

Preservice Teachers' Perceptions and Knowledge of

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Abstract

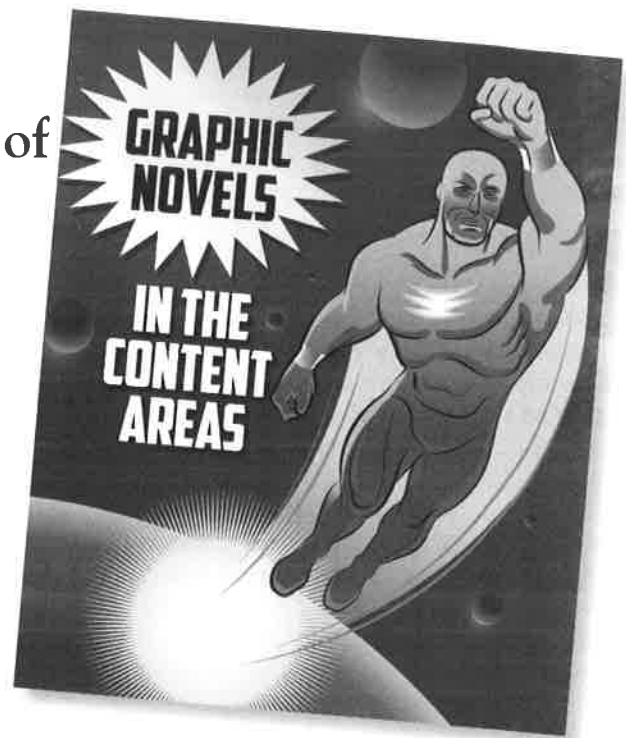
This article describes a qualitative study conducted to introduce preservice teachers to graphic novels which are often considered 'unconventional' reading materials. The study addressed specific questions to gain better understanding of preservice teachers' perceptions and knowledge of graphic novels, as well as, how graphic novels can be used as classroom resources in each content area. There were fifteen preservice teachers involved in the study. Findings reveal that overall preservice teachers in this study believed that graphic novels were a beneficial resource to engage students in content material, and using them as a resource can foster meaningful learning in all content areas.

Ask any young adolescent about books they enjoy and graphic novels will surely be mentioned. This format has increased in popularity among teens in the recent years (Brozo, 2013; Carter, 2007; Gavigan, 2011; Griffith, 2011; Monnin, 2013). While graphic novels are widely popular among publishers, librarians, the public, and adolescents, they are still relative new-comers within classroom settings (McTaggart, 2008). The purpose of this study was to address this disconnect by providing preservice middle grades teachers with opportunities to understand the format of graphic novels. More specifically, the project introduced preservice middle grades teachers to the structure and language of graphic novels while they considered this tool as a resource in the various content areas. This study addressed the following questions:

1. What are preservice teachers' perceptions and knowledge of graphic novels?
2. Do preservice teachers recognize graphic novels as valuable curriculum materials for content area instruction? Why or why not?

Adolescent Readers and Graphic Novels

Graphic novels are books in which "images and text arrive together, work together, and should be read together" (Gravett, 2005, p. 11). There are many genres these books address such as fiction, classic literature, science fiction, historical fiction, realistic fiction, non-fiction, manga, and others (Gavigan, 2011; Griffith, 2011). Adolescent readers also appreciate and gravitate towards these novels because they provide a form of entertainment similar to modern media formats they are familiar with and



provide visual scaffolding that encourage and often engage struggling readers (Hassett & Schieble, 2007; McTaggart, 2008). In addition to being a medium that sparks interest, graphic novels also provide a rich and rewarding reading experience. Graphic novels require readers to interpret the connection between text and graphics and in doing so readers draw upon a wide range of strategies and comprehension skills. Incorporating graphic novels in the classroom not only gives students exposure to diverse texts, but also motivates and requires them to think critically as they read. By combining images with text, graphic novels provide opportunities to enhance students' reading comprehension skills, promoted critical thinking- and therefore, moved classrooms away from "one size fits all" literacy instruction.

Emphasizing complex and informational texts, the Common Core literacy standards are designed to support the development of advanced literacy skills required to be engaged and productive citizens in the 21st century. However, the potential of the Core to achieve this ambitious goal depends – in part – upon both content area educators' willingness to integrate reading instruction into their practice and adolescents' motivation to read and to engage with academic texts. At the same time, most adolescents' proficiency with and motivation to read 'traditional' school texts is weak at best. Outside of school, adolescents engage with a wide range of multimodal texts such as blogs, magazines, rap lyrics, graphic novels, websites, and film; however these "everyday literacies" are rarely recognized and incorporated into K-12 classroom practices (Heller & Greenleaf, 2007; Kamil, 2003). Rejection of 'school texts' is the most common result

of these dynamics (Brozo, 2010). Thus, despite state and federal level initiatives to combat adolescent illiteracy, recent assessments of middle and high school students' reading skills suggest that little progress has been made (NCES, 2011).

Many national indicators reveal that US students' reading abilities and habits continue to atrophy. The National Center for Educational Statistics (NCES) Assessment of Educational Progress results from 2009 indicate that a majority of high school students are "reading significantly below" grade level and results from the 2011 Reading Assessment suggest little has changed (NCES, 2009, 2011). Other findings from a 2007 NEA report reveal that after elementary school the time students spend reading declines significantly (2007). The cumulative effects of this decline is not merely lower test scores or decreased "proficiency levels," but an increase in dropout rates, a decrease in work productivity and less participation in cultural and civic life (Gallagher, 2009).

Reversing this alarming trend requires a multifaceted approach including the modeling and integration of new literacies, which could occur specifically through the utilization of graphic novels across the curriculum. Since teachers play a significant role in motivating students to read and write, it is important for teachers to promote engaged and motivating reading experiences for their students (Ruddell, 1995). Furthermore, teachers need to become more familiar with the multi-model texts that adolescents engage with outside of school. To meet these challenges, teacher education programs must prepare preservice teachers to utilize a wide and diverse range of texts including graphic novels. This task is not solely the responsibility of language arts and reading teachers but must be a coordinated effort across all content areas including Social Studies, Math and Science to ensure literacy across the content areas.

Few adolescents benefit from reading instruction if they are not motivated to read (Kamil, 2003). Throughout the literature on adolescent literacy the importance of motivation and engagement in reading comprehension is a common refrain (Moje, Overby, Tysvaer, & Morris, 2008; NCTE, 2006, 2007; Pitcher, Martinez, Dicembre, Fewster & McCormick, 2010). Studies on motivation, adolescents and reading suggest that providing students with access to a wide variety of text types, "desirable reading material," and with choices is key (Ivey & Broadus, 2001; Moje, et. al, 2008; NCTE, 2006, 2007; Pitcher, et. al, 2010). Other contextual factors that foster motivation include the integration of electronic and visual media, the incorporation of multiple perspectives, a clearly articulated purpose for any reading activity and a

classroom environment in which students are provided with multiple opportunities to discuss what they read (NCTE, 2006, 2007).

Statement of Purpose

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

Methodology

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

Participants read an assigned graphic novel for the content area they identified that they were most interested in learning about this semester. These novels included: Math— *Babymouse: Dragonslayer* by Jennifer L. Holm & Matthew Holm, Science— *Investigating the Scientific Method with Max Axiom Super Scientist* by Donald B. Lemke, Language Arts— *Fables: Legends in Exhile* by Bill Willingham, Lan Medina, Steve Leialoha and Craig Hamilton, and Social Studies— *Little Rock Nine* by Marshall Poe. These novels were selected as interesting and engaging novels that represented graphic novel formats and topics and their respective content areas. In the course, all participants learned the basics of graphic novels and how to read this format. They were asked to read their assigned graphic novel on their own and come back with the survey questions completed so that they could meet in small groups to discuss their overall thoughts and

perceptions of graphic novels.

Participants and Context

This study was conducted at a large regional university within the southeastern United States. Participants consisted of 15 preservice middle grades teachers concurrently enrolled in the Spring 2014 session of required methods courses. The demographic breakdown of the participants included: three males and twelve females, five African American, two Hispanic, and eight Caucasian preservice teachers. Participants were recruited from these courses on a voluntary basis, with no bearing on their course grade. These preservice teachers were minoring in a variety of content area concentrations and were typically in their junior year of study in the program; only two semesters away from student teaching and certification. During this semester they enroll in both Language Arts and Social Studies methods courses regardless of their content area concentrations in their program of study. This setting was purposefully selected since it reflects the average or typical experience of preservice teacher candidates in the program and was “not in any major way atypical, deviant, or intensely unusual” (Patton, 2002, p. 236).

Data Collection and Analysis

Data collection began with an initial survey to assess preservice teachers' prior knowledge of and experiences with reading graphic novels. Throughout the semester preservice teachers' perceptions were further explored through two additional open-ended survey to collect information about preservice teachers' perceptions of and experiences reading graphic novels before, during, and after the reading experience. The pre-reading survey questions included:

1. What resources are typically used in your content area and what are the pros and cons of each?
2. What do you think graphic novels are? (List examples if you are able to do so)
3. Have you read any graphic novels? (List titles if you are able to do so)
4. For what age would graphic novels be appropriate?

During reading survey questions included:

1. What content area(s) do you think this novel might be utilized in/why?
2. What are your thoughts about the style of this graphic novel?
3. How would you use this graphic novel in a specific content area?
4. What are your perceptions of this novel?
5. In what areas do you think your students would struggle with while reading this graphic novel?
6. As a reader what is your reaction or response to this graphic novel?

The post-reading survey questions included:

1. What did you learn about graphic novels that you didn't know before?
2. What are your thoughts of the graphic novel format?
3. What age or educational subgroups would graphic novels be appropriate for?
4. Do you see graphic novels as a resource for your content area? How would you implement these into your classroom?
5. What are the pros and cons of graphic novels? Are there specific challenges with this type of material?

The preservice teachers completed the 'pre and post' open ended surveys during class time. They took the 'during reading' survey questions home and were asked to complete this while they were reading their assigned graphic novel and to bring these fully answered to the next class meeting.

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

Findings

As a result of the data analysis conducted, three categories emerged. In each section that follows we provided a table that organized the themes and categorical results of the study.

Result One: Preservice Teachers' Perceptions and Knowledge of Graphic Novels

In response to research question one regarding preservice teachers' perceptions and knowledge of graphic novels, when asked if they had read any graphic novels prior to the one assigned in the Language Arts Methods I course, five out of fifteen students answered yes, but two out of fifteen answered “I am not sure”. One preservice teacher, particularly stated, “I remember talking about them [graphic novels] in school, but I don't remember any I've read.” Several preservice teachers also listed a

few examples that they considered graphic novels which included: *Misfits*, *Stargirl*, and *Andersonville*. (It should be noted that these titles are NOT classified as graphic novels.)

The preservice teachers also considered what age or educational groups' graphic novels would be appropriate. Seven out of fifteen preservice teachers agreed that graphic novels are appropriate for all ages. Three out of fifteen stated that graphic novels are appropriate for middle to high school aged students, one out of fifteen felt that graphic novels were appropriate for students first through twelfth grade, and one out of fifteen students stated that graphic novels are appropriate for grades third through eighth. From data analysis, the findings showed that preservice teachers have a general idea of what graphic novels are and what grades they would be most appropriate, even though not all of them have ever read one.

Prior understanding of resources in the content areas. Before exposure to graphic novels, the preservice teachers were asked what resources were typically used within classrooms and the pros and cons of each. The data collected had overwhelmingly similar comments between the preservice teachers' answers. Half of the participants who claimed textbooks were typically used in the classroom also declared that the information in textbooks was often incorrect or "biased". One preservice teacher wrote that textbooks are "not the full history, just pieces" meaning that the resources used in classes today might be only telling one side of the story. While all preservice teachers were sure to mention the more traditional resources, many of them listed other resources, such as, Smart Boards, videos, labs, and Powerpoints. However, it was surprising that only one out of fifteen preservice teachers made reference to graphic novels.

TABLE 1
Categories-Initial Perceptions/Knowledge

Category	Key Expression
Have You Read a Graphic Novel	8-No 2-Not Sure 5-Yes Total out of 15
What are Graphic Novels (Prior Understanding)	13 of the participants stated that Graphic Novels had something to do with "pictures" "images along with words" "novels along with pictures" "books with few words and a lot of pictures" "pictures with text" "graphic novels are stories that reflect a conflict or controversy or explain a point of view"
What Age are Graphic Novels Appropriate (Prior Understanding)	7-All Ages/Grades "students of all ages might enjoy the graphic novels because of the pictures alone" "appropriateness depends on the content in the graphic novel" "depends on your students, some are not very mature" "depends on how graphic the content is in the novel" "8th grade and younger, don't want the older kids to feel like babies" "as the students get older you could see their thoughts and feelings about the visuals"
Resources Typically Used in Content Areas	11-Textbooks "provide key terms and vocabulary" "Easy for teachers to use" "can be boring" "can be biased or inaccurate" 10-Worksheets "give students practice" "provide lots of information" "help assess student understanding" "good images" "can be boring" "seen as busy work"

TABLE 2

Themes-Perceptions During Reading

Category	Key Expression
Emotions	“really captured emotion through facial expressions” “you can see what the characters are actually thinking and feeling” “sometimes a picture says so much more than words” “these books say so much more about what characters are thinking and feeling that just words on a page. I could actually feel the different emotions through some of the visuals”
Style	Positives: “enjoyed visuals and images” “simple wording made them easy to read” “short and sweet” “easy to follow” “unique and fun to read” “liked that the pictures told more than the words” Negatives: “overwhelmed with all the visuals” “challenging at times to follow all the stories” “hard to follow at times” “didn’t present enough content information”
Teaching Resource	“great resource for a role play activity for the students to better understand the content” “could serve as a great way to introduce content and background information” “this resource would capture students’ attention and get them to read” “got me engaged in the content and that would work for my students” “my students might really enjoy reading about the Scientific Method in this format” “might need more background knowledge before using this format”

Perceptions during reading. Halfway through reading their assigned graphic novel, the preservice teachers were asked to answer a series of questions. These questions were developed in to obtain a clearer understanding of how preservice teachers perceived graphic novels and thought about the possibility of utilizing these as teaching resources in the classroom. When the preservice teachers were asked to comment on the style of the graphic novel, ten out of fifteen participants mentioned how they enjoyed the details in the “visuals” and “images”. Though, many of the preservice teachers found that graphic novels had a very unique style that they could appreciate while reading and that the visuals really provided a sense of the range of emotions characters’ were experiencing throughout the story, some continued to find it challenging to figure out how they would use these graphic novels for their related content areas. However, only one participant stated that the graphic novel would not be a helpful teaching tool in their content area because the novel was not strictly content related.

Anytime one uses a new resource or technique, there will be some speed bumps or struggling points. This is true with graphic novels as well. Five of the participants claimed that the format of the graphic novel was a challenge for them. They stated that the visuals, text, and format of the pages were sometimes “hard to follow”. Four out of the fifteen preservice teachers mentioned that the content of the graphic novel was difficult to understand and background knowledge needed to be taught before reading. Four of the participants claimed the allusions within the novel might be unnoticed by younger readers. Lastly, the participants were asked a very simple and straightforward question; what were their overall thoughts of the graphic novel format. Ten out of fifteen preservice teachers claimed to have enjoyed their graphic novel and felt that this resource would be enjoyed in a classroom.

Result Two: How Graphic Novels can Serve as a Resource in the Content Areas
 In response to research question two that sought to

understand whether preservice teachers recognize graphic novels as valuable curriculum materials for content area instruction, the following results were found through data analysis. After they finished reading and discussing the graphic novels, preservice teachers were asked to think about how this format could be utilized in various content classrooms. All fifteen of the preservice teacher participants claimed that the graphic novels could be used in one way or another in their future classrooms. Half of the participants mentioned that the graphic novels reached out to different types of learners through the detailed visuals which went along with the text but that the appropriate age group for the graphic novel depended on the content of the novel. Seven of the fifteen participants pointed out that the students might have difficulties reading the novel due to the set-up of the pages and the sometimes “distracting images” and that the teacher will need to provide information on how to effectively read a graphic novel.

Social Studies. Four of the participants read the graphic novel *Little Rock Nine* and due to the fact that this novel addresses the Civil Rights Movement, they felt this novel was best suited for a Social Studies classroom. The preservice teachers who read this graphic novel claimed that they would definitely use this as a resource in their classroom and that they could use the graphic novel to incorporate background information into their lesson. Another approach they stated would support this graphic novel was to role-play with the students. They felt the students could read the graphic novel and act out a scene to gain a better understanding of the *Little Rock Nine*. Several preservice teachers said that the graphic novel was “fun and engaging” and it “disguised learning” by providing content learning in a more engaging format.

Mathematics. When asked how one would use the graphic novel *Babymouse-Dragonslayer* in a specific content area, the responses varied. For the math graphic novel, only one of the four preservice teachers, said that they would use this to “teach students who are struggling with math about how to overcome their fears and insecurities”, and/or to “encourage kids that are struggling with Math.” Others that read this graphic novel said they would use this “if students are having confidence issues in math” or “trying to overcome challenges.” It is obvious that due to the lack of content-based information, it would be hard to use the graphic novel that was utilized in this study to teach students concepts in Math.

The participants suggested it could also be placed in any other content area as well. The participants mentioned that this particular graphic novel might not help the reader strengthen their mathematical skills

but it could help them learn “life lessons”. Because the theme was getting over one’s fears, particularly in math class, the participants claim that this graphic novel could be used as a guide to help students overcome their fears in any content area. The preservice teachers stated that they could recommend this graphic novel to help those students who are struggling in math or have given up on the harder tasks in school. When asked what their perceptions were of this novel, all four of the Math preservice teachers said that they “really enjoyed the book” however two participants stated that they did not see how they could relate the book to Math content. Two out of four pre-service teachers felt the novel “could be used for a hook activity” or “down time in class” and/or “extra credit.”

Science. Another group of four participants read a graphic novel titled *Investigating the Scientific Method with Max Axiom-Super Scientist*. After reading the graphic novel, the participants stated they could use this graphic novel for several reasons in their science classroom including extra credit or extra help. They felt because the graphic novel “reaches out to different types of learners”, almost every learning style was accommodated for with this one resource and provided an opportunity for the students to learn the content in a “new way.”

Language Arts. Finally, three participants read a very “graphic” graphic novel titled *Fables-Legends in Exile* which focused around concepts taught in the Language Arts classroom. The three participants pointedly stated that this graphic novel should not be used in the middle school or early high school years because of the “explicit content”. However, the participants said they could see graphic novels as resources within classrooms through the use of the visuals to support the text. This included using graphic novels that were created on the Classics or other novels that were being read and shared in class. The participants noted that based on their experience graphic novels must be pre-read to determine whether the novel was appropriate for the grade level.

Discussion

Previous research has revealed graphic novels as increasingly popular, amongst the young adolescent age group (Brozo, 2013). This could result from the notion that ‘traditional’ school textbooks are perceived as being filled with “boring” or “misleading” passages as indicated by the eight of the fifteen preservice teachers in this study. Not to mention the information in traditional textbooks usually lack emotion, perspective, and relevance, which could very well be the reason that students are so disconnected from the classroom. The lack of connection between the adolescents and traditional textbooks generally serve

as a barrier, depriving students of meaningful learning experiences. Even with technological advances, getting students to become active, engaged readers is still a challenge that preservice, as well as seasoned teachers face daily.

Our data indicate that fourteen out of fifteen participants now consider graphic novels as resources that may spark fun in reading again. Furthermore, graphic novels are now seen as teaching tools for the classroom, which is very different from the comic book format that many individuals are previously accustomed to with this genre. Because of the format, design and striking visuals, graphic novels have the power to capture the attention of their readers. Along with the ability to engage students graphic novels can also help bridge the gap between students and literacy levels. As we previously noted, reading scores indicate almost "70% of middle and high school students read below the proficient level" (NCES, 2010). This statistic is startling since low reading levels can be linked to higher dropout rates, a decrease in work productivity, and less participation in society. (Gallager, 2009) Therefore, it is critical that students are given more opportunities to gain more experience in reading critically. Because one third of our preservice teachers mention that the format of the graphic novels may be challenging to young adolescents, it is important that these students be taught how to understand the fundamentals of reading. In addition these preservice teachers need to understand how to comprehend and interact with text in order to make relevant connections and graphic novels can be the medium to do so.

Making preservice teachers aware of the benefits to graphic novels as resources within the classroom is crucial. Numerous researchers found that graphic novels can be used in the classroom settings; with one-way being to, promote and strengthen interdisciplinary teaching. All fifteen of our participants claimed they could use a graphic novel in their classroom to support various content areas which supports what previous researchers have found. As opposed to traditional school textbooks, graphic novels can provide a rich reading experience and promote critical literacy skills. Introducing a storyline and including pictures to core concepts that students are responsible for learning helps students to relate and interact with a text. Therefore, it makes perfect sense that students would be more willing to read books that have a developing plot with characters and scenes verses paragraph after paragraph of information written by an author that they have absolutely no connection to.

Since there are graphic novels designed specifically for the content areas including, but not limited to, Language Arts, Math, Social Studies, and Science;

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

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