

# Comprehension Strategies in Practice Through a Graphic Novel Study

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## ABSTRACT

This qualitative case study explored the use of graphic novels as key reading texts for elementary students involved in a reading support program. Participants were five elementary school students from grades five and six, with average intellectual ability, who had been previously identified as requiring additional assistance in reading. Results of the study included the benefits of 'sequential art narratives' related to the following: application of reading comprehension strategies, developing increased vocabulary knowledge, avid reading, active reading where students have multiple alerting influences to keep them attentive throughout the reading task, and dramatic oral reading events where students put visual information about characters into their textual dialogue. Implications of the study are connected to the manner in which graphic novels elicit metacognitive comprehension strategies related to self-awareness, task-awareness and text-awareness, suggesting the usefulness of the graphic novel form to support reading instruction with general elementary education populations. Further research is recommended in order to support the use of the graphic novel form as a standard elementary classroom resource as well as a resource for special education populations.

## Introduction

This qualitative exploratory case study 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 support program. The study was conducted as focus group research with urban students attending Read to Succeed (R2S) at 'Forest Springs School.' Students as informants (Sitton, 1980) offered critical insight regarding the impact of using graphic novels as school resources. While contextualized within the group of participants, the results of this study provide intriguing themes related to graphic novels as a literary form that supports struggling readers, the role of graphic novels within the context of reading comprehension lessons in elementary classrooms, and graphic novels as a general teaching resource worthy of consideration by preservice and inservice elementary teachers.

Although consensus around the definition of the term 'graphic novel' is still developing, Will Eisner's *A Contract With God* is generally cited as the first novel in this format (O'English, Matthews & Lindsay, 2006; Yang, 2008). For the purpose of this study, graphic novels are defined as 'sequential art narratives' (Carter, 2009; Eisner, 1985) characterized by a definite beginning, middle and end, unlike serial comic strips with a continuous or undefined storyline. While implications are available regarding the use of graphic novels as classroom resources in secondary classrooms (Cary, 2004; Chun, 2009; Smetana, Odelson, Burns, & Grisham, 2009), research pairing the graphic novel form and elementary-age students is rare (Bomphray, 2011; Author, 2012; Author, 2011; Pantaleo & Bomphray, 2011). Further studies are

needed to explore the potential of the graphic novel form with younger students, offering guidance for educators interested in utilizing graphic novels in their classrooms.

## Research Questions

The primary research questions were:

1. What responses to graphic novels emerge from a group of elementary-age students who have been identified as requiring extra support in reading?
2. What reading comprehension supports are demonstrated by these students in terms of metacognitive understandings (self-awareness, task awareness, and text awareness)?

## The Research Framework

### Theoretical and Conceptual Underpinnings

When designing the study, it was our assumption that teachers' interactions with learners impact the learning process and outcomes of students. Constructivist theory identifies learning as an "interpretive, recursive, building process by active learners interacting with the physical and social world" (Fosnot, 1996, p.30). Learning through interaction with others, where the activities offer connections with and between students, is the essence of social constructivism (Vygotsky, 1962). Vygotsky argued that children are naturally equipped with the necessary tools for learning, such as the ability to derive information from experiences within social and linguistic contexts, and Vygotsky also indicated that children are active participants in learning that is mediated by adults. Different life experiences and circumstance result in a diversity of cultural tools afforded to children. Recognition of

such diversity prompts adults to enhance the learning environment which mediates the children's interactions with materials, peers and adults. A student-centred adult-mediated learning environment was developed to support this study of reading graphic novels, with students being asked directly about their individual responses to the books.

## *Learning through interaction with others is the essence of social constructivism*

Our study capitalized on the introduction of the graphic novel form as a means of engaging students in an interactive method of teaching and learning, for the purposes of targeting inferential comprehension strategies. Instructional activities were designed to create a common experience for the students in order to have them co-construct new knowledge on their existing schema of knowledge and experiences. Students involved in the study had previously been identified by the school team as struggling readers due to skill sets deriving from different cultural experiences and unique responses to general classroom instruction. In this study, context-rich common experiences facilitated collaborative discussions of the students' individual and shared experiences and supported higher level comprehension along with metacognitive reading strategies.

Metacognition is the ability to actively reflect on one's thinking processes, in this case, conscious understandings related to reading (Baker & Brown, 1984; Flavell, 1979). Struggling readers may have less metacognitive skill development than skilled readers who strategically assess narratives to activate prior learning, and who anticipate and synthesize new information. The types of strategies demonstrated by students in this study were categorized in terms of their basis in awareness of self, awareness of task, and awareness of text, three categories within which metacognitive reading comprehension processes have been delineated (Author, 1991).

### **Methods**

The case study was conducted by a research assistant who was an experienced classroom teacher, with additional special education teaching qualifications and experience, alongside a special education teacher, during 18 sessions of 45 minutes each, over a period of nine weeks, in a 'Read to Succeed' (R2S) program at an urban elementary school. Daily field notes were collected from observations and informal student interviews, along with portfolios of student work, and these were subjected to content analysis by the research assistant and the lead investigator, looking for patterns and trends among students as well as seeking to build individual strategy profiles of students as readers.

More specifically, the investigators were exploring students' responses to the graphic novel resources as well as metacognitive understandings demonstrated in this reading context. A change in scores on formal tests related to reading comprehension was not part of this

qualitative study. In terms of background, the lead investigator has special education certification as well as classroom and special education teaching experience, with a focus on reading instruction. Coupled with the background of the lead investigator and the research assistant was the experience of the R2S special education teacher, and all data was passed through this teacher as a final check prior to a confirmation of the tentative findings presented in this article.

At 'Forest Springs,' the R2S program provided 45 minutes of daily intensive explicit reading instruction to middle years' students with the end result optimally being grade-level reading according to the Gray Oral Reading Test (Weiderholt & Bryant, 2001). The R2S program was developed by its hosting school division to support students who are not reading at grade level. The teacher who operated the R2S program identified the following goals for her students, goals that were then contextualized in the age appropriate graphic novel resource base:

- The students will be able to make text-to-text, text-to-self and text-to-world connections to support comprehension of text;
- The students will be able to generate questions to facilitate their understanding of text;
- The students will be able to infer meanings from what is read to help comprehend text; and
- The students will combine strategies as needed to come to a fuller understanding of text.

The participants in the study were a group of five students including a boy and girl from grade five, and two boys and a girl from grade six. Each of the students was identified with average intellectual ability and each experienced social, emotional or behavioural challenges. The students' learning was characterized by significant difficulties in written expression, decoding, reading fluency and comprehension. Two of the five students were new Canadians (immigrants from China and Africa) and one student who had recently moved to an urban residence from a reserve setting was self-declared First Nations.

The researcher assistant was introduced as both a learner and a co-teacher, participating in the classroom context twice a week during the duration of the study. The special education teacher and the students were also publicly recognized as learners and teachers within the project. The teacher was learning different teaching strategies through the co-teaching approach and the students were tasked to teach the researcher through the sharing of their knowledge within each lesson and through pre- and post-surveys.

Curiosities created through the inquiry approach about the format of graphic novels were addressed by direct instruction. Comprehension strategies were taught through graphic novel selections by utilizing a co-teaching format in which lessons were introduced using a "one-teaching/one-drifting" approach, and later co-teaching or "team teaching", followed by a practice or activity component using parallel-teaching (Cook & Friend, 2003). Each co-operatively taught lesson was introduced by the teacher while the research assistant observed and supported

individual students' attention, followed by participatory small-group activities which were supported by either the teacher or research assistant. Graphic novel resources were available for students to read outside of direct instructional periods. Informal discussions with students, and semi-structured protocols in the form of written questionnaires and interviews, provided feedback on the process which focussed on graphic novels as a medium through which to identify perceptions of reading skill development. Key portions of the lessons were tape-recorded and transcribed.

### Results, Conclusions, Interpretations

Results of case study research are tentative and contextualized (Merriam, 1998) and care has been taken to discuss findings within the context from which they have arisen. For this reason, the analysis below supports the potential of graphic novels with elementary students while at the same time suggesting the importance of further research.

#### Reading for Enjoyment (Self Knowledge)

Participants described as reluctant readers identified this work as fun. In this classroom context, particular students discovered a love of reading and a change in attitude towards accessing support to improve their reading skills. Dallas said, "I'm happy now because of the books... there's times I want to come" (to the resource room, during Singing Assembly). Although labelled a 'reluctant reader', Dallas had to be asked to stop reading in order to attend to the group directions—while the teacher and research assistant were quietly cheering at her heightened interest in reading.

Going beyond a simple conclusion regarding the idea that graphic novels increase pleasure reading in particular students, this study also illuminated how sensitive these struggling readers were to ideas about age-appropriate reading. Initial comments about graphic novels indicated that at the beginning of the study, these students perceived the focus texts with less respect than they might perceive books read by their peers in the regular classroom, and data supporting this statement included comments that a graphic novel was "not a real book".

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, in addition to noting the admirable length of some titles (i.e. the collected works of Bone), the senior content of others (i.e. Shakespeare's plays in graphic novel form), and the legitimacy of the format (i.e. a graphic novel as textbook support for studying Plato at university), the participants' respect increased for this textual form along with their willingness to explore it. 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 reading motivation.

#### Perception of Reading as Problem Solving (Task Knowledge)

One characteristic of younger readers in a previous study of metacognitive strategies highlighted the confidence with which they approached reading challenges, cheerfully treating reading situations as problem solving opportunities (Author, 1991, 1995a, 1995b). 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 readers—words are the "bad guy" in reading situations where they struggle to comprehend. Important to note here is that when words are the "bad guy," how easy is it to treat words as an interesting subject for study?

As the place of words shifted off centre, it became possible for participants to enjoy the art involved in multi-modal texts that were visually saturated with meaning. As students' focus on the interpretation of visuals increased, word work became more of a creative problem solving activity, not just a science previously unattainable. In addition, 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).

The dramatic emphasis noted in the students' reading aloud was interpreted as enthusiasm for this kind of 'word work.' As these grade five and six students became more comfortable as active problem solvers, they began to shift in an impression of their reading selves as subjects separate from the reading act. 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.

While comprehension seemed to be affected by this kind of targeted vocabulary development, text understanding was further enhanced by a teacher-led strategy of writing down text-based questions on sticky notes which were organized on class charts. In this way, the students highlighted links to what they were reading, enhancing their understanding through text-to-self, text-to-text, and text-to-world connections. The ability to ask questions increased throughout the study, offering students a basis for the study of other kinds of texts.

#### Perception of Reading as a Non-Linear Process (Task Knowledge)

Movement of 'the reading eyes' within the 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. As teachers and researchers, we compare the reading of multi-modal cues to the kind of support provided by other interventions that allow students 'movement' in order to achieve greater attention and focus. Sit Fit

cushions, for example— air-filled alternate seating devices—have been utilized in classrooms to give students heightened ability to focus during a seated task. It appeared to the research team that the focus and concentration of the study participants increased when using the graphic novel resources, and perhaps this could be due to the license for ‘activity’ during reading sessions where multiple stimuli was involved. Demonstrating positive results of these ‘mental gymnastics’ during reading, students consistently attended to the details of the distinctive visual presentation of the words and dialogue format (i.e., thoughts, dialogue, outbursts) and subsequently related it to a speaker’s perspective, demonstrating deep understanding.

#### Perception of Books as Characterful (Text Knowledge)

It appeared that the students were particularly responsive to the characterizations developed within the graphic novels, and oral round-robin reading events took on new meaning as opportunities to perform characters in role. The R2S teacher conjectured that students developed stronger connections to characters because they could see facial expressions and physical attributes even more clearly than if these components were included with words alone. With a strong visual connection to characters, students were perhaps more apt to dramatize these characters using style and vocal tone, and were observed to avidly skim ahead and practice their ‘parts’ prior to their turn in the oral reading. Understanding of characters demonstrated a textual component integral to comprehension, and certainly a goal of reading instruction.

#### Educational Importance

Concerns in education regarding the teaching of reading relate to the connection between slower reading acquisition and later progress, a situation where less reading creates less fluent readers while more reading creates more fluent readers—a phenomenon known as the Matthew effect (Stanovich, 1986). If graphic novels support more reading, more enthusiasm for reading, and more comprehension during reading, as our data seemed to suggest, students will be practicing and refining their reading skills and strategies, increasing vocabulary, for example, to the benefit of their overall reading development. One characteristic of graphic novels, reported by the students, is that this form made it “easier” to read. Examples of this involved descriptions of how picture cues reinforced the storyline, characterization, and key vocabulary. It is only through engaging reading contexts with materials at the students’ level of difficulty that true opportunity exists for fulsome application of previously taught reading comprehension strategies.

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Important as far as educators are concerned is the idea of self-direction when it comes to reading growth and development. At the beginning of the study, only one student identified that reading more grade level and challenging books would improve reading skills while other students could not identify a skill improvement strategy beyond “asking for help”. At the end of the study, students were able to talk about strategies that they were using to improve their reading. Students who previously stated they would ask for assistance had expanded their personal repertoire of pre-assistance strategies, indicating they would “read to myself” and “use sticky notes to record questions.” Growth in confidence was evident as students reported things like: “Before I was kinda shy (about oral reading). I was scared people laughed at me. But now I read more now.” Another student confided: “I like reading out loud. I should put my hand up.” The students also described responding to content area assignments with strategies practiced in the study, thereby demonstrating application of knowledge beyond the study’s parameters.

A recommendation from this study involves home and school communication, and the importance of bringing parents and caregivers along on their children’s reading journeys. Examples occurred where particular strategies used by students caused surprise and, on one case, alarm in families unused to hearing their sons or daughters ask questions related to text. Dallas’s questions at home in the context of this study made parents worry that she was struggling more as a reader, simply because she was asking questions about particular vocabulary. In addition to providing information for families about content taught at school, supports for shared reading at home are highly recommended. The emotional connection reading brings to the adult-child relationship continues beyond the learning to read stage. One student described the joy she felt when her mother and sister read to her in the evenings, just as her grandfather had done before he died.

Students’ active engagement using comprehension strategies within a more concrete context than the context offered by strictly narrative text may support student application and ‘ownership’ of comprehension strategies during independent reading situations. In practice, such teaching and transference can be identified as ‘scaffolding’ (Wood, Bruner & Ross, 1976), a practice identified as supportive for learners. Other opportunities for scaffolding may arise as students more easily understand main idea in graphic texts; once they are immersed in the storyline, more accurate problem solving may occur regarding word identification. Scaffolding may also occur through attention to characterization, encouraging oral reading events through which students’ reading processes are more able to be monitored and supported.

Oral round-robin reading situations, while criticized in the past for causing anxiety in struggling readers (Eldredge et al, 1996; Gill, 2002; Rasinski et al, 2003), may result in more positive experiences when graphic novel resources are used as the materials for oral reading. Instead of just waiting for their turn, students

in this study were actively working on words, preparing ahead for their 'part,' and yet still engaged with the ongoing storyline. It seemed possible for these students to multi-task during the oral reading event, and no visible anxiety was detected either related to their upcoming turn, or regarding waiting for another student to finish—the latter often noted as tedious for students in traditional narrative oral-reading situations where no visual stimuli is available to enrich the story between turns. In this study, students were eager to take on characters and read aloud, their focus on playing a role rather than on presenting isolated words. The visual format of the text provided the cues for the 'art' of reading. Students enjoyed reading the sound effects and providing dramatic expression to the words written with visual impact, thereby enhancing expressive communication. If characters can be made more dynamic to readers, such as through the visual component of graphic novel texts, this may thus heighten students' ability to interpret and dramatize a story, and support rehearsed oral reading in a manner that supports expressive language as well as general literacy development.

### The Last Word

Understanding cues related to the format of graphic novels appears to be an influential component of students' comprehension when reading the graphic novel form. How colour and text boxes, for example, are utilized to signal emotion and tone, are two specific types of signals used. While teachers and students may learn these cues together, through experience, resource books (Booth & Lundy, 2007; Thompson, 2008; Thurman & Hearn, 2010) are available that outline some critical understandings. Teachers unfamiliar with the graphic novel form may thus learn alongside students in a classroom experience rewarding to all.

Further research is needed in order to move graphic novels onto classroom landscapes, and particular guiding questions that result from this study include the following:

- How might we encourage the addition of graphic novels to school and classroom libraries?
- What are barriers to actualizing the potential use of the graphic novel format in classrooms?
- What brain activity do children demonstrate while reading graphic novels in comparison to other textual forms, and how might this activity support students with special needs such as Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder?
- Is the visual characterizations in graphic novels, as well as their concrete demonstration of emotions, particularly helpful for story comprehension by readers with autism?
- In what ways might educational publishers be encouraged to seek new academic content-specific manuscripts with visuals included to support struggling readers beyond the K – 3 age group for whom illustrations are generally included?
- What supports do graphic novels provide for creative drama, including the promotion of oral reading fluency?

As educators seek further ways to support student success in reading, it is highly recommended that age-appropriate graphic novels be considered for general classroom use in addition to employment as special education support materials. As well as providing highly motivating reading materials, graphic novels offer ways to support metacognition in reading through considerations of self, task and text knowledge, and appear to have the potential to be valuable resources in any context. ■

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