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High School Students' Reading Experiences with Graphic Novels, Comics, and Manga

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HIGH SCHOOL STUDENTS' READING EXPERIENCES WITH GRAPHIC NOVELS, COMICS, AND MANGA

by

ESTHER JIN KIM

Under the Direction of Dr. Michelle Zoss

ABSTRACT

This qualitative study explored high school students' reading experiences with graphic novels. Historically, comics and graphic novels were not recognized by the mainstream as a respectable form of literature, thereby prompting the medium exclusion from school curricula (Lewkowich, 2019b; Versaci, 2001). However, graphic novels are now gaining popularity and becoming a preferred reading choice for students (Carter, 2007; Lewkowich, 2019b). Rooted in transactional theory of reading and sociocultural theories of meaning making, this case study examined how students made meaning from reading graphic novels, comics, and manga within an English language arts classroom setting. Data collection included recorded conversations during independent reading and semi-structured interviews. Data analysis involved multiple coding cycles to develop themes describing the roles of semiotics, transactional reading, sociocultural contexts, and joy in students' reading experiences. I found that students took advantage of their access to technology in a STEM setting to pursue the books that brought them joy. Reading graphic novels humanized their reading identities within a STEM high school setting. By focusing on students' perspectives of reading graphic novels, the study added to the

ongoing conversation about high school students making their own reading choices and the

importance and relevance of graphic novels in the English language arts curriculum.

INDEX WORDS: Case study, comic books, English language arts, graphic novels, high school

students, independent reading, manga, meaning making, semiotics, sociocultural theory, STEM

high school, transactional theory

HIGH SCHOOL STUDENTS' READING EXPERIENCES WITH GRAPHIC NOVELS,

COMICS, AND MANGA

by

ESTHER JIN KIM

A Dissertation

Presented in Partial Fulfillment of Requirements for the

Degree of

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in

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in

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in

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DEDICATION

This work is dedicated to my family.

엄마, 아빠, and 오빠—We learned the hard way that the American Dream isn't all we

thought it'd be, but we made it. I couldn't have completed this degree without seeing firsthand

the blood, sweat, and tears that's required to persevere.

But mostly, this work is for 언니, my sister.

I will never be able to repay you for the sacrifices you've made so that I could have the

better things in life, but I thank you, I see you, and I love you.

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INTRODUCTION

My high school language arts teacher ignited my passion for reading and writing—Ms. Holly's Advanced Placement (AP) Language course opened a safe space for me to be creative. One of the most memorable activities in the class was a project in which students were able to integrate artwork into our creative stories as essential, and not just decorative, parts of our narrative. For the first time in my young adult education, I saw that literature did not have to be limited to just words and text; I was able to break conventional grammar rules and incorporate images to tell stories. The course opened a world in which I could have fun with literature; so, a few years later, Ms. Holly inspired me to pursue my degree in English.

I thought my decision to become an English major would result in having enjoyable experiences like the ones in Ms. Holly's class. Instead, I started to suffer from an intense case of imposter syndrome. I was in a disadvantaged position; most "real" English majors had already grown up reading and learning canonical texts in their early education, while I had spent my early education learning the English language whilst also learning the Korean language I was developing at home. Attempting to read the assigned readings for my college courses was difficult because I struggled with the difficult vocabulary and sophisticated English that is often found within classic literature. I relied on class discussions to help me visualize the stories; these dialogues helped fill in the spaces of my own misunderstanding from the previous nights' assigned readings.

McLean et al. (2017) discussed the importance of talk as being central to how learners create understanding and make meaning of their world. In my own experience as a student in a college classroom, I relied on the dialogue and conversations I had with my professors and peers to make meaning of the literary texts we were analyzing for class. Then, it was Dr. Collins's graphic novels course that provided a haven from my imposter syndrome. The course was an

arbitrary degree elective, but seeing the animated conversations students could have about graphic novels opened my eyes to the value of comics as a creditable form of literature. Even more, for one of the first times in my undergraduate career, I felt that I could contribute to the class conversations because the comic medium—with the images and selective text—made it easier for me to read. Regardless of how proficient or knowledgeable students were about literature, Dr. Collins's comics course provided a leveling ground for how students could talk about books. Shortly after, I determined that wherever my career would take me down the road, I would commit to focusing on graphic novels as an important component for my teaching career.

Now, I have the honor of working as a language arts teacher at one of the first student-choice STEM high schools in the Southeast: Corners STEM High School.[1] For many, the students (or their parents) chose our school because they believed our school provided unique opportunities that they may not encounter in traditional schools. At the same time, the students and teachers at Corners STEM High School (CSHS) faced particular challenges because we were a Title I school. The student body is comprised largely of students from Hispanic, Latinx, and Black families, and it is not uncommon for many of them work 40+ hours a week to support their family or miss weeks of school to care for their siblings. Also, during the study, the Covid-19 pandemic placed additional strains onto the challenges students and teachers were already experiencing prior to the pandemic. Yet, despite the obstacles our students faced, the teachers at CSHS were fervent in their pursuit of providing quality teaching and equitable opportunities for all students. Our mantra was, aptly, "STEM for all."

As a language arts department, we made it our mission to be the literacy cornerstone of our school and to be a catalyst for inspiring students to harness the power of literacy. We

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[1] Corners STEM High School is a pseudonym; all names of schools, students, and teachers in the study are pseudonyms.

believed that literacy empowered our kids to value their unique identities through the pages of the books they chose. We believed this empowerment was only accomplished by prioritizing student choice, voice, and diversity; therefore, we embedded independent reading (IR) time into every day of our school year. During IR, students had a space to enter a world apart from their own, to live and breathe through the adventures of diverse characters, and to grapple with universal human obstacles. However, it was also important that students understood that we were invested in who they are and how their reading shaped who they would become; therefore, conferring with students about their independent reading book was another valued aspect of IR time. Gallagher and Kittle (2018) contended that carving out quality time to conference with students humanizes teaching; the conferences provided space for students to understand that we paid attention to them, we cared about them, and we valued their thoughts. As a result, students gained confidence in their ability to engage in the learning process because they saw that their teachers valued their thoughts and ideas, and invested in their learning and growth. Reading conferences were a practice that I began three years ago, and I can attest to Kittle and Gallagher's convictions—the one-on-one time with my students had become a sacred, invaluable part of our shared experience.

It was during IR time that I noticed many of my students reading graphic novels, comics, and manga. What initially piqued my attention was the intensity to which they delved into their books—as a teacher, I found myself repeatedly asking my students to put their graphic novels away long after IR time. What also surprised me were the variety learners who were reading these novels. Some graphic novel readers were students who appeared to be disengaged and non-participatory in school—they were students who rarely spoke up during classroom discussions and students who had below-average grades across many content courses. Yet, these were the

same students who eagerly talked to me about their books during our IR conferences and the same students who frequently ask me to go the library to check out the next series for their comic. Other graphic novel readers were students who were considered the "top-tier" academic students—they hardly missed a day of school, they were the first to raise their hands, and they made every effort to earn an 'A.' What I was witnessing in my own classroom contradicted my own experience with comics in high school; graphic novels were rarely read amongst my peers and were approached with disdain because they were seen as books for struggling readers or reputed as "not real books."

In response to the number of students who were interested in reading graphic novels, I initiated a graphic novel book club at our school. Students gathered in their book clubs and pulled graphic novels from my bookshelves, read comics with their peers, and shared their reactions from their readings. The level of reader diversity astounded me—the club invited students from all grade levels, of varying academic levels, and of different genders and backgrounds together to commune in their love for comics. In these book clubs, I heard 9th grade English Language Learners speak excitedly with Advanced Placement seniors over *Pashmina* (Chanani, 2018). I saw students who were wrestling with their sexual orientation find comfort in *The Magic Fish* (Le, 2020). In these book clubs, students coped with their parent's death in *Dancing at the Pity Party* (Feder, 2020). Something magical happened in this space that brought book club members back every week and I sought to understand the magic that encaptivated high school kids to read these graphic novels.

My observations led me to the following research questions:

What are students' reading experiences with graphic novels?

a. How do readers consider the visual qualities of graphic novels to construct meaning from their reading?

b. When provided opportunities to choose their own books, why do students choose graphic novels?

In this chapter, I present the following sections to contextualize my proposed dissertation research: (1) Definition of Terms, where I define keywords relevant to my study, (2) Background of the Problem, where I provide some context for the study, (3) Epistemology, where I discuss the roots of how I gain knowledge, (4) Theoretical Perspectives, where I provide the frameworks that guide my research study, and finally, (5) an Overview of the Study, where I provide readers with a road map of the next chapters of this dissertation.

Definition of Terms

My study focused on high school students' reading experiences with graphic novels. In this section, I used literature from the field to define the terms *graphic novels* and *experience.*

Graphic Novels

The definition of *graphic novels* remains contentious and a topic of debate, primarily because of its close overlap with the terms *comics* and *graphic narratives*. Furthermore, the term *graphic novel* emerged as a political effort to cast the comics medium in a more "literary light" (Yang, 2008, p. 186). Will Eisner (2008), champion of the graphic novel, defined comics as a series of artistic images and words intended to be read in sequential order; he described graphic novels as larger, self-contained works of sequential art (Botzakis et al., 2017; Levitz et al., 2015). However, Eisner's definition of graphic novels suggested that graphic novels must be single, stand-alone works and excluded graphic novels that may be a part of a series.

American cartoonist and comic theorist Scott McCloud (1994) defined comics as "juxtaposed pictorial and other images in deliberate sequence, intended to convey information

and/or to produce an aesthetic response to the viewer" (p. 9). In his earlier work, McCloud overlooked *text* as an important factor in comics, but later included text as an important component to defining comics (2006). Then, we have Petersen's (2011) description of *graphic narratives* as static images that tell stories synchronically (images appearing all at once) and diachronically (images appearing in a sequence). Petersen's emphasis on "static images" allowed the definition to encompass comics and graphic narratives while excluding films and animation. Finally, Carter (2007) defined graphic novels as "book-length sequential art narrative[s] featuring anthology-style collection[s] of comic art…collection[s] of reprinted comic book issues comprising a single story line, or an original, stand-alone graphic narrative" (p. 1).

For this study, defining *manga* was also relevant to the context of graphic novels. Manga is an umbrella term for the wide variety of comic books and graphic novels that are produced in Japan (Petersen, 2011). Some unique features of manga include reading them left-to-right, from back cover to front cover. They also feature a distinct style of artwork that incorporates an emphasis on emotions (Abbott & Forceville, 2011) and Japanese visual language (Cohn, 2014).

In this dissertation, I use the word *comics* as a broad, blanketed term to reference sequential art with incorporated text while also adopting Carter's (2007) specific interpretation of *graphic novels* as a medium with story-telling elements and sequential artistic images that can be stand-alone novels or a part of a series.

Experience

Dewey (1958, 2018) argued that every experience is a result of the interactions between the individual and some aspect of the world in which they live; the interactions included people acting, sensing, thinking, feeling, and making meaning in a setting, and the experiences involved the integration of past experiences into the present and beyond. One of the principles of Dewey's theory of experience is the principle of continuity. Dewey's (1938) principle of continuity

recognized that past experiences affect an individual's current being which, in turn, changed all subsequent experiences. Therefore, each person's past experiences build upon each other to construct how one approaches current and future experiences. The notion that an individual's past experiences can consequently affect current and future experiences is reflective of social-constructivist theories of knowing (Vygotsky, 1978; Wertsch, 1985). Furthermore, experiences are also affected by interactions within a social context. Because human beings are a part of the larger world, experiences do not only occur within individual people, but can result in transactions between the person and external aspects of the world. Within my study, I took into consideration that students' past experiences affect their ongoing experiences—whether those experiences included reading experiences in general, reading experiences with graphic novels, and reading experiences when reading with others. I recognized that students brought to school their own diverse varieties of knowledge and experiences that inform their current and ongoing interactions between the world and people, and that these interactions were more than simply two beings reacting to each another but, rather, a mutual transaction (Louise M. Rosenblatt, 1994). Therefore, this study examined how students' past experiences informed how they interact with other readers and how they interacted with their reading of graphic novels.

Background of the Problem

Historically, comics and graphic novels were not recognized by the mainstream as a respectable form of literature, thereby prompting the medium to be excluded from school curricula (Lewkowich, 2019b; Versaci, 2001). However, graphic novels are now gaining popularity and becoming a preferred reading choice for students (Carter, 2007; Lewkowich, 2019b). Major publishing companies and newspapers are popularizing graphic novels by generating reviews, reader comments, and discussions. *The New York Times* has been publishing

reviews about graphic novels for several years now and proposed that graphic novels may become the nation's new literature of choice (Yang, 2008; Yildirim, 2013). Even major literary works, like Shakespeare's *Macbeth* and *Anne Frank's Diary*, are available in graphic novel versions. Yet, despite their popularity, teachers are hesitant about introducing them in the classroom because of the perceived difficulty in utilizing them as instructional tools. For example, educators believe graphic novels perform poorly as read-aloud books, which in turn makes graphic novels difficult tools for group reading activities (Hughes et al., 2011). Furthermore, there is a misconception that graphic novels are preferred by boys rather than by girls, making it harder for teachers to consider graphic novels as a common text to teach a whole class (Moeller, 2011). Other studies reveal teachers' apprehension of graphic novels because of the uncertainty of whether students would know how to read graphic novels; teachers were unsure if their students would know how to manage the pictorial material and cognitive load of the visuals (McGrail et al., 2017).

However, when examining the few studies of teachers who have used graphic novels in the classroom, the studies were often tied to using the medium for improving reading comprehension (Cook, 2017) and building reading motivation (Luetkemeyer, 2021). In an era of Common Core State Standards (CCSS) where teacher evaluations and standardized test scores take precedence in public education, the pressure to improve reading scores became a priority in English language arts (ELA) curriculum (Richardson, 2017; Tampio, 2018). For instance, an important step for students to master comprehension skills is the ability to visualize a concept— when students fail to create mental pictures, they tend to be demotivated to read (Beers, 1996; Sadoski et al., 1990). Graphic novels can aid students with visualization and, hence, improve reading comprehension. Because graphic novels can help motivate struggling readers, this

custom of using graphic novel to help students develop reading skills has led to the reputation of comics as a vessel for people with low literacy (Eisner, 2008; Griffith, 2010; Hallenbeck, 1976; McCloud, 1994; Richardson, 2017).

One reason why students may prefer comics is because of what Yang (2008) describes as the "visual permanence" of graphic novels, where the pace of how readers read graphic novels is under the control of the reader (p. 188). What this means is that students choose how quickly or slowly they process the images and text in the graphic novel, allowing them to gain control of their reading pace. Furthermore, the visual permanence of graphic novels allows readers to go back to review the layout and panels as often as they need in order to make meaning of their reading. Therefore, while teachers may consider the medium difficult to utilize as read-aloud books because students read graphic novels in a multitude of ways and at different paces (Hughes et al., 2011), the books offer students opportunities to read and reread that are valuable for sustaining lifelong reading practices (Beers, 1996).

Although studies show graphic novels can help increase reading comprehension, it does not and should not suggest graphic novels are less complex texts to examine. Scholars argued that graphic novels can prove to be effective teaching tools as they can help boost students' creativity and imagination through a complex reading experience (Mouly, 2011; Yildirim, 2013). Jacobs (2013) contended that comics defy the predominant mode of literacy that is overwhelmingly prioritized in the current era of standards-based curriculum. Graphic novels raised what Witek (2009) described as "complex questions bearing on semiotics, linguistics, aesthetics, textuality, representation, epistemology, narrative, and spatiality" (p. 520). In other words, comics featured multiple modes of meaning (visual and textual) within one page and readers must navigate through complex reading processes as they construct meaning from the

way panels and gutter spaces are drawn, word bubbles and sound effects are formed, and colors and images are drawn. All of the visual and textual elements of graphic novels come together on a page and it is upon the power of the reader to interweave these modes to construct their own understanding of the text.

Purpose of the Study

The study sought to understand how high school students considered the visual and textual modes in graphic novels to construct their own understanding of the text. Because educational research regarding graphic novels focused largely on how graphic novels are helpful for improving reading comprehension and reading motivation, I sought to understand students' experiences with reading graphic novels that were not tied to reading measurements. Comics and graphic novels offer important features of literature that are not exclusive to the traditional, text-only books that are favored in schools—graphic novels can offer opportunities to analyze literary elements such as structure, tone, and character development (Schwarz, 2002). By understanding how students negotiated modes of literacy to construct meaning from reading comics can allow opportunities for graphic novels to be welcomed in classroom spaces as worthy companions to traditional texts.

This study recognized that as students read, their reading was an experience that was intimately connected to their unique identities; how readers are socially and culturally situated influenced how readers interpret the visual and textual to inform their understanding of the text (Smagorinsky, 2001). The conversations that the students and I had during our IR conferences and the semi-structured interviews allowed me to better understand the nuanced ways in which readers constructed meaning from their reading interactions with comics. In the following section, I describe the theories that supported the foundations and frameworks for this study.

Epistemology

Epistemology is the theory of knowledge that explains one's way of understanding and "know[ing] what we know" (Crotty, 1998, p. 3). As a researcher, it was important for me to defend my epistemological stance because my knowledge foundation drove my theoretical perspectives, my methodology, and my study. Crotty (1998) explained that epistemologies can be categorized as objectivism, constructionism, and subjectivism. Objectivist epistemology theorized that meaning and knowledge exist apart from consciousness; therefore, knowledge was an existent object to be discovered by the knower. Constructionist epistemology contended that humans' interactions with one another and with the world helped the knower gain understanding. And finally, subjectivist epistemology argued that meaning is an object that is imposed upon the knower (Crotty, 1998).

Constructionism arose to displace the objectivism that was standard in Western academic thought; while objectivism proposed that meaning exists upon objects regardless of one's consciousness towards the object, constructionism viewed knowledge as being reliant upon human interactions (Crotty, 1998). Social constructionism was a branch of constructionism that emphasized the idea that all meaning is socially constructed (Crotty, 1998), and that it is the interactions between people that helped to construct knowledge (Burr, 1995). In other words, it was people with their unique, cultural, and historical perspectives who ascribed meaning to objects and interactions. Each individual had distinctive personalities and backgrounds that helped them experience the world differently and uniquely. I therefore approached knowledge from a social constructionist stance.

Theoretical Perspectives

Theoretical perspectives help researchers to look at and make sense of the world (Crotty, 1998). Various theoretical perspectives guided my inquiry of students' reading experiences with graphic novels; each theoretical perspective provided a specific lens for understanding the research study. In the following sections, I discussed the transactional theory of reading to explain the interactions readers had with texts and sociocultural theories of meaning-making to provide context for the perspectives which readers brought to their reading experience.

Transactional Theory of Reading

Rosenblatt's (1994) transactional theory of reading provided a framework for understanding how readers made meaning with texts; she postulated that meaning is constructed as a result of a transaction between the reader and text. Dewey (1958) inspired Rosenblatt's terminology of *transactional*—that the term *transaction* reflected an ongoing process in which the interaction between the reader and the text were inseparable. The notion of transaction rejected the objectivist view of a stimulus-response model and shifted towards a constructivist view that emphasized the intrinsic learning process of individuals.

Readers' unique experiences inform their understanding of the text (Rosenblatt, 1994a, 1994b, 1995). Conversely, text can only have meaning when it is constructed by the reader's engagement with the text. Therefore, readers were actively constructing meaning with the text as they were guided, page-by-page, by the words on the page. In addition to the transaction between the reader and the text, Rosenblatt (1994) argued that other elements contributing to the reading process included the reader's stance, the efferent-aesthetic continuum, and evocation.

The *reader's stance*, or the reader's role, was the first component of the reading process according to transactional theory (Louise M. Rosenblatt, 1994). Traditionally, literary theorists had emphasized attention to authors and discovering what knowledge the author wanted to

impart on the reader; there was little emphasis on the reader (Appleman, 2015). However, Rosenblatt (1995) challenged previous notions that there was only one interpretation to a literature piece as the author had intended and argued that readers brought unique experiences with them while reading that informed their understanding of the text. Additionally, readers chose, consciously or subconsciously, selective attitudes about the text depending on their purpose and situation. For my study, the students freely chose to read graphic novels—they chose to read a graphic novel of their choice for their IR conversations. There were no assessments attached to their reading, which provided students' more autonomy over their own reading pleasure and pace. As a researcher, I was mindful that the readers' role influenced the reading transaction between the reader and the novel.

The second component of Rosenblatt's transactional theory of reading was the *efferent-aesthetic continuum*. According to Louise M. Rosenblatt (1994), all reading processes fell somewhere on the efferent-aesthetic continuum. In efferent reading, the reader primarily sought to gain information from the text and disengaged from personal connections with the text. When readers intended to read for objective information, they took on an efferent perspective. On the opposite end of the continuum, aesthetic reading indicated when the reader used their senses, feelings, and intuition while interacting with the text. The notion of aesthetic reading was a significant breakthrough in literacy curricula because it embraced the idea of readers bringing their own personal experiences, feelings, and thoughts into their reading (Soter et al., 2010). However, it is important to note that Rosenblatt (1995) emphasized reading is a "to-and-fro, spiraling, nonlinear, [and] continuously reciprocal" process, therefore readers can move fluidly, or within a series of gradations, in a variety of ways along the efferent-aesthetic continuum and do not have to stay within a fixed point on the continuum (p. xvi).

However, Soter et al. (2010) argued that designating all reading responses within the efferent-reading continuum can be limiting because while some students' may have personal and emotional connections to the text (an aesthetic response), the connections may not necessarily connect with the literary elements of the text. Therefore, Soter et al. made a case for adding an *expressive response*—a term derived from Jakobson's (1987) analysis of language to include connections that readers make to the text that do not necessarily reflect the text's literary role. When examining students' reading connections with graphic novels, I understood that students' reactions to the graphic novels may be on the efferent-aesthetic continuum or be an expressive response or both.

The hopeful goal to the reading process is the third and final component of Rosenblatt's (1994) transactional theory: the notion of evocation, or the reader's response. Rosenblatt (1994) described evocation as "the lived-through process of building up the work through a penumbra of 'memories' of what has preceded, ready to be activated by what follows, and providing the context from which further meaning will be derived" (p. 69). What this means is that readers arrive at a text with preconceived ideas, feelings, and knowledge, but over time, they can relive different parts of the text that generate a renewed connection and perspective to the text. It is through a process of evocation that readers construct meaning and the text becomes meaningful (Smagorinsky, 2001). In other words, evocation is a way of talking about and examining the idiosyncratic experiences readers have when the text means something to them.

Transactional Theory with Graphic Novels

Studies revealed that students can have aesthetic responses from reading graphic novels (Pantaleo, 2013; Pantaleo & Bomphray, 2011). In her study, Pantaleo (2013) found that the visual elements of graphic novels contributed to students' aesthetic responses to their reading of *The Arrival* (Tan, 2006). *The Arrival* is a wordless graphic novel that uses only images to tell the

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story of the immigrant protagonist in the story; Tan relied on the "silent narrative" to prompt

readers to explore the visual elements and conventions to make meaning of the text (para. 9).

Students expressed feeling a deep, emotional connection to *The Arrival* because they were

examining the visuals as part of the meaning-making process. As a result, students exemplified

aesthetic responses that reflected personal and emotional responses to the text. In another study,

Lewkowich (2019) observed his preservice teachers react with meaningful, reflective

introspection as they read graphic novels about adolescent life; research participants expressed

powerful, affective qualities about reading comics that gave them "feelings" (p. 315). Because

graphic novels invite a multitude of ways in which readers can interpret the text, the aesthetic

responses to reading comics become flexible and unique to the individual reader.

It is important to note that Louise Rosenblatt (1994) stressed that readers' initial reaction

to a text is the beginning of instruction; she emphasized that children's personal responses must

be elaborated through a social exchange of ideas in which readers' interactions with one another

allow for an opportunity for hearing and seeing different perspectives (McMahon & Raphael,

1997). While Louise Rosenblatt (1994) emphasized a dualistic relationship between the reader

and the text, she failed to consider the reader's cultural, historical, and environmental settings

that affect their reading processes. Smagorinsky (2001) iterated that reading processes are

culturally mediated, indicating that individuals' cultural history and social practices influence the

experiences readers encounter with the text. Therefore, while I recognized that readers' personal

experiences can involve their own private thinking about their reading, I acknowledged that

readers' personal experiences also included a cache of sociocultural aspects that influenced their

reading that can be enriched when they encounter other external influences such as other peers

and teachers. Therefore, I looked to Vygotsky's sociocultural theory of learning and Wertsch's theory of mediated action to illuminate the social elements of the study.

Sociocultural Theories of Meaning-Making

Vygotsky (1978) introduced sociocultural learning theory by asserting that individual learning occurs in social interactions, and the only way to understand an individual's learning processes is to study their social and cultural interactions. While Vygotsky predominantly used the terms *cultural historical* or *sociohistorical*, Vygotskian scholar Wertsch (1991) preferred using the word *sociocultural* because he believed it more aptly described the "cultural, institutional, and historical setting in which [human action] occurs" (p. 15). Vygotskian perspectives of sociocultural learning posited that knowledge and meaning are mutually and collaboratively constructed in social and cultural settings (Lee & Smagorinsky, 2000; Wink & Putney, 2001). Vygotsky (1986) also claimed that social speech develops before inner speech. He argued that individuals first learn how to interact with others through external communication; without these formative experiences of external social interaction, people cannot learn to develop inner, or private, speech in which they have internal dialogue with themselves (and not others). Therefore, social interactions and the language used within social activities are crucial in forming inner speech and in constructing meaning. This theory, then, fits with the transactional theory of reading as a meaning making enterprise. In my study, the students' thinking and meaning-making through participation with other readers who enjoyed graphic novels were explored to understand how the actions of others inform their own thinking, meaning-making, and interactions with reading.

One of the key principles of Vygotsky's (1986) sociocultural theory of learning is co-construction of knowledge. Co-construction of knowledge describes a learning process in which teachers and students work together to find meaning rather than facts; and one of the ways in

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which adolescents can construct knowledge is through dialogue, a face-to-face interaction using spoken language (Lee & Smagorinsky, 2000; Mahn, 2003; Wells, 2000). In his writing, Vygotsky (1986) explained that learning is powerful when children are engaged in meaningful activities that included a great deal of talk. Understanding is also constructed in the process of learners collaborating together through the course of shared activity, illustrating the notion that when a learner is attempting to grasp a concept but cannot manage it on their own, they rely on co-participants for help in order to acquire the new knowledge or skill (Vygotsky, 1978; Wells, 2000). Unfortunately, most discussions in schools are teacher-led with students having very little input (Smagorinsky, 2008b). This study provided a space where students talked about what comics meant to them and had their voices heard; students had an opportunity engage in a face-to-face discussion and dialogue with me about their reading experiences with graphic novels of their choice.

Co-construction of knowledge can be facilitated through *mediated action*, a sociocultural concept that accounts for the individual, social, cultural, and historical contexts in which learning occurs (Wertsch, 1991). Mediated action helps researchers to understand how the learner, the learner's context, and the tools of learning interact *simultaneously* within any learning event (Rowe & Bachman, 2012). Furthermore, Smagorinsky (2001) argued that when students read, atop the cultural, historical, and social knowledge base that readers bring to their own reading experience, the settings in which readers read can provide "differential kinds of force and power for individual readers" (p. 136). So, while groups and institutions, such as schools, have influence over an individual, students may read the same graphic novels within an in-school, classroom setting and have a completely different experience in an after-school setting even when they are reading the same graphic novels.

Another theoretical concept to acknowledge is the role of semiotics when reading comics. Suhor (1984) broadly defined semiotics as a study of *signs* and *sign systems*; signs include any "thing" that has meaning. A group of signs make up sign systems such as oral language, writing, and number systems; and sign systems can take on various forms of expression (i.e. linguistic, gestural, constructive, pictorial) and are created by societies that change throughout human history as they become affected by cultural development. Because signs and sign systems are a result of cultural development, signs can be interpreted differently according to a person's cultural connection with those signs (Smagorinsky, 2001; Suhor, 1984). A graphic novel uses linguistic and pictorial signs to convey meaning and can be interpreted in myriad ways depending on who, with whom, and where it is read.

Suhor (1984) explained that when people communicate with each other, they can use multiple signs and sign systems, and that those sign systems can overlap and occur at the same time or in rapid succession. He also coined the term *transmediation* to describe how meaning can be constructed across multiple sign systems. For example, when students draw a response to a linguistic text like a typical novel, they transmediate their meaning-making across the linguistic and pictorial sign systems. In the case of graphic novels, the images on the pages (pictorial) and the words within the panels (linguistic) are presented simultaneously, so students are offered multiple sign systems to use for their meaning making. If students were to write an essay about a graphic novel, they would be transmediating their meaning making from two sign systems (pictorial and linguistic) into a single sign system (linguistic). Therefore, reading graphic novels is "a synthetic activity that dynamically integrates the comprehension of word and image" (Larsson, 2007, p. 45). In other words, graphic novels require readers to consider how the story

is conveyed through various semiotic modes, especially visual elements such as color, panel layout, and lettering.

Siegel (1995) made the argument that transmediation allows students to create new meaning because learners must construct connections between multiple sign systems. Additionally, classroom practices that involve transmediation encourage students to practice generative and reflective thinking. Though scholars have argued for more inclusion of multimodal media into school curricula, schools tend to be partial towards one (language) sign system, limiting and discrediting the multiple ways that students learn (Siegel, 1995; Smagorinsky, 2001; Suhor, 1984; Zoss et al., 2007).

The sociocultural perspectives of Vygotsky, Wertsch, Smagorinsky provided a lens for understanding students' experiences and histories, especially concerning the ways in which they construct meaning. Applied to my study, sociocultural learning theories acknowledge that readers harnessed unique past experiences, thereby celebrating readers' diverse ways of constructing meaning. The processes of meaning-making were complex because they are influenced by a multitude of social interactions, histories, cultures, and the various sign systems adapted to build knowledge.

Overview of the Study

In this chapter, I introduced the background and purpose for my study whilst defining keywords relevant to my study. I explained how my epistemology is grounded in constructionism, which led to sociocultural theoretical perspectives that guide my research inquiry. I described how Dewey's notion of experience defined what constitutes an experience, while Rosenblatt illuminated how readers can have unique experiences with their readings. The sociocultural perspectives of Vygotsky, Wertsch, and Smagorinsky demonstrate how learning is

a deeply social activity, an activity that is influenced by cultural and historical contexts and social interactions with other individuals. In Chapter 2, I review the literature concerning a brief history of graphic novels and their use in classrooms and students' general reading experiences in high school.

LITERATURE REVIEW

In Chapter 2, I review existing literature relevant to my study of high school students' reading experience with graphic novels. I begin by discussing a brief history of graphic novels and comics and the use of graphic novels in educational contexts. The literature review aims to establish an understanding of current research on students' reading experiences within the classroom and their reading experiences with graphic novels.

A Brief History of Graphic Novels and Comics

Understanding a brief history of graphic novels necessitates a general understanding of the history of comics. Comic strips were popular in the early 1900s when they served as quick entertainment pieces for newspaper readers (Weiner, 2012). Shortly after, comic books became a collection of reprints from newspaper comic strips. However, companies recognized a growing public interest in comic books and hired artists and writers to create stories as quickly and cheaply as possible (Weiner, 2012). Then, *Superman* the comic book made its first appearance in 1938 and launched the world of comics into a major industry—soon after, superheroes like Batman, Wonder Woman, and Captain Marvel entered the comic world (Gorman, 2003; Weiner, 2012). While comics were generally read by people of all ages, comic books generally targeted children. For this reason, superheroes were given sidekicks such as Batman's Robin, Wonder Woman's Wonder Girl, and Captain America's Bucky to include children to participate (Weiner, 2012). The Golden Age of comics experienced a rapid growth of comic book sales following *Superman*—by 1940, nearly 7.5 million comic book copies were being sold every month, most of them to school-age children and teenagers (Dorrell et al., 1995).

Comic books continued to thrive during World War II for several reasons: (1) superheroes within comic books were fighting with the Allies, (2) comics worked well as portable forms of entertainment for U.S. soldiers who were in the trenches of war, and (3) they

were exceptionally cheap to purchase in an economy that was suffering from the Great

Depression (Petersen, 2011; Weiner, 2012). Shortly after the war, however, comics began facing

criticism for inspiring "juvenile delinquency" (Wertham, 1954). Wertham's (1954) book

Seduction of the Innocent was a problematic study that criticized comics as being detrimental for

young readers; Wertham blamed comics for encouraging violence, drug addiction, and

psychopathic tendencies in children. He further asserted that a "very large proportion of children

who cannot read well habitually read comic books (p. 122). Though there were persistent

critiques against Wertham's research (Tilley, 2012), his work generated concern amongst

parents, teachers, and librarians, so much so that Wertham's work brought forth the 1954

Kefauver Hearings (Petersen, 2011; Tilley, 2012). The Kefauver Committee, also known as the

Special Committee on Organized Crime in Interstate Commerce, was a committee led by Senator

Estes Kefauver; the committee's prime responsibility was to investigate interstate crimes across

the United States. Though not the first congressional committee to televise their proceedings, the

Kefauver Committee hearings became the most widely viewed program by U.S. Americans. This

committee held hearings on drug trafficking, gambling, and bribery and focused much of its

attention on urban areas. In 1954, alarmed by the rising rate of juvenile delinquency, the

committee investigated the influence of comic books as detrimental to youth behavior. During

this nationally-televised hearing, Wertham attacked comics as lacking verisimilitude, artistic

merit, and decorum (Petersen, 2011). Unfortunately, the negative reputation of comics as being a

medium for low-level, trouble-making readers continues to linger today (Gross, 2022).

As a result of the hearings, comic book publishers underwent a new standard of

censorship that controlled the content that was being printed in the books—legal censorship of

comics was policed by the Comics Code of Authority (Petersen, 2011). Though the censorship

contributed to a decline in comic book interest, Stan Lee revived the comic industry by defying

the Comics Code of Authority and creating new, multifaceted characters who were more

appealing to readers (Petersen, 2011). Marvel Comics created characters like Spider-Man and

Fantastic Four where ordinary people, with fallible character traits, became superheroes. Then,

comic fandom (adult comic fans) and the underground comix (self-published comics depicting

forbidden content) movement revitalized the industry in the 1970s (Weiner, 2012).

Following the 1970s, graphic novels emerged as an attempt to create sophisticated stories

in comic book format in one full-length book (Weiner, 2012). Will Eisner was credited for

popularizing the term *graphic novel* with the publication of his book *A Contract with God*

(Eisner, 1978) While Eisner is widely dubbed as the "father [and] champion" of the graphic

novel, his initial reason for coining *graphic novel* was to create a term other than comic book to

persuade publishers to take his work seriously (Levitz et al., 2015).

The history books often interchange *graphic narratives* with *graphic novels* (Petersen,

2011; Stein, 2013). *Graphic narrative* is a relatively new expression that was first mentioned by

David Kunzle (1973), and later picked up by other scholars such as Chute and DeKoven (2007);

while Kunzle mentions *graphic narrative*, he does not define or delimit the term. However,

Chute and DeKoven (2007) define graphic narratives as "narrative work in the medium of

comics" (p. 767).

Even though the acclaimed *Maus* (Spiegelman, 1997) is labeled a graphic novel, Art

Spiegelman humbly denies it as so, claiming that the term graphic novel was a bid for social

acceptability and a way for "well-dressed comic books [to find] their way into legitimate

bookshops" (Baetens & Frey, 2017, p. 2). Other scholars concede with Spiegelman's sentiments

and admit that the graphic novel has become a comics' passport to recognition as a form of

literature and even admit that graphic novel has come to mean "expensive comic book" (Meskin, 2009). Therefore, there continues to be a debate over the definitive terminology of graphic novels.

Controversies

Adding to the contention of the terminology of graphic novels, there was further controversy when graphic novels were considered for literary awards. In 1991, Neil Gaiman won the World Fantasy Award for the best short fiction with his collaborative issue of a serial comic called *The Sandman*. His award for a comic generated enough backlash that judging rules were rewritten to exclude comic books from ever winning a literature category again for the World Fantasy Award competition (Hermann, 1991). Fast forward to the 21st century, *Maus* (Spiegelman, 1997) had just been banned in January 2022 by a Tennessee school board because of its "unnecessary use of profanity and nudity and its depiction of violence and suicide, " despite the fact the graphic novel uses an all-animal cast and centers on a story of the Holocaust (Mangan, 2022). The controversies reveal that even in an esteemed world of literature, graphic novels are not taken seriously as a contender for literature. Furthermore, the battle for including comics into curricula continue today.

So, What Is Manga?

While there is an intricate Japanese history connected to the development of manga, modern manga as many Westerners know them refers to the Western influence on Japanese comics. As comics rose in popularity and the U.S. became a leader in comics post-World War II, Japanese modern manga began to take precedence in Japan and, later, the Western world (Canário, 2016; Ito, 2005). Inspired by U.S. cartoons like Mickey Mouse and Betty Boop, Japanese artists began to create their own distinct style that began to appear as comic strips in newspapers, and then eventually, magazines dedicated to just manga (Canário, 2016).

Furthermore, manga was an affordable form of entertainment that the Japanese people sought within a country that was devastated by war (Ito, 2005). Over time, manga began to encompass every genre, the stories became more deeper and more complex, and instead of simple comic strips, manga turned into entire books and book series.

Several features of manga, alongside their Japanese origin, make the medium unique. Unlike the Western tradition of reading right-to-left from the front cover to back, manga is read left-to-right from back cover to front cover. Furthermore, the artwork associated with manga differs stylistically to Western comics; manga artwork can be traced back to the traditional arts of *e-makimono*, in which a tale unfolds with one scene at a time, and *ukiyo-e*, woodblock artwork that featured history, folk talks, and landscapes (Canário, 2016). Artwork in manga is also typically printed in black and white. Cohn (2014) argued that the styles of cartooning in Japanese manga influenced the Western interest in manga—some of these features include emphasis on the invisible qualities of emotions through stylized renderings of facial expressions, with special attention to the eyes and mouth. These illustrators also preserve some of the original Japanese language in the panels to convey sound effects in the story. By keeping the *hiragana* language characters alongside tiny English translations, Western readers can get a feel for the intensity that the Japanese composers intended. A similar analog to these Japanese characters are the POW!, CRACK!, and other onomatopoeia used in American comics. While Western comic creators put their sound effects in speech bubbles, Japanese manga creators insert their sound characters without the need for those same bubbles. Figure 2.1 offers some examples of manga drawings that illustrate the styles for emotions and the use of Japanese language to convey sound details.

Figure 0.1

Examples of Manga Artwork
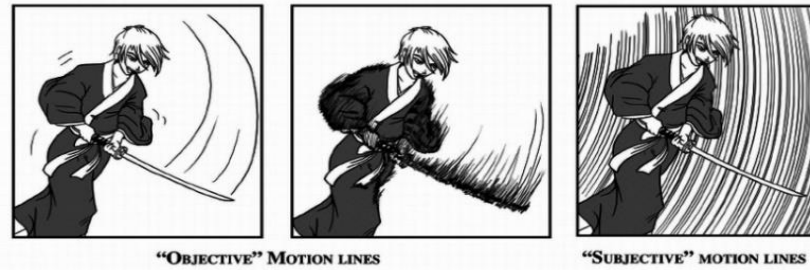
Despite manga's unique aesthetic, for this study, manga fell under the broader definition of graphic novels and comics because they featured story-telling elements with sequential artistic images. I included manga as a part of this dissertation study because a large proportion of the student population at Corners STEM High School read manga, in addition to other Western graphic novels and comics.

Graphic Novels in Educational Contexts

Early research on graphic novels and comics in educational contexts were generally superficial. One of the earliest known studies of using comics as teaching tools was Hutchinson's (1949) study—she argued that because comics were a universally-accepted reading activity for children, comics should be accepted for the school experience. Hutchinson's study provided instructional manuals to over 2,000 teachers across the U.S. that provided suggestions for how to embed comics into curricula. After 13 weeks of the study, 438 teachers returned questionnaires about their use of comics in the classroom—the questionnaires revealed that comics' greatest use was made for reading comprehension, vocabulary development, and as supplemental material for other content areas. However, the lingering notion that comics were detrimental to young readers continued—Zorbaugh's (1949) study revealed that 25% of the 3,000 adults he interviewed believed comics were dangerous to children's mental health. Ironically, librarians and teachers also opposed comics, believing they stunted children's imagination (Dorrell et al., 1995). The problem here is that when academic mentors like teachers and librarians, who have the means to inspire kids to read, disapprove of graphic novels, their mentality marginalizes students who prefer the medium, and can discourage students from being open to reading texts that are new to them.

Most research studies about students' reading interactions with graphic novels have thus focused on gauging the ways to improve reading measurements such as comprehension and fluency (Cook, 2017; Lamanno, 2008; Reutzel et al., 2012). The few studies that have not concentrated on such measurements typically featured people reading graphic novels in out-of-school settings—of these studies, many utilized reading groups to provide readers a space to talk with other comic book readers (Carter, 2007, 2011).

Reading Comprehension

Illustrations and visuals have long been an important component for aiding emergent readers (Sipe, 2007). As students get older and gain reading proficiency, teachers rely on more text-only books. However, the shift towards text-only readings removes the visual support some readers need for comprehension.

Graphic novels can improve reading comprehension for a variety of readers. Kennedy and Chinokul (2020) showed that language learners improved on their reading comprehension when exposed to the graphic novel version of *Frankenstein*. Cook (2017) implemented a graphic adaptation of "The Cask of Amontillado" and found an improvement in reading comprehension amongst high school students. However, in another study, high school students reading below grade level were involved in small group reading interventions that determined if the use of graphic novels could increase their reading comprehension—the results revealed that there was no significant increase in reading comprehension, but students did express positive experiences with reading graphic novels (Lamanno, 2008). Lamanno's (2008) research suggests that while reading comprehension could be an appealing factor for utilizing graphic novels in the classroom, the enjoyment students gain when reading graphic novels is also important in understanding comics in school settings.

Reading for Joy and Connection

        Graphic novels have shown they can encourage reading motivation and engagement amongst all levels of readers (Edwards, 2009; Jennings et al., 2014; Luetkemeyer, 2021). Jennings et al. (2014) supposed that the features of illustrations paired with the text bubbles allow readers to be more engaged with graphic novels; the multimodal nature of simultaneously reading text, examining images, and following panels enables readers to be more focused with the novel. Luetkemeyer (2021) pointed out that the visual world of social media and multimedia in the 21st century contributes to students' inclination towards graphic novels. Smith and Wilhelm (2002), who studied the reading practices of boys, found that boys preferred graphic novels and comic books over text-only literature. While the handful of studies listed here focus on students reading graphic novels in schools, the studies that examine their reading experiences beyond comprehension measures are situated outside of school settings.

        In one example of students reading for joy, Sabeti's (2013) reading group of secondary school students described enjoying the group experience of getting together with other people to talk about what they had read. Part of the enjoyment of reading together was attributed to a shift in power dynamics between the students and their teacher—while reading graphic novels, students were in control of their reading pace and they held more expertise in understanding how to examine visual elements within the graphic novels. Students had agency over their own reading choices, and, in turn, began to associate this type of reading with pleasure.

        Carter (2007, 2011) explored how technology was used as a platform for engaging comic book readers and found that readers were remarkably invested in reading and critiquing graphic novels whilst also interacting with other comic book enthusiasts. Conversations that occurred online included discussions about creators' methods of drawing, excitement about potential book releases, and suggestions for how plots should move forward. Carter's studies demonstrated a

vested interest and commitment from the comic book community when they have a space to come together to explore graphic novels.

Botzakis (2009) discovered that one of the predominant factors of promoting life-long reading amongst adult readers was providing opportunities to support readers' interests and expand readers' choice. In his study with adult comic book readers, he realized that they discovered their love for comic books largely in part because they had access to that choice. Independent reading practices in classrooms offer students the opportunity to select their own texts, have time to read during school, and honor the individual interests that they have.

Independent Reading

Independent reading (IR), also known as *sustained silent reading (SSR)*, is a dedicated time during class in which students are allowed to choose their own reading materials and read independently (Gardiner, 2005). Though IR has been a teaching practice that has been around for decades, there are different attitudes from teachers and scholars who question the advantages of IR (Dickerson, 2015; Vorhies, 2012). Using studies that featured quantitative data methods to measure reading fluency, the National Reading Panel claimed that independent reading programs showed no significant improvement in reading comprehension (National Institute of Child Health and Human Development, 2000). Furthermore, silent reading does not necessarily mean that students are actively involved with their reading (Kelley & Clausen-Grace, 2006). Teachers have also expressed feeling uncomfortable with classroom management as students settle for IR time—disinterested students distract their peers, students forget their books at home, or students simply struggle to stay silent during IR time (Dickerson, 2015; Gardiner, 2005). In these instances, the expectations were that students are silent and still while immersed in their reading. On the other hand, some teachers also struggle to justify spending instructional time for "just reading" (Gardiner, 2005, p. 5). In this sense, the act of reading is seen as something only

marginally important for school time, which is ironic since all students are expected to read and understand the material in English language arts and all of their classes.

Despite the critics of IR, independent reading has shown that it can increase reading scores for high school students (Fisher, 2004), improve reading fluency (Reutzel et al., 2012), and bolster reading stamina (Merga, 2013). More importantly though, independent reading empowers students to select their own reading material, especially as they gain more autonomy over their own learning. IR empowers students to become more self-reflective and involved with their reading, thereby encouraging students to expand their preferred choice of book genre, understand their likes and dislikes in book choices, and sustain a general enjoyment of reading (Merga & Moon, 2016; Vorhies, 2012). In my own classroom where students are all at different reading levels, with different attitudes about reading in general, and different interests in what they like to read, dedicating class time for IR offers opportunities for selecting their own reading material is important in helping them regain power over their own reading preferences.

The Power of Choice

Studies reveal the importance of choice when fostering independent reading amongst students (Mercurio, 2005; Merga, 2013). Adolescence is a time when students need to develop a sense of agency and autonomy, but when kids are forced to read difficult texts assigned by teachers, they may foster feelings of resentment, thereby, diminishing students' motivation to read (Beers, 2004; Bintz, 1993; Manuel, 2012). Scholars even suggest that students do not necessarily lose interest in reading; rather, they lose interest in the reading they are required to do in school (Bintz, 1993; Ivey, 1999). Additionally, Smith and Wilhelm (2002) discuss adolescent boys' innate needs for competence and control in order to enjoy any activity—when boys are given no choices for their reading or only limited choices, the reading became a task tied only to school expectations and not their own desires. Reading that divorced from their personal interests

became a chore and boys were less inclined to do it. When teachers refrain from opportunities for students to select their own reading materials, they eliminate opportunities for students to feel recognized or valued as unique readers.

Additionally, teachers who equip students with a diverse classroom library find that students are willing to interact more with books, spend more time reading, and demonstrate more positive attitudes about reading (Guthrie & Storey, 2008; Kelley & Clausen-Grace, 2006; Miller, 2014). For students, reading graphic novels and comics is a marginalized activity in other spaces; therefore, being able to choose to read comics in a welcoming space adds a level of agency and power for comic book readers (Sabeti, 2013). In my own classroom, by welcoming the different books and readings students choose during IR time, I am providing a space for my own diverse students to take risks and explore their own reading preferences.

Students who practice independent reading become deeply involved in a process of self-reflection (Mercurio, 2005). Readers are more likely to sympathize and connect with the characters of their books when reading books that are relevant or captivating to them. In the case with graphic novels, Sardone (2012) suggests that comics are appealing to students because they "resemble [their] non-visual self-awareness, so [they] inherently identify with them" (p. 68). What this means is that the character images represented in comic books can allow students to connect more with the story than if they had the same story in just written form. McCloud (1994) even states that the way comics are drawn adds an element of universality to the characters.

Readers express a sense of connection and joy when they encounter graphic novels—they gain pleasure from looking at the artwork, feel they can "escape" when they enter the world of comics, and feel deeply connected to comic book characters (Botzakis, 2009; Gomes & Carter,

2010). The range of reasons for choosing graphic novels vary, but readers *choose* them because graphic novels offer them enjoyment.

In our current century, there is a wealth of graphic novels that feature a wide diversity of adolescent experiences—students have more options than ever before to read and see books that feature a variety of unique human experiences (Botzakis & Lewis, 2021). In my study, I seek to understand from students' perspective how they personally connect with reading graphic novels.

Summary

Many of the studies surrounding graphic novels with adolescent readers aim to measure how they improve reading skills. Furthermore, studies that exclusively focus on students' reading experiences with graphic novels are set in out-of-school contexts. The recurring, false notion that comics are for struggling readers or contribute to misbehavior discourages a space for comic book readers to feel they are welcomed in school settings. In my research, I aimed to understand what prompts students to choose graphic novels within the classroom setting. In Chapter 3, I discuss the research design for my study, including detailed descriptions of my methodology, participants, data collection procedures, and data analysis.

METHODOLOGY

Smagorinsky (2008a) talked about the importance of the methods section as a conceptual epicenter for research. In this chapter, I guide readers through the methodology of my research study. The chapter begins with a rationale for the case study research design, followed by a description of the research setting and the participants. Then, I explain my methods for data collection and analysis. Finally, I conclude with ethical considerations, including my subjectivity and role as a researcher.

This qualitative research was rooted within a constructionist paradigm, which assumes that learners and researchers have multiple ways of knowing (Merriam, 2009). Therefore, qualitative researchers are invested in understanding how people make meaning of their experiences, and they draw upon people's experiences as empirical artifacts for research (Denzin & Lincoln, 2017). These empirical artifacts include data sources such as interviews and observations to contribute to the researcher's understandings of a phenomenon. Furthermore, because qualitative research is interpretive, researchers recognize their own subjectivities when constructing meaning within their study (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007).

The study began towards the end of Spring 2022 following approval from the Institutional Review Board (IRB) and from my committee. In this chapter, I discussed the details of my research methodology to explore the phenomenon of students' experiences with reading graphic novels during school with the following research questions:

1. What are students' reading experiences with graphic novels?

    a. How do readers consider the visual qualities of graphic novels to construct meaning from their reading?

    b. When provided opportunities to choose their own books, why do students choose graphic novels?

Research Design

Students were the epicenter of my research; youth voices are largely excluded from conversations around schooling (Intrator & Kunzman, 2009; McGrail et al., 2020) and because they yearn to express their voices, I sought to understand students' reading experiences with graphic novels. Therefore, I proposed that a qualitative case study was the most suitable design for gathering in-depth data on their experiences. Case studies allow researchers to understand complex interrelationships (Hodkinson & Hodkinson, 2001) with intensity and depth (Marshall & Rossman, 2016). A case study consists of in-depth analysis of bounded units, such as a group of individuals who share common interests (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007; Merriam, 2009; Stake, 1995). In this study, my own language arts students at CSHS students who chose to read graphic novels during Independent Reading time made up the bounded unit for the case study. Furthermore, my classroom became what Dyson and Genishi (2005) considered a "small, naturalistic social unit" (p. 2) which included a subset of my students who had a expressed interest in reading graphic novels.

It is the "messy complexity of human experience" that leads researchers to case studies (Dyson & Genishi, 2005, p. 3). Case studies provide in-depth opportunities to examine events, issues, or phenomena in their natural contexts without the control of an experimental design (Creswell & Miller, 2000) in order to gain insight to the dynamics of the phenomenon being studied (Dyson & Genishi, 2005). Working with students in the context of the classroom allowed me, as a participant observer (Creswell, 2011), to systematically collect and analyze data while being open to the unexpected as a phenomenon unfolds.

Research Setting

Blue and gold banners adorned the entrance as visitors walked through the front doors of Corners STEM High School. The ceilings were inordinately high, and the building brightly lit, more from the natural sunlight beaming through the windows rather than the fluorescent lights. The first thing guests saw when they entered was the Media Center, followed by glass-walled study rooms. Another unique feature of the school includes "C-spaces," common spaces on each floor of the building that encourage students to sit together to socialize and collaborate. In all, the school building reflected a setting that values modernity, innovation, and collaboration.

Following the desegregation of students in the U.S., the National Commission on Excellence in Education (1983) published *A Nation at Risk*, a report that chastised U.S. public school educators for being overtaken by competitors in science, technology, and industrial fields. After the publishing of the report, a nationwide emphasis on Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics (STEM) education erupted. Nearly 40 years later, advances in technology and the ongoing debates about how schools and curriculum should be handled contribute to the current and apt demand for STEM schools. Therefore, when Corners STEM High School opened in 2018 as the county's first STEM school, the school generated considerable attention from members of the community.

The research setting was set at a public high school in one of the largest districts in the southeastern United States. The school was situated along an industrial freeway with a multitude of tech businesses and industrial buildings within the area, some of where CSHS students had internships. A few miles down the road, there were two Christian-based private schools and CSHS' sister school, North High School.

Corners STEM High School was one of eight Title I schools in the county and was the district's first student-choice STEM high school. In other words, students in the local area could choose between attending Corners STEM High School or North High School. While North High School offered sports and an IB program, CSHS boasted STEM pathways and specialized internships. However, the most unique feature of CSHS was their non-traditional school schedule: students were required to attend CSHS four days a week (Monday-Thursday), but had an optional in-person attendance on Digital Learning Day (Friday). Figure 3.1 illustrates the hybrid bell schedule for the school setting.

Figure 0.1

Bell Schedule at CSHS with Digital Learning Day Fridays

Corners STEM High School Bell Schedule
2021-2022 School Year

Monday 7 Periods	Tuesday A Block Day	Wednesday B Block Day	Thursday 7 Periods	Flex Friday Blue & Gold Days
1st Period 7:00 AM – 7:47 AM	1st Period 7:00 AM – 8:30 AM	2nd Period 7:00 AM – 8:30 AM	1st Period 7:00 AM – 7:47 AM	1st Period: Block Sign Up 7:00 AM – 7:20 AM
2nd Period 7:53 AM – 8:40 AM			2nd Period 7:53 AM – 8:40 AM	Academic Block 1 7:25 AM – 8:45 AM
3rd Period 8:46 AM – 9:32 AM	3rd Period 8:36 AM – 10:06 AM	4th Period 8:36 AM – 10:06 AM	3rd Period 8:46 AM – 9:32 AM	Academic Block 2 8:55 AM – 10:20 AM
4TH Period 9:38 – 10:24 AM		Advisement 10:06– 10:24	4TH Period 9:38 – 10:24 AM	
5th Period 10:30 AM – 12:04 PM	5th Period 10:12 AM – 12:15 PM	Intervention Flex Block 10:30 AM -- 12:15 PM	5th Period 10:30 AM – 12:04 PM	Academic Block 3 & Lunch 10:25 AM– 12:15 PM
Lunch	Lunch	Lunch	Lunch	
6th Period 12:10 PM – 12:56 PM	7th Period 12:21 PM – 1:50 PM	6th Period 12:21 PM – 1:50 PM	6th Period 12:10 PM – 12:56 PM	Academic Block 4 & STEM Block 12:20 – 1:50 PM
7th Period 1:02 PM – 1:50 PM			7th Period 1:02 PM – 1:50 PM	

With optional attendance on Fridays, a wide variety of activities took place on- and off-campus. For some students, they arrived on campus on Fridays for a conducive environment to complete their digital learning assignments. Other students came to campus to participate in extracurricular clubs, such as my graphic novel book club. Some others arrived to take advantage of their free- or reduced-cost lunch. When students were off-campus, they were typically completing their digital learning assignment from home, working at an off-site internship, or working to support their families.

Graphic Novel Media Circulation

Based on data provided by the media specialist, graphic novels were increasing in popularity at CSHS. Table 3.1 reveals how frequently graphic novels (including comics and manga) were checked out in comparison to the total number of all books checked out. The data tracks book circulation from 2018 to 2021. While the numbers were influenced by factors including the Covid-19 pandemic, I would be remiss to ignore that students maintain an active interest in graphic novels at this school.

Table 0.1

Graphic Novels and Book Circulation at CSHS Media Center

	Graphic Novels Checked Out (included comics and manga)	Total Circulation (total books checked out)	Percentage Rate
Year 1 (2018-2019)	1,378	6,641	21%
Year 2 (2019-2020)*	1,906	9,899	19%
Year 3 (2020-2021)*	778	2,537	31%
Year 4 (Aug 2021-Oct 2021)*	977	5,442	25%

indicates Covid-19 pandemic year

Covid-19 Pandemic

At the time of the study, the coronavirus (Covid-19) pandemic continued to disrupt many facets of public education. In 2020-2021, 60% of CSHS students opted to engage in digital learning; students logged into live, online platforms to participate in classroom learning. The remaining 40% agreed to follow the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) guidelines by wearing masks, maintaining 6-foot social distancing, and walking down one-way hallways to learn within the school building. Exorbitant amounts of expectations were imposed on teachers throughout this concurrent teaching model for both in-person and online teaching: Teachers navigated pandemic-era classrooms with desks six feet apart, masks on all personnel, all while preparing and enacting lessons for both "roomies" and "Zoomies." Atop technology breakdowns and high student absenteeism, teacher burn-out was at an all-time high—these issues had been pervasive across the nation (Mecham et al., 2021; Yang et al., 2021). As a result of the frustrations from the last year, the county mandated that all students return as in-person learners for the 2021-2022 school year. Students continued to wear masks within the building, though other CDC recommendations, such as maintaining social distancing, were impossible tasks to implement. Unfortunately, many important effects of the pandemic had not been effectively factored into school procedures and county policies: The school district became even more steadfast in pushing teachers to close what they perceived to be students' "learning gaps" as they returned to a "normal" school year despite the glaring socio-emotional issues that have resulted from distance learning and despite the pandemic that has still not yet ended (McCray, 2020).

Independent Reading

When the school first opened in 2018, the language arts department came together to create a mission and vision statement that encompassed our philosophy about literacy. Together, we expressed our belief that literacy empowers our students to value their unique identities

through the pages of the books they choose. We believed this empowerment is only accomplished by prioritizing student choice, voice, and diversity. Therefore, we embedded IR as essential to our literacy curriculum. We incorporated IR into our instructional time because we recognized that some of our students may not have access to a quiet space for reading or a wide array of books at home.

Independent reading was devoted time during class in which students read a book of their choice. During IR at Corners STEM High School, students spent 10-15 minutes at the beginning of their language arts class period reading books of their choice. The books students chose varied—Maria preferred reading informational books about cars, David was starting a series from one of his favorite authors, and Andre read a supplemental fiction book assigned by the forensics teacher. By the end of the school week, language arts students would have dedicated at least 40 minutes of class time to reading their IR books. Unlike other IR programs, teachers at CSHS were not rigid about having students log the length of time or the number of pages they read.

While studies revealed that independent reading can boost students' attitudes and motivation for reading (Block & Mangieri, 2002; Lin et al., 2012), silent reading does not necessarily mean that students are actively involved with their reading (Kelley & Clausen-Grace, 2006). Therefore, during IR time, I conferred with students using Notice-and-Note[2] conference questions and I took notes on our conversations—the notes detailed bullet points of our conversations and served as a point of reference when following-up with them again at our next IR conversation (Appendix A).

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[2] Notice & Note is a close reading strategy developed by Beers, K., & Probst, R. E. (2013). *Notice & Note: Strategies for close reading*. Heinemann. The "signposts" alert readers to identify significant moments in works of literature.

Though our conversations sometimes involved discussing literary elements of their books (how the plot progressed since our last IR conversation, how characters developed in unexpected ways, how conflicts dissipated over the course of the novel), the greater goal of these 5-minute conversations was to understand who my students were as readers. The conferring time allowed me to grasp what interested or disinterested them as readers, what genre of books they liked to read, and what excited them to pick up another book. On average, I conferred with eight students a week with the goal of speaking with each student once a month.

In the context of the study, I asked IR conference questions that were directed at understanding how students considered the visual and textual elements in their graphic novels to make meaning of the story. During this study, students used the graphic novel-related Notice-and-Note questions as they read their IR books (Appendix B). The purpose of the notice-and-note reading strategy was to guide students to identify significant moments during their own reading.

Participants

As of the 2021-2022 school year, there were approximately 1,200 students in grades 9-12. The student demographic was comprised largely of students who come from Hispanic (47%) and Black (23%) families. Additionally, more than half of the student population qualified for free- or reduced-lunch (Figure 3.2).
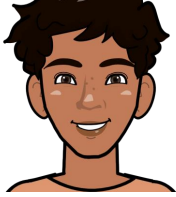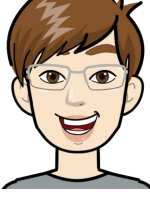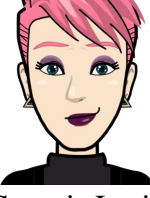
Figure 0.2

Student Population at CSHS
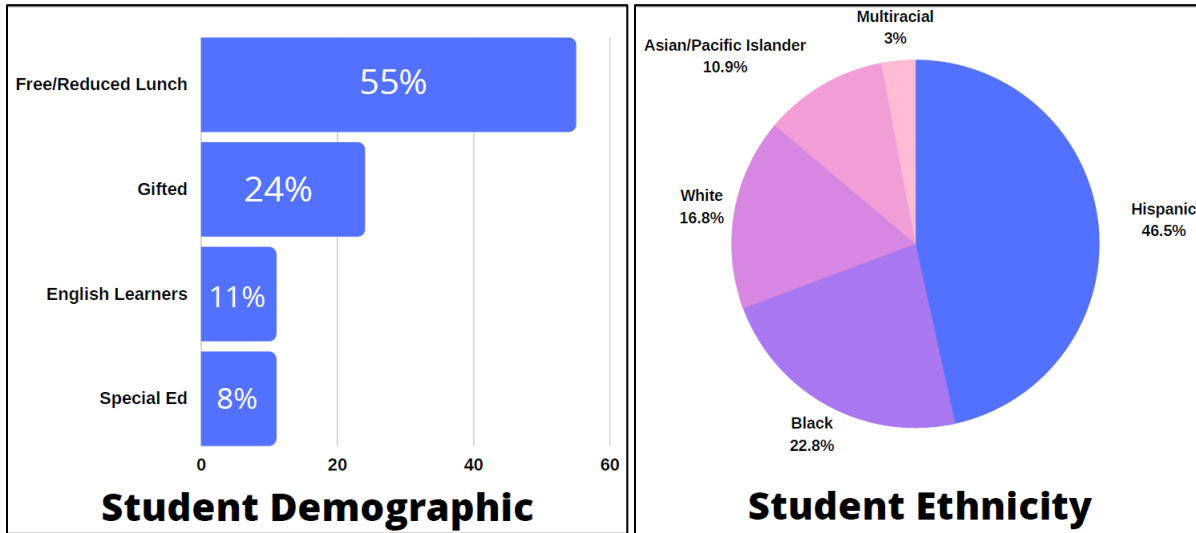
For many, the students (or their parents) chose CSHS because they believe the school provided opportunities that they may not encounter in traditional schools. So, while most of the student population comprised of students from surrounding neighborhoods, CSHS attracted a small percentage of former private school students. As a whole, however, the students and teachers at CSHS faced particular challenges because many of the students were students with families who lived below the poverty level, were immigrants whose first language was not English, and/or were students who had jobs to support their families. The socioeconomic aspects of students' home lives affected their school lives—several students missed school to take care of their younger siblings at home, they were too tired from their evening jobs to stay focused during classes, or they were unmotivated because they struggle to keep up with the demands of their school and home lives (Jensen, 2013). Despite the challenges our students faced, the teachers at CSHS were fervent in their pursuit of providing quality teaching and equitable opportunities for all students.

The participants I included in my study were CSHS students in my own language arts classes. My courses included 10th grade World Literature, 11th grade American Literature, and 12th grade Multicultural Literature. Furthermore, these courses varied by level: college prep and honors. College prep courses were meant to prepare students for college-level curriculum, while honors courses, on top of preparing students for college-level curriculum, incorporated supplementary curriculum that added more rigor for students.

Participants between the ages 14-18 who provided assent/consent (Appendix C and Appendix D) and whose parent or guardian provided permission (Appendix E) were included in the study. My initial goal was to include up to eight participants in my study so that a variety of youth voices could be represented. However, because I did not have IR conversations with every student every week, it was important for me, as a researcher, to obtain as much data about students' in-class interactions with their reading. Therefore, I selected students who had demonstrated consistent attendance throughout the school year. While I had started the study with eight students, two students were removed midway through the study because of their inconsistent attendance consequently leaving six total participants in the study. Using criterion-based selection for participants' inclusion in my study, I included participants who varied by gender, grade level, race, and socioeconomic background (LeCompte et al., 1993). Table 3.2 provides an overview of the participants, followed by, descriptions of the six readers in the next section. The names of each participant were pseudonyms that they chose for themselves.

Table 0.2

Overview of the Participants

Participant	Gender	Race/Ethnicity	Grade Level	ELA Grade	GPA
1. Ana Blair	Female	Black	12th	A	3.5
2. Bruce Cardoso	Male	Hispanic	10th	B	3.6
3. Nelson Connor	Male	Chinese-American	10th	A	4.0
4. Lillith Fields	Non-Binary	White	12th	A	3.4
5. Genesis Lorimer	Male	Black	11th	D	0.8
6. Saana Zidan	Female	Bengali	10th	A	3.4

Meet the Readers

Figure 0.3

Comic Character Representation of Ana Blair

Ana Blair was a Black, female, 12th grade student who I had the special opportunity of teaching for three years as a freshman, junior, and senior. She was passionate about creative writing and was the type of student who never hesitated to whip out a book during independent reading and stay focused for the entirety of IR time; some of her favorite genre of books included realistic fiction, fantasy, and science fiction. During our IR conversations in years past, she was always excited to talk to someone about the contents of the book she was reading at the time.

Ana preferred to read traditional books—many of the IR conversations I had with her throughout the course of our three years together were based on text-only novels. However, after engaging in our whole-class graphic novel unit (unrelated to the study) and piquing her interest in this research study, she transitioned to reading graphic novels for Independent Reading.

Ana was the only research participant who chose to read Western-style comics—*Star Wars: Rogue One Adaptation* (Houser et al., 2017)—rather than manga or graphic novels. Because she was typically a lover of traditional, text-only books and the only participant to read

comics, she brought along a unique perspective to understanding students' overall experiences with reading graphic novels.

Figure 0.4

Comic Character Representation of Bruce Cardoso
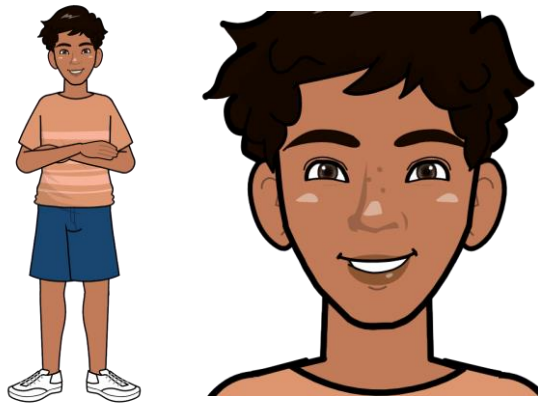
Bruce Cardoso was a Hispanic, male, 10th grader who primarily enjoyed realistic fiction books. He was an outgoing, social butterfly who was always hanging around people whether they be his friends, his classmates, or his teachers. He had a magnetism that endeared him to his classmates, and he relied on his friends and peers to help him track his train-of-thought. For example, there were several moments throughout our IR conversations and interviews when Bruce asked his group mates to help him "think of the word" that he needed to express his thoughts. His reliance on his peers to express his thoughts were rooted in being a multi-language learner—at home, he spoke Spanish with his family, whereas, at school, he practiced English. In fact, Bruce's earliest memories around reading involved him having to help his sister learn English. Despite having an older brother who could also speak English, his parents relied on Bruce, who they believed was the most English-proficient in the family, to help his sister get "on level" with reading. Even though he felt annoyed by the responsibility of teaching a second

language to his sister, he describes these early memories as being wholesome because he felt it was a bonding experience for him and his sister.

When I asked Bruce how he became the most proficient English-speaker in his household, Bruce discussed how exposure to the internet had taught him to pick up on the language. Though he largely credited his brother for introducing him to manga, his early navigation of the internet also led to the vast online library of manga available at the tip of his fingers.

Figure 0.5

Comic Character Representation of Nelson Connor
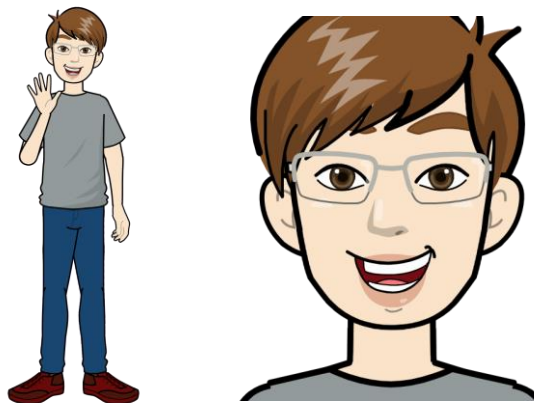
Nelson Connor was a half-Chinese, half-American, male sophomore at CSHS At home, he spoke English with his parents, though his mother taught him to read, write, and speak in Chinese, as well. He described himself as an "iPad kid–" a kid who is obsessed with delving through the labyrinths of the internet to learn about anything and everything. Nelson was inquisitive and curious– and he had a fascination with technology and how it could be used for innovation in STEM fields. When he was not busy tackling his AP classes, he spent his time after school working with his team mates for VEX Robotics. Nelson exemplified an all-around STEM kid.

Nelson read his graphic novels primarily from Webtoon.com– a website that hosts thousands of comics created by what the website describes as "ordinary" citizens. I discuss the influence of Webtoons in further detail later in Chapter 4. Though Nelson excelled in language arts by achievement standards, he admitted to struggling with his attention span when it came to reading; hence, why he preferred reading manga as they are quick, short series that were easily accessible on his phone. The detail in the panels, the artwork, and the integration of different comic elements helped his mind stay focused with reading because of the visual interaction between the layout, colors, and text.

Unfortunately, for someone who enjoyed reading comics online, Nelson's parents discouraged his computer use at home and enforced reading physical books instead. Perhaps it is because he was forced to read at home that contributed to his contempt for reading, so much so that his Pre-K teacher thought he had a reading learning disability because he refused to read books. While Nelson consistently struggled to enjoy reading traditional books, we discovered through our conversations together that he pretty much always had an affinity for picture books and graphic novels– his early memories of reading was *Captain Underpants* (Pilkey, 1997), *Diary of a Wimpy Kid* (Kinney, 2007), and *Timmy Failure* (Pastis, 2013).

Figure 0.6

Comic Character Representation of Lillith Fields
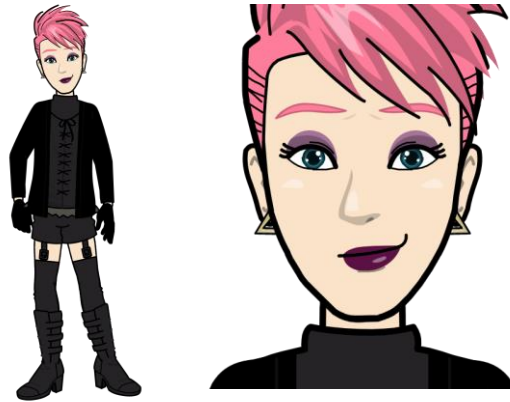
Lilith Fields identified as a white, non-binary senior. Her blonde hair periodically changed between electric colors of pink, blue, and green, her wardrobe palette only existed in the color black, and her accessories consisted of studs or spikes. She was proudly independent and was a vocal advocate for social justice issues.

Lillith carried a positive attitude towards many facets of her life– school, friends, and family. She stated that school had always come easy for her, so maintaining As and Bs in her classes was never really a struggle; however, her ability to do well in school could not be mistaken for a lack of work ethic. Lilith always completed her assignments with integrity and willingly dedicated many after-school hours as assistant director to the theater program. She maintained that it was her busy schedule that allowed her to appreciate Independent Reading time during language arts.

Lilith was an avid reader–she came from a family of readers and credited her grandfather for fostering a love for reading. Her earliest memories involved her grandfather reading to her and, when she was old enough to read for herself, reading aloud to her grandfather. She also

remembered garnering attention from her elementary school teachers because of her high Lexile scores. Lexile scores are derived from the Lexile Framework for Reading that uses quantitative methods (i.e. individual words, sentence lengths) to measure students' reading levels (Harvey, 2011). This memory was a source of pride for her because it affirmed her confidence to do well in school.

Lilith preferred to read traditional, text-only books and acknowledged not having much experience with reading graphic novels. But, because she generally enjoyed reading, she thought that being a part of the study would encourage her to venture out of her comfort zone of reading traditional books and to explore a new, different reading experience with graphic novels. Therefore, for this study, she chose to read *On a Sunbeam* (Walden, 2018), an LGBTQ-friendly novel that featured a non-binary character. As someone who campaigned for gender issues, she was able to buy into the graphic novel because the book featured an acceptance and awareness of gender fluidity.

Figure 0.7

Comic Character Representation of Genesis Lorimer

Genesis Lorimer was a Black, male junior who enjoyed creating content videos as a YouTuber. Unlike the other research participants in the study who attended CSHS for

consecutive years, the year of the study was Genesis' first year at CSHS. Prior to that year, he was homeschooled and attended several schools in the county.

Genesis tended to hang his head low and hide himself under his hoodie–it was easy to mistake that he was falling asleep on his desk when, in fact, he was reading manga on his phone under his desk. And he was constantly reading manga, even when he was supposed to be paying attention in class. Almost every other week, he asked for a pass to go to the library to return his old books and check out new ones; each time he returned from the library, he had five books in his hands, the maximum number of books that the media center allowed students to check out at a time.

When asked about why he preferred to read graphic novels, he said that he always struggled with creating mental pictures in his head; therefore, he appreciated how graphic novels were able to visually, and explicitly, portray emotions and expressions.

Figure 0.8

Comic Character Representation of Saana Zidan
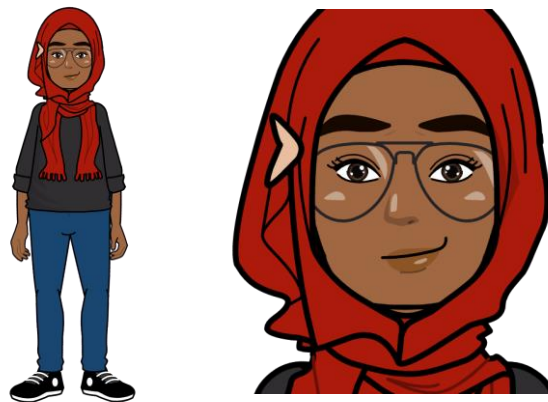
Saana Zidan was a sophomore whose family was from Bangladesh. Though she initially portrayed herself as a shy and reserved individual, the decorative hijabs she wore to match her outfits revealed a personality that was willing to open up when people took the time to talk to

her. Her hijabs also reflected an artistic nature to her– Saana had an affinity for art and creativity, prioritizing art classes for her elective courses.

Like many high school students, school kept Saana busy and IR time during language arts was one of her only times she could dedicate time for reading. She said her love for reading began in school when her third-grade teacher read aloud the *Percy Jackson* (Riordan, 2005) series.

As an artist, a major component to her preference for graphic novels was the artwork presented within the story–when I asked why she opted to read *Magic Fish (Le, 2020)*, she described how she appreciated how much time and effort the author put into the book— especially the details drawn in the character design. For Saana, authors' artwork was the quality that drew her to a book choice.

Data Collection

To make sense of the data within my study, I used multiple sources of data for collection and analysis. Creswell (2011) recommended several types of qualitative data collection: observations, recordings, interviews, and documents. The data sources that I gathered for this study included: (1) observational field notes during independent reading time and interview sessions, (2) audio recordings of IR conversations and follow-up interviews, and (3) semi-structured interviews with participants, and (4) inventory surveys of students' reading histories. Using multiple data sources allowed me to triangulate the data and strengthen the credibility of the research (Creswell, 2011).

Observations

Field notes include the researcher's intuitive moments, conversations, and interactions with participants to help gain a deeper insight and understanding of people's behavior (DeWalt & DeWalt, 2011; Dyson & Genishi, 2005). As a researcher in this study, I was a participant

observer, engaging with my participants within our IR conversations whilst also taking ethnographic field notes (Emerson et al., 2011). I also took field notes when conducting interviews with the participants. Emerson et al. (2011) advised researchers to remain sensitive to writing field notes as it may intrude or disrupt the trust-building process with participants. Therefore, as a participant observer, it was important for me to maintain a balance of taking informative notes while being in the moment as a teacher. I intended for my field notes to detail comments and insights readers made about their reading experiences with graphic novels, in addition to my own thoughts and insights as the study unfolded. The field notes also included a continuation of notes I customarily wrote during IR conversations, a general routine that students were accustomed to prior to the study. During the note-taking process, I wrote the title of the book students were reading, the conference question I asked, and bullet points about their responses to the conference questions. The next time I had an IR conference with the student, I referred to my notes to understand how the story had changed since the last time we conferred.

After taking field notes, I also wrote reflective notes (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007; Creswell, 2011) about what I was thinking and feeling after my conversations with my students. To preserve instructional time, the reflective notes were written during my planning period or after school.

Audio Recordings

Audio recordings of IR conferences had been an ongoing practice prior to the implementation of my study. I recorded reading conferences with students to help me, as a teacher, keep track of students' readings. However, upon approval from the IRB to conduct the study, I used recordings of research participants to support my field notes and data analysis. Regardless of whether they were participants in the study, IR conversations were recorded for

every student to prevent anyone from feeling singled-out. Additionally, audio recordings during

interviews were only conducted with consenting participants.

The purpose of the audio recordings was to gain richer, in-depth data that I may not have

necessarily picked up on during initial interactions and in addition to my field notes.

Furthermore, the audio recordings allowed me to chronicle students' interactions with their

reading in the moment—students were able to express their immediate thoughts about their

reading and point at the visual and textual elements of their graphic novels during the IR

conversations. At the end of each week, I transcribed the recordings with the aid of a

transcription software (Rev.com). To ensure accuracy of the transcription, I reviewed, listened,

and revised the transcriptions simultaneously as needed.

Dyson and Genishi (2005) warned researchers about two housekeeping challenges with

audio recordings: systematic storage and timely transcription. I recorded students' conversations

on a passcode-locked smartphone so that the recording device would minimize having students

feel distracted when having conversations with me. Then, I systematically labeled and uploaded

each recording at the end of the day into a passcode-locked computer and deleted the files from

the smartphone. Additionally, because I aimed to focus on writing reflective notes at the end of

each day, I transcribed the recordings by the end of each week for the sake of preserving time for

my field notes.

Interviews

The study aimed to understand students' experiences, so it was important for students to

voice their thoughts in retrospect to the in-the-moment conversations students had with me

during IR time—the interviews allowed students to reflect back on their reading processes with

graphic novels. Stake (1995) described interviews as open-ended processes that emphasized

individuals' unique experiences. I conducted semi-structured interviews that followed an

interview protocol (Merriam, 2009)—the protocol began with informing participants they were being recorded, assuring students they may be honest and reflective, and reminding them that they could choose to discontinue the interview at any point in the study. I also reiterated that students' participation in the study was not tied to their grades. Because the theoretical framework to my study focused on transactional theory and sociocultural theories of meaning-making, the interview questions were framed around understanding students' personal connections with their graphic novels (Appendix F). Guided by Bogdan and Biklen's (2007) interview probes, I used open-ended questions such as "Describe…" and "Tell me about…" and "Could you explain…" so that I could avoid simple "yes" or "no" answers. Though the interviews were guided by a list of questions, the semi-structured format allowed me to respond naturally to the responses of students just as I did in our IR conversations.

Interview sessions occurred at three points throughout the study: (1) midpoint of the study after three weeks of independent reading, (2) toward the end of the study after six weeks of independent reading, and (3) in the month of May for a member checking conversation. The sessions were held based on the availability of the students; therefore, interviews were conducted within 30-minute increments during school lunch times, tutoring hours on Wednesdays or Fridays, or after school.

Documents

The bulk of data collection used field notes, interviews, and audio recordings. However, I also used a reading inventory (Appendix G) that students completed at the beginning of the study as a supplemental artifact to understand my students and their histories with reading. The interest surveys coincided with a graphic novel unit I implemented into our language arts curriculum. The survey included questions that aimed to understand how students perceived themselves and

their relationship with reading. While I intended for the interviews to be an open, fluid conversation, I used the surveys to supplement the data I received from the interviews.

Implementation

The classroom practice of independent reading and conferences had been an ongoing activity since the beginning of the 2021-2022 school year. However, this study was conducted over six weeks in the spring of 2022 upon approval from the IRB for Georgia State University, research approval from the school district, and approved consent from the participants and participants' guardian.

Before beginning my study, I reviewed the reading inventories and the consent forms to invite students to participate. After constructing a list of potential participants, I followed-up with each student to confirm that they wanted to proceed with the study.

During weeks 1 and 2, I continued my IR conferences with all the students in my classes with the addition of taking detailed field notes of the study's participants. By the end of each day, I wrote reflective notes on my thoughts and observations relative to the study. Then, at the end of each week, I transcribed the recorded IR conversations.

During week 3, I continued to have recorded IR conversations with students and continued to take reflective notes regarding the conversations with the research participants. Throughout week 3, participants scheduled a time to have their first interviews with me. The interviews served as a checkpoint to understand and provide time for more extended responses about their ongoing reading experiences with graphic novels. At the end of week 3, I transcribed the recorded IR conversations and interview sessions.

During weeks 4 and 5, I continued to have recorded IR conversations with my students, wrote reflective notes at the end of each day, and transcribed IR conversations at the end of the week.

During week 6 towards the end of the study, participants scheduled a time to have their second interview with me. In the second interview, I followed-up with my summaries and interpretations from our last interview as a method of member-checking. Then, we continued to reflect and discuss their reading processes and experiences.

After data collection of IR conversations, the students scheduled one final interview in May to discuss my findings and interpretations throughout the entire 6-week study. These member check sessions provided the space for students to make any last comments, thoughts, or modifications to my interpretations for their experiences. Figure 3.8 illustrates the timeline of the research study.

Figure 0.9

Research Study Timeline
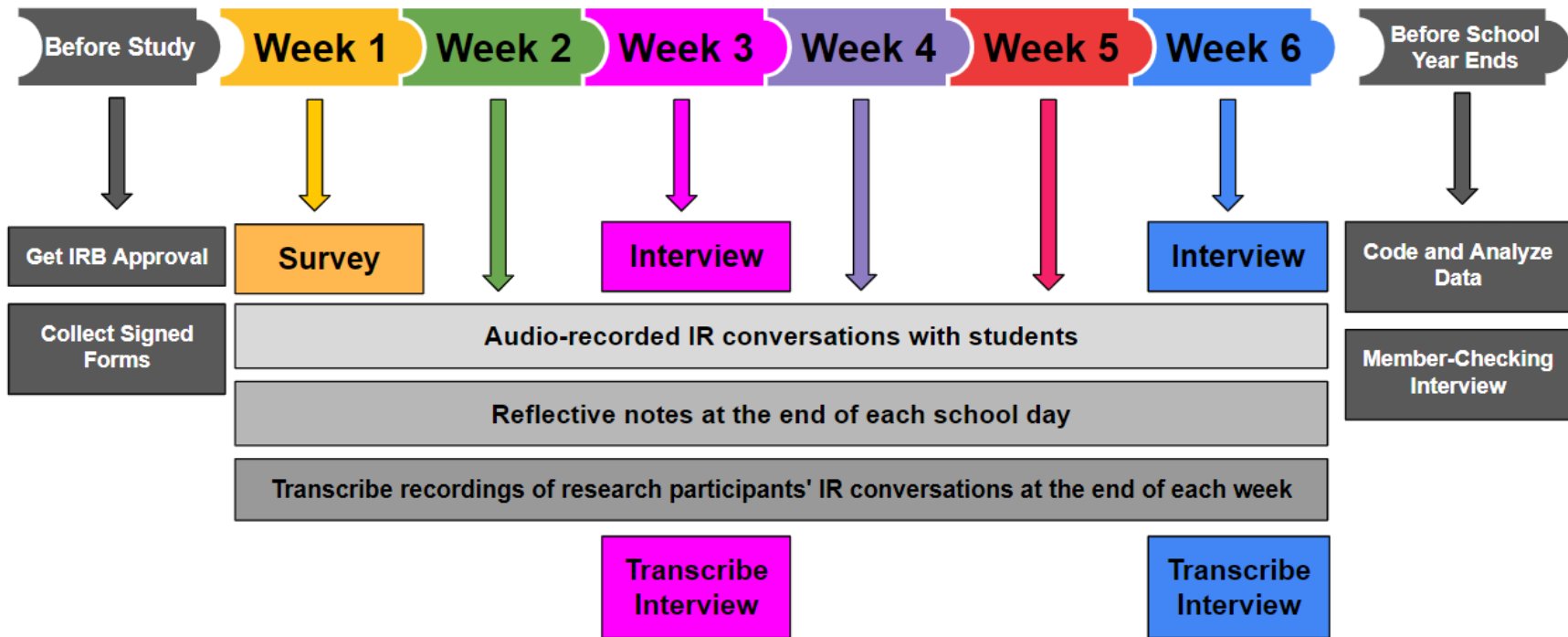
Data Analysis

Data analysis allows researchers to develop meaning out of their data collection (Merriam, 1998). Data analysis involves organizing the data, breaking them into manageable units, coding them, synthesizing them, and searching for patterns (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007). For this study, the data collected for analysis included field notes, audio recordings, interviews, and documents. Throughout the study, I made note of patterns or themes that emerged to guide how I organize the data for coding.

Coding Data

My data analysis process began as soon as I began the recorded IR conversations and interviews with my participants. By the end of each week of the six-week study, I uploaded the audio recordings into Rev (www.rev.com) to process them through an initial transcription process. After uploading my audio recordings and having the conversations transcribed, I reviewed the initial transcription generated by Rev whilst listening to the audio recordings simultaneously. During this second cycle of transcription, I revised and edited any missing words or phrases so that the final transcription stayed true to the audio recording.

After I reviewed and transcribed the recordings, I began the coding process using Quirkos (www.quirkos.com). Quirkos was recommended to me shortly after I attempted to use Nvivo as a data coding resource. I preferred Quirkos over Nvivo because of its ability to color code and "drag, drop, and grow" text—I was able to color code lines of text and drag key lines of text into "Quirkos bubble" codes. The Quirkos bubbles grew as I moved more selections of text into their respective codes. The feature of having the bubbles grow was important because it allowed me to visually see which codes transcended across multiple participants. Furthermore, I preferred using Quirkos for coding because the spatial placement and color-coding of the bubble-codes helped

me to cognitively and visually remember where my codes were situated. Figure 3.10 provides a visual of the beginning stages of the Quirkos bubbles.

Figure 0.10

Early Stages of Quirkos Bubble Coding

Throughout the coding process, I constantly reflected back to my research questions and the theoretical frameworks that guided my study. Therefore, I conducted three steps in the data analysis process. I began with open and axial coding before developing my themes. Table 3.3 provides an overview of my coding process.

Table 0.3

Overview of Analysis

Analysis Steps	Description
Open Coding	I examined the data and highlighted segments of data that I identified as units of thought (Zoss, 2007). Then, I created coded labels to describe what was happening within the discrete units of thought.
Axial Coding	I looked for similarities amongst codes using the "constant comparative method," a process of grouping the open-coded labels into a larger categories (Miles et al., 2014).
Theme Development	Guided by my theoretical frameworks, I examined where the axial codes fell under the umbrella of the theories that drove my research.

Open coding is the initial process of breaking down qualitative data into discrete parts or units of thought (Saldaña, 2021; Zoss, 2007). For example, a unit of thought could be a single idea or concept developed by one or more speakers. Once the idea within the conversation shifted to another idea, I began chunking the next unit of thought. For example, when I asked Ana how she chose which graphic novels to read, she explained, "First, I actually look at the cover. I know that's the whole thing or it's like, 'Don't judge a book by its cover,' but I do look at the cover if it's appealing. Um…I actually see how many female characters are on the cover because I like to read about female stories. Then, I'll look at the genre." This quote was one unit of thought about how Ana selected books. Using this unit of thought, I coded Ana's statement with three labels to describe the criteria she used for her selection: (1) *selecting* a book based on the cover *art,* (2) *selecting* a book based on the relatability of the *character*, and (3) *selecting* books based on the *genre*.

The purpose of open coding is to remain open to exploring whatever theoretical possibilities researchers can discern from the data (Charmaz, 2014). Furthermore, I took an inductive approach to the coding process—a process where researchers are open to what is present in the data rather than "force-fitting" the data into preexisting codes (Miles et al., 2014; Saldaña, 2021). Therefore, the open coding phase allowed me as a researcher to take the time to reflect deeply about the data.

After the open coding process, the next step was a deductive approach to axial coding. The purpose of axial coding is to reorganize the data to determine which codes are the "dominant ones" and which are the less important ones (Boeije, 2010). In other words, the codes become refocused to examine how the conceptual frameworks for the study connected through the data. In order to understand which codes needed to be refocused, I used the constant comparative method (Miles et al., 2014) to think about the similarities and differences between what was occurring within the codes. For instance, when examining Ana's description of how she selected graphic novels, I categorized the three open codes under axial codes that described *visual qualities* and *personal connections as readers*. These codes appear in the blue and peach columns of Table 3.4. In another example, when understanding the sociocultural factors that influenced why students chose graphic novels, I categorized them into various groups: (1) *sociocultural interactions*, (2) *influence of media*, and (3) *connection through conversations*. Table 3.4 provides a list of all the codes and themes.

Finally, I examined the axial codes in order to condense, sharpen, and highlight the most important aspects of my data analysis and to accentuate the theoretical frameworks of the study (Charmaz, 2006). During this phase, I used reflexive thematic analysis to identify and bring meaning to the shared experiences of the participants in my research study (Braun & Clarke,

2021). Reflexive approaches to theme development place greater responsibility on the researcher's analytic process to coding because it relies on the interpretive work of the researcher. In other words, as I was open-coding and building axial codes, I was constructing labels that were based on my understanding of the theories that framed the study. Braun and Clarke (2021) described this process as an organic process with a potential for the codes to evolve to capture the researcher's deepening understanding of the data. Though reflexive thematic analysis recognizes that the coding process is subjective, it holds researchers accountable to their coding process because it requires them to reflect on their own assumptions and how their assumptions might shape and delimit their coding.

During the thematic analysis process, I familiarized myself again with the coded data, generated initial themes, and reviewed and refined the axial codes before naming and describing the themes. Because the study was rooted in transactional reading theory and sociocultural theories of meaning-making, I sought to develop themes that helped me to understand why students chose to read graphic novels and how these readers consider the visual and textual elements of their books to construct meaning from their reading. Therefore, the themes I created focus on the *roles of semiotics*, *transactional reading*, *sociocultural contexts*, and *joy* in the experiences of the students.

Throughout the coding process, I recognized that many of the codes overlapped across axial codes and themes; therefore, as a researcher, I had to make decisions about where I would categorize an open code within an axial code. For example, Lillith recalled early memories of reading with her grandfather that brought joy and comfort to her reading experience; my initial open codes for her recollection of these memories included *early memories: family* and *reading joy: comfort*. While her early memories of reading included *picture books* (coded into the *visual*

qualities axial category), it was the social nature of reading with her grandfather that shaped her enjoyment of reading; therefore, I chose to categorize Lillith's interactions with her grandparent under the category *sociocultural interactions*. These early memories also spill into the theme I created for the *role of joy*. For Lillith, these memories are all the same set of moments, but for the sake of analysis, I parsed them into a variety of codes, axial categories, and ultimately, themes, to help describe and explain why these early memories were important to her reading choices in high school.

Table 0.4

Overview of Analysis Process

Role of Semiotics			Role of Transactional Reading
Frustrations with Reading	**Availability and Accessibility**	**Visual Qualities**	**Personal Connections as Readers**
• Decline in Reading: Attention Span • Reading Frustration: Difficult Visualizing • Reading Frustration: Length/Completion • Reading Frustration: Physical Weight • Reading Frustration: Reading as Task • Reading Frustration: Textbooks • Reading Frustration: Time • Reading Frustration: Unrelatability • Reading Frustration: Vocabulary	• Accessibility • Accommodating Physical Space	• Artwork: Characterization • Colors: Tone • Early Memories: Picture Books • GN Frustration: Visuals • GN Joy: Arts • GN Joy: Entertainment • GN Rec: Visuals • GN Selection: Art Style • GN Selection: Artists • GN Selection: Cover Art • GN Selection: Text / Dialogue • Lines as Emotions (IR Convo) • Practice Makes Perfect • Reading Joy: Visualization • Reading Selection: Covers • Text Bubbles: Enhancing Emotion • Visual Imagery: Character • Webtoon	• Character Lessons • Character Motivations • Conflict: Acceptance • Connections to Other Stories • Fast Pace of Reading • Finish Book Attitudes • Gender, Race, Cultural Portrayal • GN Joy: Relatability • GN Rec: Imp of Choice • GN Rec: Life Lessons / Relatability • GN Selection: Character • GN Selection: Genre • Gutter Space • Lack of Perspective: Bias • Lack of Perspective: Clarity and Understanding • Life Lesson: Finding Closure • Life Lesson: Friendships are Important • Life Lesson: Letting Go of the Past • Life Lesson: Survival • Perspective • Predictions for Plot • Reading Joy: Gaining Perspectives • Reading Joy: Sliding Doors • Reading Selection: Genre • Repetition and Patterns • Re-Readings • Same Books • Transformational • Transformed Understanding of GNs

Role of Sociocultural Contexts			Role of Joy
Sociocultural Interactions	**Influence of Media**	**Connection through Conversation**	**Reading Joy**
• Early Memories: Family • Early Memories: Positive School Experience: Read Aloud • Joy Reading: Family • Trouble • Webtoon	• GN Preference: Media • Influence of Internet • Influence of Media	• Debrief • End Study Reflection • Influence of Peers/People • Joy (IR): Excitement • Member Check Reflection: Graphic Cues • Positive Teacher-Student Relationships • Reading Joy (GN) Talking about Books • Reading Joy Talking about Books	• GN Joy: Entertainment • GN Joy: Feeling Good • GN Joy: Relatability • Reading Joy: Author's Storytelling • Reading Joy: Comfort • Reading Joy: Escape • Reading Joy: Family • Reading Joy: Hobby • Reading Joy: Physical Touch

Note. The four main groups in the table are themes (e.g., Role of Semiotics), below themes are the eight axial codes (e.g., Frustration with Reading), and below axial codes are the open codes in bulleted lists. Graphic novels appear as GN, independent reading as IR.

Figure 0.11

Comic Character Representation of Researcher
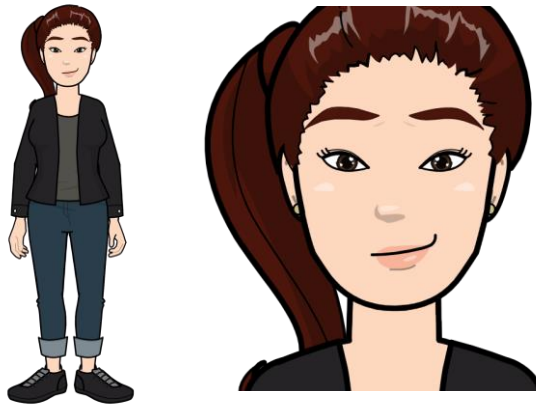
Researcher Role and Positionality

As a language arts educator, I am passionate about establishing a platform where literacy can be equitable to *all* students regardless of race, gender, and socioeconomic background. As a second-generation immigrant, I am keenly aware of the struggles in learning English at school while maintaining another language at home. Therefore, throughout my seven years of experience in teaching, most of the courses I have taught centered around media literacy and multicultural literature—I wanted to provide courses that emphasized that the art of language is diverse and does not have to be exclusive to English text on a page. One of the ways in which I showcased my support of diverse readers was through my classroom library.

Four bookshelves surrounded a designated reading corner, an area of the classroom set apart with a colorful rug, hanging lanterns, and cushioned pillows. The bookshelves hosted a wide variety of books: children's picture books, the *Junie B. Jones* series in Spanish, slam poetry, and young adult fiction. However, it was hard to miss a significant portion of the shelves that were dedicated to graphic novels—graphic novels, comics, and manga sat in a separate

bookshelf dedicated only for these books. When students entered my classroom, they saw it was a space where *any* reading is encouraged (Figure 3.13).

Figure 0.12

Reading Corner with Bookshelf for Graphic Novels, Comics, and Manga

As a teacher and reader who had rich experiences with graphic novels, I understood that this study was deeply personal to me. Because I believed that learning involved interactions between individuals, I could not deny that my passion for graphic novels and comics may have influenced my own students in some shape or form. However, I also believed that my extrinsic love for graphic novels could have served as an asset for students because it allowed them to recognize there was a space where love or curiosity about comics were welcomed. Nevertheless, I acknowledged that my responsibility as a researcher required that the study was trustworthy and credible. Therefore, I took several measures to ensure the study's credibility.

Credibility

It is important that qualitative researchers establish several procedures to ensure credibility of their study. Therefore, I referred to Creswell and Miller's (2000) list of procedures to safeguard the trustworthiness of my research.

One method to establish credibility was to provide thick, rich descriptions. Thick, descriptive details required describing the setting, participants, and themes of the study. The thick descriptions allowed me to convey a level of verisimilitude in my experiences and the experiences of the participants. Then, I practiced reflexivity, a process in which researchers continually ruminate on their own assumptions, beliefs, and biases (Creswell & Miller, 2000). As I revisited my field notes, I was careful and mindful of the subjectivity I imposed when taking reflective notes after the IR conferences and interview sessions.

Another way to ensure credibility was to triangulate my data. Qualitative researchers often use triangulation to gather data from different sources in order to support and strengthen their observations and interpretations (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007). Data sources I used for triangulation included field notes, audio recordings and transcriptions, and survey documents. I cross-referenced across multiple data sources, checking for consistency between participants' words and my interpretation.

In addition to triangulating the data, I also invited participants to member check. Lincoln and Guba (1985) contended that member checking was the most crucial method of establishing credibility. Because I was fervent in honoring youth voices and experiences, I took the data and my interpretations back to the participants so they could confirm the accuracy of the accounts I had written. Furthermore, I invited participants to review the final draft of the data analysis for yet another opportunity to confirm their account. Because the school year was coming to an end

and I was unable to complete the coding process before students dismissed for summer vacation, I completed a member-checking interview based on a brief overview of the transcribed conversations of each participant. Participants had an opportunity to read my summaries, write notes and commentaries on the summaries, and share their thoughts with me in that final member-checking interview.

Finally, Creswell and Miller (2000) stated that prolonged engagement in the research setting instills credibility because the researcher establishes trust with participants. The participants of the study were students who I have known and taught over the course of several months, allowing us time to build rapport and establish trust. Furthermore, because the participants were also students in my language arts classes, I ensured they understood that their participation in the study were not tied to their course grades. In other words, students participated in the study neither received additional merit nor credit to their language arts grade.

Ethical Considerations

Within this research, ethical issues were taken into consideration. First, I complied with IRB guidelines and made sure that all participants and their families could read and understand the consent/assent and permission forms. The consent/assent forms were also translated to Spanish for the Spanish-speaking research participants and their families. I also reiterated to research participants that participation was voluntary, and they were able to withdraw at any point of the study without penalty. Students' personal information was protected by filing all documentation into a password-protected computer or locked filing cabinet. I also protected students' identities by encouraging them to create pseudonyms for themselves. Furthermore, I recorded the IR conversations with all my students, rather than just those who participated in the study, to establish confidentiality of the research participants within the classroom. Finally, I

positioned my member checking as an opportunity check back with students and receive their

feedback on my discussion of their reading experiences. I also checked-in with their

confirmation about the creation and representation of their comic characters. These member

checks allowed me to enact my commitment to maintaining trust with my students.

FINDINGS

Throughout this study I found that students had a variety of purposes for reading graphic novels, manga, and comics. The themes I developed in my analysis consider students' experiences with reading as a whole, and with graphic novels in particular. I discuss themes involving the role of semiotics, transactional reading, and sociocultural contexts in students' reading experiences. Then, I explain the role of joy as it intersected across all themes, as well as, permeated the experiences of all the students.

Role of Semiotics

Semiotics examines how signs and sign systems take on various forms of expression. In the case of graphic novels, readers were engaging with linguistic (reading and speaking) and pictorial (artwork and images) signs to construct meaning from their books (Suhor, 1984). For this study, I observed the ways in which the role of semiotics affected their frustrations with reading and how their frustrations may have influenced their preference for graphic novels because of comics' availability and accessibility as well as their visual appeal.

Frustrations with Reading

To understand why students chose to read graphic novels, I needed a full picture of their reasons for reading, both positive and negative. Therefore, I also wanted to understand their frustrations with reading. For some, reading was frustrating when obstacles disrupted the flow of their reading process. For example, because Lillith was "so quick to [understand] things," she disliked confronting difficult language or vocabulary that impeded her understanding of what she was reading. Having to re-read was a practice she was not accustomed to because she considered herself a capable reader. Nelson, however, attributed a difficulty with attention span as a hindering process to reading; graphic novels helped him with reading because the interactive nature of reading the dialogue, incorporating the visuals, and moving from panel-to-panel

afforded him the opportunity to stay proactive during his reading. When reading graphic novels, Nelson's attention span was no longer a constraint. His explanation showed that comics offered him a way to incorporate multiple signs for meaning-making as an immersive activity to reading.

For Genesis, his frustration with the reading process came from his struggle with visualizing the words.

 : Well, when I read chapter books, like, I can't really see [or] visualize how they react. 'Cause like, in some situations, I can't picture, "Oh, what face would they make in the situation?" I wanna picture it in my head and the situations that happen in the books [but] the books I read, I can't picture.

Genesis expressed a desire to connect with the characters and be included in the imaginative world of the story, but he depended on visual cues to be a part of the storytelling. Genesis's frustration was important to note because he displayed students' desire to be a part of stories; yet, if classroom spaces privilege only linguistic modes of meaning-making, they exclude other readers like Genesis who rely on other modes of meaning-making.

Saana and Bruce were drawn to graphic novels, in part because of frustrations with reading long novels; both expressed a history of not finishing books because of the book lengths. Saana described how being in school and dealing with homework made her "too mentally exhausted" to have energy to read lengthy books. She would start a book, but over time as she struggled to muster the energy to keep reading, she would lose interest in the book, which would result in her opting for other books of better interest. Bruce argued that lengthy books weren't as compelling or interesting because he believed graphic novels contained more enjoyable stories; he felt frustrated that books were being pushed solely based on the length when graphic novels offered him an equal, if not better, reading experience for him. Both Saana and Bruce placed

their own interest as imperative to their reading joy. For Saana, reading was difficult when her school tasks prevented her from having the mental focus and protracted time required to finish a book; therefore, reading manga allowed her to feel a sense of accomplishment when she could finish it quickly, whilst still enjoying the story; whereas, Bruce didn't want to feel forced to read lengthy books if he already enjoyed manga.

While others described their frustrations with reading as related to the discouragement they felt when they could not understand the words or struggled with the attention span to stay focused or had difficulty with visualizing what they were reading or were discouraged when faced with a lengthy reading task, Ana's frustrations were based on the physical restraints of reading. More specifically, she felt frustrated with reading when she could not place herself in a comfortable position or if there was a lack of proper lighting for reading.

 : …if I'm reading like hardcover books and I can't find a comfortable position to read, that can be frustrating…or the lack of lighting. That's also another frustrating aspect to reading.

 : That's funny because you're talking about a lot of the physical, external elements to reading.

Ana differed from the rest of the participants because she placed importance on the physical space for reading pleasure she highlighted the importance of having a safe, comfortable environment to enjoy reading (see Figure 4.1)

Figure 0.1

Ana Enjoyed Reading in a Comfortable Space

Availability and Accessibility

One finding of this study was the role of accessibility in influencing students' preference for graphic novels. Throughout my IR conversations and researcher observations, all but two of the students were reading their graphic novels on their phones or on their laptops.

Graphic novels are easily, readily, and abundantly available online. Better yet, a vast majority of them are free. According to an article posted on *Forbes*, Webtoon—a site many of the students use to read their graphic novels—draws over 72 million monthly active users (Salkowitz, 2021). Furthermore, the online resource provides a massive library of comics—readers have the opportunity to choose their reading based on new publications, favorite genres, and popularity ratings. For example, Genesis explained how the range of choices was one of the reasons why he enjoyed reading on his phone.

 : So, most of what you're reading is online?

 : Yeah.

 : Talk to me about that.

 : I like reading on my phone 'cause there's like, more variety of what I have to choose from. 'Cause like, if I don't see something I like in a library, I be like, 'Oh, I can just probably pull it…find it on my phone somewhere.'

 : I also just remembered—you're one of the few people who always asks to go to the library to check out books or whatever.

 : Mm-hmm.

 : So, do you have a library at home? Or maybe not a library but a collection of books that you can choose from? Or is that something that is only available to you at school?

 : [I go to the library] 'cause my parents are kind-of…they're always busy 'cause they own a business so I don't really have anyone to take me to the library.

In this quote, Genesis highlighted the limitations that libraries and media centers could have regarding their lack of availability of certain titles. Graphic novels, specifically manga, are often

expanded into several volumes worth of content, and it can be impractical and difficult to print

manga series as quickly as they are being written. For example, *#Killstagram* (Ryoung, 2019)

was a manga Genesis read throughout IR and it has 44 chapters, or "episodes," in a season[3].

Another book that Genesis read—*unOrdinary* (uru-chan, 2016)—was first published in 2016 and

was still ongoing in 2023 with 290 episodes, with a new episode being published each week. It is

also difficult for libraries to keep their shelves stocked with the ever-growing number of stories.

In addition to the lack of titles the school library might provide, visiting the local library requires

a patron to access transportation to and from the building. For Genesis, he relied on his parents'

free time to access the library. Because his parents were using their time to manage their

business, it limited how often Genesis was able to visit the local library.

Second, the accessibility of reading on a phone offered a variety of benefits for different

readers. For Genesis, reading on his phone was important because it allowed him to read during

nighttime while sharing a room with his brother.

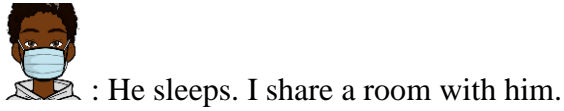 : [I like reading on my phone] 'cause I'm able to read it at night 'cause that's

when I mostly read.

 : Ah—because the light on your phone shows up. But couldn't you just turn on a

light when you read an actual book?

 : Disturbs my brother.

---

[3] Webtoon use the word *episodes* to describe series within a title. A collection of episodes can make up a *season*.

 : Huh?

 : He sleeps. I share a room with him.

Atop the abundance of available texts to choose from online, reading graphic novels online also accommodated the limitations of reading a physical book, requiring a lamp to read in the dark. Reading his manga on his phone allowed Genesis to read within the time of night when he most enjoyed reading and without disturbing his brother (See Figure 4.2).

Figure 0.2

Genesis Enjoyed Reading at Nighttime
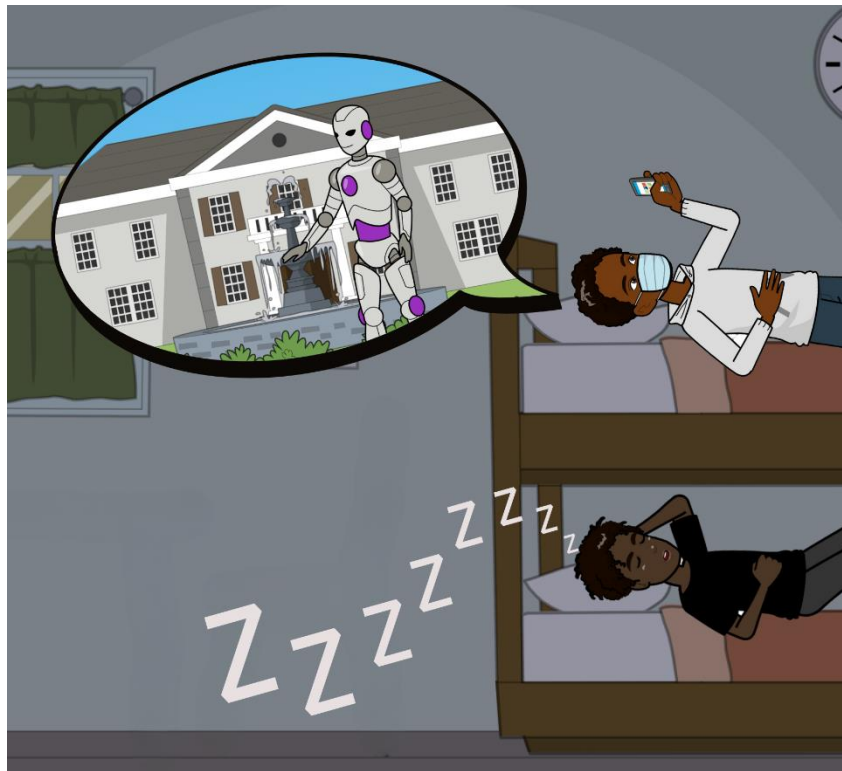
Similarly, Ana shared that lack of lighting was one of the frustrating aspects of reading, in addition to, reading hardcover books—her and Genesis's conversations identified the

dependence that physical books have to external spaces, especially when physical books require lighting that may disturb other people who are sharing in the same spaces. Reading on a digital device, especially with the greater access to titles, provided more accessible affordances than physical books. Graphic novels' easy online accessibility also indicated why Bruce and Saana read their books online, as well—Bruce on his laptop and Saana on her phone.

For Nelson, he preferred reading graphic novels on his phone because of the ability to focus on one panel at a time. Therefore, reading online facilitated his reading process.

: For most of the online graphic novels the way [panels] are organized are very different than your traditional graphic novel because it's all in a more PDF format. So, it's not like you have *x* amount of panels to the left of the page and *x* to the right. It's just one panel after each other continuously until the end of the chapter.

: So, is it hard to see layout in a big picture because you're looking at it through your phone?

: Yeah. I think that's the reason why [authors] do it as well. I always find that because of how much freedom illustrators and authors have for making their graphic novel, having a unique layout makes reading it more difficult. Because I oftentimes find I skip a panel. And even though it seems like the right order to me, it's not what the author intended and I'm just lost for a second. While for [reading online], it's just always in order and you don't have to worry about it.

Nelson described how when he read graphic novels online, the panels appeared one at a time, therefore he did not have to think about if he was reading the panels in the correct order. Scott

McCloud (2000) defined this phenomenon of reading one panel at a time as *infinite canvas* because it refers to the one long, vertical strip of comics that are often featured in online comics. The infinite canvas became a phenomenon once comic creators began creating their work online and needed the comic pages to fit within the spatial limitations of a webpage. Thus, a benefit of reading comics online is the ability to focus on one panel at a time.

Lillith—one of the two students who did not read her graphic novels online—described how navigating the panels within a physical book could be frustrating to her reading process.

 : Sometimes it's a little bit more difficult for me to read a graphic novel just 'cause I'm not used to it. Jumping from panel to panel sometimes can get a little bit confusing. But I'm finding that the more I get into like the graphic novels, the easier it is for me to pick up that style of reading and pick up all the little like blurbs and mini-captions and things like that.

 : So, it's maybe how where your eyes follow with the layout, you forget that, "Oh, maybe I read this text bubble a little too early. I need to go back" or something like that?

 : Yeah. Sometimes I'll misread a text bubble and then I have to be like, "wait, that doesn't make sense" and go back and re-read.

I included Lillith's conversation because as someone who preferred reading traditional books, she expressed a level of frustration from reading a physical comic book. Readers who are not familiar with reading comics may struggle with reading a different medium. Therefore, the infinite canvas feature of online comics can facilitate the reading process because panels are displayed in the order authors intended. And while Ana was also another reader who read

physical comic books, she had more experience and practice with reading comics than Lillith did and, thereby, did not run into the same frustrations as Lillith faced. Lillith revealed that after re-reading and getting used to the comic layout, she was able to read with more ease. Her conversation expressed the importance of practice with all levels of reading—that with increased exposure and practice, reading can become less frustrating.

Visual Qualities

When asked why readers opted to read graphic novels or how they went about choosing which graphic novels to read, all the students described artwork and art style as an important factor. In fact, the trope "don't judge a book by its cover" was disregarded by Ana when selecting her graphic novels.

 : How do you go about picking which [graphic novels and comics] you might want to read? What's your process?

 : First, I actually look at the cover. I know that's a whole thing—"don't judge a book by its cover"—but I do look at the cover if it's appealing.

Ana looked at the cover in deciding if she was going to choose to read the book or not because the artwork displayed on the cover of a comic can give insight into the visual storytelling of the book. Even Lillith laughed when she said she also judged a book by its cover when picking graphic novels to read because, as someone who read traditional books, Lillith knew the general understanding that readers shouldn't simply choose a book based on the cover. Unlike traditional books, the stories in graphic novels are told by synthesizing the visual and textual elements. Therefore, judging a graphic novel by its cover provided a preview of the visual story that would take place in a book Ana or Lillith might pick up.

In another example, the artwork in *The Magic Fish* (Le, 2020) was what caught the attention of Saana when she talked about how she went about picking books to read.

: Tell me why you picked *Magic Fish* as your top option compared to other graphic novels?

: Honestly, uh, the art style lured me first 'cause I just liked how it looked from the cover and everything.

: What about the art style intrigued you?

: I don't know. It's like, as someone who likes drawing, I like to learn how to draw different things in different ways and the way the author like…For example, the hair is very detailed in that novel. And it just made me think like, "I would not be wasting so much time on hair like the way [the author] did."

: That's an interesting perspective because I didn't even think about it like that.

: Yeah (laughs). Like, I would not—the way [Nguyen] drew like the single strands of every hair, I was like "Nah." I'm not going to sit there and draw like that and, you know, put time into that novel.

As a student who enjoyed art and devoted time to pursuing this hobby, Saana immediately appreciated the intricate work that the comic artist poured into his work and read *The Magic Fish* (Le, 2020) as one of her top choices during IR. And while Saana was captivated by *The Magic*

Fish because of the detailed artwork, Nelson considered it "too distracting." For Nelson, the most important factor in his choosing a graphic novel to read was the genre first, then the art style second. Moreover, he stated that he preferred a simpler art style so that it would be easier for him to focus on the content. This preference showed that there was an intersection between the linguistic and visual elements of graphic novels that influenced students' reading process. Regardless of how much artwork was prioritized in students' process of choosing books, it was a factor that influenced how they chose their books.

Furthermore, art styles can have such important roles in students' reading experience that readers like Bruce opted to select books based on the artists alone.

 : How do you choose which manga to read?

 : I have certain mangakas that I like really prefer.

 : Manga-what?

 : Mangakas—they're like creators of manga, basically, and they each have their own art style. That's what I really like also.

 : But does that mean that you prioritize the art over maybe some of the plots or the kind of stories they tell?

 : I feel like most good artists in manga can tell a good story.

Mangakas are comic artists who write and illustrate manga; while some artists study at art school, many take on an apprenticeship with other artists before they create their own work (Lewis, 2018). Over time, mangakas can become distinguished as they garner a fanbase who enjoy their work. Therefore, just as readers may select books based on the authors they admire or the style of writing the author uses in their work, students might choose graphic novels based on the mangakas they respect and the nature of artwork that is characteristic to the mangakas. Bruce was the only reader to mention mangakas as an important factor in choosing what to read, and it provided a perspective that resembles how readers might choose traditional books based on specific authors and how for comic readers, they could choose to read comics based on their art style.

Additionally, the visual appeal of graphic novels was not limited to appreciating the art—students chose graphic novels because the artwork allowed them to understand the emotional responses of characters and they became aware of how the artwork accentuates literary elements in the book. In continuing our conversation about why Bruce preferred reading graphic novels, he described how the artwork clearly visualized how characters were feeling.

 : …the visuals give like, emotion to the book and you can't really tell someone's emotion through just words.

 : You need the visuals to see it?

 : Yeah, you need the visual. 'Cause like, [in regular books] the author has to say "it's in a sarcastic tone" if it's in a sarcastic tone.

 : Whereas you can see it in a manga?

 : Yeah, you can see it through someone's facial expressions.

Like Bruce, Genesis also expressed being able to better empathize with characters because he could *see* and understand the visual cues. For example, when asked how lines conveyed emotions in his reading, he pointed out the furrow, scrunch lines that were pressed on a character's forehead to show anger. In traditional books, rather than having to "read between the lines" and interpret what authors meant by the words they wrote, the visual art in comics provided clearer understanding for readers who preferred this type of reading.

In addition to being able to see the emotions through the facial expression of characters, the artwork in graphic novels also prompted participants to *feel* what was happening in their stories. During an IR conversation, Lillith explained how the colors in her book coincided with the mood of the story.

 : How do you think the colors are portraying a certain mood or tone in your story?

 : I want to say it almost feels empty, very simplistic. I think the reason they made the background so neutral and so cool tone is to emphasize this dramatic conversation that's happening. Because these two haven't seen each other in years and she's not supposed to be on the planet that she's on and she owns the planet and nobody's supposed to be allowed on the planet, but she's the sister of her girlfriend.

The author-illustrator of *On a Sunbeam* (Walden, 2018) was purposeful in the color-blocking style of the book, juxtaposing sections of monotone colors with splashes of bright colors.

Therefore, when I inquired about a possible motive for the author's use of colors, Lillith expressed how it dramatized the emotions happening between characters. Lillith's recognition of how colors deepen the understanding of characters' emotion was important to notice because it illustrated how she was transmediating between the narration and dialogue of her book with the visual signs of the book in order to make meaning of her reading.

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Role of Transactional Reading

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Transactional theory signifies that both the reader and text are important during the meaning-making process (Rosenblatt, 1994). Rosenblatt placed value on readers' individual selves as an important component to the transaction that occurs between reader and text. Readers bring personal feelings, memories, and associations as they read; therefore, readers come up with a range of meanings when they read their books.

Personal Connections as Readers

One of the ways in which readers connected with their reading was when they saw characters who were reflections of their own lives. For example, Genesis saw an aspect of himself in his reading of *#Killstagram* (Ryoung, 2019).

: Mostly from, like, books I read, I try to imitate the character and take things from them. Like, if I see a character who used to be timid and they, over time, are not like that anymore, I'd be like, "Oh, I should probably be like that." So, I think that's how I changed as a person 'cause in middle school I was, like, very, very shy and I didn't really go out that much, so I think it's probably 'cause the books I've read. I think they've changed me.

: That's really inspirational! But, that's what books should do, right?! They should change you somehow because you're reading it and you're putting it in your head and you're getting feelings. It's gotta affect you, right?

: Yeah. There's books that have made a very impact on me, like *#Killstagram*. It had me, like, "Wow, just wow."

: What about that book changed you? How did it influence you to be different?

: Well, 'cause as a YouTuber, I have a lotta subscribers, so I'll have people text me and they wanna get to know more about me. And in that same situation, it happened in the book, and I was like, "Oh shit! That coulda been me!" And I was like, shocked for a moment 'cause I wanted to see where [the story] would go. And yeah, so, like, people ask me, "Where do you live?" and "What's your real name?" and all this and [the character] did the exact same thing I did, so I was like, "Wow, I have to be more careful" 'cause that could be me, or something like that.

Genesis spoke with conviction when describing *#Killstagram* (Ryoung, 2019) because it mirrored his own experience as a content creator on social media. The manga tells a story about Remi Do, a social media star and because of her social media influence, she catches the attention of a stalker. Genesis related to the character's social media identity and shy personality, then reflected on how the story was similar to his own life experiences. He even began taking precautionary steps against interacting with his online fans when he began recognizing how the graphic novel so closely resembled his own life. This experience showed how students' reading

of graphic novels can play a role in how they develop their identities and how they interact with others in social spaces. Furthermore, Djikic et al. (2009) described how the role of art can shift readers own perception of self as they related to the characters they read in their books. Genesis was informed by the life lessons he encountered in the stories he read, a position that Soter et al. (2010) argue is possible when approaching reading from a transactional framework.

Readers also recognized that the stories they were reading illustrated life lessons they could transpose into their own lives. For example, Lillith recognized the trauma the main character in *On the Sunbeam* (Walden, 2018) experienced with her girlfriend from boarding school, and the importance of healing from one's pain to move on in life. Bruce learned through the characters in *Tokyo Revenger* (Wakui, 2017) that mistakes can happen in life and it is not up to us to bear full responsibility for those mistakes. While Louise M. Rosenblatt (1994) may not have considered graphic novels as part of her exploration of readers' interactions with the text, the readers in the study showed they could have personal connections with their reading regardless of whether they were graphic novels or traditional texts.

Also, reading transformations can happen over time through multiple readings of the same book (Sumara, 2014). Nelson described how his perception of a book his mother read to him as a child had changed as he grew older.

 : Do you have a favorite graphic novel?

 : Actually, it's kind of funny 'cause the first graphic novel I really read was *American Born Chinese*. And I just really liked that story 'cause being half-Chinese, I liked the Monkey King stories the best just 'cause I kind of always heard of the Monkey King [and] I didn't really know what it was about. And after talking with my mom about

it after I read that book, I was able to like talk to her about it. She used to listen to the

Monkey King stories over a radio when she was a kid. So, she was able to talk to me

[because] a lot of it was pretty translated well.

: So how has your understanding of this book changed over time?

: When I was a kid, I just, I mainly enjoyed it for the story. And I also could kind

of sort of relate to the main character, Jin. But when I reread it last month, more of the

messages that were like shown or emphasized to me. It's like … I was able to see more of

how people change. There was a lot about how people change in the book and not just

about, uh, you know, suffering from like being in two cultures and stuff.

As a Chinese-American, Nelson and his mother were connected to *American Born Chinese*

(Yang, 2007) because they recognized the stories of Monkey King as originating from Chinese

culture. His mother remembered the stories from her own childhood and it became a source of

connection between mother and son. However, as he re-read the novel in high school, his

understanding of the story shifted: Whereas he first perceived this story to be about the struggle

of being Chinese and American, he recognized a different perspective about how people (and

characters) can change over time. Just as the main character Jin changed in the book, Nelson had

changed and could see more facets to the stories than of the Monkey King.

Throughout the study, several students were re-reading manga they had read in the past,

when they wanted a break from a manga series. In their re-readings, they expressed how their

understanding of the book had changed: They developed a more acute awareness for the artists'

work, examining how detailed artistry plays a role in how characters develop over time, and their

life experiences gave them a different lens in which to relate to characters' experiences. For

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example, Saana remarked that after reading McCloud's (1994) explanation of *universality*, she made note of how characters were drawn in order to understand her own personal connection she made to characters. In addition to readers' own personal connections to their reading, readers gained a joyful experience with reading with it included social interactions with other people.

<p align="center">**Role of Sociocultural Contexts**</p>

Sociocultural theories emphasize the interpersonal interactions between people and their environment as central to making meaning (Lee & Smagorinsky, 2000; Vygotsky, 1978). In this section, I discuss the sociocultural aspects that readers shared about their reading experiences, including sociocultural interactions, the influence of media, and connection through conversation.

Sociocultural Interactions

Sociocultural theory acknowledges that interactions with people are influential in how learners gain knowledge and expand their understanding of the world (Vygotsky, 1986), and this phenomenon was reiterated when I analyzed how students became graphic novel readers. One of the prominent examples of how students' reading lives were shaped was through their interactions with family and friends. For Ana, it was her friend's joy with a novel that inspired her to start reading.

 : So, who do you think helped you enjoy reading or what do you think contributed to your love for reading?

 : Actually, my friends because I wasn't really much of a reader in elementary school. I didn't enjoy it. I didn't like it because partially, I couldn't find books that I enjoyed. And so around sixth grade is when I started to actually read because my friend was reading

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a book and she's like, "Oh, I love it so much. You should try it." …And so I was like, "Okay, I'll give it a shot." And I read it and I was like obsessed…. And then I was like, "Okay. And maybe I should start reading" (laughs). And so I started to find books that were similar to it and it was a fantasy book. And that's kinda what shifted me into the process of being a reader.

Despite being a voracious reader now, Ana explained that she did not start off enjoying reading and in large part because she didn't know how to go about choosing books she might enjoy. However, her friend's excitement about a book prompted Ana to want to join in and share the joy of reading. Then, when asked about how she began reading graphic novels, she credits her brother.

 : My brother. My brother…he was obsessed with (laughs) graphic novels and essentially, before he went to college, he gave me his whole collection and I was like, "Wow, that's really cool." And, at first, I didn't touch it all. And then I was like, "You know what? I'll give it a try."

Her brother's accessible collection of comics exposed Ana to graphic novels and provided a gateway through which she moved fluidly between reading traditional books and graphic novels. Coincidentally, Genesis and Bruce also talked about their brothers being involved in how they shared and talked about what they were reading. As an older brother, Genesis was motivated in trying to convince his younger brother to read some of his favorite books—he gained pride when he recommended a book that his brother ended up "binge[ing]," but he also gained joy because he could talk about the obscure books that "nobody's ever read." On the other hand, Bruce's older brother introduced him to anime, which eventually prompted Bruce to discover manga in online forums. Smith and Wilhelm (2002) postulated that social relations were crucial to improving boys' literacy. Genesis and Bruce demonstrated the value of social relationships,

particularly with their brothers, as part of the joy they experience with reading; therefore, brothers played generative roles in nurturing these reader's enjoyment of graphic novels.

Lillith recalled coming from a family where everybody enjoyed reading, but she attributed her love for reading to her grandfather. Her fondest memory involved bonding and spending time with her grandfather, especially as he read to her before bedtime—as she got old enough to pick up a book, she would also read aloud to him. For Lillith, the interaction of reading with a beloved family member within the comfort of her home gave her a "warm, family feeling." Therefore, the social nature of reading together with her family members established Lillith's positive relationship and self-confidence for reading.

Although Ana, Genesis, Bruce, and Lillith discovered their love of reading through the interactions they had with their family members, Nelson and Saana's positive memories of reading developed from being tasked to read. Nelson recalled have strict rules about reading set by his parents—from Monday through Friday, he was not allowed to be on the computer and instead, he was encouraged to read. Since he didn't have access to other media distractions, he used his free time to read for entertainment. Though he acknowledged that he started reading fewer books as he transitioned to high school, especially because his parents allowed him more freedom with his computer usage, the opportunity to be on his computer also coincided with his increased progression towards reading more novels online. Ironically, even though Nelson's parents restricted internet access so that he would devote more time to reading physical books, it introduced him to the world of online graphic novels.

With Saana, she distinctly remembered a reading assignment from her third-grade teacher that introduced, and got her "hooked," into the *Percy Jackson and the Olympians* (Riordan, 2005) series. Though the assignment asked students to read one novel, doing a book report on a

novel that was part of a series swayed Saana to pick up the next book in the series. Saana's memory affirmed the influential role her third-grade teacher made in showing her that there were whole books she could love enough to finish and, subsequently, helped guide her to choose the book she wanted to read next. Additionally, Saana's example also revealed the potential importance of book series—if readers find a book they enjoy and know that it is part of a series, it might encourage them to read more. In the case with graphic novels, comics, and manga, because they typically have series of books, they might propel readers to read on and in shorter bursts of time. Hence, there are popular manga series like *#Killstagram* (Ryoung, 2019) or *unOrdinary* (uru-chan, 2016) that have scores of episodes and willing fan bases eager to read through the entire collection of stories.

Influence of Media

As mentioned in the earlier discussion of accessibility and availability, online graphic novels allowed readers the convenience of interacting with other online readers and authors across multiple spaces. Throughout our interview conversations and member-checking, Nelson admired most the online feature of *Webtoons*.

 : I thought your discussion of online graphic novels was interesting because you talked about how you liked that people were able to comment on some of these [online novels] and if they didn't like the way the author was doing something, authors were able to adapt and kind of appease the audience members with their feedback.

 : Yeah, exactly. I think my personal favorite example of that is there's a series called *unOrdinary*. It's been running for a long time and it was one of the original, biggest, and still is one of the biggest [series]. And for a while…they focused on the character arc of

one character. And it was the main character, but after a while everyone was kind of like, "We like this, but we kind of want to move on" because there [were] other plots that they were pushing off to focus on this one character. And it wasn't bad…we just wanted to see those other plots proceed.

The conversation with Nelson revealed that online readers had unique opportunities to interact directly and immediately with contemporary authors and artists. The online spaces also allowed readers to leave comments and feedback for comic creators and, in turn, creators could consider their audience's reactions as they reconstruct the next series of their stories. Most in-school readings within ELA curriculum focus on texts from "old, dead authors," which can limit the personal connection readers may feel to the writers. Plus, because online series on sites like *Webtoon* get released on a weekly basis, readers can check-in frequently, at the ease of their fingertips, to read new releases; whereas, with traditional books, the means with which readers gained access to copies could be more limited by time, availability, and money.

Adding to Nelson's enjoyment of the online community, readers like Saana relied on online ratings and comments to choose what she wanted to read.

 : So how do you choose which manga or graphic novels you want to read?

 : …ratings. Like, if people say "It's garbage" then I'm probably not gonna read it or do anything about it, but if most people say that it's really good, then yeah, I'll give it a try.

Saana's reliance on others' thoughts and comments about a series exemplified the sociocultural interactions of individuals within an online space—in addition to reading, reacting, and rating

author's works, individuals also read and react to users' comments and ratings to inform their own decisions about their reading choices.

Bruce, Genesis, and Ana discussed the influence T.V. shows and movies had on the books they read and how they sometimes liked choosing books that were already made or were going to be made into films. Bruce initially enjoyed watching anime series that were based on books; however, he stated that, over time, he preferred reading the manga only because the film versions lacked details that were presented in the comic. On the other hand, Genesis enjoyed knowing when manga were being made into films because he liked to compare the two mediums.

 : In your opinion, what are the similarities and differences between graphic novels, comics, and manga?

 : Manga have a lot of facial expressions, so that's why I like reading it so much…[and] manga's hella got into anime. Like, when I read Naruto, I was like, "Oh, there's a show about it" and I didn't know so it was actually pretty cool to compare.

Regardless of whether he was interacting with manga in a book or through film media, Genesis enjoyed the variety of ways manga were presented.

For Ana, knowing books were going to be made into movies excited her to read the books before film got released. In fact, some of the first books she read were books that were made into movies. Like Genesis, she enjoyed comparing the two mediums; and like Bruce, she agreed that films missed major details from the books. Regardless, she continued to enjoy reading books that would turn into film.

The students highlighted the role of contemporary media and entertainment as a part of their reading lives and the multifaceted ways in which pop culture made them excited to read.

Film creations made the readers curious about the visual interpretations filmmakers would construct based on the novels—even more, Ana and Genesis enjoyed the process of comparing two mediums while it prompted Bruce to lean more towards reading manga. The role of media allowed students to navigate multiple sign systems—images, text, movement, for example— across the two mediums of film and novel.

Connection through Conversation

During the follow-up interviews, I asked students to reflect on their experiences with our conversations—conversations during Independent Reading and conversations throughout interviews—to understand how they might experience school differently if more conversations happened in the classroom. By and large, the readers expressed how *connected* they would feel to other students and teachers if more conversations occurred as part of the learning process. For Ana, the conversations helped her to feel seen as a student.

 : How would school look differently if all your teachers took the time to just sit and talk with their students one-on-one like this?

 : I'd feel more important and more recognized or appreciated. Having basic conversations to get to know people, I think that's really important because then you can make *connections* for your entire life.

Ana described the importance of being recognized as a student because it was an important life skill that taught her how to connect with other people. While Ana emphasized the importance of connections beyond the classroom, Bruce and Saana saw the benefits of conversations within classroom settings.

: If we did [IR conversations], it would be an easier classroom scenario. I feel like the teacher and the student would be more *connected* so then the classroom chemistry just works.

Bruce recognized the importance of teacher-student relationships because they contributed to a safe classroom environment, but Saana thought conservations were crucial in seeing teachers as something other than just authority figures.

: I feel like if the teachers were to sit down and get to personally know the students, …there would be a *connection* between the student and the teacher, and maybe the learning environment would be different. For example, say I don't like this teacher, but if we were to actually know each other, I might be more comfortable with her and her teaching style. It's nice to not see the teacher as just a teacher, but as maybe a friend or someone to look up to so it's more comfortable to work with them. So yeah, I feel getting to know your students on a personal level would be good for, I guess, the kids.

Saana believed conversations would allow for a more trusting relationship between students and teachers. Likewise, Lillith approached the enriched teacher-student relationship as constructive for her own emotional needs.

: I think it's a really enriching experience to get close with your teachers, not only through the lens of emotionally and they can help you academically, but also it's important to form connections in your life…I feel for me personally, sometimes I've wanted to lash out or do something I wasn't supposed to, but I'll just go to a teacher that I

really *connect* with and have a conversation and they help me think about it rather than just acting about it.

She highlighted the role educators play in helping students not only grow as learners but also navigate their emotions. For Genesis, he imagined an opportunity where he could share more and talk more, especially about books.

 : I guess they'd all be my favorite teacher, I guess. I guess I'd enjoy the class a little bit more. I always like talking about, especially books, I like talking to people about books, whether it's an adult or child. It doesn't really matter.

Genesis's statement revealed that there wasn't much talking, sharing, or interacting happening in general school environments. Or, as Nelson pointed out, the conversations were surface level.

 : I think it would be really influential and impactful because generally at schools, [conversations] are very lighthearted and I feel like almost all the conversation is small talk, which is great sometimes, but it's nice to talk about some of the things with deeper meaning…Being able to do one-on-one, especially if teachers are somehow miraculously able to do it with every student, would just give them a better idea of how to teacher their classes…because every student is different.

Nelson not only desired more meaningful conversations, he saw the opportunity for conversations to help teachers improve their pedagogy by recognizing the unique learners that interact within a classroom.

The students agreed that conversations have the power to create bridges and meaningful relationships between teachers and students. Their conversations with me revealed that not all classroom settings provide a comfortable, productive learning environment, and one way to

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mitigate that sense of unease and discomfort is generating connections among teachers and students. Furthermore, the conversations might provide opportunities for students to feel valued within school spaces (North, 2023).

The Role of Joy

Throughout students' discussion of their reading experiences, they expressed the enjoyment they experienced from reading that encompassed all of the themes that we discussed in our conversations. Reading gave them comfort, offered an escape from reality, and provided a sense of belongingness.

Students described the positive, physical feelings reading evoked in them—reading was a therapeutic activity that relieved them from stress. Saana, Lillith, and Ana described reading as a way to momentarily break away from their realities by entering the world of books.

 : I enjoy how I use my time within reading. It's more relaxational and therapeutic. At an age when high school students were faced with social and academic pressures, reading served as a curative relief from the worries and stressors of their lives.

 : I feel like it's a good escape from reality. You know, like you watch a movie or a T.V. show and you just relax. I think that's what books are for me.

 : I like reading because I feel like it takes me to a different world. Like, reading is sort of my stress-freeing tactic, as I would say. If I'm really feeling not well, I would read 'cause it takes me to a whole 'nother world.

While the girls discussed the physical joys of reading—how it made them feel and the therapeutic remedies it provided—the boys discussed the joy experienced from anticipation of

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the adventures stories offered and the different insights reading brought to their own understanding of the world.

 : I like to see perspective throughout other people's stories. Like, since everyone was raised with different upbringings, it really affects their view on certain aspects of political, cultural, and mainly, life.

 : What I enjoy about reading is that [authors] are able to build a story…and when people are given a story, you're able to think "You know, I would have never thought of that."
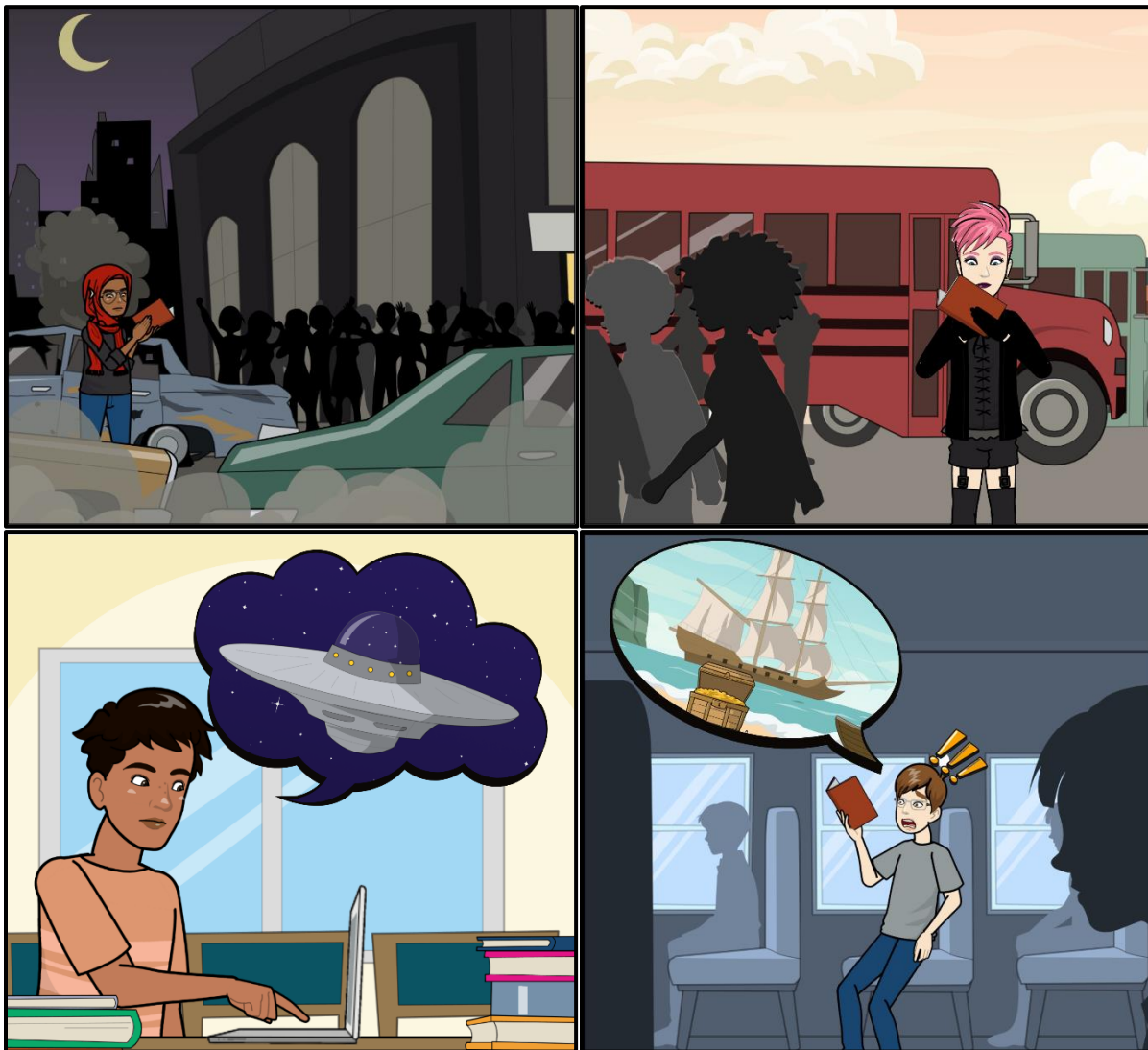
 : I enjoy the feeling of what's going to happen next…And the art style.

The readers valued the unique, diverse, and varied worldviews authors brought to their storytelling, and they immersed themselves in these narratives as a way to connect with both imaginative and real worlds (See Figure 4.3)

Figure 0.3

Reading Connected Students to Real and Imaginative Worlds

      Finally, reading brought a sense of belongingness because students were reading stories that they could personally connect with. The sense of belonging brought nourishment and self-affirmation that helped them to understand themselves and relate to others; reading stories that they could connect with established their place in this world (See Figure 4.4)

Figure 0.4

Reading Brought a Sense of Belonging

Students' joy in reading were related to conditions that existed beyond academic settings. Their enjoyment of reading rested in their own agency over their reading: They read when they wanted stress relief, when they wanted to escape to a different world, and when they wanted to learn more about their own world. By supporting readers' joy, I sought to provide opportunities where students could feel more whole in who they were, more happiness in exploring their identities, and more confidence in interacting with literature.

DISCUSSION

The purpose of this dissertation study was to examine how high school students constructed meaning from graphic novels, comics, and manga. Based in the theoretical frameworks of semiotics, transactional theory, and sociocultural theory, this case study explored the nuances of meaning-making as readers interacted with graphic novels during Independent Reading time. This chapter discusses the role of technology and the importance of humanizing through joy and art, followed by implications, delimitations, and suggestions for future research.

The Role of Technology

When the study began, it was important for me as a researcher to understand what readers found frustrating about their reading processes so that I could gain better insight to how their frustrations might influence their preference for graphic novels. While students' responses varied, from struggling with visualizing the text or feeling uncomfortable holding a hardcover book for an extended time, graphic novels offered opportunities for readers that may not necessarily be found in traditional novels.

The emphasis of technology in K-12 school contexts has grown throughout the United States (Burch & Good, 2014; Kennedy & Archambault, 2012). In a STEM high school where every student had one-to-one access to a laptop computer, comic readers took advantage of this technology to read online. The availability and accessibility of online graphic novels were important for several reasons. First, it mitigated external barriers that stood in the way of how students could reach their books. For example, Genesis didn't have to rely on a mode of transportation to get to the public library or wait for certain titles to be stocked in the school library. Second, the adaptation of the infinite canvas for smart phones and computer screens facilitated the reading process, thereby allowing reading to be more enjoyable since students didn't get frustrated by the order in which they were reading comic panels.

Taking advantage of the tools and technology that were already at hand granted readers more agency over their reading because readers had power over choosing when and how they accessed their books. Readers' agency is important because reading is an intentional and active process (Kucirkova & Rowsell, 2020). Therefore, what we choose to read and how we read becomes essential to reading joy.

The online space of comics also provided readers with an immediate connection to other authors and readers, thereby, allowing connections between readers and writers on a personal level (McGrail & Davis, 2014). Students considered the online interactions as important to the books they chose; if there was a manga that had low ratings, then readers in this study were less likely to choose it as a reading option. Additionally, readers enjoyed the interactions that took place online and the awareness of knowing they could directly influence how stories would continue. Other studies have attributed readers' interest with online comics to feelings of belongingness due to the fun and enjoyment they experience with other readers, and because of the positive feelings of the online interaction, it prompted readers to continue to interact socially (Huang & Chen, 2018; Li et al., 2019). The ability to interact in these online spaces became a shared experience in which readers and authors could connect globally and gain wider perspectives.

Humanizing through Art and Joy

In an educational culture that attempts to measure reading and separate the reader from the text, Muhammad (2023) rallies teachers to pursue joy; she argued that joy should be the ultimate goal of teaching and learning, not "test prep or graduation" (p. 17). Cultivating joy in education means helping students to uplift beauty, aesthetics, and personal fulfillment (Muhammad, 2023). Many studies regarding graphic novels in school curricula look to examine

how graphic novels could improve reading comprehension or reading skills (Cook, 2017; Lamanno, 2008; Reutzel et al., 2012). However, one of the goals of this study was to provide insight to how readers derived joy from reading graphic novels apart from standardized measurements of reading achievement.

Students found the most joy in their reading when it was positioned from their own agency and autonomy in reading (Dougherty et al., 2022). In other words, readers found joy in their reading when they made the choices to read books that were relevant to who they were and what they enjoyed. Additionally, their reading was not tied to any classroom tasks or grades; therefore, by honoring the emotions and delight they drew from their readings, I was humanizing their reading experiences in a way that was authentic to their reading identities rather than their reading abilities.

Another one of the ways in which students gained joy from reading graphic novels was through the connections they made with the visual artwork. Guthrie and Davis (2003) contended that qualified books—books that interest students—support students' imaginations, empathy skills, and also expand their perspectives; books that students enjoy also help students build emotional connections with characters and stories. While Guthrie and Davis spoke specifically about text-only books, research has also shown that integration of art and literature can support students' understanding of emotions within their reading (Zoss, 2009), as well as students' personal connections and meaning-making to and with literature (Smagorinsky et al., 2007). Artwork was important to readers because it influenced how they chose their graphic novels and because it influenced how they reacted to character's emotions or the story's tone. For example, readers needed the visual cues to see if a character was using a sarcastic tone or the lines on a forehead to see a furrowed expression of frustration or anger. When students recognized

character's emotional state visually, it created a shared experience between the reader and character. Readers' connections to characters, through the visual qualities of graphic novels, allows opportunities to expand their understanding of the world and of what human experiences are like.

Existing research on readers' experiences with comics are predominantly focused on reading performance. However, this study involved readers who talked about art as being meaningful in their lives. Therefore, reading graphic novels allowed them to continue to honor their artistic joy, especially in a school context where STEM is a major focus.

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Implications

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Based on the discussion of this study, there are pedagogical implications in advocating for graphic novels in the classroom. In the following sections, I discuss the implications for teachers, students, and English language arts curricula.

Teachers

Despite existing research that support comics in curriculum, Cary (2004) argued that "comics-friendly teachers" continue to outweigh the "comics-using teachers," in large part because educators still believe comics demote literacy skills (p. 2). Carter (2008) suspected two main reasons why teachers may be reluctant to incorporate comics in literacy curriculum: (1) teachers are unsure of how to teach graphic novels in the classroom, and (2) political and educational policies make teachers uncomfortable about using them in the classroom.

First, pedagogical research concerning graphic novels is relatively new and emerging; therefore, educators might be hesitant to teach a medium they lack practice with (Carter, 2008). However, despite the limited number of studies there is evidence to encourage using comics in classrooms because it is sound practice to do so and because comics encourage excitement and

confidence for students (McGrail et al., 2017). This study served as an example of how to expand research on and understanding of how comics can enrich students' reading lives.

Second, in credit to Wertham's (1954) *Seduction of the Innocent*, comic books have a political history that posited negative assumptions about the medium and its readers. And while policies and politics may make teachers uncomfortable advocating for new ideas in the classroom, the choice to keep comics out of the classroom is also a political choice. Postman and Weingartner (1969) asserted that the choices individuals make reveal the values that are upheld, and when educators refuse to include graphic novels in the classroom, they are suggesting that learners who read, think, and experience texts differently are unimportant. Furthermore, the decision to refrain from accepting graphic novels privileges a literacy that is an elitist, classist approach to literacy that desists to uplift other modes of literacy (Cadiero-Kaplan, 2002). Teachers' advocacy for graphic novels is a step towards equitable practices in education, an action that informs learners that their varied, diverse, and unique reading identities are valued.

Students

Modern-day students are facing challenges that were not part of previous generations; students now are facing an array of social, emotional, and economic pressures that are particular to their age group (Christenbury et al., 2009; Fisher et al., 2022; Morgan, 2022). Therefore, any opportunities within school settings for students to gain control over their own learning is important to developing their own identity and agency. By carving out time to prioritize students' own preferences for reading, teachers can cultivate the message that students matter, and who they are and what they like are welcomed through the reading choices they make. Encouraging a variety of texts for students to read, especially graphic novels, provides space within ELA curriculum for an equitable learning environment (Scripp & Paradis, 2014).

English Language Arts Curriculum in STEM Schools

In 2007, President George W. Bush signed into law the America Creating Opportunities to Meaningfully Promote Excellence in Technology, Education, and Science (COMPETES) Act (U.S.C., 2007) that placed emphasis on STEM schools throughout the nation. The primary purpose of opening STEM high schools was to build a more technically-trained workforce, specifically in areas of math, science, technology, and engineering.

The general characteristics of STEM curricula can be credited to LaForce et al. (2016), who provided recommendations for prioritizing student-focused learning experiences such as incorporating multiple disciplines, authentic, real-world contexts, and critical thinking. STEM schools endeavor to help students make connections between their school learning and future careers. So, this push for STEM learning and careers begs a question: How does ELA curriculum, specifically with graphic novels, fit in the picture of a STEM high school?

By engaging with graphic novels, readers are actively involved in the critical thinking process that STEM education emphasizes. The process of reading graphic novels involves multiple modes of meaning-making. Readers must simultaneously dwell on the visuals and words whilst navigating the panels, thereby encouraging a deliberate interaction with the text. Additionally, graphic novels offer opportunities to make real-world, emotional connections with other cultures and other contents. For example, students showed a higher sense of empathy, gathered multiple perspectives, and gained greater understanding of historical situations when school subjects were paired with graphic novels (Clark, 2013; Tome-Alonso & Alaminos-Hervas, 2022; Williams, 2008). But most importantly, in a climate that pushes workforce readiness, graphic novels in the classroom make space for students to see that there is room for art and reading joy in school contexts.

Delimitations

Theofanidis and Fountouki (2018) made a distinction between *limitations* and *delimitations* of a study. Limitations are concerned with the study's weaknesses that were out of the researcher's control, whereas delimitations include the boundaries and limits researchers decide to impose on the study. In other words, delimitations address reasons for redirecting the research process.

When I began the study, one of my lines of inquiry sought to understand how students consider the visual and textual elements of graphic novels to make meaning of their reading. However, throughout the study, the IR conversations veered more into visual elements than textual elements. The focus on visual elements happened for several reasons: (1) in the first interview I learned that students were choosing graphic novels because of the art style of the novels, (2) students gravitated towards discussing the visual elements in both the interviews and the IR conversations, and (3) the Notice-and-Note signposts that we used to facilitate conversations consisted mostly of visual elements. For these reasons, I responded to students' initial discussion about the artistic appeal of graphic novels by focusing my IR discussion on questions about the visuals, and I continued in that line of reasoning because the visual elements were an important aspect in why students chose to read graphic novels.

Additionally, time was a limitation to the study because I was also having IR conversations with other classroom students and those students also expected to have time to talk with me. Since Independent Reading comprised of 10-15 minutes of class time, I was only able to conference with 3-4 students in a day. Therefore, in an average class size of 30 and within an ideal three-day school week with no external interruptions (i.e., emergency drills, standardized tests, school events), it would take three weeks to conference with each student at least once.

While I made a purposeful effort to conference with my research participants twice a week to gather richer data for the study, our IR conversations had to be limited because (1) I wanted to protect participants' identities within the context of the class environment, and (2) I wanted to fulfill my responsibility as a classroom teacher to hold conferences with every student.

Finally, the study was conducted near the end of the school year, with the member-check interviews taking place the week before final exams. As a result, maintaining the study in a season of AP exams, standardized tests, and end-of-year fatigue further constrained the full extent of the conversations I could have had with students. For example, I missed one day of IR conversations with my 12th grade students because they were participating in Senior Week—a week to honor and celebrate graduating seniors. However, Independent Reading was a reading practice that was embedded into the culture of our school; therefore, I started the school year with IR conversations. Maintaining the IR conversations from our first semester established trust, rapport, and routine with the students, thereby establishing authenticity to the conversations I continued to have with students in the second semester.

Suggestions for Future Research

Given these delimitations, the study focused more on the visual elements of graphic novels rather than textual elements. Therefore, further research in examining how readers consider the textual elements (i.e., fonts, speech bubbles) in their reading of graphic novels may provide further understanding of how they make meaning of their reading. Also, exploring IR conversations with students over an extended period of time (i.e., an entire school year or longer) could provide more insight into how readers grow and transform over time. Because the research setting was a school that valued Independent Reading across all grade levels and because it was a smaller school setting, it was likely that a teacher could teach the same student across multiple

grade levels—so a setting similar to this school might have the affordances needed to study reader development across multiple years. Documenting individuals' IR conversations throughout their high school journey may provide deeper insight into readers' transformative journeys over time. Finally, embedding conversations in other content areas might provide insight on how students make meaning in other content areas.

Final Thoughts

When I retrace my steps back to the beginning of this dissertation journey, it seems incongruous that I would do a study on comics—I never grew up reading graphic novels or comics like some of my students did. But I clearly recall Dr. Collins' class and remember feeling joy that I could understand and talk about literature through graphic novels—I finally felt I could belong in that college space.

When I begin my IR conversations at the beginning of each school year, there are a few students who ashamedly hide their comics when I approach them for our one-on-ones—they are ashamed because they think they are not reading "real" books and that they will be punished for reading "picture books." It breaks my heart that they feel they must hide: Hide their books, hide their joy, and hide who they are.

This dissertation was meant to celebrate all readers and to celebrate the life reading gives, that making sense of the world can come through a multitude of ways that is beautiful, artistic, and different. In this document itself, I honored the ways in which comics and visuals brought joy into the conversations students had with their reading experiences by making the conversation turn-taking and transcripts a more visual experience. The joy in these conversations was possible, in part, because of the visual and linguistic pairing, so it seemed fitting to bring in comic characters to help represent both the students and myself. Therefore, in presenting this

study, I challenged the genre of dissertation writing to include comic characters to bring joy to others' visual meaning-making processes. With the help of my students' insights on semiotics, transactional reading, sociocultural contexts, and joy, this dissertation has become a truly heartwarming and jubilant space for me as well. As a teacher and scholar, this study into the experiences of my students affirms that there is joy and learning abundant in the reading of graphic novels.

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APPENDICES

Appendix A: Notice and Note Conference Questions on Classroom Posters

Author and Audience

Notice

Notice the author's "reading perspective" or bias to the text as well as character bias and perspective.

Note

Who the author writing to and why?

If I can accept this point/perspective without understanding the details of why it is true or do more questions need to be asked of the author or speaker?

AKS 5/3

Contrast, Contradict, Compete

Notice

Notice when a character does/says something that contrasts or contradicts what I'd expect them to do/say at that point in the story/text or competes with another character/perspective or subplot in the story.

Note

Why is what the character is doing/saying contradictory or surprising?

What should the character be saying/reacting based on previous behavior?

AKS 1/1; 3/4

Tough Questions

Notice

NonFiction: Notice when and where the diction/text demands me to ask a question of it.

Fiction: Notice when a character is faced with a very difficult question or situation.

Note

When/if does a shift in the text/character as text/story develops?

If I can't understand the point, perhaps I can understand a similar but simpler idea?

What words do I need to define for clarification?

AKS 39

Language

Notice

Notice when the author uses specific words or phrases, including figurative, connotative, and technical meanings.

Note

What is the cumulative impact of specific word choices (connotation vs denotation) on meaning and tone in context of the whole text?

Is there a pattern of word choice being used to create an effect on a character, the tone, the setting, the conflict, the plot?

AKS 4/11, 38, 40, 41

Exclusion

Notice

Notice what assumptions and/or ambiguity does the author make about what I already know or should know; thus, s/he leaves out certain aspects of the plot or elaborations of character and/or setting because it is assumed or purposely omitted.

Note

What information does the author purposely omit from his/her character or plot development?

What more do you wish you would have known after a particular event or crisis point in the plot?

Why didn't the author explain it the way that I can understand it?

Am I missing some subtlety? Did the author miss a subtlety?

AKS 1/1; 10/15

Organization

Notice

Notice how the author structures the order of events or manipulates time in a non/fiction text.

Notice how the text is introduced, how the plot or the argument unfolds, and how they conclude.

Note

How is the text organized?
Is it narrative, chronological, cause/effect, problem/solution, compare/contrast, order of importance, degree, spatial, advantages/disadvantages, etc.?

Does the author incorporate flashbacks, in medias res, framed narrative?

How does the structure of the text add mystery, tension, surprise, etc.?

What is the significance of the author's choice in structuring/organizing the text/story in such a way?

AKS 1/3/1; 1/1/14

Evaluating Evidence
Citations for NonFiction

Notice

Notice when the author cites primary/secondary sources, statistics, or quotes and reasons or explains their relevance.

Note

How many sources are used? What variety of sources are used?
(Peer-reviewed, journalistic, reference, experiential, etc.)

Where/how is the credibility and reliability noted?

Where is the explanation or reasoning that makes the evidence relevant to the purpose of the argument?

What information is/is not relevant to be noted for understanding?

AKS 1/10, 2/1

Evaluating Evidence
Citations for Fiction

Notice

Notice and collect evidence that allows me to defend the conclusions I make about characters, plot, setting, conflict, tone?

Note

How does the author use textual evidence in order to portray characters, construct or advance the plot, establish setting, create conflict, develop tone etc.?

Where is the explanation or reasoning that makes the evidence relevant to the purpose of the argument?

What information is/is not relevant to be noted for understanding?

AKS 1/10, 2/1

Connections
Text to Text; Text to World

Notice

Notice when something I am reading connects to another text I am familiar with or another concept I have studied. I may also be able to connect to something going on in the world that reminds me of this idea or way of thinking.

Note

What other texts/information across my classes relate to this topic/theme?

What world event was going on then or is going on now that is relevant to the text?

What prior knowledge do I need to note about this topic/theme?

AKS 9/3

Again and Again

Notice

Notice when a word, phrase, or situation is mentioned repeatedly in order to determine foreshadowing, character/plot development, symbolism, motifs, and other patterns that will help create a shift or contrast if/when necessary to the progress of the story.

Note

What objects, images, words, phrases, actions are repeated throughout the text?
(After identifying a pattern, I will need to find when the repetition/pattern first occurred.)

What is the impact or effect this repetition (pattern) has on the overall theme, motif, plot, setting, characters, etc.

What significance or effect does a shift in this repetition or pattern have?

AKS 4/11; 1/14, 38, 40, 41

Non-Verbal Representation

Notice

Notice any charts/graphs/pictures or other non-verbal representations (i.e. text) that are included with text or problem that may aid in understanding the text.

Note

What can I include in a summary of the text to demonstrate how it clarifies, questions, or elaborates on the purpose of the main text?

Why does the author include the non-verbal representation?

What are the dis/advantages of including the non-verbal representation?

What other questions/perspectives the non-verbal representation create?

AKS 1/10; 1/11

Memory Moment

Notice

Notice when the author interrupts the action to tell me about a memory.

Note

How does the memory develop characters, advance the plot, or impact the relationships between characters?

Why this memory is important?

What the significance is of the author revealing the memory at a particular point of the story?

AKS 3/12; 5/14

Words of the Archetype

Notice

Notice when the author employs an archetype (character, situational, symbolic) in order to advance the plot, develop characters and their relationships, reveal conflicts, and establish settings.

Note

What the significance is of the archetype occurring at a particular point in the story or being used in the story as a whole?

How the archetype might affect the assumptions that readers make about the plot or character?

How the use of the archetype might change the course of the plot or character?

AKS 3/11; 4/11; 5/14

AHA Moment

Notice

Notice when a character comes to some realization that will shift the character's actions, understanding of one's self, others, or the world around him/her.

Note

How does or who helps the character come to this realization?

How this realization might lead to adding suspense, building action, revealing the climax, or deciding the resolution of the story?

How this Aha moment might aid in the development of the character(s)?

AKS 3/12; 5/14

Appendix B: Notice and Note Conference Questions for Graphic Novels

Appendix C: Student Assent Form

**Georgia State University
Student Assent Form**

<u>Title</u>: High School Students' Reading Experiences with Graphic Novels
<u>Principal Investigator</u>: Dr. Michelle Zoss
<u>Student Principal Investigator</u>: Esther Kim

Information
You are invited to take part in a research study. The study is to understand your reading experience with graphic novels. Your role in the study will last 5.5 hours over six weeks (0.5 hours will be for completing a reading survey, 3.5 hours will be for independent reading during class time, and 1.5 hours for interviews).

You will be asked to:
1. Complete a reading survey (which should not take more than 30 mins)
2. Read a graphic novel of your choice for 10-20 minutes during IR time,
3. Conference with Ms. Kim during IR time,
4. Talk with Ms. Kim in a 30-minute interview halfway through the study (at three weeks),
5. Talk with Ms. Kim in a 30-minute interview toward the end of the study (at six weeks).
6. Talk with Ms. Kim about what she learned in the study in a 30-minute conversation in May.

Purpose
We are trying to better understand students' reading experiences with graphic novels. You are invited to take part in this research study because you are a high school student who is interested in reading graphic novels. A total of 8 people will be invited to be in the study.

Procedures
If you choose to be in the study, you will first be asked to complete a survey that asks about yourself as a reader. Then, you will be asked to read graphic novels of your choosing and conference with Ms. Kim during IR time. During the study, Ms. Kim will be observing the classroom. Then, you will talk with Ms. Kim in three interviews at different times: three weeks into the study, six weeks into the study, and then before school ends in May. Ms. Kim will record your IR talks and interviews for research.

Risks
There are no known risks associated with the study. However, if you think you have been hurt, please contact the research team as soon as possible. Georgia State University and the research team have not set aside money to pay for injury.

Benefits
You may develop an interest in reading graphic novels or a better understanding of yourself as a reader. Overall, we hope to learn from the study how to get better at teaching and encouraging reading practices in education.

Voluntary Participation and Withdrawal
You do not have to be in this study, and your parent(s)/legal guardian(s) cannot make you be in it. If you want to be in the study at first and but change your mind, you can drop out at any time. No one will be mad or upset with you if you decide not to be in the study. You can skip questions or stop participating at any time. You will not be penalized for leaving the study. The student principal investigator (researcher) is the instructor for this class. No preference will be given to those who participate. The decision to participate, or not take part, will have no effect on your grade or standing in this class.

Confidentiality
We will keep your records private to the extent allowed by law. The following people and entities will have access to the information you provide:
Esther Kim and Dr. Michelle Zoss
GSU Institutional Review Board
Office for Human Research Protection (OHRP)

We will use fake names rather than your real name on study records. The information you provide will be stored in a password-protected computer and locked filing cabinets. When we present or publish the results of this study, we will not use your name or other information that may identify you.

Contact Information
If you have questions or concerns about the study, please contact Esther Kim at (770) 410-8061 or ekim40@student.gsu.edu and Dr. Michelle Zoss at (404) 413-8415 or zoss@gsu.edu

The IRB at Georgia State University reviews all research that involves human participants. You can contact the IRB if you would like to speak to someone who is not involved directly with the study. You can contact the IRB for questions, concerns, problems, information, input, or questions about your rights as a research participant. Contact the IRB at 404-413-3500 or irb@gsu.edu.

Assent
We will give you a copy of this assent form to keep.
If you are willing to volunteer for this research, please sign below.

_____
        Printed Name of Participant

_____   _____
        Signature of Participant   Date

_____   _____
Principal Investigator or Researcher Obtaining Consent   Date

Appendix D: Student Consent Form

Georgia State University
Student Consent Form
(for participants 18 years old)

Title: High School Students' Reading Experiences with Graphic Novels
Principal Investigator: Dr. Michelle Zoss
Student Principal Investigator: Esther Kim

Introduction and Key Information:
You are invited to take part in a research study. It is up to you if you would like to participate in the study. The purpose of the study is to understand students' reading experience with graphic novels.
Your role in the study will last 5.5 hours over six weeks (0.5 hours will be for completing a reading survey, 3.5 hours will be for independent reading (IR) during class time, and 1.5 hours for interviews).

You will be asked to do the following:
1. Complete a reading survey (which should not take more than 30 mins)
2. Read a graphic novel for 10-20 minutes during IR time,
3. Conference with Ms. Kim during IR time,
4. Talk with Ms. Kim in a 30-minute interview halfway through the study (at three weeks),
5. Talk with Ms. Kim in a 30-minute interview toward the end of the study (at six weeks).
6. Talk with Ms. Kim about what she learned in the study in a 30-minute conversation in May.

Participating in this study will not expose you to any more risks than you would experience in a typical day. This study is not designed to benefit you. Overall, we hope to better understand students' reading experiences with graphic novels when provided the space to read graphic novels.

Purpose
We are trying to better understand students' reading experiences with graphic novels. You are invited to take part in this research study because you are a high school student who is interested in reading graphic novels. A total of 8 people will be invited to be in the study.

Procedures
If you choose to be in the study, you will be asked to complete a survey answering questions about yourself as a reader. Then, you will read a graphic novel of your choice and conference with Ms. Kim during IR time. During the study, Ms. Kim will also be observing the classroom. Then, you will talk with Ms. Kim in three interviews at different times: three weeks into the study, six weeks into the study, and then before school ends in May. Ms. Kim will audio record your IR talks and interviews for research. You will only be interacting with Ms. Kim during IR time and the interviews; all interactions will take place in Ms. Kim's classroom. Research will begin on March 7th, 2022 and will conclude on May 20, 2022.

Future Research
The researcher (Ms. Kim) will remove information that may identify you and will not use or distribute your data for future research studies even if identifiers are removed.

Risks
There are no known risks associated with the study. However, if you think you have been hurt, please contact the research team as soon as possible. Georgia State University and the research team have not set aside money to pay for injury.

Benefits
The study is not designed to benefit you personally. If there is a personal benefit, then it maybe that you develop an overall interest in reading graphic novels or a better understanding of yourself as a reader. Overall, we hope to learn from the study how to get better at teaching and encouraging reading practices in education.

Alternatives
The alternative to taking part in this study is to not take part in the study.

Voluntary Participation and Withdrawal
You do not have to be in this study. If you want to be in the study at first and but change your mind, you can drop out at any time. No one will be mad or upset with you if you decide not to be in the study. You can skip questions or stop participating at any time. You will not be penalized for leaving the study. The student principal investigator (researcher) is the instructor for this class. No preference will be given to those who participate. The decision to participate, or not take part, will have no effect on your grade or standing in this class.

Confidentiality
We will keep your records private to the extent allowed by law. The following people and entities will have access to the information you provide:
Esther Kim and Dr. Michelle Zoss
GSU Institutional Review Board
Office for Human Research Protection (OHRP)

Real names will be replaced by fake names on study records. A code sheet that links real names with fake names will be kept separate from participant data. The information you provide will be stored in a password-protected computer and locked filing cabinets. Additionally, audio recordings of IR conversations and interview conversations will be stored in a password-protected computer and locked filing cabinets. When we present or publish the results of this study, we will not use your name or other information that may identify you.

Contact Information
If you have questions or concerns about the study, please contact Esther Kim at (770) 410-8061 or ekim40@student.gsu.edu and Dr. Michelle Zoss at (404) 413-8415 or zoss@gsu.edu

The IRB at Georgia State University reviews all research that involves human participants. You can contact the IRB if you would like to speak to someone who is not involved directly with the study. You can contact the IRB for questions, concerns, problems, information, input, or questions about your rights as a research participant. Contact the IRB at 404-413-3500 or irb@gsu.edu.

Consent
We will give you a copy of this consent form to keep.

If you are willing to volunteer for this research, please sign below.

_____
       Printed Name of Participant

_____   _____
       Signature of Participant   Date

_____   _____
Principal Investigator or Researcher Obtaining Consent   Date

Appendix E: Parent/Guardian Permission Form

<u>Title</u>: High School Students' Reading Experiences with Graphic Novels
<u>Principal Investigator</u>: Dr. Michelle Zoss
<u>Student Principal Investigator</u>: Esther Kim

Introduction and Key Information

Your child is invited to take part in a research study. It is up to you and your child to decide if your child would like to participate in the study. The purpose of the study is to understand students' reading experience with graphic novels.

Your child's role in the study will last 5.5 hours over six weeks (0.5 hours will be for completing a reading survey, 3.5 hours will be for independent reading (IR) during class time, and 1.5 hours for interviews). Your child will be asked to do the following:

1. Complete a reading survey (which should not take more than 30 mins)
2. Read a graphic novel of their choice for 10-20 minutes during IR time,
3. Conference with Ms. Kim during IR time,
4. Talk with Ms. Kim in a 30-minute interview halfway through the study (at three weeks),
5. Talk with Ms. Kim in a 30-minute interview toward the end of the study (at six weeks).
6. Talk with Ms. Kim about what she learned in the study in a 30-minute conversation in May.

Participating in this study will not expose your child to any more risks than they would experience in a typical day. This study is not designed to benefit your child. Overall, we hope to better understand students' reading experiences with graphic novels when provided the space to read graphic novels.

Purpose

The purpose of the study is to better understand students' reading experiences with graphic novels. Your child is invited to take part in this research study because they are a high school student who is interested in reading graphic novels. A total of 8 people will be invited to be in the study.

Procedures

If your child decides to take part in the study, they will first begin by taking a survey answering questions about themselves as readers. Then, they will be asked to read graphic novels of their choice and conference with Ms. Kim during independent reading (IR) time. During the study, Ms. Kim will also be observing the classroom. Then, they will talk with Ms. Kim in three recorded interviews at different times: three weeks into the study, six weeks into the study, and then before school ends in May. Ms. Kim will audio record IR conversations between the teacher and student (your child) and will record the three interviews for research. Students will only be interacting with Ms. Kim during IR time and the interviews; all interactions will take place in Ms. Kim's classroom. Research will begin on March 7th, 2022 and will conclude on May 20, 2022.

Students will be asked to:
Complete a reading survey (which should not take more than 30 mins)
Read a graphic novel of their choice for 10-20 minutes during IR time,
Conference with Ms. Kim during IR time,
Talk with Ms. Kim in a 30-minute interview halfway through the study (at three weeks),
Talk with Ms. Kim in a 30-minute interview toward the end of the study (at six weeks).
Talk with Ms. Kim about what she learned in the study in a 30-minute conversation in May.

Future Research
The researcher (Ms. Kim) will remove information that may identify your child and will not use or distribute your child's data for future research studies even if identifiers are removed.

Risks
There are no known risks associated with the study. However, if you or your child think they have been hurt, please contact the research team as soon as possible. Georgia State University and the research team have not set aside money to pay for injury.

Benefits
This study is not designed to benefit your child personally. If there is a personal benefit, then it may be that your child develops an overall interest in reading graphic novels, or a better understanding of themselves as a reader. Overall, the researcher (Ms. Kim) hopes to learn from the study how to get better at teaching and encouraging reading practices in education.

Alternatives
The alternative to taking part in this study is to not take part in the study.

Voluntary Participation and Withdrawal
Your child does not have to be in this study. If you decide for your child to be in the study and change your mind, you have the right for your child to drop out at any time. Your child may skip questions or stop participating at any time. You may refuse for your child to take part in the study or stop at any time. This will not cause your child to lose any benefits to which he/she is otherwise entitled.
The student principal investigator (researcher) is the instructor for this class. No preference will be given to those who participate. The decision to participate, or not take part, will have no effect on your child's grade or standing in this class.

Confidentiality
We will keep records private to the extent allowed by law. The following people and entities will have access to the information your child provides:
Esther Kim and Dr. Michelle Zoss
GSU Institutional Review Board
Office for Human Research Protection (OHRP)

Real names will be replaced by fake names on study records. A code sheet that links real names with fake names will be kept separate from participant data. The information they provide will be stored in a password-protected computer and locked filing cabinets. Additionally, audio recordings of IR conversations and interview conversations will be stored in a password-protected computer and locked filing cabinets. When we present or publish the results of this study, we will not use their name or other information that may identify them.

Contact Information
If you have questions or concerns about the study, please contact Esther Kim at (770) 410-8061 or ekim40@student.gsu.edu and Dr. Michelle Zoss at (404) 413-8415 or zoss@gsu.edu

The IRB at Georgia State University reviews all research that involves human participants. You can contact the IRB if you would like to speak to someone who is not involved directly with the study. You can contact the IRB for questions, concerns, problems, information, input, or questions about your child's rights as a research participant. Contact the IRB at 404-413-3500 or irb@gsu.edu.

Parental Permission
We will give you a copy of this permission form to keep.

If you are willing to volunteer your child to volunteer for this research, please sign below.

_____
      Printed Name of Child Participant

_____
      Printed Name of Parent or Guardian

_____   _____
      Parent or Guardian Signature   Date

_____   _____
Principal Investigator or Researcher Obtaining Consent   Date

Appendix F: Interview Protocols

Interview One Protocol
(after 3 weeks of study)

Opening
- Today is [date] and the time is [time]. I will be interviewing [student name].
- I really appreciate you taking the time to be a part of the interview. It should not take longer than 30 minutes. I am just going to ask questions about who you are as a student and who you are as a reader. I will also ask a few questions about graphic novels and comics.
- Remember that you can stop the interview or stop your participation in the study at any point. No hard feelings! Do you have any questions for me before we begin?

Interview Questions

1. Student experience with graphic novels
    a. In your opinion, what *are* graphic novels, comics, and manga? Are they all the same?
    b. How did you come to enjoy reading graphic novels? What are you earliest memories around reading graphic novels?
    c. What are some graphic novels you enjoyed? What are some reasons why you enjoyed reading them?
    d. Can you try to explain to me how you choose which graphic novels to read?
    e. What is it about graphic novels makes you feel drawn to reading them (over text-only books)?

2. Student perception of self as reader
    a. What do you enjoy about reading? What do you find frustrating about reading?
    b. Who do you think helped you to enjoy/dislike reading? What do you think contributed to your love/dislike of reading?
    c. Tell me about your earliest memories around reading.
    d. What are some of the books you enjoy reading? What are some reasons why you enjoyed those books?

3. Student experience with independent reading
    a. How was independent reading been going for the past three weeks?
    b. What have you been reading during IR?
    c. Are you enjoying your IR book? Why or why not?
    d. Are you enjoying IR time? Why or why not?
    e. What are some things you'd like to keep or change about IR?
    f. Do you read at home? How does your reading at home differ from reading at school?

Interview Two Protocol
(after six weeks of study)

Opening
- Today is [date] and the time is [time]. I will be interviewing [student name].
- I really appreciate you taking the time to be a part of the interview. It should not take longer than 30 minutes.
- I am just going to ask a few follow-up questions about our last interview and ask questions about your independent reading since we last talked.
- Remember that you can stop the interview or stop your participation in the study at any point. No hard feelings!
- Do you have any questions for me before we begin?

Interview Questions
1. Follow-up questions regarding Interview One: Member Checking
   a. Summary of student's perception of self (I remind student about what we talked about)
   b. Summary of student's perception of self as reader (I remind student about what we talked about)
   c. Did I misinterpret anything and/or is there anything else you think is important for me to know about you?

2. Student experience with graphic novels
   a. How has independent reading been going for the past few weeks?
      i. What (graphic novels) have you been reading?
   b. Are you reading any new type of graphic novels (ex. reading a graphic novel that is not manga)?
      i. If so, what made you want to read something different?
      ii. If not, what is your hesitation with wanting to read something different?
   c. Do you think graphic novels should be included in language arts? Why or why not?

Interview Three Protocol

(member-check interview in May)

Opening
- Today is [date] and the time is [time]. I will be interviewing [student name].
- I really appreciate you taking the time to be a part of the interview. It should not take longer than 30 minutes.
- I am just going to ask a few follow-up questions about our last interview and ask questions about your independent reading since we last talked.
- Remember that you can stop the interview or stop your participation in the study at any point. No hard feelings!
- Do you have any questions for me before we begin?

Interview Questions
1. Follow-up questions regarding Interview and Interview Two
   a. Summary of student's perception of self (I remind student about what we talked about)
   b. Summary of student's perception of self as reader (I remind student about what we talked about)
   c. Summary of student's reading experience with graphic novels
   d. Summary of student's reading experience with independent reading
   e. Did I misinterpret anything and/or is there anything else you think is important for me to know about you?

Appendix G: Reading Interest Survey

Modified from Smagorinsky's (2008b) Teaching English by Design: How to Create and Carry

Out Instructional Units

Reading Interest Inventory

There are 14 questions on this survey. Please be as honest and descriptive as possible! Your answers will only be shared with Ms. Kim

esther_kim@g.gcpsk12.org (not shared) Switch account

* Required

First and Last Name *

Your answer

What expectations do your family members have of you in and outside of school? *

Your answer

Describe your personality from your point of view. *

Your answer

What makes you happy? *

Your answer

What makes you angry?

Your answer

What do you have trouble dealing with?

Your answer

Complete this statement: "It is difficult for me to learn..." *

Your answer

Complete this statement: "It is easy for me to learn..." *

Your answer

If you had to choose, would you rather read or write? Why *

Your answer

If you enjoy reading, what is your favorite book and/or what type of things do you enjoy reading?

Your answer

If you do not enjoy reading, why not? What type of things do you read?

Your answer

Next   Clear form

Section 2 of 2

Graphic Novel Interest Form

Description (optional)

Do you read graphic novels, comics, or manga? If so, what types do you read?

Long answer text

If you enjoy reading graphic novels, comics, or manga, why do you enjoy reading them?

Long answer text

If you do not read graphic novels, comics, or manga, would you be interested in reading them?

Long answer text