

## Searching for Graphic Novels in Literacy Texts

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### Abstract

Two literacy teacher educators charged with teaching literacy to preservice elementary teachers discovered the potential of graphic novels for supporting multimodal comprehension and Internet navigation among students. Reviewing their adopted texts, they found almost nothing about graphic novels and questioned whether this was the case in other texts. They conducted a review of a semi-random collection of literacy texts published since 2000 to determine how graphic novels are treated in those texts. Results indicated that 73% of the texts made no mention of graphic novels, and only two suggested specific strategies for use with graphic novels. This paper discussed the plan of action the researchers implemented to include graphic novels in their curriculum, as well as implications of their findings.

**Keywords:** graphic novels, literacy texts, multimodal reading, visual strategies, synthesizing strategies

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### Introduction

When my copy of Shaun Tan's (2007) *The Arrival* came in the mail, I (Barbara, the first author) quickly sat down to read it. I first learned about the book while reading an article published in *The Reading Teacher*. The article strongly suggested that graphic novels (GNs) could be useful in helping students learn to negotiate our multimodal world, especially reading on the Internet (Dallacqua, Kersten, & Rhoads, 2015). I already had an interest in this topic and was well aware of Leu et al.'s (2015) research, which showed that adolescents were not at all skilled with determining how to negotiate the multimodal World Wide Web. "If GNs will help," I thought, "I need to learn more about them."

Sitting down with *The Arrival*, I was unprepared for what I found. I paged through the book, completely lost. The book had no words at all; it was a story completely told in sepia-toned paintings. I read it once with very little understanding of what was happening in the book. I realized I had no idea how to make sense of a complicated text with no words. Then, I read it a second time, and I slowly began to understand how to read this GN so that it made sense. I studied each image carefully, metacognitively connected it to the preceding and subsequent images, and made inferences within and across images. It occurred to me that if I, an expert reader, struggled with reading a GN, it was likely a challenge among preservice elementary teachers. I took my copy of *The Arrival* into my adolescent literacy class, and as

I expected, the students found it difficult to comprehend.

My experiences with *The Arrival*, coupled with Dallacqua et al.'s (2015) suggestion to use GNs as tools to scaffold the reading of multimodal text and Serafini's (2014) concept of "multimodal ensembles" (pp. 12-13), sparked more questions and led me to complete two tasks. First, I read everything I could find on GNs. Second, I contacted Maribeth (the second author), a colleague who taught in the same teacher preparation program and had similar interests regarding technology integration and media literacy. Maribeth also began reading GN literature, and we shared insights in face-to-face and email conversations over a period of months. During this time, Maribeth confided that her granddaughter professed to hate GNs and could not explain exactly why.

Through our study, we learned that GNs were used to support reading comprehension among struggling readers (Hughes, King, Perkins, & Fuke, 2011; Matthews, 2011; Smetana, 2010) and English language learners (Danzak, 2011; Park, 2016). GNs were also used as tools to assist with teaching difficult concepts in science, math, and social studies (Brozo, 2012, 2013; Matthews, 2011). Furthermore, we discovered that librarians (Galley, 2004; Mooney, 2002; Williams & Peterson, 2009) and English teachers (Carter, 2007; Cook, 2017) had been promoting and using GNs for a number of years.

In light of these revelations, we essentially looked at each other and said, "We're reading 'experts!' How could we not know about graphic novels?" We both completed the same master's and doctoral degree programs that had a reading focus and could not recall any readings or learning activities about GNs in either of these graduate programs. We also reviewed the textbooks we used in the reading courses we taught among preservice elementary teachers and realized that none of them offered more than a mention of GNs. None of these textbooks provided strategies regarding how to

read or use GNs in the classroom. We were convinced that students needed more support with how to make sense of GNs (Monnin, 2010; Serafini, 2014). Barbara's struggle with *The Arrival*, Maribeth's concern that her granddaughter hated reading GNs, and the lack of attention to GNs in reading textbooks ultimately became the impetus for this study.

## Literature Review

Comics and GNs became hugely popular among many young people long before they gained serious attention within the education community (Galley, 2004; Williams & Peterson, 2009). From 1940-1960, a campaign was waged against comics, citing them as morally corrupt (McCloud, 1994; Novak, 2014; Sabeti, 2013). GNs, which evolved from comics, have been perceived as simple texts with no literary value (Galley, 2004), thus engendering an attitude of dismissal by many educators and researchers (Clark, 2013; Jimenez & Meyer, 2016). Additionally, the predominance of GN use to lessen the vocabulary load for struggling readers and English Language Learners has led many educators to believe that GNs were just simplistic versions of real literature (Galley, 2004).

Clark (2013) introduced preservice teachers to GNs as legitimate literary works and found that preservice teachers personally enjoyed GNs and saw a use for them in the classroom. Despite this finding, most preservice teachers in the study indicated that they would not be inclined to use them in their classrooms because they feared losing credibility with their colleagues, administrators, and community members. Several other researchers (e.g., Clark & Camica, 2014; Matthews, 2011; Schwarz, 2009) discussed similar attempts to introduce preservice teachers to GNs that failed to develop significant positive responses. These findings indicated that preservice teachers had already taken notice of the dismissive and negative attitudes towards GNs.

At first, we thought perhaps other teacher preparation programs or reading textbooks might be addressing GNs, even though ours were not. After reflecting on our school visits and student teacher observations conducted during the past ten years, we realized that neither of us have seen any indication that GNs were commonly used as classroom texts. With this in mind, we questioned, “Do teachers receive any type of training regarding use of GNs? As teacher educators, were we the only ones not addressing GNs during teacher preparation, or was this a systemic omission?” From these questions, we designed this study to provide insights concerning how GNs were addressed within common reading textbooks used during teacher preparation.

### **Rationale for Design of Study**

We designed this study with the concepts that underlie action research. Action research has long been a staple of professional development for teachers trying to understand their own practice at all levels (Noffke, 1997). Ferrance (2000) offered a summarizing description of action research:

Educators are working in their own environment, with their own students, on problems that affect them directly. They are at the place where research and practice intersect and real change can occur. Results of their actions can be seen first-hand, and they can build on this information. (p. 29)

Mills (2000) further clarified that action research was “any system of inquiry conducted by teacher researchers, principals, school counselors, or other stakeholders in the teaching/learning environment to gather information about the ways that their particular schools operate, how they teach, and how well their students learn” (p. 6). Mills categorized two types of action research: critical action research and practical action research. Critical action research investigates previously unchallenged assumptions with a postmodernist view, while practical action research entails a

self-examination of professional practice with the purpose of continuous improvement. As researchers, we felt our study had a strong foothold in both approaches. It was with this understanding and concern for our own teacher preparation practices, multimodal literacies, and GNs that we developed the following research question: To what extent does a semi-random collection of recently published textbooks for reading instruction in teacher preparation programs treat or discuss the use of GNs in K-12 classrooms?

## **Method**

### **Selection of Texts**

The teacher preparation program at the university where we work requires successful completion of five literacy/reading courses and two language arts courses (see Appendix A). As a result, we had shelves full of reading textbooks, including texts currently being used, previous editions of those texts, and texts received from publishers to review for adoption. To achieve the purpose of our study, we decided to review each of these texts for material related to GNs. In order to ensure relevance with our findings, we limited our sample to include the most recent editions of texts published from the year 2000 forward. As shown in Appendix B, our sample consisted of 26 reading textbooks.

### **Data Collection and Analysis**

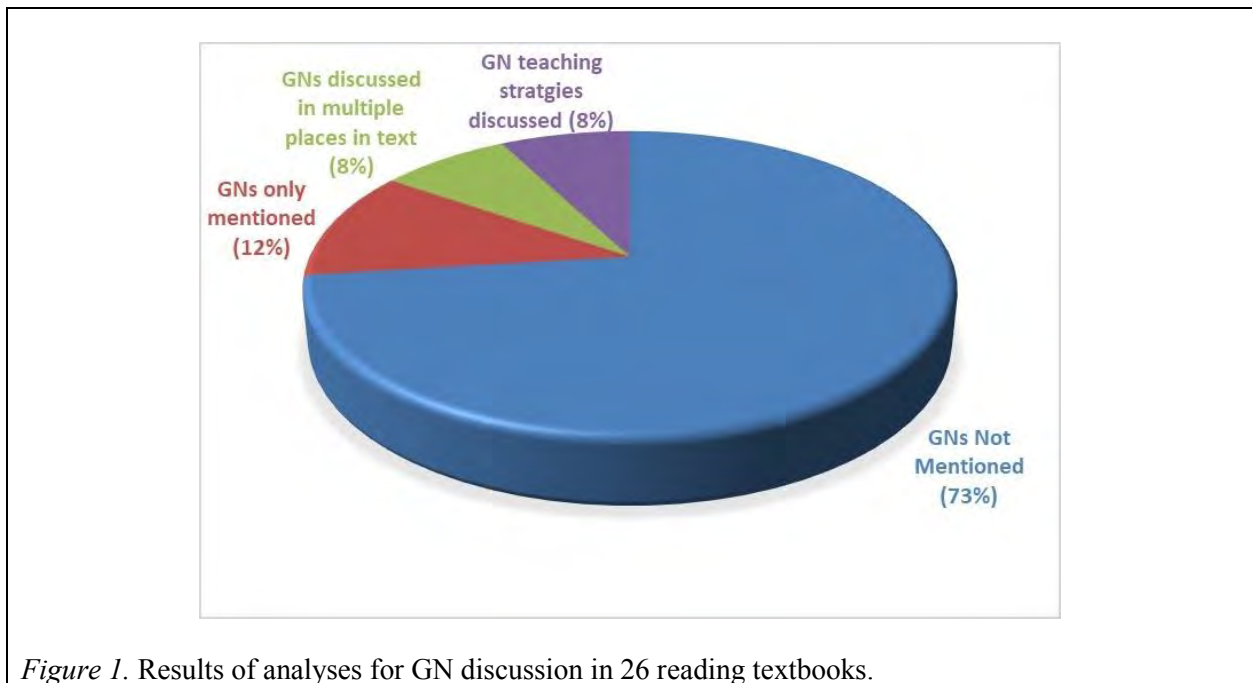
We reviewed reading textbooks individually and recorded our independent analyses in a single table. The table organized the textbooks in individual rows with the following columns: Grade/Age Level, GN Mentioned, Other Nontraditional Genres, GN Discussion, and Specific GN Strategies and Lesson Ideas. The review process for each textbook began by first checking the index to see if GNs were listed. If there were entries in the index, the indicated pages were reviewed to determine specifically how GNs were discussed. The textbooks were then added to the table, and we recorded notes in the appropriate columns. The table was shared electronically during this

review process to eliminate duplicates and resolve any differences with our analyses. Once we completed the table, we organized the textbooks into four groups: GNs not mentioned, GNs only mentioned, GNs discussed in multiple paragraphs or text excerpts, and GN strategies offered. We determined that the column labeled Other Nontraditional Genres did not add important information to achieve the purpose for this study, so it was not included in our analyses. For the three groups of textbooks that addresses GN (i.e., GNs only mentioned, GNs discussed in multiple paragraphs or text excerpts, and GN strategies offered), we conducted additional analyses to compare references to GNs among

textbooks. We conferred frequently to discuss and resolve any discrepancies in our analyses.

### Findings

The quantitative results of our reading textbook review are shown in Figure 1. Of the 26 textbooks reviewed, 19 (73%) did not mention GNs at all. Three textbooks (12%) simply mentioned GNs as useful in some capacity, and two textbooks (8%) discussed GNs in multiple paragraphs or contexts. Two textbooks (8%) offered a single strategy for teaching with GNs.



In-depth analyses of textbooks that did address GNs in some manner yielded important results. Among the three textbooks in which GNs were only mentioned, two textbooks commented that GNs represented a type of nontraditional children’s literature. The third textbook pointed out that GNs were multimodal

texts and helpful for supporting comprehension among ELLs.

Regarding textbooks that offered more extended comments on GNs, one textbook mentioned GNs were useful for teaching disciplinary content and provided a two-sentence discussion explaining how GNs can help

struggling readers learn to make inferences. The second textbook in this category briefly discussed GNs with regard to New Literacies and visual literacy. This textbook also mentioned GNs in four other sections as (a) prompts for creating comics; (b) examples of trade books for young readers, (c) acceptable options for all readers, including English language learners, reluctant readers, and gifted learners; and (d) promising formats for disciplinary content.

The final category represented two textbooks that offered at least one specific strategy for teaching students how to read GNs. One of these textbooks provided a three-page discussion of GNs, including an explanation of the characteristics and functions of gutters and clear directions on how to implement a synthesizing strategy. The synthesizing strategy involved how to model a think-aloud and use cloze sentences to promote inferencing about what is happening between panels across the gutter. The second textbook offered extended discussions regarding (a) how GNs provide context clues for English language learners; (b) how GNs cultivate motivation and engagement among all readers, particularly reluctant readers; and (c) the literary value of GNs. This textbook also included an example of how a teacher used a think-aloud to help English language learners discern visual cues to understand that the sequential images in a GN contained the literary characteristics of characters, setting, and plot.

### **Discussion**

Our analyses of data provided a clear answer to our research question regarding the extent to which GNs were addressed within the pages of the 26 textbooks we reviewed. It was evident that GNs did not occupy an important place in most of the textbooks we reviewed. The two textbooks that did include specific strategies for using GNs were published in 2013 and 2014. However, six of the textbooks were published in 2014 or afterwards and contained little or no information for GNs. Additionally, the two textbooks that addressed GNs more explicitly provided instructional strategies that

addressed different purposes. Therefore, the textbooks we reviewed did not attend to GNs comprehensively or systematically. As teacher educators, we concluded that we would not be able to rely on any of these reading textbooks to supply what is necessary to teach preservice elementary teachers with and about GNs. We realized that we needed to find materials or develop our own to help preservice elementary teachers gain a thorough understanding of GNs. As a result of our efforts, we created the following action plan.

### **Action Plan for GN Use among Preservice Elementary Teachers**

We shared several GNs with preservice elementary teachers in our teacher preparation program and began explicitly teaching how to read GNs. We felt no single strategy would be enough to support our students, so we developed a systematic approach to teach three specific concepts associated with GNs: (1) how to read the images, (2) how to understand the conventions and vocabulary, and (3) how to synthesize words and images from panel to panel across gutters.

We began with how to read the images. We utilized Visual Thinking Strategies to help preservice elementary teachers learn to read visual images (Cappello & Walker, 2016). This strategy involved displaying an image from a GN and asking three questions: (1) What is happening in this picture? (2) What do you see that makes you think that? (3) What else do you see? After providing time for preservice elementary teachers to think about these questions independently, we facilitate related discussions.

We used Monnin's (2013) *Teaching Reading Comprehension with Graphic Texts* to teach preservice elementary teachers how to understand the conventions and vocabulary of GNs. We used examples from actual GNs to highlight specific vocabulary terms and other affordances. Knowing preservice elementary teachers needed more practice with this GN concept, Barbara also utilized the Lansdown's

(1991) Word Card strategy, which involved using folded cards to write the vocabulary word, provide a definition, and draw a corresponding picture. Preservice elementary teachers created their word cards copying image examples from GNs and then practiced using the word cards as an instructional tool.

To teach preservice elementary teachers how to synthesize words and images from panel to panel across gutters, we developed a strategy called Double Entry Journal-Jigsaw. First, we selected two pages from a children's GN that contained eight panels. Next, we blacked out all of the images on one page and all of the words on the second page and made several photocopies of each. Then, we divided the class into small groups and gave half of the small groups the photocopies of the image-less page and the other half of the small groups the photocopies of the word-less pages. Each small group also received copies of a one-page, two-column journal. We instructed preservice elementary teachers to record observations about their page in the left column and to reflect on each observation in the right column. After preservice elementary teachers completed this task, we provided each small group with photocopies of the opposing page in order to demonstrate the equal importance of images and words to synthesize meaning within GNs.

Besides using these strategies in our classes with preservice elementary teachers, we twice shared them in professional conference settings. The responses we have received from these presentations has been encouraging. Additionally, Barbara administered a brief survey among preservice elementary teachers at the conclusion of one course. Preservice elementary teachers indicated that these three strategies were very helpful in developing their ability to read and comprehend GNs.

### **Limitations**

This study was limited to a review of textbooks to which we had immediate access. Although the number of textbooks we reviewed was small, we determined that they were

representative of the reading textbooks available for teacher preparation. However, we recommend that future studies employ comparative analyses of other reading textbooks used to prepare preservice elementary teachers.

### **Conclusion**

While sharing our findings among colleagues, we were made aware that GNs are covered in some teacher preparation programs. However, we were concerned that if the textbook does not address GNs thoroughly and effectively, the likelihood of the teacher educator doing so is not high, particularly if their instruction closely follows textbook chapters. If preservice elementary teachers do not learn about GNs in their coursework, they may not learn about them at all.

Two factors are important here. First, it has become apparent that GNs are more difficult to read than generally thought and require explicit strategic instruction and support (Cook, 2017; Monnin, 2010, 2013; Serafini, 2014). This means that students, preservice teachers, and practicing teachers require a greater level of comfort with GNs (Lapp, Wolsey, Fisher, & Frey, 2012; Serafini, 2014). A concerted effort to inject the teaching of explicit reading strategies for GNs into K-12 literacy classrooms is clearly in order.

Second, researchers have intimated that GNs provide scaffolding for multimodal reading, especially on the Internet (Brozo, Moorman, & Meyer, 2014; Cook, 2017; Dallacqua et al., 2015; Hall, 2011; Monnin, 2010, 2013; Serafini, 2014). With this in mind, teachers cannot afford to let such a valuable tool go to waste. Literacy teacher educators must develop a body of knowledge about GNs by reading these texts themselves and learning, at the very least, how to read images in GNs, how to understand the conventions and vocabulary used in GNs, and how to synthesize words and images from panel to panel across gutters. Literacy teacher educators must then incorporate these concepts associated with GNs into coursework, so that preservice elementary

teachers leave their teacher preparation programs with essential understandings of how to teach about and with GNs.

Beyond these factors, authors of reading textbooks must offer adequate space and attention to thorough discussions of GNs. These discussions should highlight the usefulness of

GNs and include a system of specific instructional strategies that promote the reading and comprehending of GNs. This will be a critical component in making sure that GNs are addressed in teacher preparation programs so that future teachers are prepared to address GNs in K-12 classrooms.

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## Appendix A

### Reading/Literacy and Language Arts Courses in a Teacher Preparation Program for Preservice Elementary Teachers

Course Number	Course Title and Targeted Grade Levels	University Catalog Course Description
ELED 3513	Emerging and Developing Literacy (Pre-K & K)	Designed specifically for the undergraduate elementary, early childhood, and special education teacher candidate. The focus for this course is emergent and developing literacy in Pre-K and kindergarten classrooms.
ELED 3523	Literacy in the Primary Grades (1 <sup>st</sup> -3 <sup>rd</sup> )	Designed specifically for the undergraduate elementary, early childhood, and special education teacher candidate. The focus for this course is literacy in the primary grades. Prerequisite: ELED 3513 with grade of C or better
ELED 3533	Literacy in the Intermediate Grades (4 <sup>th</sup> -6 <sup>th</sup> )	Designed specifically for the undergraduate elementary, early childhood, and special education teacher candidate. The focus for this course is literacy in the intermediate grades. Prerequisite: ELED 3523 with grade of C or better
ELED 3543	Adolescent Literacy (7 <sup>th</sup> -8 <sup>th</sup> )	Designed specifically for the undergraduate elementary, early childhood, and special education teacher candidate. The focus for this course is adolescent literacy. Prerequisite: ELED 3533 with grade of C or better
ELED 4444	Diagnosis and Remediation of Reading at Elementary Level	Includes assessment procedures, class profiles, referral techniques, as well as development of instructional programs using instructional objectives, and diagnosis and tutoring of struggling readers. Prerequisites: ELED3423 and ELED 3433 with a grade of C or better
ELED 4513	Language Arts I (Pre-K-3 <sup>rd</sup> )	Designed specifically for the undergraduate elementary and early childhood teacher candidate. This course includes listening, speaking, reading, writing, viewing, and visual representation. Integration of grammar, spelling, vocabulary, handwriting, and word processing instruction into the writing process is included. This course focuses on emergent and developing learners in Pre-K, kindergarten, and primary grades.
ELED 4533	Language Arts II (4 <sup>th</sup> -8 <sup>th</sup> )	Designed specifically for the undergraduate elementary teacher candidate. This course includes listening, speaking, reading, writing, viewing, and visual representation. Integration of grammar, spelling, vocabulary, handwriting, and word processing instruction into the writing process is included. This course focuses on learners in intermediate grades and middle grades.

## Appendix B

### Literacy Texts Reviewed in Chronological Order by Publication Date

- 2000 - *Teaching Children to Read: Putting the Pieces Together* (3<sup>rd</sup> ed.) by Reutzel & Cooter
- 2006 - *Reading to Learn in the Content Areas* (6<sup>th</sup> ed.) by Richards, Morgan, & Fleener
- 2007 - *Reading Problems: Assessment and Teaching Strategies* (6<sup>th</sup> ed.) by Rubin & Optiz
- 2008 - *Literacy Assessment Intervention for K-6 Classrooms* by DeVries
- 2008 - *Understanding Reading Problems* (7<sup>th</sup> ed.) by Gillet, Temple, & Crawford
- 2008 - *Best Practices in Adolescent Literacy Instruction* by Hinchman & Sheridan-Thomas
- 2008 - *Teaching Content Reading & Writing* (5<sup>th</sup> ed.) by Ruddell
- 2008 - *Integrating the Language Arts* (4<sup>th</sup> ed.) by Yellin, Jones, & DeVries
- 2009 - *Literacy Development in the Early Years: Helping Children Read and Write* (6<sup>th</sup> ed.) by Morrow
- 2009 - *Teaching Reading in Today's Elementary Schools* (10<sup>th</sup> ed.) by Roe, Smith, & Burns
- 2010 - *Assessing and Correcting Reading and Writing Difficulties* (4<sup>th</sup> ed.) by Gunning
- 2010 - *Reading Problems: Assessment and Teaching Strategies* (6<sup>th</sup> ed.) by Jennings, Caldwell, & Lerner
- 2010 - *Literacy in the Middle Grades: Teaching Reading and Writing to Fourth through Eighth Graders* (2<sup>nd</sup> ed.) by Tompkins
- 2011 - *Literacy in the Early Grades* (3<sup>rd</sup> ed.) by Tompkins
- 2012 - *Understanding Reading Problems* (8<sup>th</sup> ed.) by Gillet, Temple, Temple, & Crawford
- 2012 - *Literacy Development in the Early Years: Helping Children Read and Write* (7<sup>th</sup> ed.) by Morrow
- 2012 - *Teaching Reading in Today's Elementary Schools* (11<sup>th</sup> ed.) by Roe & Smith
- 2013\* - *Forward Thinking: Teaching Language Arts in Today's Classrooms* by Dobler, Johnson, & Wolsey
- 2014 - *Early Childhood Language Arts* (6<sup>th</sup> ed.) by Jalongo
- 2014\* - *Content Area Reading: Literacy and Learning Across the Curriculum* (11<sup>th</sup> ed.) by Vacca, Vacca, & Mraz
- 2015 - *40 Strategies for Middle and Secondary Classrooms: Developing Content Area Literacy* by Antonacci, O'Callaghan, & Berbowitz
- 2015 - *Literacy in the Early Grades* (4<sup>th</sup> ed.) by Tompkins
- 2015 - *Essentials of Integrating the Language Arts* by Yellin & DeVries
- 2018 - *All Children Read: Teaching Literacy in Today's Diverse Classrooms* (5<sup>th</sup> ed.) by Temple, Ogle, Crawford, & Temple
- 2018 - *Reading and Learning to Read* by Vacca, Vacca, Gove, Burkey, Lenhard, & McKeon
- 2018 - *Literacy: Helping Students Construct Meaning* (10<sup>th</sup> ed.) by Cooper, Kiger, Robinson, & Slansky

\*Text containing at least one strategy for teaching GNs.