

Perceptions and Use of Graphic Novels in the Classroom

A Master's Research Project Presented to
the Faculty of the College of Education
Ohio University

In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements of the Degree
Master of Education

By

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May, 2009

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Abstract

Graphic novels are becoming increasingly popular among young readers. They provide entertainment similar to most modern media formats and visual scaffolding for struggling readers. While graphic novels are attracting attention among publishers, librarians, and the public, they are still relatively unknown in educational settings. This study examined whether or not language arts teachers were using graphic novels in their classrooms, and how they perceive graphic novels overall. Eleven 7-12th grade language arts teachers were interviewed regarding their use and perceptions of graphic novels. Analysis of their responses revealed the majority of teachers do not use graphic novels as teaching tools, most likely due to a lack of familiarity with and accessibility to the genre. However, the majority of teachers reported a positive view of graphic novels and expressed interest in finding out more about how to use them in the classroom. Suggestions and resources for teachers on how to use graphic novels with their students are included.

Introduction

Today's students and classrooms are becoming more diverse and unique each day. The ethnic and cultural makeup of the United States changes constantly, and likewise that of our classrooms (Gargiulo, 2008). Educators are gaining a better understanding of different learning styles, varied ways of introducing new material and the value of critical thinking. In language arts classrooms, students are being asked to look at literature on deep and complex levels. Even the concept of literacy itself has been expanded to account for multiple intelligences and skills important in the 21st century (Beers, Probst, and Rief, 2007). However, for some students, the link between reading a text and

learning can be difficult for many reasons. Over 45% of all students receiving special education have been identified as having specific learning disabilities, the majority of those in reading/language arts (Gargiulo, 2008). Some of these students struggle with comprehending written text, while others simply are not interested in the typical classroom reading material. Students who have reading difficulties are often reluctant to read and loose interest in literature (Gorman, 2003). It is due to these issues in language arts education that graphic novels and other non-traditional texts are becoming more popular and advocated in educational settings. According to Carter (2007a), "comics and graphic novels are experiencing a burgeoning Golden Age in education today (p. 1).

While the definition of graphic novels varies among authors, they are often described as longer, bound comic books (Yang, 2008). Graphic novels can be classified in many of the same ways as regular text: fiction, non-fiction, fantasy, history, memoir and mystery to name a few categories. Whatever the definition or subject, it is clear that graphic novels are gaining popularity among all types of readers. According to one informal survey, 75% of students in a sixth grade classroom have read and enjoyed a graphic novel (Carter, 2007a). Graphic novels are being championed in libraries around the country, as well as by bookstores and book clubs, and the New York Times has been reviewing graphic novels on a regular basis for several years (Yang, 2008).

In addition to an increase in popularity, many scholars have suggested that graphic novels can and should be used in classrooms on many different levels. Graphic novels are often regarded as a very beneficial media for visual learners, as they combine images with text to increase comprehension (Hassett & Schieble, 2007). For this reason, and due to their high interest level, they are highly recommended for so-called reluctant

learners and those who struggle with reading (Schwarz, 2002a). Graphic novel advocates also stress the ability of graphic novels to reach out to a wider variety of readers, as they deal with topics of cultural diversity and issues important to adolescents (Ruggieri, 2002).

If there is such a strong popular and academic push towards the use and acceptance of graphic novels as a teaching tool, it is important to determine if teachers are actually using them in their classrooms. This study was designed to determine if teachers of adolescent students are using graphic novels, as well as how they view the genre. If teachers are not using graphic novels in the classroom, what is their reasoning behind this decision? And finally, if numerous anecdotes and preliminary research suggest that using graphic novels is an effective teaching tool, what can teachers do to find out more about this topic, and how can this genre be integrated into instruction?

Review of Literature

The literature on graphic novels in educational settings is fairly recent and limited. There have been few studies on graphic novels as teaching tools, and the majority of their reported benefits are anecdotal. However, there is a great deal of information about the genre written by fans, authors, illustrators and librarians. Graphic novels have been influential and popular with both adult and young readers for many years, so it is fairly easy to find reviews and resources. In this section, literature on graphic novels is examined in the following sections: the history of graphic novels, Manga, or Japanese comics, the popularity of graphic novels, benefits of graphic novels, and reluctance and concerns with graphic novels.

The History of Graphic Novels

The history of graphic novels is very closely tied to the history of comics. Comics have been an important and influential part of American culture for many years. The 1940s were considered the “Golden Age” of comics (Carter, 2007a), when serial comic strips were put into “comic books.” These books, geared towards younger readers, typically involved super heroes and action/adventure plot lines, although several classic stories were made into comic book form, such as *Huckleberry Finn* and *Oliver Twist*. There were also comics written especially for teens, dealing with adolescent issues, namely, the *Archie* series (Gorman, 2003).

In the 1940s and 1950s, the adult view of comic books changed from general acceptance to distrust and fear for the 'moral' well being of children. Motivated by a book written by Fredric Wertham (1954) entitled, *Seduction of the Innocent*, a senate committee was formed to investigate the comic book industry. In his book, Wertham stated that comic books led to criminal activity, sex, destruction, homosexuality and overall juvenile delinquency (Haugen, 2005). Popular theories at this time also suggested that comic books caused reading problems and disabilities among young readers (Carter, 2007a). However, in the 1960s, during the rise of the civil rights movement, comic books took on a new form in 'comix' that served as underground readings for many organizations. At the same time, comics began to regain some popularity and acceptance (Morrison, Bryan, and Chilcoat., 2002).

By the 1970s, comics had become mainstream again, even being used as teaching tools in some classrooms. In 1978, Will Eisner published his lengthy comic book, *Contract with God and Other Tenement Stories*. Eisner himself coined the phrase 'graphic novel' to market his book to a wider audience (O'English, Matthews, and Lindsay, 2006).

From that point on, the term graphic novel has been used to describe longer, book-like comics. There is some debate as to this name even today, as many graphic novels are actually works of non-fiction (not technically novels) or comic strip series collected into one bound copy (Gravett, 2005). One graphic novel expert defines them as a “more refined, big sibling,” to comic books (Carter, 2007b, p. 49). Educator and comic illustrator Gene Yang refers to them as a “thick comic book” (Yang, 2008, p. 186). For the purpose of this study, both the term graphic novel and comic book will be used interchangeably. Whatever the preferred definition, graphic novels became increasingly popular in the 1980s, especially after the publishing of Art Spiegelman’s *Maus: A Survivor’s Tale*, in 1987. This novel, written about Spiegelman’s father, a holocaust survivor was critically and popularly successful, and won a Pulitzer Prize in 1992 (Sturm, 2002). *Maus* was a leader for many other graphic novels as they became a new and exciting genre, with variety, controversy, diversity and literary merit.

Today, graphic novels are major players in the literary world. They are extremely popular in libraries, have entire sections in chain bookstores and are reviewed and discussed by many mainstream newspapers and Internet sites, including the New York Times, School Library Journal and Amazon.com. The content of graphic novels has exploded as well. There are many graphic novels that are true to their comic book predecessors, written about superheroes, science fiction and fantasy. Many have also been written about history, including past and recent wars, politics, civil rights and more personal issues such as abuse, disabilities and family relationships (Gorman, 2002). Many classics have been rewritten in graphic novel form, and in today’s libraries one can find graphic versions of *Moby Dick* and *Romeo and Juliet*, along graphic historical texts on

the American Revolution and the invention of electricity (Bickers, 2007). Essentially, graphic novels have been created that touch on all of the subjects covered by more traditional texts. In addition, graphic novels have gained appreciation and audience as a visual media, considered serious and significant forms of visual art (Haugen, 2005).

Manga: Japanese Comic Books

With the rise of graphic novels as a literary genre has come the increasing popularity of Japanese Manga among American readers. Manga is a term given to a form of Japanese comics that has become the most common type of reading material in Japan (Allen & Ingulsrud, 2003). Unlike American comics, Manga are read from the back of the book to the front and are typically read in less than 30 minutes. In Japan, Manga are rarely re-read or kept in libraries, rather they are thrown away after reading, like newspapers or magazines (Schodt, 1996). On the other hand, both Manga and graphic novels use images to illustrate a story with minimal text and in panel format. While some Manga is serialized, like some comics, others are written as short stories or novels with a clear beginning and end, like many graphic novels (Schodt, 1996). In the 1990s, Manga became more well-known in America. Today, Manga sales have exploded. Borders bookstores have an entire section dedicated to the genre, and one study of middle school students suggests that 80% of young readers enjoy Manga (Carter, 2007a). As Manga competes with typical American-style graphic novels, the subject matter has diversified as well. Manga are written for very young children, adolescents and adults, with a special series for parents. There are action, fantasy, sports, romance and erotic Manga. Some Manga series have been critically acclaimed on both literary and artistic levels, such as *Akira*, a dark and significant thriller by Katsuhiro Otomo, *published* by Marvel Comics.

There are even Manga classics, like Sonia Leong's *Romeo ad Juliet*, part of a Manga Shakespeare series that illustrates the original text in Manga format (2007).

Popularity of Graphic Novels

Possibly as a result of the expanding subject matter and variety found in today's graphic novels, or possibly the actual cause of this variety, the number of children and adolescents who read and enjoy this genre has risen dramatically. Graphic novel publishing companies are growing at greater rates than traditional text publishers (Gorman, 2003). School librarians have seen significant reader demand for graphic novels and comics, even without any promotion from the library (Bickers, 2007). Scholars have theorized several reasons for this rise in interest among young readers. First, as society becomes more visual through television, the Internet and movies, children have come to understand and feel comfortable with visual media. Many young people grow up around video and computer games, and when it comes to reading, they expect similarities (O'English et al., 2006). According to Carter (2007a), "the current generation is more comfortable with non-text visual media" (p. 11). These students have developed ways to learn directly through visual media devices such as computers, video games and the Internet, which have more similarities to graphic novels than traditional literature (Beers et al., 2007). Gorman (2006), in *What Teens Want*, states "because they appeal to teens' predilection to a more visual medium, these novels transcend apathy and the lack of coolness sometimes associated with reading," (p. 42). Schwarz (2002a,.) states that "young people's expectations for entertainment are high" (¶ 2). It is important that educators note this predilection by young readers, because, as Brenda Pennella (2009)

writes, “teachers are given the daunting task of contending with HBO, Nickelodeon and MTV” (¶ 6).

The popularity of Manga in the U.S. can also be explained with similar reasons. Many American children have grown up watching Japanese cartoons, or 'anime', such as the *Powderpuff Girls* and *Princess Mononoke*. Manga images are directly related to these shows and movies, and students feel comfortable going between forms (Beers et al., 2007). The cartoon illustrations are very similar, as are the storylines and themes, with certain cultural aspects that are portrayed in both Manga and anime cartoons (Schodt, 1996). Manga has found huge audiences in this country, particularly among teenage girls. With many graphic novels catering to adolescent boys and adults, Manga has begun targeting young women with a great deal of success (Gorman, 2003). This success may be due to the wide range of themes within the genre, or perhaps due to the availability of Manga written about female super heroines, such as *Sailor Moon* and *Peach Girl*.

Beyond a familiarity with and preference for visual media, young readers are also choosing to read graphic novels for a simpler reason- they are entertaining to read. As Little (2005) states, “any student reading comics will provide the most crucial insight about the medium: fun” (¶ 4). Indeed, in a study of Japanese Manga readers, the top two reasons for reading Manga were because they 'are interesting' and 'because I love it' (Allen & Ingulsrud, 2003). One of the most popular graphic series among young readers is Jeff Smith’s *Bone*, a 1,300 page fantasy/adventure epic. The growth and acceptance of *Bone* in libraries and classrooms comes not from reading specialists, teachers or literary research, but directly from students (Bickers, 2007). This interest should be accepted and encouraged in the classroom. If students have choice in their reading material, they may

“see themselves as having a voice in the matter,” (O’English et al., 2006). And as graphic novelist Art Spiegelman states, “it doesn’t take a hard sell to get kids to look at comics” (Goldsmith, 2002).

In addition to popularity among children and teenagers, adult interest in graphic novels has also dramatically increased during recent years. According to Yang (2008), the New York Times has suggested that graphic novels may become the top literature choice in America in future years. One of the interesting ideas about this genre is that, like much of today’s television shows and movies, graphic novels can be enjoyed by people of all ages (Schwarz, 2002a). It is hard to imagine a 13 year-old and a 35 year-old discussing *The Grapes of Wrath* together, but Jeff Smith’s *Bone* series enjoys a very wide audience and can be appreciated on many levels. However, there is some debate as to whether graphic novels are becoming geared too much towards adult readers, leaving the younger audience with fewer choices. The critical acclaim and serious subject matter of many well-known graphic novels has made many supporters fear that comics have forgotten about children, historically their first audience (Gravett, 2005). Fortunately, some graphic novelists, namely Art Spiegelman and Francoise Mouly through their *Little Lit* series have created exciting and significant graphic novels for children.

Benefits of Graphic Novels

While student interest is certainly one of if not the most important benefits of graphic novels, there are many other benefits of using this genre in educational settings. One of the most comprehensive benefits of graphic novels is their supporting role in theories of multiple literacies. Today, instead of a focus on text-based literacy, additional attention is given to critical and visual literacies (Carter, 2007b). Multiple literacies take

information and channel it through different modes. If some students do not understand a concept from direct text, they may understand it through the visual representation in graphic novels, or from critical thinking-based discussions that occur after reading.

According to Carter, a graphic novel scholar, through the use of graphic novels in the English classroom, educators will move away “from ‘one size fits all’ literacy instruction” (Carter, 2007b, p. 52).

Graphic novels promote critical literacies, or critical thinking, through increasing discussion and offering diverse and thought-provoking subject matter. For example, the graphic novel *Superman: Peace on Earth* (1999) by Alex Ross and Paul Dini deals with issues of world hunger and military rule. These concepts can be incorporated into in-depth class discussion or research on these topics (Schwarz, 2002a). One of the advantages of using graphic novels to bring critical thinking into the classroom is that they are often shorter and quicker to read than other texts. In a case example, a class of college students read a three page graphic novel by John Callahan that provoked discussions for two entire class periods (Versaci, 2001).

Graphic novels are especially important in promoting ideas of visual literacy and accommodating students who might be classified as visual learners. Students begin reading by using picture books. At a certain age/grade, this becomes considered inappropriate, and students move to text-only literature. Graphic novels can bridge this gap, an essential transition for some students (Gorman, 2003). The combination of images and words work together to increase comprehension (Little, 2005). According to Spiegelman, sequential comics allow the reader to gain a great deal of information by just looking at the page (Goldsmith, 2002). This is not to say the text is unimportant, but for

some readers, this visual scaffold is the best way to understand the concepts the author is presenting. Not only do these images make comprehension easier, they also add depth that might be lost through text alone. In their article *Finding space and time for the visual in K-12 literacy instruction*, Hassett and Schieble (2007) discuss scenes from Marjane Satrapi's novel *Persepolis*, in which the shading of the main character's face provides information about tone and mood at a much deeper level than the accompanying text.

In addition to aiding visual learners, graphic novels have been touted as being a beneficial tool for reluctant or struggling readers (possibly because many of these students are visual learners). Again, because graphic novels often are of interest to young readers, this alone can benefit reluctant readers. After years of struggling, these students may not be inclined to want to read, however, if they are interested in a text, it will improve the chances they will pick up a book and start reading. Many adults who read graphic novels were once reluctant readers, and graphic novels have been termed a 'gateway' into traditional literature (Goldsmith, 2002). *Bone* author, Jeff Smith states, "comics taught me to read" (Gorman, 2003, p. ix). Some reluctant readers may not be able to detect certain literary elements such as tone, mood, theme and foreshadowing from text alone. However, the images in graphic novels provide these elements at a level easier to reach for many readers (Beers et al., 2007). According to novelist Art Spiegelman, young comic book readers may be able to understand 60-70% of a story by just using images alone (Gorman, 2003). Additionally, the text format of many graphic novels using text bubbles and short sentences may be easier to read and less daunting for struggling readers (Little, 2005). In a specific case study, one teacher used graphic novels and comics to teach her English class about transcendentalism. She found the students

who were struggling most in her class improved in both achievement and overall understanding at the end of the unit. And perhaps more importantly, her entire class appeared more engaged and interested throughout the unit (Ruggieri, 2002).

Beyond aiding comprehension and improving interest, graphic novels may be helpful in specific areas of reading instruction. The visual images in graphic novels can support vocabulary development. Students may see an unfamiliar word, but with the help of visual context clues, be able to decode it (Pennella, 2009). Students can use predicting strategies with graphic novels, trying to determine what would likely be the next scene—both through images and text.

Graphic novels can also be beneficial for writing instruction. When students read graphic novels, they become familiar with tone, mood and especially dialogue techniques, which can be transferred to their own writing (O'English et al., 2006). Writing comic books and graphic novels can help students with story mapping, organization, re-phrasing, character development and editing (Morrison et al., 2002). In one case study, a comic book artist worked with at-risk youth to construct individual graphic novels and found that students were extraordinarily engaged during the activity. In addition, they wrote creative and unique stories that illustrated a true understanding of writing techniques (Sturm, 2002). NCTE supports the use of graphic novel and comic book writing to promote 21st century skills, such as clear and effective thinking and media literacy (Barack, 2008).

Additionally, some research has shown that graphic novels and comics are effective in helping English language learners (Carter, 2007a). These students may be able to understand overall concepts and themes, even if they have not yet mastered all the

relevant vocabulary. More specifically, it has been suggested that using Manga as a transitional tool can be very beneficial for Japanese students learning English and vice versa, as many translations exist (Allen & Ingulsrud, 2003).

Advocates suggest the benefits of graphic novels extend beyond literary instruction. Graphic novels today have a place in almost all subject areas, as well as in non-academic areas such as counseling. One of the reasons young readers are so drawn to graphic novels is that so many of them are written about issues relative to teenagers today. While some graphic novels allow a release from reality in superheroes and fantasy adventures, others deal with topics like family relationships, first romances, abuse, homelessness and youth subcultures. Gravett (2005) suggests young readers have even found identities through Charles Schulz's *Peanuts* comic strips, recognizing elements of themselves in the insecurities of Charlie Brown and his friends.

One of the most well-known graphic novels, *The Tale of One Bad Rat*, by Bryan Talbot tells a story of sexual abuse and homelessness surrounding a teenage girl. This story could be used in counseling settings, as adolescents may identify with the strong issues put forth in the story. As Carter (2007b) states, "there are many high-quality graphic novels that focus on important issues relative to teens, and teachers need to be aware of them" (p. 49). Even Manga writers tend to gravitate towards teenage subjects- bullying, friendships, sports and other real-life issues, which have added to their popularity among that age group (Allen & Ingulsrud, 2003).

One of the most noted praises for graphic novels as a literary genre is that many of them have been written about issues of cultural diversity and different world view points. Graphic novels were quick to branch out into themes representing cultures and

ethnicities around the world. Graphic novels are able to make serious comments about culture in a way that is accessible to a wide audience (Ruggieri, 2002). Examples of this include *Persepolis*, *Maus*, and *Fagin the Jew* by Will Eisner. These and other titles allow teachers an easy and modern way to bring discussions on cultural history into their classrooms. Graphic novels can even be used to broach topics of disability. In her essay, Squier argues that two graphic novels, David B's *Epileptic* and Paul and Judy Karasik's *The Ride Together*, challenge contemporary views of disabilities and allow for greater discourse and advocacy (Squier, 2008).

Finally, graphic novels can be applicable in academic subject areas beyond the language arts classroom. Many historical concepts have been written about in graphic novels, such as the American Revolution and World War II. Alternate views on American history have been presented in novels such as *Still I Rise*, edited by Laird, Laird and Bey (1997). This work could be used to promote critical thinking discussions in history and social studies classes (Schwarz, 2002b). Larry Gonick's *The Cartoon History of the Universe*, covers all areas of study, from history and science to humanities (1990-1997). One of the most talked about graphic novels that deals with a rather surprising topic is Larry Gonick and Wollcott Smith's *The Cartoon Guide to Statistics* (1993). Schwarz (2002b) recognizes this as a very useful tool for introducing statistics to high school students in an easy to understand and entertaining manner. Many diversified graphic novels could be used to foster cross-curricular studies, for example, reading *Maus* in English class while studying World War II in social studies.

Reluctance and Concerns with Graphic Novels

Despite the rising popularity of graphic novels, and the numerous benefits and strengths of the genre, there is still a great deal of reluctance among educators and others to use and promote them. Two of the most common reasons for this reluctance are that many perceive graphic novels as too violent and potentially dangerous to young readers, and that graphic novels are not of any real substance as far as literature goes. Much of the fear for immorality in graphic novels still stems from the 1950s backlash against comics. Some people, when they hear the word 'graphic,' immediately think pornographic material. While there are indeed sexually explicit graphic novels, they are no more common than those of other texts (Rudiger & Schliesman, 2007). This perception is often found when adults view Manga, as some of them are potentially offensive. It is important to understand that the majority of Manga are not sexual or violent, and for the few that are, Japanese writing may lean towards this trend due to the fact that the Japanese have a tradition of having clear definitions between reality and fantasy in literature (Schodt, 1996). With other graphic novels that may contain adult content, just as with other books and media, teachers should screen materials before allowing students to read them, and if necessary, get parental permission before using adult-content material in the classroom (Schwarz, 2002b). Librarians in particular are very careful to note that parents and other adults have tried to censor graphic novels such as *Sin City* by Frank Miller and *The Sandman* series by Neil Gaiman. Censorship of graphic novels deserves the same attention and debate as with other texts, as many books found in a public library deal with adult topics such as murder, violence, and sex (Gorman, 2002).

Another complaint against graphic novels is that they are not 'real' books. This is of great concern to many graphic novelists and advocates, who believe that graphic

novels have a great deal of depth, literary merit and cultural significance. Even the idea that they are bridges to ‘real’ books leaves some concerned, as they feel that graphic novels should be considered as ‘real’ as any other type of reading material (Gravett, 2005). Some educators may feel that graphic novels, as nontraditional texts may take away from time that could be spent with more accepted books. With the emphasis on following the curriculum and state standards, this leaves some teachers feeling that using this genre will be frowned upon by others (Morrison et al., 2002). Ways to combine graphic novels with the traditional literary canon will be examined later in the discussion section of this paper.

If graphic novels have such great potential as a learning tool, it is important to determine if teachers are using them with their own students. If so, what are the results, and if not, what is the reasoning behind their reluctance? Students appear to love reading graphic novels at all levels, from Jeff Smith’s *Bone* to various forms of Manga.

According to one newspaper report, librarians have been shouting the praises of graphic novels for 10 years, stating they are hard to keep on the shelves (Bickers, 2007). Even some educators are recommending their use in the classroom. The National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) offers lesson plans for elementary students to create their own graphic novels (Barack, 2008). The Maryland Department of Education has started the Maryland Comic Initiative to create graphic novel lesson plans for educators of all grade levels (Yang, 2008). This study seeks to determine whether or not teachers are following these trends and if not, the reasons behind their reluctance.

Methodology

The purpose of this study was to determine middle and high school language arts teachers' perceptions of graphic novels and if they are using them in their own classrooms. Face to face interviews were conducted to examine these questions and to look at elements that contributed to perceptions about and use of this genre. After interviews were conducted, quantitative and qualitative data was analyzed to provide various suppositions regarding the research topic. The specific details of how this study was carried out are discussed in the following sections.

Participants

Participants in this study were eleven language arts teachers of students grades 7-12. For the purpose of this study, language arts included reading, writing and English instruction, as different schools and departments tend to have separate names for some courses. Two Southeastern Ohio schools were used to recruit potential participants, one middle school and one high school. Upon securing approval from the local university's Institutional Review Board for the use of Human Subjects, teachers were recruited by email after permission was granted from school principals. Emails were sent to all teachers in the English/language arts departments, as well as any teachers in special education departments who taught language arts.

Procedures

Upon agreeing to participate, teachers were contacted to set up a time to conduct the interview. At this meeting, they were asked to sign a consent form, ensuring that all identifiable data would be removed from the final report. Teachers were then asked a series of 10-11 open-ended questions in a one-on-one, face-to-face interview that lasted approximately five minutes. The interviews were audiotaped and later transcribed for

analysis. The interviews took place at the school buildings at times convenient to the participants, with the exception of one interview that took place at a local university to accommodate the participant's schedule.

Instrument

The interview questions were designed to look at two elements of graphic novel use in schools. Are teachers using graphic novels and how do teachers perceive this genre? Three questions were designed to acquire background demographic information about the participants and their classrooms. These questions included what grades they were teaching, how many years they taught language arts and what percentage of their students receive special education services. The remaining questions focused on how familiar teachers were with the graphic novel genre, how popular they were among students, if they were used in lesson planning/activities, what criteria would be important in deciding which graphic novels to use and how teachers view the genre overall. For the actual interview questions, see Appendix A.

Data Analysis

Due to the small number of participants, any interview question that could be analyzed using quantitative analysis, such as how long a teacher had been instructing language arts, was calculated by hand. After interviews were transcribed from audiotape, the majority of questions were analyzed qualitatively. This method allowed for more insight into specific reasoning and views behind the use of this genre by teachers. Common themes were identified from the responses, such as criteria for using graphic novels and positive, negative or neutral overall perceptions. Data was also analyzed across categories, for example, looking at whether the number of years teaching affected

how teachers viewed graphic novels, or whether teachers who had a large number of students with special needs tended to use graphic novels more often than other teachers.

Specific results are discussed in the following section.

Results

In this section, the results from each demographic question are reported individually, followed by results relative to themes gathered from all responses. Both quantitative and qualitative data including quotations by participants were derived from the interviews. Actual interview questions can be found in Appendix A. A total of 11 language arts teachers participated in this study.

The first question asked teachers what grades they are currently teaching. Several teachers reported instructing more than one grade level. Results are shown in Table 1.

Table 1

Grades Taught by Participants

Grade taught	Number of teachers
7th	4
8th	5
9th	1
10th	1
11th	1

12th

2

The second question asked how many years participants had been teaching language arts. Responses were broken down into less than 5, 5-10, 11-15 and more than 15 years. The range of responses was 1 to 25 years. The majority of participants had been teaching for 10 years or less. Results are shown in Table 2.

Table 2

Years of Language Arts Instruction by Participants

Number of years teaching language arts	Number of teachers
<5 years	4
5-10 years	3
11-15 years	2
>15 years	2

The third question was designed to determine whether there was any connection between teaching students who receive services for special education in reading (who may be struggling readers,) and using graphic novels in the classroom. Some research suggests that students with limited skills in reading may benefit greatly from the visual components of graphic novels (Beers et al., 2007). It is important to note that teachers

were not asked to identify exactly what percentage of their students fit this category, so some responses were estimated. Eight responses fell between less than 5% and up to 25%, and three participants responded that 100% of their students receive special education services. Results are reported in Table 3.

Table 3

Students Receiving Special Education Services in Language Arts as Reported by Participants

% of students receiving services	Number of responses
< 5%	3
5-15%	2
16-25%	3
100%	3

The remaining interview questions specifically addressed the research questions. Question number four asked whether or not participants were familiar with graphic novels as a genre. Responses were mostly limited to yes and no answers, with eight teachers (73%) reporting that they were familiar with the genre, two (18%) reporting that they were not and one (9%) elaborated by stating: “Only very minimally, they look like comic strips but have a higher reading level, I think.”

Question five was designed to determine teachers' familiarity with graphic novels, asking participants if they could name a few popular graphic novels. Answers to this question were used to determine how familiar teachers actually were with the genre as well as which graphic novels might be more popular and well-known, perhaps explaining how they are being promoted by advocates. Six teachers (55%) were not able to name any specific graphic novels, although one stated that they had “seen some in the library based on historic events,” which suggests that librarians may be promoting books of this nature. Five teachers (45%) were able to list the names of some graphic novels. The titles mentioned are listed in Table 4.

Table 4

Graphic Novel Titles and Authors (if available) Known to Language Arts Teachers

Maus: A Survivor's Tale by Art Spiegelman (mentioned by 2 teachers)

A graphic novel form of *Hamlet* by William Shakespeare, artist unknown

Bone by Jeff Smith

The Watchmen by Alan Moore and Dave Gibbons (“only from the recent movie”)

City of Light and Dark, author unknown

Persepolis by Marjane Satrapi

Question six asked whether or not participants had read any graphic novels themselves. Nine teachers (82%) reported they had not read a graphic novel, while two (18%) had. One of the two teachers who had read them stated, “A few, but I have read lots of comic books and comics.” One of the teachers who had not read any graphic

novels stated, “I tried to, but it wasn’t my style. I haven’t ever been able to get into them.” The remaining participants did not expand upon their responses to this question.

For comparison, teachers were next asked to approximate how many of their students read graphic novels independently. Answers are divided into four sections: I’m not sure, None, A few, and Many of them, based on typical responses. Results are listed in Table 5. Unfortunately, there was not time during this study to determine how many students read graphic novels independently in the classroom, which would have provided very useful comparison data.

Table 5

Teachers' Predictions of How Many Students Read Graphic Novels Independently

Teacher Predictions	Number of Responses
I’m not sure	3
None	1 (“none that I’m aware of”)
A few	4
Many of them	3

The eighth question asked participants whether they had every used graphic novels as part of a lesson plan or class activity. Ten teachers (91%) had not used them, and one (9%) had. They were also asked why they had or had not used this genre in their classes. Some of the teachers who had not used graphic novels provided their reasoning.

One teacher stated, “Only recently have school librarians started to include them in purchases. Access would be my main reason and the fact that I haven’t really read any of them myself.” Another responded, “No, but the Accelerated Reader program includes some of them in choices of books.” A third said, “No, I’m just not familiar enough with them.” And finally, “No, but I have thought about it. It might be a handy teaching tool. I don’t know where to get the resources to use them.”

The one teacher who had used graphic novels in the classroom responded by saying, “We used *Romeo and Juliet* and it made the subject more approachable.” This teacher was also asked how the students responded to the activity, and the answer was simply, “positive.”

Participants were next asked what criteria they would use to determine whether or not to use graphic novels in their classrooms. Responses were varied, and ranged from appropriate reading level to student interests. Summarized responses are listed in Table 6 along with the number of times a participant mentioned each criteria.

Table 6

Teachers' criteria for deciding to use graphic novels in their classrooms

Criteria for deciding to use graphic novels	Number of responses
Connection to curriculum/unit	5
Reading/grade level	5
Ties in to state/district standards	3
Well-written	1

Complex ideas and language	1
Included in the Accelerated Reader program	1
Of interest to students	6
Appropriate subject for school	3
Appropriate vocabulary (no adult-language)	1

The final question asked teachers to describe their overall perception of graphic novels as a literary genre. Responses were separated into three categories: neutral perception, positive perception and negative perception. Two participants (18%) had a neutral view of graphic novels. One explained, “If they fit in with standards, they would be okay. I’m really not familiar with them.” A second reported, “I need to be more familiar with these books before I could decide whether to use them with my students.”

Two participants (18%) had a more negative view of graphic novels. One responded by saying, “I don’t like reading them. I find that they are hard to get into, so it would be hard to use them in my classroom.” The second explained, “I don’t know much about them. I feel that sometimes they are too violent for my students.”

The majority (64%) of the participants reported more positive perceptions of graphic novels. Some responses addressed their novelty, “They would be a nice break for kids.” “I like them myself.” Others confirmed the benefit of reaching reluctant readers. ““I hope I’m never too old and stuffy to look at anything that would be helpful to get kids to read.” And, “Many students that wouldn’t read otherwise read them, but I also have avid readers who read them as well.” Finally, “I think they would reach more reluctant readers, and they seem modern to kids.” One teacher addressed the issue of using visuals

to enhance comprehension by saying, “Some students have trouble creating images of stories in their heads when they read. I think graphic novels may help them by providing these images.”

An additional level of analysis was done using participant responses to look at patterns and trends that emerged from all responses. For example, do teachers who read graphic novels themselves have a more positive perception of them? Have teachers who instruct a large number of students with reading disabilities use graphic novels more or less often than other teachers? Unfortunately, due to the small sample size and consistent unfamiliarity with this genre, it is difficult to identify many trends along these lines, and therefore difficult to make any generalizations. However, some descriptions of the emerging patterns are discussed in the following sections.

Does the number of years teaching affect how likely a teacher is to use graphic novels with their students?

According to these results, there is no connection between years spent teaching and use of graphic novels. The one teacher who had used them had been teaching language arts for three years. No other teachers had used them, so it makes it difficult to analyze this issue any further. Additionally, the researcher considered if the number of years teaching affected how teachers perceive graphic novels. Again, it appeared there was no connection between number of years teaching and overall perceptions of graphic novels. However, it is interesting to note that the most positive and insightful responses came from a participant who had been teaching for 24 years. Results are shown in Table 7.

Table 7

Number of Years Teaching Language Arts and the Impact on Perception of Graphic Novels

Number of Years Teaching	Negative Perception	Neutral Perception	Positive Perception
<5 years	1	1	3
5-10 years		1	1
11-15 years	1		1
>15 years			2

Do teachers of different grade levels use and/or perceive graphic novels differently from their colleagues?

Again, because only one teacher had actually used graphic novels as a teaching tool, it is impossible to determine if grade level taught affects the decision to do so. Data between grades and perceptions was analyzed and reported in Table 8. It should be noted that some teachers reported teaching more than one grade, so their responses are included in each grade level where they are currently teaching. Interestingly, all teachers above the 8th grade level reported a positive perception of graphic novels.

Table 8

Grades Taught and the Impact on Perception of Graphic Novels

Grade taught	Negative Perception	Neutral Perception	Positive Perception
7th	1	1	2
8th	2	1	2
9th			1
10th			1
11th			1
12th			2

Do teachers use graphic novels more frequently with students who receive special education services for language arts?

The third interview question dealt with students who receive special education services for language arts. Due to the fact that only one teacher reported using graphic novels, there can be no connection drawn between teaching potentially struggling readers and using these books in the classroom. However, data was examined to see if teachers reported more or less of their students reading graphic novels independently in classes where many students were identified as having disabilities in reading. Of the three teachers who reported having less than 5% of students receiving special education services, one of them reported that none of their students read these books on their own, and the other two reported they were not sure how many read them. On the other hand, of

the three teachers who taught in classes where 100% of students received special education services, one of them reported that a few of the students read graphic novels independently, and the other two reported that many of their students read them. This may suggest a connection between struggling readers and graphic novels as a preferred choice of literature.

Does reading graphic novels independently impact teachers' perceptions of them?

The one participant who had used them in a lesson had read a few independently and had a positive view of the genre. The other teacher who had read them independently also had a very positive view of graphic novels. Of the remaining teachers who had not read any graphic novels, five had positive views, two had negative views and two had neutral perceptions of them.

Overall, it appears that the majority of teachers are not using graphic novels in their classrooms. Only one out of eleven (9%) had used them as a teaching tool. Teachers reported a variety of reasons for not using graphic novels, one of the most common being unfamiliarity with the genre. On the other hand, the majority (64%) of teachers had positive perceptions of graphic novels. Teachers reported a variety of criteria to consider should they use graphic novels in their future classes, including interest level, adherence to curriculum and reading level. Next, the results from this study will be discussed and examined further in relation to implications for practice.

Discussion

As a result of such a small sample size ($n = 11$) in this study, it is difficult to generalize how educators use and view graphic novels. However, it is clear that, based on the above results, the majority of teachers are not using these books in their classrooms.

Only one of the eleven participants had ever used a graphic novel in a lesson. Only two of the eleven had actually read one independently. Less than half of the participants were able to name a popular graphic novel, and two of the participants were not even familiar with the genre prior to the start of the interview. These results are not surprising. James Bucky Carter states in the introduction to his book, *Building Literary Connections with Graphic Novels: Page by Page, Panel by Panel* (2007), “published studies by English language arts teachers who have used graphic novels in their classes have been relatively rare.” On the other hand, the majority (n = 7) of the participants in this study reported positive perceptions of graphic novels as a genre, citing several different reasons for this view. The question then arises, if the majority of teachers feel graphic novels could be beneficial in the classroom, why are they not being used? What is contributing to their reluctance to use these books? And finally, how could teachers effectively use graphic novels in their classrooms more often? These and other questions brought forth by this study will now be discussed.

There are several reasons why teachers are not using graphic novels in their classes, but perhaps the most common reason reported in this study is that they are not familiar enough with the genre. Little (2005) states that the most prominent reason for teachers' reluctance to use graphic novels is, “most teachers either don't know what comics do, or aren't familiar enough with the medium to make good choices” (¶ 1). Indeed, lack of familiarity was mentioned four times by participants in this study. One teacher stated specifically the reason behind not using them was, “I'm just not familiar enough with them.” This lack of knowledge as to what graphic novels are and how they can be used for may be attributed to many different things, such as teachers not reading

graphic novels independently, lack of research on the topic, not enough promotion by reading specialists and school librarians, or an existing cultural prejudice against the genre that keeps these books from entering mainstream use, although research suggests this trend has been changing for some time.

Another reason mentioned by participants for not using graphic novels is that they are not reading these books themselves. One participant mentioned that upon trying to read one, she found that it “just wasn’t my style.” This is a rather unfortunate statement, in that it may reflect a lack of attention to student choice and interest in the classroom. Certainly educators should promote a variety of literature in their classrooms, not just books they themselves enjoy. Carter (2007b) writes about Manga specifically, “Manga is to teachers today what music videos were a generation ago: something of import to students that we shouldn’t ignore, even if we might not ever ‘get’ it” (p. 50).

Another participant stated, “the fact that I haven’t really read any of them myself,” as a reason for not using them in the classroom. Again, this may be cause for concern, as it imposes strict limits on young readers. Many graphic novels have been written for adult audiences, and perhaps these could be examined by teachers to increase student interest. Paul Gravett’s book *Graphic Novels: Stories to Change Your Life* (2005) provides a very comprehensive (and visually interesting) summary of many popular graphic novels for readers of all ages and interests.

Two participants mentioned a lack of access to graphic novels as a reason for not using them in the classroom. One stated graphic novels had just recently been included in the school library and the other stated, “I don’t know where to get the resources to use them.” There is actually a strong push by librarians to promote graphic novels among

young readers (Bickers, 2007). One of the most useful resources for graphic novels and graphic novel lesson activities can be found in Michele Gorman's book, *Getting Graphic! Using Graphic Novels to Promote Literacy with Preteens and Teens* (2003). In this book, Gorman lists graphic novels for different grade levels as well as for different subject areas. She also lists and describes several organization contacts and websites to learn more about graphic novels. Like any new, exciting teaching tool, research and increased promotion will help teachers to be able to find the resources they require to use these books with their students.

One participant mentioned a fear of violence and inappropriate content as a reason for not using graphic novels in the classroom. This viewpoint was echoed in some of the literature reviewed for this study. Authors and graphic novel advocates were quick to note that almost all books in most genres can contain adult material, and graphic novels need to be looked at one at a time, to see if they are appropriate for the intended audience (Rudiger & Schliesman, 2007). There are many graphic novels intended for adolescent readers that contain no overly violent or sexual material. These include the *Bone* series by Jeff Smith, the *Akiko* series by Mark Crilley and the *Leave it to Chance* series by James Robinson and Paul Smith (Gorman, 2002). Pulitzer Prize winner Art Spiegelman has published a series for very young readers, *Little Lit: Strange Stories for Strange Kids* with his wife Francoise Mouly. There are even graphic novels for more conservative or religious classrooms, such as *Visitations* by Scott Morris and the *Left Behind* series by John S. Layman and Tim F. LaHaye. In many public and school libraries, graphic novels are given ratings, such as M for mature if they contain violence or partial nudity (Gorman, 2003). With a little extra time and attention, teachers can make sure that any

graphic novels used in their classroom are safe and appropriate for their students, just as they would with any other text.

It is interesting to note that no teachers mentioned a fear of breaking with the traditional literary canon or curriculum as a reason for not using graphic novels. The literature raises this as a common concern for educators. According to Morrison et al., (2002), “they [teachers] fear that such a nontraditional approach denies students time during which they could gain additional exposure to the canon. It can be difficult to validate outcomes of popular culture experiences in terms of teachers’ goals and objectives” (p. 758). While this idea did not seem to be a concern shared by the participants in this study, adherences to standards and curriculum were important criteria identified by teachers if they were to use these books in their own classes. To alleviate this concern, several resources are available for teachers to integrate graphic novels into the curriculum, including combining graphic novels with traditional literature to promote discussion and critical thinking. These strategies will be discussed further in this section.

Of course, a question arises as to whether or not teachers really should be using graphic novels as teaching tools. As the previously reviewed literature suggests, there are many possible benefits of using these books that range from assisting struggling readers to provoking cultural discourse and critical thinking. One of the best ways to get reluctant readers to start reading is to find literature that is of interest to them. It appears from this study that students, especially those who receive services for special education, choose to read graphic novels independently, certainly more often than their teachers. In two of the three classes with 100% of students receiving special education services, teachers

reported that many of their students were reading graphic novels on their own. These students are often reluctant to read any books independently.

During an interview with a local graphic artist, Sandy Plunkett reported that he has dyslexia and did not read at all until he started reading comics (Personal communication, May 2009). If students are enjoying these books, and there is a great deal of anecdotal evidence that their use can help improve reading ability, teachers should consider using them in their classes.

Moreover, graphic novels can be useful in promoting multiple literacies, such as critical and cultural literacies. These are becoming more important today as classrooms are becoming more diverse, and more expectations are being placed on students to be creative and independent thinkers. According to Schwarz (2002b), “an important benefit of graphic novels is that they present alternative views of culture, history and human life in general in accessible ways, giving voice to minorities and those with diverse viewpoints” (§ 9).

Finally, graphic novels are a great tool for supporting media literacy. Again, Schwarz (2002b) states, “students can explore such questions as how color affects emotions, how pictures can stereotype people, how angles of viewing affect perception, and how realism or the lack of it plays into the message of a work” (§ 8). Graphic novels are an effective tool to get students to move between visual media such as the Internet and television and traditional written books (Little, 2005).

Thus, it appears there are benefits to using graphic novels in the classroom, the majority of teachers feel they are a positive medium, but few teachers are actually using them as a tool. Therefore, it is necessary to identify ways and resources for teachers to

begin using graphic novels in everyday classroom activities, while paying attention to the criteria they have identified as being important when determining which texts to use.

One of the easiest ways for teachers to use graphic novels is to help students learn specific reading strategies and to teach components of text, such as tone, character and plot. Graphic novels and comics can be effective tools for teaching about dialogue, as the majority of text represents speech between characters (O'English et al., 2006). Most graphic novels have a clear combination of first and third person writing that can easily be identified by where and how the text is presented. Using dialogue in graphic novels could be a useful way to teach younger readers and writers about the difference between the two perspectives. One of the participants in this study mentioned using graphic novels in reader's theatre activities as a possibility, and an attention to dialogue would make such an activity easy to do and entertaining for students. Graphic novelist Will Eisner's book *Comics & Sequential Art*, (1985), showcases many of the different ways that artists present story elements and perspectives through images and layout. It provides some actual examples of representing tone, mood, and other concepts that could be used by teachers.

Graphic novels can be used to support vocabulary instruction. Vocabulary is best learned when presented through multiple modes, such as visual, auditory and written (Bromley, 2002). Graphic novels accomplish this by using images to support words. Students may see an unfamiliar word, but are able to derive its meaning through a picture associated with that particular panel (Pennella, 2008).

Graphic novels such as Marjane Satrapi's *Persepolis* have been used to promote reading strategies in accordance with NCTE standards that include, "applying a wide

range of strategies to comprehend, interpret, evaluate, and appreciate texts” (Spangler, 2009, p. 5). Images from Spiegelman’s *Maus*, such as one where the characters are walking along a road shaped like a Nazi swastika, not knowing which direction to go, could be used to promote discussion on imagery, metaphor and mood in ways that traditional text could not (Hassett & Schieble, 2007). Several websites exist for finding specific lesson plans for using graphic novels in reading instruction, and Carter’s (2007) book *Building Literacy Connections with Graphic Novels: Page by Page, Panel by Panel*, offers detailed lessons for this as well.

Teachers may also find it useful and motivating to use graphic novels in writing instruction. According to authors Morrison et al, in their article *Using student-generated comic books in the classroom* (2002), “constructing a comic book requires students to determine what is most important from their readings, to re-phrase it succinctly, and the to organize it logically” (p. 759). This same article provides step-by-step instructions for students to create their own comic books based on a variety of subjects and provides research-based evidence for success. The National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) offers a downloadable lesson plan for using student-created graphic novels of short stories (Barack, 2008). Artist Will Sturm (2002) provides an anecdotal account of teaching at-risk youth in Seattle how to create their own comics, stating, “the teacher was astonished by the energy and enthusiasm her students were able to maintain throughout the week.” Sturm’s article appears on the website www.teachingcomics.org, which is a useful tool for teachers created by the National Association of Comics Arts Educators.

Connection to the curriculum was mentioned five times by participants as a criterion for determining whether or not to use a graphic novel in a lesson plan. In most

instances, a typical language arts curriculum leans more towards traditional literature for lessons and activities. However, graphic novels can be used in place of or even better, to compliment traditional texts. According to Little (2005) “comics still examine the universal themes that are most often engaged in classrooms through novels” (§ 13). Many graphic novelists write about significant issues, and there is as much variety in the genre as in any other literary genre. Carter (2007a) provides several examples of pairing a graphic novel with a traditional book, such as Marjane Satrapi’s *Persepolis* and *Before We Were Free*, by Julia Alvarez to discuss family issues. Also shown is a way to combine Nathaniel Hawthorne’s *The Scarlet Letter* with *The Amazing “True” Story of a Teenage Mom*, by Katharine Arnoldi to discuss the history of women and stereotypes. There is even an example of using the *X-Men* comic series with Dante’s *The Inferno*. The “Manga Shakespeare” series, including *Romeo and Juliet*, illustrated by Sonia Leong presents the actual Shakespearean text along with Manga-style illustrations. There are many graphic novel adaptations of classic literature, from *Beowulf* to *Moby Dick* (Gorman, 2003). Not only are these entertaining to students, but also they provide the same stories without the intimidation often found from such lengthy and complicated classics. By using these and other graphic novels, teachers can still follow the curriculum and cover the same required concepts and standards while maintaining student interest and excitement in the classroom.

Finally, graphic novels can be used across curriculum, between different subject and content areas. According to Little, (2005) there are graphic novels addressing topics from “evolution and physics, to world history and the Civil Rights Movement” (§ 10). Michele Gorman’s book *Getting Graphic! Using Graphic Novels to Promote Literacy*

with Preteens and Teens (2003,) lists several graphic novels that provide historical accounts, either through non-fictional or biographical perspectives. Websites such as www.rationalmagic.com/Comics/Comics.html also list graphic novels for young readers by subject.

If these and other strategies inspire teachers to use graphic novels in their classes, what additional resources are available to find out more information? It is evidenced by this study that teachers are not leading the way in promoting graphic novels. Rather, it is students, librarians and bookstores that are moving them forward (Bickers, 2007). School and public librarians may be the best resource for teachers to increase their knowledge and comfort level. They have been creating special displays for young readers, adding to already extensive collections and even conducting research on graphic novels and literacy. Articles are being written in library journals that include suggestions for librarians to set up staff-support meetings with teachers to promote and explain these books, as well as to provide research-based evidence for their place in the school library (Rudiger & Schliesman, 2007). According to this study, reading level and accessibility were major criteria for choosing graphic novels, and it could be beneficial of librarians to provide reading/grade levels on some of the more popular novels in order to make this process easier for teachers.

Some advocates suggest that librarians and college educators should provide teacher pre-service training to give teachers an early start and eliminate any misconceptions or prejudices against the genre (O'English et al., 2006). Teachers should check the nearest college or university to see if any continuing education courses are offered on graphic novels or other non-traditional texts. There may be online seminars

and discussion boards for professionals as well. Many very useful resource books are available for teachers interested in using graphic novels. Those referenced in this study and a few additional books are listed in Table 9.

Table 9

Book Resources for Teachers by Title

Building Literary Connections with Graphic Novels: Page by Page, Panel by Panel by James Bucky Carter, 2007

Comics and Sequential Art by Will Eisner, 1985

Dreamland Japan: Writings on Modern Manga by Frederick Schodt, 1996

Getting Graphic! Using Graphic Novels to Promote Literacy with Preteens and Teens by Michele Gorman, 2003

Graphic Novels: Stories to Change Your Life by Paul Gravett, 2005

Understanding Comics: The Invisible Art by Scott McCloud, 1994

101 Best Graphic Novels by Stephen Weiner, 2001

Overall, teachers need to pick up a few graphic novels and read them independently. There are many topics to choose from, so there is bound to be something of interest to everyone. Once teachers have a better feel for these books, they can bring them into their classes and connect with their students on a much higher level.

Limitations and Recommendations for Further Research

There are clearly several limitations to this study, the most significant being sample size. While it was possible to make a few assumptions based on these results, it was impossible to make generalizations that could be applied to all teachers. There may in fact be many teachers who are using graphic novels in their classes on a regular basis. Even with the small sample size, a more in depth interview would have been helpful, perhaps asking teachers for more specifics on their perceptions of graphic novels and comparing them to how they view traditional literature choices. It would have been interesting to interview students on the same subjects as well, and compare their responses with those of their teachers.

Because only one participant of the eleven had actually used graphic novels in a lesson, it was difficult to determine how effective such an activity could or would be. While that teacher reported a positive response from the students, this does not provide enough information to generalize to other cases. In a larger study, perhaps more examples of using graphic novels could be compared. It would be interesting and useful to conduct a larger, similar study to this one, as it would provide much needed information. According to Carter (2007a), there have been no studies that examine "teachers' beliefs and attitudes concerning graphic novels; we have no clear idea of why teachers might be hesitant to use them" (p. 20).

Most of the literature reviewed for this study provided anecdotal evidence for promoting the use of graphic novels. While student interest and possible benefits are important factors, actual, empirical evidence of improving student literacy is needed before these books can truly be accepted in educational settings. Studies need to be done to see if graphic novels actually motivate reluctant readers to start reading and if they do

act as a “bridge” to traditional literature. Studies should also be done on how well these books help improve reading comprehension and fluency for struggling readers, and how well they promote visual learning. Today’s emphasis on evidence-based support for all school activities makes these studies essential if graphic novel advocates ever want these books to become part of the traditional literary canon. According to Carter, (2007b) “the dearth of essays on specific graphic novel titles in NCTE journals and elsewhere suggests that the transformatative power of many graphic novels to help adolescents related to adolescent issues is still relatively unexplored” (p. 50). Carter recommends teachers who use graphic novels make an effort to publish their lesson plans so that others can try them out and report on their own student outcomes.

Conclusion

The information provided by this study is not surprising. While the majority of the literature on graphic novels emphasizes their benefits, the authors typically write that there is still a great deal of work to be done if these novels will be accepted in the classroom. According to Little (2005), the "admiration for comics and their creators has not been widespread among educators" (¶ 1). Indeed, the results of this study suggest that teachers are not using graphic novels as educational tools, even if their students may benefit from doing so. The main reasons cited by participants in this study for not using graphic novels in their classes included lack of familiarity with the genre and lack of availability or resources. In the literature, other reasons for reluctance include fear of inappropriateness and perceptions that graphic novels are not 'real' literature. One participant mentioned that she felt graphic novels may be inappropriate, but none of the participants felt that graphic novels were not a significant form of literature.

Despite not using them in the classroom, the majority of teachers did report a positive perception of graphic novels. 64% of participants felt that graphic novels could be useful in one way or another for their students. Only 18% reported a negative perception. Teachers stressed certain criteria as being important should they choose to use graphic novels in their classrooms, namely appropriate reading level, connection to the school curriculum and interest to students. The majority of teachers appeared to be open to using graphic novels if they meet these criteria.

As a result of this study, it can be concluded that teachers are not using graphic novels in their classrooms on a regular basis. This choice is not as much due to a negative perception, but as to a lack of familiarity with these books and how to use them as teaching tools. There are several important steps that teachers can take to use these and other non-traditional texts more often and appropriately. Their students will be interested and may benefit from the unique ways in which graphic novels present their content. First of all, teachers should talk to school librarians. Librarians appear to be one of the strongest group of graphic novel advocates (Gorman, 2003). They may have access to reviews and promotional ideas, as well as ideas on how to connect graphic novels to the school curriculum. Teachers should also take advantage of some of the resources available that rate and separate graphic novels by subject/age level. A few of these resources have been listed in this study, in Table 9, but a wider range is available on the Internet and in libraries. Finally, teachers should read a few graphic novels themselves. They may be surprised to find how interesting and engaging they can be. Teachers should not be discouraged if they struggle at first with the visual format of graphic novels. There are so many topics and styles available today that eventually, even the least visual/media-

minded person can become interested. It is likely that teachers will discover what their students already know, that graphic novels are worthy of attention, both in and out of the classroom.

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Appendix

Interview Questions

1. What grade(s) are you currently teaching?
2. How many years have you been teaching language arts?
3. What percentage of your students are identified as receiving services for special education in reading/language arts?
4. Are you familiar with graphic novels as a literature genre?
5. Can you name a few popular graphic novels?
6. Have you ever read any graphic novels independently?
7. How many of your students read graphic novels independently?
8. Have you ever used graphic novels as part of a lesson or unit plan? Why or why not?
9. If you have used graphic novels in your classroom, can you describe the student responses?
10. What criteria would you use when determining whether or not to use graphic novels in your instructional planning?
11. What is your overall perception of graphic novels?