

**Beyond Promotion: School Librarians as Advocates and
Teaching Partners for Using Graphic Novels in the Classroom**

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ADVOCATING FOR GRAPHIC NOVELS IN CLASSROOMS

Abstract

This paper examines evidence-based research to support the claim that school librarians play an integral role in advocating for the use of graphic novels in classroom-based instruction. Research studies indicate students who engage in graphic novels experience improved fluency, comprehension, visual and spatial reasoning. With specific action steps, school librarians can become better teaching partners and advocate for graphic novels to improve reading achievement for all students.

Keywords: graphic novels, comics, school librarians, reading instruction

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School librarians play a significant role in promoting graphic novels as motivation for struggling or reluctant readers. Traditionally, parents and teachers tolerate graphic novels as temporary motivational tools for beginning or struggling readers in hopes they will soon advance into ‘real’ reading. This attitude can negatively influence how adults and children perceive graphic novels. If teachers are reluctant to use graphic novels as instructional tools, what can school librarians do to educate teachers on how graphic novels can support reading? Emerging research indicates that using graphic novels in classroom-based instruction can improve specific reading skills for all readers, not just struggling or reluctant readers (Brugar et al., 2018; Jimenez & Meyer, 2016). Current studies find that students who engage in graphic novels experience improved fluency, comprehension, linguistic, visual, and spatial reasoning.

In recent years, graphic novels have become more popular and prominent in libraries and schools (Brugar et al., 2018; Jimenez & Meyer, 2016; Rick, 2011). The term graphic novel and comics are often used interchangeably, which can be misleading. It is important to distinguish the difference between a comic book and a graphic novel. Similar to comic books, graphic novels use framed images displayed in a sequential format to convey a story. Unlike comics, “graphic novels are book-length, stand-alone fiction or nonfiction narratives in the comics medium (Meyer & Jimenez, 2017, p.153). This definition of a graphic novel will be used throughout this paper.

With more awareness about the benefits of graphic novels with young readers, school librarians can become better teaching partners and advocates for using graphic novels in classroom-based instruction. School librarians must first improve their own level of knowledge

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by reading graphic novels and research studies. They can integrate graphic novels into programming, increase fiction and nonfiction titles through improved collection development, and collaborate with colleagues to offer authentic learning experiences. It is not enough for school librarians to merely suggest graphic novels for struggling or reluctant readers when research indicates how graphic novels can improve reading achievement for all readers.

Following a review of research-based evidence, an action plan for using graphic novels in the classroom is outlined to improve school librarians' roles as advocates and teaching partners.

Evidence-Based Research about Using Graphic Novels in the Classroom

Recent studies explore the complex processes involved in reading graphic novels such as fluency, comprehension, linguistic, visual, and spatial reasoning. In one such study, researchers focused on using graphic novels to improve reading fluency rates among students identified with learning disabilities (Fenty & Brydon, 2020). Teachers planned a comprehensive fluency unit that included “the following six steps: (a) previewing and predicting, (b) teacher modeling, (c) echo or choral reading, (d) independent practice, (e) 1-min timing, and (f) written response” (Fenty & Brydon, 2020, p. 282). Results indicated that student engagement in sustained reading increased when given a choice in their reading and multiple opportunities to reread the text. Fenty and Brydon suggested further research is needed “as a way to make complex content area concepts such as those found in science...and social studies texts more comprehensible” (2020, p. 284).

With the increased focus on reading in the content areas, graphic novels have been used to improve comprehension when teachers use specific frameworks and reading strategies. Multiple studies indicate the growing use of graphic novels to improve comprehension of content area subjects among students in various grade levels (Brown, 2013; Brugar et al., 2018). One

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such study involved using historical graphic novels with a group of sixth graders. Brugar et al. (2018) conducted mixed-methods research to “explore the possibilities for students to learn history content using a graphic novel unit” (p. 199). The authors concluded that students understood complex historical content more accurately because of the integrated use of visual representation combined with text from the graphic novel format. The data analysis basis included pre- and post-intervention scores, end of unit content assessment, and written surveys. Brugar et al. concluded that intentionally teaching comprehension strategies while reading graphic novels could improve students’ overall understanding of the text.

While Brugar et al. (2018) studied sixth-graders, Brown’s (2013) study engaged second-grade students in a reading-writing workshop using graphic novels. Students spent the first five weeks immersed in reading a variety of graphic novels with direct instruction on how to navigate the pictures and the text. During the second part of the study, students wrote their own narrative stories in graphic format. “All along, students practiced fluency skills such as character voices, reading high action events, and paying attention to punctuation” (2013, p. 216). Brown concluded that “graphic novels are just one tool available for teaching reading comprehension and fluency in a meaningful way to elementary students” (2013, p. 217). One student reported, “I know what is happening in these books [graphic novels] because of the pictures. I don’t always know what is going on in other books” (2013, p. 217).

Brenna (2013) also asserts that graphic novels improve reading comprehension when students are taught specific metacognitive reading strategies. This qualitative study explored the relationship between comprehension strategies and graphic novels in a fourth-grade classroom. Basing the research on constructivist theory, Brenna explored how readers build their own meaning through active problem-solving. Students were taught specific comprehension strategies

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and then given opportunities to practice applying these strategies in a 10-week long unit exploring graphic novels. Results from this study concluded that “the direct teaching and application of form-specific strategies related to graphic novel explorations could serve as placeholders for the direct teaching and learning of other comprehension strategies related to other types of text” (Breanna, 2013, p. 92). Breanna suggests further exploration is needed to deepen our understanding of how multimodal texts can support the development of readers.

While most research has focused on using graphic novels with struggling or reluctant readers (Fenty & Brydon, 2020), other studies include expert readers investigating the complex reading strategies involved in reading a graphic book. In their qualitative study, Jimenez and Meyer (2016) compared expert print dominant readers with expert graphic novel readers to dispel the myth that reading graphic novels is easier than reading narrative text. The authors used a system of coding to analyze the cognitive processes required while reading graphic novels. Their findings “show the synthesis of linguistic, visual, and spatial resources is a cognitively complex activity” (Jimenez & Meyer, 2016, p. 437). Because reading graphic novels is more complicated than previously thought, “teachers need to understand the multiple ways these texts can be read, and most importantly, that reading visual and spatial cues is not easy, natural or fast (Jimenez & Meyer, 2016, p. 440). Implications for practice suggest that teachers need more experience using graphic novels in classroom-based instruction.

Leading Change in Education

School librarians can influence student achievement by going beyond merely promoting graphic novels and advocating for their use in classroom instruction. In their feature articles, Meyer and Jimenez (2017) and Julie Rick (2011) offer helpful tips for how school librarians can convince educators about the value of using graphic novels.

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Education. First, school librarians should read graphic novels themselves. Becoming familiar with the format and reading graphic novels provides a foundation for advocacy (Meyer & Jimenez, 2017). By reading more graphic novels, school librarians will recognize the discrepancy between readability and content in many popular graphic novels. Often the low readability level does not correspond to the mature content found in these books. School librarians should match the content and audience when suggesting graphic novels to young readers (Bucher & Manning, 2004). School librarians should familiarize themselves with the latest research and be able to discuss the literary merits of graphic novels in an academic setting (Rick, 2011). By staying informed on the latest research, school librarians can become experts in their school communities.

Programming. School librarians can include graphic novels in programming. Promoting graphic novels in reader's advisory services or promotional materials can present graphic novels to a broader audience. Librarians can model how to read graphic novels during story times. Integrating technology, such as digital copies of a graphic novel or using document cameras to display pages in a book, allows access to whole group instruction.

Collection Development. Librarians can increase the school library's graphic novel collection with titles that support classroom-based content areas. School librarians can appeal to classroom teachers by selecting graphic novels that will complement subject areas such as science, social studies, history, and language arts. School librarians also need to be aware that readability levels in graphic novels tend to be lower than the storyline's sophisticated content. It is important that school librarians choose books with appropriate age level content for their population of students.

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Collaboration. School librarians can “offer to collaborate with colleagues to create meaningful and authentic learning experiences” (Rick, 2011, p. 38). Nonfiction titles could be appropriate selections for teaching content area subjects. For example, Brugar et al. (2018) used Nathan Hale’s *One Dead Spy* to teach students about the American Revolution. Librarians should become familiar with the grade-level curriculum and familiarize themselves with books that can support content area subjects. School librarians can also demonstrate how to read graphic novels through direct instruction. It takes time and practice to understand the complex visual and spatial cues found in graphic novels (Jimenez & Meyer, 2016).

Suggestions for Practice and Future Research

While most librarians could implement the steps outlined in this plan, classroom teachers might need more support to integrate graphic novels into their instructional practice. Publishing companies often dictate what materials are available to schools and thus influence access to innovative materials such as graphic novels. Most public school teachers are required to use the district’s approved curriculum materials. By including graphic novels in their curriculum materials, publishing companies could have a direct and wide-ranging influence on how educators view the graphic novels’ literary merits. Further investigation is needed to ascertain if publishing companies currently include graphic novels in their instructional materials.

Most education research has focused on using graphic novels as motivational tools to engage reluctant or struggling readers. More research is needed that includes readers of all levels to question the assumption that reading graphic novels is easier than traditional print-dominant novels (Brugar et al., 2018; Jimenez & Meyer, 2016). School librarians should begin to advocate for the use of graphic novels, even if they are reluctant readers of graphic novels themselves.

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School librarians must continue to promote a variety of texts to reach all readers, including the use of graphic novels as legitimate sources of information.

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