels in Curriculum and Instruction Collections" that graphic novels

are "perceived as less threatening by overwhelmed students, and the pictures can help them grasp the meaning of the content, learn new vocabulary words, advance the narrative, and be motivated to read," (p. 183). This is extremely significant when considering the alternative. Here, Downey not only found that graphic novels motivated students, but furthermore that the medium actual benefited their ability to grasp content and narrative as well as learn new vocabulary.

While educators work to engage struggling readers, research has also found that overall as students progress through school reading motivation decreases. In "Motivating Middle School Readers: The Graphic Novel Link", Buffy Edwards (2009) notes, "current research on reading motivation finds that as children move from upper elementary grades towards adolescence, motivation to read, particularly during free time, declines," (p. 56). Overall students are spending less time engaging with reading activities as they get older. Put simply, motivation to read declines. However, in this same study, Edwards (2009) found, "that reading graphic novels...could affect the intrinsic motivation, vocabulary and comprehension ability of seventh graders," (p. 57). Intrinsic motivation refers internal motivation to engage in an activity. For instance students reading for pleasure and not for a grade, which would constitute extrinsic motivation. Edwards (2009) continues, "following the study, students indicated they liked reading more, they were more skilled at reading, and they enjoyed reading the format of graphic novels. More participants said reading was valued for intrinsic reasons, while fewer participants said reading was valued for extrinsic reasons," (p. 57). In a 2016 study entitled, "Understanding Children's reading Activities: Reading Motivation, Skills and Child Characteristics as Predictors," Sarah P. McGeown, Cara Osborn, Amy Warhurst, Roger Morgate, and Lynne G. Duncan concluded much the same

thing. Finding a link between intrinsic motivation and comic book reading (McGeown et al., 2016, p. 120). This shift brought about by graphic novels is huge! Researchers were able to show that for a population that has been shown to traditionally lose motivation, graphic novels appear to help reverse that slide as students move into and through adolescence. Additional studies have drawn similar conclusions. In "More than Comic Books" Bill Boerman-Cornell (2013) concludes that "graphic novels also make compelling reading for some students and may prove an effective way to hold interest in reading during the crucial late elementary and middle school years," (p. 76). If educators and parents alike hope to curb the decline in reading motivation as children move forward in their schooling, research supports a place for graphic novels in prevention.

However, one does not have to wait until the middle school slide takes hold. Research conducted on students in early elementary grades found that when primary graphic novels (PGN) were integrated into the classroom children were motivated to engage with the medium. "Students were immediately enamored with the PGN's fresh look, and the books continued to draw their attention during any free reading moments throughout the experience," (Chase, Son, Steiner, 2014, p. 442). In their work to discover how best to use graphic novels in the classroom, researchers Chase et al., (2014) found that "the PGN's accessible content, owing to their abundant visual information and appropriate grade-level text, enabled all students in this diverse class of learners to find titles to enjoy," (p. 442). Because graphic novels exist across grade levels and content areas teachers can access grade appropriate texts even for the youngest of readers. As seen in Chase et al.'s research, students respond positively to graphic novels' inclusion in the classroom. Therefore, a diverse range of learners can begin building motivation and reading skills right at the beginning.

Reading motivation is crucial to reading skills development and attainment as students progress through their schooling. Even at the earliest ages, student motivation begins to create a gap in skills and identities as readers. Fortunately, across grades graphic novels have been shown to increase motivation in students as young as first grade through high school, and help build struggling readers' engagement and ability as literacy learners.

Part 2: Multimodal

As highlighted through motivation, many struggling readers found the visuals incorporated as part of graphic novels to be a stimulus in engaging with the text. But beyond struggling or reluctant readers, the need to engage with multimodal mediums is becoming more and more important to today's learners. William Boerman-Cornell, in his 2016 study defines multimodality. "Multimodality simply means communicating using more than one mode-music, spoken word, dance, or in the case of GNs, words and images," (Boerman-Cornell, 2016, p. 327). Students today exist in a world inundated by multimodal forms. "For several centuries there was, in Western culture, a tendency towards 'monomodality.' The culturally most highly valued genres of writing (literacy novels, academic treatises, official documents, etc.) were characterised by graphically uniform, dense pages of print and carried no illustrations," (van Leeuwen, 2017, p. 17). Traditionally, valued texts were monomodal. For it to be seen as important, text needed to consist of only one modality, most notably text-only. This way of thinking still persists in classrooms, but is becoming more and more outdated.

Today, children no longer live in a monomodal world. "To read websites, advertising, magazine articles, and other sources, students need to learn to decode words, images, and other modes all at once," (Boerman-Cornell, 2016, p. 327). With the ever growing presence

of multimodal literacy weaving its way into children's everyday lives, the monomodal model of the past is becoming increasingly obsolete.

This shift is in fact happening faster than teachers and parents may even realize. According to Common Sense Media's 2017 *Common Sense Census: Media Use by Kids Age Zero to Eight*,

> "Nearly all (98 percent) children age 8 and under live in a home with some type of mobile device... Ninety-five percent of families with children this age now have a smartphone, up from 63 percent in 2013 and 41 percent in 2011, and 78 percent have a tablet (up from...8 percent just six years ago, in 2011). Indeed, 42 percent of children now have their own tablet device — up from 7 percent four years ago and less than 1 percent in 2011," (Common Sense Media, 2017, p. 15).

A child's world today is constantly changing. If 42 percent of children now have access to a personal tablet, a jump of 41 percent in just eight years, educators must be prepared for this trend to continue.

While some adults may look back at a time in which monomodal text was a beacon of learning, children today are and will continue to exist in a world that requires competence with multimodal texts. As media becomes ever more present in their lives, it becomes an increasing necessity on the part of educators to make sure that children will have the skill necessary to engage in a technology dominant society. In "Redefining Literacy in the Digital Age," Ruth Reynard (2017) corroborates this stance, "the growing challenge over the last several decades is that new technology and various new media have altered how meaning is constructed - how language is used, and therefore, what literacy involves," (p. 11). We no longer live in a world that plays solely by the traditional rules of the game. The ever

changing and expanding role of new technologies is effectively changing the way children need to take in and process information. Reynard (2017) continues, "Ultimately, if we are trying to evaluate literacy using old rules, old functions and old meaning, we are really not evaluating literacy as it exists now," (p. 11). If educators are not willing to adapt to today's landscape, then children will not be prepared to evaluate and interpret the multimodal literacy that exists in the world in which they must function.

Considering the children coming through schools today have never existed in a world devoid of cell phones and the internet, teachers must be aware and accommodate for the style of learning necessary to reach these children. "Norman Rockwell never painted *Boy Swiping Finger on Screen*, and our own vision of a perfect childhood has never adjusted to accommodate that now-common tableau" (Rosin, 2013). In the twenty-first century childhood is a rapidly changing environment. Digital natives, children today are growing up in a world dominated by ever-expanding forms of technology. Such a prevalence of screens and screen-based media open for consumption has effectively altered the landscape of childhood and created a largely multimodal literacy for these children to ingest.

The rise in technology and consumption of screen-based media has therefore had a profound effect on the way children spend their time. According to the American Academy of Pediatrics, "today's children are spending an average of seven hours a day on entertainment media, including televisions, computers, phones and other electronic devices" ("Media and Children," n.d.). This number reveals a shocking truth about the way children take in and process information and is crucial to the way technology then impacts and shapes development. Teachers cannot simply ignore this shift in the classroom. They must work,

even for the youngest of children, to find ways to work with children to build literacy skills based in the environment in which these children exist.

Graphic novels offer such a potential. "Today's students have had a childhood filled with the rapid pace and visual stimulation of television and video games, and they therefore seek the same characteristics in their reading materials," (Downey, 2009, p. 183). In a world in which children are developing with not only access to, but increasing involvement and consumption of visual and multimodal sources, the classroom context must adjust with the integration of mediums that reflect the type of literacy these children crave. According to Kimberly Ann Jennings, Audrey C. Rule, Sarah M. Vander Zanden (2014) in a study examining the efficacy of graphic novels in comparison to heavily illustrated novels and traditional novels, "graphic novels include the fast paced visual media to which students are growing accustomed" (p. 260). Graphic novels have be found to present students with the type of literacy that their everyday lives have prepared them to ingest.

Jennings et al. (2014), continue, "graphic novels not only motivate students to read but use of graphic novels has been shown to improve students' reading comprehension by motivating them through complex materials and providing other modalities for learning," (p. 261). Here, Jennings et al., integrate the previously cited importance of motivation and now tie it to the multimodal context in which students exist. Their findings track that if children are more readily taking in multimodal information, their motivation would increase when exposed to literacy that reflects this model and then be more likely to develop as literacy learners.

The multimodal nature of graphic novels is crucial to the landscape in which children need to function, however, particularly the visual aspects must be highlighted. "New

technology necessitates using visual stimuli to capture the attention of students and facilitate their understanding of new topics," (Jennings et al., 2014, p. 258). While such an assertion may irk some still holding onto the value of text-only novels, if one is to consider findings related to motivation once more, creating a literacy landscape that speaks to children, is necessary. "The ever-increasing use of technology in virtually every aspect of life legitimizes visual literacy's place on the list of language arts," (McVicker, 2007, p. 88). The fact that graphic novels contain this integration of visual literacy alongside text is crucial to its role as a motivator for students and a support for the type of literacy children will use in the future and are using today.

It is with this ever changing and increasingly multimodal environment in mind that educators should consider the integration of graphic novels into the classroom. "As our students text, tweet, and send photos of themselves to each other, they are using both text and images to create and process ideas and information. The way in which these different modes of presenting information work together to create meaning is very similar to the way that graphic novels use text and image to convey meaning," (Moeller, 2013, p. 15). Unlike the monomodal world of the past, today's children are actively engaging with multimodal literacy on a regular basis. As Robin A. Moeller contests, the type of literacy in which children already regularly engage closely resembles that of graphic novel formats. In "The Case for Graphic Novels," Steven Hoover (2012) echos Moeller's sentiments. "The need for instruction in texts that contain multiple modes of information and require active participation on the part of the reader, such as graphic novels, is perhaps greater now than ever before," (Hoover, 2012, p. 176). The combination of text and images taken together

enables educators to use graphic novels as a means to help students become literate in today's culture.

Graphic novels are ideally suited as a means of bringing multimodal literacy into the classroom. In our now multimodal landscape, students are being required to not only take in text that contains both text and images, but that they are able to analyze both together and draw meaning from the resulting analysis. In this way, teachers can prepare students to do so with the use of graphic novels. "Because graphic novels rely on the synthesis of textual and visual information to create meaning, their potential is difficult to ignore," (Hoover, 2012, p. 177). Graphic novels are inherently multimodal. It is not enough to merely analyze the images or read the text, in order to create meaning both must be taken as a whole. Graphic novels require both textual and visual analysis happening concurrently in order to gain greater meaning. These two combined processes can then be transferred across mediums and into the myriad of other sources students decode and process on a daily basis. "To construct multimodal analysis, students must engage in and develop skills for textual analysis and visual analysis, both of which can be fostered through graphic novels," (Cook & Kirchoff, 2017, p. 79). If, as Common Sense Media would suggest, children are living in a world built on multimodal literacy, it then becomes crucial that in the classroom educators are infusing literacy education with the skills necessary to process this type of information outside the classroom.

Moreover, while the fact that children must take in multimodal information beyond the walls of the classroom may be reason enough to include graphic novels in the curriculum, the ever looming presence of standardized testing can also not be ignored. One study found that "in addition to this excess of images and graphics within the media in young people's

lives, standardized test include visual elements as part of assessment," (Downey, 2009, p. 183). With an increasing emphasis put on state and standardized tests, students need to be prepared for how to analyze and synthesize information that utilizes both visual and textual evidence.

Additionally, it is not just on standardized tests that students are seeing a shift towards multimodal literacy. According to Common Core ELA Standard, as of 2018, the Common Core website states, students must be able to "integrate and evaluate content presented in diverse media and formats, including visually and quantitatively, as well as in words" (CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.CCRA.R.7). Graphic novels present an ideal way to integrate this standard into the classroom. Boerman-Cornell (2013) further highlights the ideal nature of graphic novels in meeting the Common Core standards, "the graphic novel offers another way to think about how narrative works in different modes. Images in graphic novels do not move, and they require imagination to make the leap from what is happening in one panel to the next," (p.76). In this way, teachers can then begin integrating additional learning through graphic novels unique multimodal format.

If teachers need to prepare students for standardized tests, meet Common Core standards, and prepare students for a multimodal world, graphic novels are the answer. Discussing the value of graphic novels (GN) as the ideal multimodal text, Boerman-Cornell (2016) asserts, "this means that researchers and student readers alike need to come to understand the meaning of GNs not as words, pictures, fonts, and so on that should be analyzed separately but rather all of them at once," (p. 328). Graphic novels create the means for educators to integrate multimodal literacy into the classroom in an effective and engaging way. "GNs may be good texts for students to learn multimodal meaning making. Each page

combines the meaning carried in the text, the images, the positioning, and the progression of the story from panel to panel to make a multiplicity of meaning," (Boerman-Cornell, 2016, p. 328). Graphic novels pull together several forms of literacy and engage students in meaning making through a variety of contexts. In this way graphic novels achieve the type of literacy development necessary for students.

Additionally, graphic novels can also act as a bridge between the new multimodal skills children will need and the more traditional literacy skills they will need to develop as students move forward in the education. "Because graphic novels use images and text closely integrated together, reading them builds within students the same skills they need for reading websites and magazines. At the same time they may also help students learn traditional reading skills," (Boerman-Cornell, 2013, p. 73). Graphic novels therefore act as a much needed binding force between more traditional skills and the realities of the future technological landscape. In the classroom, graphic novels have the potential to form an integrated literacy curriculum in the 21st century.

Part 3: Literacy Skills

Although multimodal literacy is necessary to bring into the classroom as a means to support the changing landscape of modern society, graphic novels also function as an ideal tool to teach traditional literacy skills that students can then bring into this new technological age. Across age groups and grade levels, graphic novels have been shown to be an effective means to build literacy skills.

In the early grades, one of the first comprehension skills taught to readers is the ability to sequence. In "Sequencing and Graphic Novels with Primary-Grade Students" researchers Maggie Chase, Eun Hye Son, and Stan Steiner found that "introducing PGNs

[primary graphic novels] to young children proved a successful tool for teaching sequencing, an important story element for literacy development," (p. 440-442). When children used graphic novels they were both able to put frames in the correct order, but were then able to translate the skill into creating their own graphic novels. Graphic novels provided inroads for children to process and monitor comprehension by focusing on the details of the panels. "One thing we noticed in the process of students' telling stories is that students often self-corrected the order of the frames as they constructed a narrative to accompany the frames," (Chase et al., 2014, p. 439). Through oral storytelling, children combined what they were seeing in the images, and then using that comprehension to construct a narrative.

While students in first and second grade were able to learn and use sequencing effectively through graphic novels, Chase et al., stipulated several additional concepts and skills that graphic novels are ideally suited to teach. Early on children gain exposure to predicting. According to Judith Westphal Irwin (2007), "good readers often read with various event and text structure expectations...predictions probably help these readers to monitor their comprehension and direct their attention to important information," (p. 91). In order to make predictions or hypotheses about what will happen next, students can use graphic novels to practice this skill. Chase et al. (2014) suggest hat teachers, "cover up the resolution page(s) and have students predict how the story will end," (p. 442). In this way graphic novels can be used as a means to engage students in practicing making predictions.

Additionally, Chase et al. (2014) encourage teachers to use graphic novels as a means to support student exploration into inferencing. "Due to their more abbreviated text PGNs, just as with graphic novels for older children, contain a lot of information that must be inferred by using the visual or textual details. Ask students to describe how a character might

be feeling or thinking based on the visual and textual cues," (Chase et al., 2014, p. 442).

Primary graphic novels for young students support the teaching of inference, since the pieces

of information are not laid out specifically by the text or images, but must be inferred by

taking both together. McVicker (2007) corroborated the use of graphic novels to teach

inferencing. "The use of comic strips provides a concrete strategy for teaching inference to

developing readers," (McVicker, 2007, p. 87). The picture clues combined with the

contextual clues provide young readers with concrete means to begin making inferences while

reading.

Similarly, when researchers used graphic novels as a means to build word work and

comprehension skills across elementary grades findings support their use. In

"Comprehension Strategies in Practice Through a Graphic Novel Study" Sloboda et al.

(2014) found that "in addition to stopping and asking themselves what a word might mean,

they began asking each other for definitions, and, at home, some students reported asking

their parents," (p. 19). Graphic novels appeared to stimulate student word work practice,

which then carried over to time outside the classroom. Additionally, citing Stephen Krashen,

Moeller (2013) states, "In his many recent studies concerning research on youth literacy,

Stephen Krashen has found that comics and graphic novels offer 20 percent more rare

vocabulary that traditional chapter books (2004)" (p. 15). Taken with Sloboda et al.'s

findings about word work motivation, this finding would indicate that students reading

graphic novels are more likely to not only engage in word work while reading, but also be

exposed to more complex and rare vocabulary while they read.

Beyond vocabulary, graphic novels provide concrete means to teach and explore

literary elements and figurative language. "Literary techniques discussed by these Grade 4

students included an identification of onomatopoeia as a common inclusion in the textual 'sound track' of graphic novels, as well as other literary techniques brought to life through graphic novels," (Brenna, 2013, p.92). Through graphic novels fourth grade students were able to identify and understand a variety of literary techniques, which in turn influence and contribute to an overall comprehension.

Moreover, graphic novels enabled students to effectively engage with and learn a variety of literacy skills. Brenna (2013) found that "Summarising previous plot and character details during the graphic novels studies, stopping to predict coming events in the respective stories and making inferences based on given information in the illustrations as well as in the text were other comprehension strategies supported in, or added to, these young readers' reading comprehension repertoires," (p. 90). Through graphic novels, teachers have the opportunity to engage students in a wide variety of the necessary literacy strategies and build their skills.

Additional studies have uncovered a variety of ways that graphic novels may be used., Sloboda et al., (2014) note that while conducting their study they found that,

> "movement of 'the reading eyes' within graphic novel texts appeared to involve a layered sampling of words and illustrations, with the story itself providing a kind of anchor. In this way reading seemed less unidirectional when compared to the reading of traditional narrative texts, offering more range of motion for students during the reading act, a range of motion that could be applied back to other types of narrative texts as reading for understanding is often recursive and strategic readers search previously read information to gather more details," (p.19)

Because the format was multimodal, layering words and illustrations, students were not bound in the same way as seen with traditional print-only texts. This additional range of motion helped students better apply strategic reading skills and gather additional details.

Similarly, when researchers assessed the use of graphic novels to teach literacy skills in upper elementary it was discovered that the medium can effectively be used to teach several key skills. Using graphic novels to teacher second through fourth graders, Boerman-Cornell (2016) found that graphic novels could be used in several specific ways, "including summarizing the story multimodally, connecting story elements over several pages, critical thinking analyzing and supporting themes, responding emotionally to the text, connecting their reading with other texts and experiences, and drawing conclusions about the GN format," (p. 333). These higher order critical thinking skills can also be taught through the use of graphic novels.

Additionally, research has found that graphic novels are an effective way to introduce and build concepts of characterization. In research conducted with middle school students Sun (2017) found that "the format of the graphic novels combined with their narrative forms contributed to effectively contextualizing the character and the causes and consequences of their actions in a detailed and meaningful manner," (p. 27). Students were able to utilize the graphic novel format to better understand and analyze the characters in the narrative. Sloboda et al., made similar conclusions, "it appeared that the students were particularly responsive to the characterizations developed within graphic novels, and oral round robin-reading events took on new meaning as opportunities to perform characters in role," (p. 19). Through graphic novels, students were able to understand and step into the shoes of characters in new ways. Similarly, Bosma, Rule, and Krueger (2013) found that " besides using contextual

clues, readers must interpret facial expressions, body postures, drawing perspective, tone of voice, and grunts or exclamations. A variety of fonts and script styles are used to express vocalizations with characters sometimes breaking out of their rectangular frames to express their emotions," (p. 62). Students not only relied on text to understand character development and emotion, the very style of drawings and fonts influenced and informed student comprehension of characterization.

Beyond traditional literacy skills, graphic novels provide additional means for students to engage with and delve deeper into literacy. "Understanding cues related to the format of graphic novels appears to be an influential component of students' comprehension when reading graphic novel form. How colour and text boxes, for example, are utilized to signal emotion and tone, are two specific types of signals used," (Sloboda et al., 2014, p. 21). The added components of graphic novels create additional means for students to build comprehension. Brenna (2013) also notes the additional comprehension skills that graphic novels are well suited to illicit. "The students identified that they were connecting lettering style, format and colour of text with the emotional climate of the story. The students also reflected on purposes for particular panels such as full-page panels, two-page spreads, overlapping pages and floating panels," (Brenna, 2013, p. 91). The various panel permutations, colors and text style can all contribute to student comprehension of the text. This integration of a variety of text elements to build total comprehension is unique to graphic novels.

Graphic novels also create a context for students to build discussions and understandings beyond that of traditional print-only texts. "When created with visual impact, words in these texts offered the opportunity for diverse responses and the students provided

feedback to peers on their interpretation of the artistry selected to convey the word (bold print, wiggly lines, etc)," (Sloboda et al., 2014, p.19). Unlike traditional chapter books, graphic novels create additional contexts for students to engage with and comprehend the text. When students are provided with these additional features, they have the opportunity for rich peer discussions.

Alongside the clear evidence that a multitude of comprehension strategies and skills can be taught through graphic novels, the importance of the visual evidence in this comprehension process that graphic novels affords students cannot be ignored. Bosma et al. (2013) claims "graphic novels provide visual imagery to accompany text, giving visual cues to boost reading comprehension," (p. 61). The multimodal format, with the added context of visuals works to aid student comprehension as they read. "Because graphic novels consist of words and pictures, they do not require students to depend solely on text-based reading strategies to access the full extent of the story's content as a text-only novel would require; students may gain comprehension meaning from the lively illustrations or interplay among panels" (Jennings et al., 2014, p. 261). When students are provided with the additional layers seen in graphic novels they do not have to rely only on one mode of understanding. They can pull from both text and images to gain comprehension. This importance of the addition of visual information provided by graphic novels was also noted by Downey (2009), "graphic novels are useful tools in classrooms where students are primarily visual learners. They illustrate cognitive and literary concepts resulting in stronger comprehension of materials," (p. 183). For students who are primarily visual learners, graphic novels provide a much needed support in the comprehension process.

Beyond just visual learners, some students cannot conjure images in their minds. For these students, graphic novels provide much needed support in comprehension. "Some students simply are not capable of conjuring images in their mind for reading the text and therefore are dependent on visual cues; graphic novels provide images that help the students interpret the text as well as denote particular thematic connotations, purpose, or ideas" (Downey, 2009, p. 183). For the student unable to visualize a text, graphic novels provide opportunities for these students to engage with narratives and build comprehension.

While there are many comprehension skills and strategies that can be taught through the use of graphic novels, research also shows that their use is extremely effective. Discussing the implementation of graphic novels to students in second through fourth grades, Boerman-Cornell (2016) concluded, "the overwhelming evidence seems to be that, if secondary students are introduced to the format, reading GNs can have many positive effects on their literacy," (p. 329). When students used graphic novels they were able to effectively engage in interpretive activities and build comprehension.

Similarly, Jennings et al., noted that "graphic novels not only motivate students to read but use of graphic novels has been shown to improve students' reading comprehension by motivating them through complex materials and providing other modalities for learning," (p. 261). Once again, it would appear that motivation and the multimodal structure of graphic novels could be tied to supporting comprehension.

Furthermore, when Eileen M. Richardson (2017) sought to compare graphic novels to traditional texts through *Coraline* by Neil Gaiman to determine which structure elicited greater comprehension, she found that "the results of Grade 6 data on average showed that graphic novel readers scoring higher than the traditional readers," (p. 27). In Jennings et al.'s

study comparing traditional print texts with heavily illustrated texts and graphic novels, researchers received similar results. "graphic novels...increased student comprehension as measured by the midterm assessment writing prompts and final project scores" (Jennings et al., 2014, p. 271). Not only did assessments in both studies highlight the general success of graphic novel use in the classroom for comprehension purposes, those who read the graphic novel over traditional print text had understood the content best. "Student's final project scores were higher for graphic novels than either of the other two novel forms" (Jennings et al., 2014, p. 272). Findings thus suggest that graphic novels may be a key to supporting students as they build comprehension skills as literacy learners.

Part 4: Content Areas

As students work to build comprehension with a focus on literacy, graphic novels can also be used to support students in a variety of other content areas. Although the first area in which one may jump to think about a graphic novel's inclusion may be in reading, graphic novels can act as an ideal means to introduce concepts and support learning across subjects.

In my own classroom in 2017, graphic novels were included in social studies while students studied both the American Revolution and later Abolition. Students were able to use graphic novels as a means to understand historical events. Research has similarly supported the use of graphic novels to teach social studies content. Bosma et al. (2013) sought to use graphic novels as a means to teach fifth grade students about the American Revolution. Research from this study found that "there were several key ideas related to the complex events of the Boston Massacre and Tea Party that were noted by students reading graphic novels but not reported by students reading nonfiction prose. This may indicate that more complex issues are better understood with the multimodal input afforded by graphic novels,"

(p. 69). When students were able to learn content through the support of graphic novels they were better equipped to understand and process key details pertaining to specific events during the American Revolution. For students learning social studies content, graphic novels then provide the necessary structure needed for students to process complex events and information.

Not only did the students reading the graphic novel retain and process more complex content, they were also able to engage more positively than students reading traditional texts. "Students' moods were more upbeat when reading graphic novels and they shared more information they were gleaning from the illustrations as they read," (Bosma et al., 2013, p. 70). Students who used graphic novels as a tool to learn social studies content were able to gain additional details and information from the inclusion of visual analysis. Bosma et al. (2013) continues, "they were more talkative about graphic novels than the regular nonfiction books and more willing to ask questions about what didn't make sense when reading graphic novels," (p.70). Not only could they talk more about the content, they were more willing to engage with the process of making sense of the information presented. Unlike students who read traditional texts, the students who read graphic novels were more likely to ask questions when something did not make sense. This finding might indicate that students who read graphic novels were perhaps monitoring their reading closer than students reading traditional social studies texts.

In Boerman-Cornell's 2013 study, "More Than Comic Books," Boerman-Cornell suggests that graphic novels in social studies content areas provide a much needed visual representation for students. "Images can provide quick social, economic, and cultural context through their depictions of clothing, buildings, transportation, and interpersonal interactions

during different periods in history," (Boerman-Cornell, 2013 p. 75). For students making the leap into historical contexts, the visual images that graphic novels provide can ground student thinking and provide support as they immerse themselves in the past. Boerman-Cornell (2013) continues, "graphic novels can also assist with corroboration by requiring readers to interact with primary sources and other documents that traditional history books usually place in sidebars and appendixes that seem incidental to the main text," (p. 75). Unlike traditional social studies texts, graphic novels can better integrate primary documents and sources into the very panels of the medium. This integration can then help students learn additional information they might have missed from a traditional text in which the same sources might be relegated to an appendix at the back of the book.

Social studies classrooms are also an ideal place to interact with current events, particularly with upper elementary and middle school students. Jennings et al. (2014) found that "using graphic novels allows teachers to incorporate different types of text to address current topics and helps readers make connections to text through visual representation" (pp. 261-262). Graphic novels' visual representations aid student comprehension as they make connections across texts and events. Graphic novels provide students with a means of engage with current events in a structure that supports their understanding.

Sun (2017) considers the use of graphic novels amongst high school students in a social studies context. "Graphic novels like *Maus, Barefoot Gen, Pride of Baghdad,* and *Persepolis*, which feature complex themes on war and its atrocities, current political development, and coming-of-age in a time of revolution in different countries, can mediate historical realities with their unique visual narrative styles," (Sun, 2017, p. 24). Graphic novels can create new contexts of understanding for students studying both history and

current events. The narrative structure and visual elements of the graphic novels provide

students with additional contexts in which to understand complex realities of the world.

Focusing in on *Persepolis*, a graphic novel about a young girl during the Iranian Revolution,

Sun (2017) notes the importance of the graphic novel in students discussion and

comprehension. "*Persepolis* generated a lot of reflection and discussion about war, revolution,

peace, and freedom from the students. Through critical mediation of this text they understood

abstract concepts in sophisticated ways," (Sun, 2017, p. 26). The graphic novel format helped

students learning complex social studies concepts and content. The medium supported

discussion and greater understanding.

In math, graphic novels can also be used to foster student comprehension of concepts

through visual representation, highlight math thinking and tell math related stories. Through

graphic novels, students who may not traditionally see themselves as math learners are

granted pathways into the subject. Biographical graphic novels centered on mathematicians

not only tell the story of these people's lives but also offer insights into how students can

thinking about mathematical problem solving. Graphic novels can be used as a model to

show students how to think as mathematicians, but "perhaps the greatest potential for

teaching math through graphic novels lies in the ability to illustrate mathematical concepts by

combining images with equations of the concepts under consideration," (Boerman-Cornell,

2013, p.75). Students reading math-based graphic novels have the opportunity to see

mathematical concepts illustrated in the visual representation of the text.

Closely linked, students studying science can use graphic novels to understand the

scientific method and particular scientific topics. In "Bringing Graphic Novels into a

School's Curriculum" Katherine T. Bucher and M. Lee Manning (2004) claim, "science

educators can use *Clan Apis* (Hosler 2000) to study the life of the honeybee, *The Sandwalk Adventures* (Hosler 2003) to look at Darwin's theory of natural selection, or *Fallout* (Ottaviani 2001) to examine the scientific and social aspects of the development of the atomic bomb," (p. 69). These titles highlight the variety of concepts available in the form of graphic novels. Bucher and Manning (2004) continue to elaborate on the role of graphic novels in this content area stating, "in the sciences, they can help adolescents explore complex and sometimes confusing topics," (p. 71). Graphic novels support students as they seek to learn and understand a variety of complex topics in the sciences providing a multimodal representation of concepts.

Finally, as educators work to build student empathy and social skills, graphic novels can be used as part of a classroom's social/emotional curriculum. Brenna (2013) found that when graphic novels were brought into the classroom, "deeper themes from the target graphic novels were highlighted in teacher-facilitated discussion, offering a rich context in which to explore concepts related to bullying, the value of imagination and acceptance of diversity," (p. 91). Graphic novels positively supported teacher-facilitated exploration into complex social/emotional topics. The medium of graphic novels directly supports student engagement and grappling with complex emotions and concepts. Research has found that "students also achieve a transformation of thought sympathizing with differing viewpoints, empathizing with other people's painful experience, and understanding human behavior as a product of time, place and history," (Sun, 2017, p. 27) when graphic novels are used in the classroom. Ultimately, graphic novels provide concrete ways for children to process and grapple with complex social and emotional topics with marked success.

Beyond their merit for all students, graphic novels can also act as a means to differentiate curriculum for students in a variety of content areas. Bosma et al., (2013) suggests just that. "Graphic novels may be used to differentiate instruction by providing alternate forms of texts that address the same topic," (Bosma et al., 2013, p. 72) As teachers seek to meet the needs of a variety of learning profiles, graphic novels can act as a means to support students for a variety of topics in math, science, social studies and even SEL curriculum. Across content areas, it can therefore be reasoned that graphic novels deserve a place in the curriculum to aid in the understanding and exploration of a variety of topics and concepts.

Conclusion

This paper sought to persuade and embolden educators to include graphic novels as part of their classrooms and integrate the medium into curriculum. Using research conducted over the past fifteen years this paper highlights the need for graphic novels to be included in the classroom. Divided into four parts centered around the importance of motivation in reading attainment and graphic novel's role as a motivator, graphic novels as a multimodal literacy, graphic novels' use to teach literacy skills and graphic novels' potential to support learning topics across content areas, this paper postively makes the case for graphic novels.

As a classroom teacher, I have seen numerous students excited and engaged as they read a variety of graphic novels. From an eagerness to read the next Raina Telgemeier graphic novel to engagement in American history through graphic novels, students and studies alike have highlighted time and time again graphic novels place in the classroom. Graphic novels not only provide the motivation necessary to push students to develop and flourish as readers, research has shown that it is an ideal medium to teach reading skills and

content across subjects. It encourages critical thinking and creates deeper meaning for students as they venture forward into more complex literacy skills and content topics.

Alongside all the benefits research has shown to come from the inclusion of graphic novels, one must acknowledge that childhood is changing. Technology is changing, and so is literacy. The needs of the future will not look like those we have come to know. Children need to be ready to step out into an ever increasingly multimodal landscape of literacy. It is the role of the educator to make sure that students will be prepared to do so. If graphic novels fit the bill to teach such a form of literacy, along with all its other previously stated benefits, why do so many still devalue their worth?

As Hoover (2012) states, "Including graphic novels in instruction is certainly not a magic bullet for combatting entrenched views of literacy within academia, but it is one way to start chipping away at some of the barriers," (p. 177). Students deserve to have teachers willing to break down barriers, and create new pathways to learning. Graphic novels are an effective and research supported tool to guide students in their learning. Perhaps, soon they will be seen as a legitimate medium in the classroom.

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