

## Encouraging Preservice Teachers to Utilize Graphic Novels as Resources in Content Areas

If you ask young adolescents about books they enjoy, they might mention graphic novels. This format has increased in popularity among teens in the recent years (Brozo, 2013; Carter, 2007; Monnin, 2013). In addition to being a medium to spark interest, graphic novels also provide a rich and rewarding literature experience. Graphic novels require readers to interpret the connection between text and graphics and in doing so readers draw upon a wide range of strategies and comprehension skills to comprehend the text. Incorporating graphic novels in the classroom not only gives students exposure to more diverse text, but also motivates and requires them to think critically as they read. Graphic novels not only provide opportunities to enhance students' reading comprehension skills, they also promote critical thinking and move classrooms away from "one size fits all" literacy instruction.

While graphic novels are widely popular among publishers, librarians, the public, and adolescents, they are still relative new-comers within classroom settings (McTaggart, 2008). The purpose of this study was to address this disconnect by providing preservice middle grades teachers with opportunities to learn about and through graphic novels. More specifically, the project introduced preservice middle grades teachers to the structure and language of graphic novels while they considered this tool as a resource in the various content areas. This study addressed the following questions:

1. What are preservice teachers' perceptions and knowledge of graphic novels?
2. How can one use graphic novels as resources in each content area?

In response to the research about adolescents as well as resistance to reading instruction among content area teachers, this study focused on preservice teachers' knowledge and perceptions of graphic novels as well as how these can be utilized as resources in content area instruction. More specifically, through the use and modeling of graphic novels we hoped to encourage preservice middle grades teachers to view reading and engagement with these texts as vital to content areas including: Math, Science, Social Studies, and Language Arts. By incorporating graphic novels into teacher education methods courses, we sought to shift preservice teachers' awareness of graphic novels to encourage our students to integrate reading instruction, and more specifically graphic novels, into their future classrooms.

In order to investigate participants' perceptions of graphic novels and their potential use in content area classrooms, a qualitative study was conducted. Qualitative studies provide an opportunity for researchers to "probe beneath the surface" and develop a rich contextual understanding of the phenomenon under study (Merriam, 2009, Tellis, 1997; Stake, 1995). In this instance, a qualitative study provided opportunities to uncover and interpret preservice teachers' perceptions of graphic novels as they read and discussed graphic novels with their peers and considered the potential instructional uses of graphic novels in various content areas.

This study was conducted in a large regional university within the southeastern United States. Participants in this qualitative study consisted of 15 preservice teachers concurrently enrolled in the Spring 2014 session of required methods courses. This setting was purposefully selected since this

setting reflects the average or typical preservice teacher candidate in the program and was “not in any major way atypical, deviant, or intensely unusual” (Patton, 2002, p. 236).

Data collection began with a survey to assess preservice teachers’ prior knowledge of and experiences with reading graphic novels. Throughout the semester preservice teachers’ perceptions were further explored through an open-ended survey that addressed: before reading the graphic novel, during reading the graphic novels, and after reading the graphic novels. A constant comparative method (Creswell, 1998; Glasser & Strauss, 1967) was used to analyze the qualitative data collected in the study. This method “combines inductive category-coding with a simultaneous comparison of social incidents observed and coded” and provides “thick description” of preservice teachers’ perceptions of and engagement with graphic novels (LeCompte & Preissle, 1993, p. 256). The surveys were read multiple times by individual researchers to initiate the data analysis process. Codes were then assigned by each researcher based upon patterns in study participants’ data. After individual analyses, the researchers met regularly to exchange, read, and sort through all data sources to identify possible themes collectively, independent of previous individual interpretations. Each member subsequently presented their individual preliminary findings followed by a dialogue over commonality and differences of interpretation to triangulate the findings.

Our data indicate that fourteen out of fifteen participants now consider graphic novels as resources that may spark the fun in reading again and they are now seen as teaching tools for the classroom, which is very different from the traditional comic book style that many individuals are previously accustomed to with a graphic novel format. Because of the format, design and striking visuals, graphic novels have the power to capture the attention of their readers. Along with the ability to engage students graphic novels can also help bridge the gap between students and literacy levels.

Because one third of our preservice teachers mention that the format of the graphic novels may be challenging to young adolescents, it is important that these preservice teachers be taught how to understand the fundamentals of reading, in addition to how to comprehend and interact with text in order to make relevant connections and graphic novels can be the medium to do so. Numerous researchers have found that graphic novels can be used in the classroom settings; with one-way being to, promote interdisciplinary teaching. Eight of the fifteen of our preservice teachers claimed they could use their graphic novel in other content areas supporting previous research findings. Graphic novels can provide a rich reading experience and promote critical literacy skills.

Prior to reading the content based graphic novels, assigned for the study, few of the preservice teachers had even read graphic novels. This lack of exposure can cause preservice teachers to be apprehensive about using graphic novels as resources in their content areas because they have had very little instruction on how to do so. It is imperative to make future teachers aware of the potential power of graphic novels in all content areas.