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Graphic Novels in Action:
A Classroom Study of Reader Response
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Abstract

This qualitative case study explored the responses of 15 students in one grade 6/7 classroom to a set of age-appropriate graphic novels. The primary research questions involved reader preferences and reading comprehension strategies that students as informants were asked to divulge. Students demonstrated consistency between pre-study and post-study reading preferences related to graphic novels, suggesting that students who preferred textual forms other than graphic novels generally did not change their reading preferences on the basis of additional exposure to graphic novel texts. Students suggested some intriguing connections between particular reading strategies and the applicability of these strategies to graphic novels; in addition, they expressed an interest in educational programs that included graphic novels, whether these were a preferred textual form or not. The results of the study support the use of graphic novels in the upper elementary grades as a resource to help develop particular reading comprehension strategies, as well as critical literacy, without inhibiting students' reading of other textual forms. In addition, there was evidence to suggest that graphic novels inspire interpersonal reading talk, offering a medium that connects readers of different ages in a shared literacy context.

Introduction

This qualitative exploratory case study was carried out in one urban grade 6/7 classroom at “Forest Springs” school, to investigate the reader responses of upper elementary students to the graphic novel form. It was conducted over a seven-week period in one urban classroom, with four classroom research visits, in addition to a pre- and post-visit. Independent reading provided the context for student exposure to graphic novels, and a set of fifty graphic novels (including

multiple copies of some of the titles; see bibliography) was provided to the students for the duration of the study.

The classroom teacher described this as a diverse group, with many students experiencing difficulties with writing. He also indicated that 10 students in the class were reluctant or struggling readers. There was a mix of ethnic backgrounds, one student with a hearing impairment, and three students who were participating in a reading support group outside the regular program. Another student was identified as having English as an additional language, with little English spoken at home. This class was selected because the classroom teacher had done a brief unit the previous year in which he used graphic texts, and he expressed interest in further understanding his students' reactions to this textual form. The current class was composed of 24 students, 8 in grade six, and 16 in grade seven; of these, 15 students returned consent forms from their parents/guardians granting permission to participate in the study.

The 15 children who participated in the study were treated as informants (Hubbard, 1989; McDaniel & Cairns, 1990) and their answers to direct questions in oral and written form comprised the study data, in addition to informal oral comments provided by the classroom teacher in regards to the study as a whole. Written data were gathered from the students on pre- and post-study questionnaires relating to their reading preferences as well as to their preferred reading comprehension strategies. Focus group discussions were conducted with small groups of students, on two separate classroom visits; group members were selected on the basis of initial questionnaire responses. Group One was composed of students who initially cited graphic novels as a reading preference. Group Two comprised students who preferred other textual forms and rated graphic novels in last, or nearly last, place, as compared to traditional novels, books of short stories, books of poetry, and non-fiction. Semi-structured, open-ended questions were offered to guide these group discussions, which were audio-taped and then transcribed.

The transcriptions from the focus group discussions, and the compiled data from the questionnaires, were qualitatively analyzed in terms of patterns, trends, and information that related to reading preferences and reading comprehension strategies. Charts containing this information demonstrated emerging categories for further exploration, and ongoing group discussions served to confirm many of the student responses. Additional information was noted as it inspired further questions that could shape research directions relating to graphic novels.

The results of the study, while contextualized within this group of participants, offer implications related to the potential of graphic novels as classroom resources that support the teaching of reading.

As ‘sequential art narratives’ (Carter, 2009), graphic novels have been evaluated in terms of their potential in supporting all aspects of the English Language Arts—listening, speaking, reading, writing, viewing and representing— as well as critical literacy skills that can be related to visual culture (Park, 2010). In spite of this potential, however, many teachers are not utilizing the graphic novel as a teaching resource, nor are graphic novels cited with much enthusiasm in provincial English Language Arts curricula. No specific references could be found to graphic novels in Saskatchewan’s most recent curriculum materials at the grade seven level (Saskatchewan Ministry of Education, 2008 b and d; Saskatchewan Ministry of Education 2009 b). Only three references were found in the curriculum materials at the grade six level, two referring to an out of print graphic novel (Saskatchewan Ministry of Education, 2009 a, p. 93), and one to a recommended graphic novel still in print and produced by an educational publisher (p. 97).

The lack of curricular references to graphic novels is surprising, as the widespread popularity of graphic novels with students seems to encourage more inclusive practices related to this textual form. Studies exploring graphic novels in the context of elementary classrooms are also limited. While previous research has explored the relationship between comprehension and metacognitive reading strategies (Baker & Brown, 1984; Brenna, 1995 a; Brenna, 1995 b; Flavell, 1979) as well as the relationship between particular metacognitive strategies and various genres (McTavish, 2008), studies are not available that deeply explore the metacognitive comprehension monitoring that may be involved in reading graphic novels.

After this study passed the requirements for ethical research, I offered parents an information letter to accompany the required consent form and anticipated that most parents would be open to having their children participate. When neither the classroom teacher nor I heard any questions or concerns from parents in this regard, we were surprised to discover that only 15 of the 24 students returned signed consent forms, with others simply not bringing the forms back or else returning forms that overtly withheld permission. This is interesting, as it may reflect negative parental perceptions regarding graphic novels that parallel the reflections of

teachers who decline to use this textual form as a classroom resource. Are graphic novels the ‘dark horse’ that may yet rise to favour among classroom materials, but whose qualities are currently controversial? Further study relating to parent and teacher perceptions of graphic texts appears to be a rich avenue for further inquiry.

Research Questions

The primary research questions of this study were:

1. Will informal exposure to graphic novels increase upper elementary students’ preferences in reading the graphic novel form?
2. What reading comprehension strategies do upper elementary students independently apply to the reading of graphic novels?
3. In what ways might we consider graphic novels as supportive of students’ development as readers?

Purpose

The central purpose of the study was to examine the personal responses of upper elementary students to graphic novels, outside a standard teaching framework. The study is informed by, and supplements, previous studies that discuss the potential classroom use of graphic novels: their use with struggling older readers (Smetana, Odelson, Burns & Grisham, 2009); their contribution to critical literacy programs (Chun, 2009); and their use as supportive resources when students are learning English as an additional language (Cary, 2004).

The Research Framework

Following research in a different setting with younger students, where particular reading strategies were taught and applied using graphic texts (Brenna, 2011), I was interested in knowing whether older students, when exposed to a school set of graphic novels, but without the influence of direct teaching, might experience changes in reading preferences or a shift in their understanding or application of reading comprehension strategies. To this purpose, the study was designed to offer supplementary reading material that could be perused by interested students, with tracking that occurred through questionnaires and focus group discussions.

In constructivist learning theory ‘metacognition’ includes the idea that readers build their own meaning during reading (McTavish, 2008). Although there is evidence to suggest that ‘we learn to read by reading,’ direct strategy teaching has been highlighted as a crucial part of supporting young readers (Smith, 2004). As a central element of school reading programs, research related to reading comprehension is critical as educators seek to discover further what occurs in the minds of young readers in their quest for meaning, as well as how particular strategies may be taught and applied.

The resources used in the teaching of reading have changed considerably over the years, moving from a focus on classical literature, to ‘age-appropriate’ selections that contain controlled vocabulary, to selections from well-known children’s authors that are compiled in anthologies on the basis of readability formulae, by publishers seeking to market these anthologies to educators. Graphic novels are thus outside the ‘traditional’ forms of texts utilized in schools; this historical trend may assist in their current exclusion, although they are one type of text within the body of children’s literature to which students have general access through libraries and other sources.

Results, Conclusions, Interpretations

Reading Preferences for Graphic Novels: Questionnaire Results

On the pre-questionnaire, traditional novels rated the highest in terms of reading preferences, with 9 votes placing novels as a top preference. In contrast, 6 students initially placed graphic novels in the preferred spot. It is interesting to note that no student initially selected short stories, poetry, or non-fiction as a top reading preference, yet these are the types of reading traditionally associated with school programs.

On the post-questionnaire only one of the initial 9 novel-preferring students, “Hugo,” placed graphic novels ahead of novels, commenting that “I learned that there are more amazing graphic novels than I knew of before.” The classroom teacher identified that Hugo, previously seen as a reluctant reader, demonstrated a tremendous increase in reading for the duration of the study, and that one book in particular—Selznick’s *The Invention of Hugo Cabret*—seemed to particularly captivate him, along with other more standard graphic titles. While Selznick’s work does not have a format common to graphic novels, it does have many visual illustrations paired

with lengthy sections of narrative. Hugo's own personal response to this novel, recorded on a form presented to students in the backs of the graphic novels offered for independent reading, included the following: "I finished the book (of 530 pages). It was awesome! I loved it!" It is important to note here that his pseudonym was self-selected prior to his discovery of this book.

The suggestion that older students' reading preferences generally remain unchanged when the students are offered additional exposure to graphic novels is interesting when compared to the findings of a study with younger children that noted how children with limited previous exposure to graphic novels quickly identified the graphic novel form as a new reading preference (Brenna, 2011). It is possible that as children are learning to read, texts such as graphic novels that offer visual supports, thus making the reading 'easier,' are appreciated for the help they provide. According to Smith (1988), good teaching should simplify the reading process, making it easy for readers rather than hard; teachers should include interesting resources that support children in their testing of hypotheses about written text. Since graphic novels provide support for 'making sense' of a text, they offer a favourable choice within an environment for learning. Where learning to read is concerned, graphic novels may thus be seen as a useful teaching resource for younger developing readers and for older struggling readers.

In addition, because of the high tolerance shown by older students for reading graphic novels, whether graphic novels were a preferred form or not, these books can be seen as having high potential as an educational tool through which teachers can focus on aspects of the reading process that require direct teaching. As the students indicated in the present study, which did not include direct teaching, the inclusion of graphic texts did not 'lure' them away from other traditional textual forms – perhaps a potential concern of teachers who currently do not include graphic novels in their educational programs. According to Jim, "It's been making me read more graphic novels, but I still like normal novels better." S.S. reiterates, "It (the study) was a good experience, but I still like regular novels better." Tina adds, "If I go to the library, I look at graphic novels differently...and it's kind of...opened me up to reading different kinds of books." A related point is that all but one of the students responded in favour of reading a book before seeing the movie—again in support of the idea that if given alternatives, students won't necessarily gravitate to the more visual form.

Another intriguing pattern in the data appeared in the preferences students acknowledged on the post-questionnaire with respect to graphic novels, comic books, and books of cartoons. The latter two categories were added to the number of potential choices on the post-questionnaire as a result of students' comments during the focus group discussion, and prompted a new research interest in terms of relationships between the three different textual forms: graphic novels, comics, and cartoons. Nearly half of the student responses in terms of reading preferences isolated graphic novels from comics or cartoon books by one or more other choices, indicating that a preference for graphic novels did not necessarily mean a student would like cartoons and comics.

Perhaps graphic novels, cartoons, and comics are not as related to each other as at first glance, and quite possibly students are seeing graphic novels as most similar to regular novels in terms of reader engagement. Further research is needed to follow up on this thread of inquiry. Many of the student comments in the focus group discussions pointed to similarities between graphic novels, comics, and cartoons, although graphic novels differed from the other two textual forms in length and in the 'commitment' required from readers. R.B said, "I've read comics...kind of the same thing but...graphic novels have more to read...'cause comics are short."

On the basis of the group discussions, as I approached the post-study questionnaire, I expected the results of reading preferences to connect graphic novels, comic books, and books of cartoons more closely. As this close relationship was not apparent in the student responses, I was struck by the possibility that without an actual teacher-directed study of graphic novels, students asked to compare these three forms of text simply respond to the similarity in visual features, without consciously considering other features, such as plot development. When asked to identify reading preferences, however, it is possible that students' responses arise from an unconscious reliance, related to reading for pleasure, on aspects such as plot development—more advanced in the graphic novel form than in comics or cartoons, thereby serving as a divisive feature when analyzing the three types of texts. This general finding may connect to parent and teacher responses to graphic novels; such textual forms are not considered suitable in the field of Education, in that adults too may see graphic novels as having the same properties as comics and cartoons, without appreciating their novel-like qualities.

Critical Literacy Connections

Data arising from the focus group discussions were rich and varied, with interesting points of comparison between the group that preferred graphic novels as a textual form, and the group that selected other textual forms over graphic novels. All of the students were enthusiastic about the study, whether they had listed graphic novels as a preference or not, and I was struck by comments such as the following, by Tina: “I kind of just wanted to try something different, see if I did like them because I haven’t actually read very many of them before.” Jim said, “I wondered if there were any other nice action ones...” and advised that graphic novels “should be separated out (in libraries)” so people can find them more easily, advice reiterated by S.S.: “It’s really hard to find them...you don’t want to take an hour just to find one book.” Jim also discussed his own critical reading of the graphic novel adaptation of *Artemis Fowl*: “I’m not trying to be racist here, or anything, but in the (original) book, Butler is Black, and in the graphic novel, he’s White.” Isabelle offered a critical viewpoint on her reading of the graphic adaptation *The Wonderful Adventures of the Wizard of Oz*: “Our school did the musical last year so I found it funny to compare...it’s cool to make a comparison.”

Much of what the students said relates to critical literacy, in the very conscientious manner that students were reading and evaluating what they read. “The only one I’ve read before is the Bone one, and to me the story didn’t make sense...and I wanted to see, ‘Were other graphic novels like that?’” said Shawn. Two students alluded to the prominence of books with sequels in the graphic novel category, and identified that these were very unsatisfying, as the individual books themselves felt unfinished. Other comments related to the fact that some titles were “better than others” and that not every graphic novel is good literature, a point elaborated on through a discussion of how some of the fonts were small and irritating, and how particular titles included insufficient details in the illustration. Tina said: “I think that this was a good experience to find a different form of reading and opened people up to new kinds of books. Thanks!” I was impressed by the quality of analyses in these comments, as well as the students’ willingness to take ownership for their part in this study, and wondered how often we present materials to elementary students, asking for their honest opinion. I conjecture that if I had ever given my honest opinion on the basal readers in my childhood classrooms, I would have been reprimanded for being disrespectful.

Graphic Novels as a Support for Interpersonal Reading Talk

One thread running through a number of the discussions was the potential for graphic novels to support interpersonal reading talk, extending Smith's (1988) concept of the classroom literacy club to include parents, older siblings, and younger siblings. Many students spoke spontaneously about sharing texts with each other as well as with family members, supporting the potential of graphic novels as bridges between readers. Perhaps because some of them offer the chance of a quicker read, the connection between people is more easily possible. Edwina said, "Graphic novels are good for little kids. I had a graphic novel at home and my little brother in Grade One wanted to read it, so I let him, and he was able to enjoy it. He didn't understand everything, he didn't understand most of the words but when he looked at the pictures he kind of knew what was happening." S.S. reported that she shared a graphic novel with her older brother, as had Sozoh, while Hugo indicated that he had shared one with a younger sister, and Isabelle offered that she had "told her sister and asked her if she liked graphic novels and she said no." In contrast to students who spoke about sharing graphic novels with siblings, Rose confided that she had shared graphic novels with both parents.

Graphic Novels as a Support for Reluctant or Struggling Readers

Another thread from the focus group discussions related to the 'easiness' of graphic novels in comparison to regular novels. Many students rated graphic novels as easier to read, with "hardly any words," and thus this form may support reluctant or struggling readers, especially readers for whom English is an additional language. "English is a new language for me," said Soroz. "The pictures in graphic novels really help." "I'm not really a big huge fan of reading," said Rose. "That's why I like graphic novels." Rose went on to clarify just what graphic novels offered to her that other forms of text did not. "Here...you have the characters in your mind. At the start of it, they show them...so when you're reading you can have those pictures in your mind." Jim said, "They seem easier for me to read than other books 'cause...I have a hard time trying to picture...and graphic novels are a big help." Other students disagreed with the label 'easy' for graphic texts. S.S. indicated that graphic novels are "just as hard. But it's a different style so some people aren't used to that yet." Shawn described how some graphic

novels are more challenging than others. There was, however, agreement that graphic novels supported readers in word identification, as the visuals offered an accessible context through which one might “increase your vocabulary” and understand what was going on.

The role of the visuals led to an interesting dialogue in one of the focus group discussions, where students came up with the idea that graphic novels were ‘easier’ and established that, while they may assist some readers and seem easier to them, a wider descriptor for graphic novels is that they are ‘quicker’ to read in terms of the demands to decode print. Although graphic novels may have “deep ideas” embedded within, or “factual information that makes them educational,” the visual images communicate ideas more quickly than the more time-consuming process of decoding many individual words. Students suggested that setting and character descriptions are abbreviated in the narration of graphic novels, and are communicated much more efficiently through the pictures.

Similar to their diverse ideas related to the simplicity of graphic novels, the students offered varying comments about who is ‘most responsible’ for the finished text. When asked whether the author or illustrator should carry the focus in library cataloguing, or on what qualities should awards for graphic novels be based, students tended towards the idea that the author of the words was most involved. As Rose stated, “The author comes up with the idea more,” and Sozoh added, “He or she work(s) hard and it is the word work” that counts. Edwina included the idea that the author “did the most editing, writing, and thinking about it.” The students were, however, willing to give the illustrator some credit, especially when awards were concerned. Tina’s point sums up the thinking here: “The illustrator should be used in the catalogue (along with the author of the words) because without the illustrator it’s just a novel.”

Reading Comprehension Strategies, Writing Skills, and Graphic Novels

Student metacognition relating to reading comprehension strategies, writing skills, and graphic novels offered some insight into students’ knowledge and close reading of these texts. Hugo, the most avid reader of graphic novels in the group, offered an initial comment expressing his perception that graphic novels don’t let you skim and scan. His pre-questionnaire contained information about his personal reading strategy preferences, and it was interesting to note that he “rarely” skips words when reading, although he reported on his post-questionnaire that he can

use skimming with books other than graphic novels. Hugo reported that when he comes to unknown words, he uses a dictionary, and he also stated that in order to be a better reader, he would have to develop a stronger ability to focus. Connections between students' individual strategy preferences and preferred textual forms are intriguing, and offer scope for further study.

Students in the focus-group discussions differed in their ability to appreciate the role of pictures in the graphic novel texts. Students in the group that preferred graphic novels tended to see the graphics as a support that allowed efficient communication, and all but one of the students in this focus group reported that they generally make pictures in their heads during reading and continue this practice during the reading of graphic novels. One of the students in this group agreed with his counterparts in the group that did not prefer graphic novels—seeing the pictures as a distraction that replaced his potential to make pictures in his head during reading. “The pictures are there,” said R.B., and Isabelle stated, “With graphic novels, it’s kind of done for me.” Perhaps the more practiced readers of graphic novels develop a refined ability to visualize when reading this textual form, and further research is required relating to this possibility.

One other response to pictures in graphic texts, from students in the focus group that rated graphic novels as a least preferred form, involved the idea that the messages, when presented in visual form, were too easily located at first sight. As the eye perceived the page, readers were prevented from being surprised by events that would unfold in a more suspenseful and chronological way through written narrative. The students thought that graphic novels reduce the chances for making predictions while reading. Said R.B., “If you look at a picture (you say to yourself) I know where this is going.” This response to illustrations may also serve to support students' earlier comments relating to the nature of graphic novels as ‘easier’ texts. A sense of ‘what happens next’ may be offered through the visuals, to support readers as they work to make meaning.

Further Research

As indicated in a previous study conducted with younger students (Brenna, 2011), questions remain about the usefulness of graphic novels in teaching reading comprehension strategies that may be applied to other types of texts. As further studies connect graphic novels to

classroom practice, observations and student-centred dialogues are critical in further guiding and shaping our understanding regarding the reading of these multi-modal texts, and the potential of these texts in elementary classroom reading programs. This study has positioned graphic novels in a positive light: they have potential as classroom resources about which students are enthusiastic, and they give rise to no ill-effects. In addition, this study suggests that graphic novels support reluctant or struggling readers, including English language learners. The flexibility of graphic novels as stimuli for interpersonal reading talk, supporting students within a school inspired 'literacy club,' is an unexpected finding that deserves further investigation. This study also prompts an interest in the reflections of parents and teachers regarding graphic novels. Further research that explores such reflections would be very useful if educators consider the inclusion of graphic novels as a component of classroom reading programs from 'dark horse' to one that figures prominently in the race for resources.

The Last Word

In considering graphic novels as a resource in language arts' classrooms, the responses of students are important if we are to promote student-centred learning environments where resources are based on children's interests and aptitudes. What we may have in the graphic novel form, in terms of a classroom resource, is a text that reads in many ways like a novel, but is quicker to access, offering opportunities for teachers to support a number of reading skills and strategies including critical literacy. When I asked the classroom teacher for his last word on this study, he reported that "I can't get the books away from them. In terms of particular students, they just won't put them down, and these would be students who are generally more reluctant readers. One girl who was not reading anything before is now reading avidly."

When I presented an opportunity for the students to offer advice about graphic novels, one student provided suggestions for authors: "I like how they did *Rapunzel's Revenge* and did it all differently...my advice for authors would be to do more of that. *Cinderella* or *Sleeping Beauty*. Knowing the original story lets you compare...." Other students gave advice for teachers in regards to the use of graphic novels in classrooms and demonstrated appreciation at being asked for their opinion. S.S. said: "Definitely use them...because some kids really like graphic novels and others not so much...a good mix of books and a good amount (is important)."

Isabelle added that it's valuable to ask kids for their own impressions on what they read. "See how many comments the books get." Rose offered that: "Graphic novels are good in the classroom for some who don't have...a vivid picture in their mind...or they just like reading them...or they don't want to read too much sometimes..." "Everyone has a different reading ability and I think that they (students) should get to choose what's good for them," said Tina. Sozoh offered the following: "If you're learning how to read, it helps you and makes it easier for you. Like me, I'm not the fastest reader, and sometimes I have troubles, too...but when I read graphic novels I get better."

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