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Recently, education and literacy researchers have acknowledged educational merit in guided reading that incorporates interactive and authentic reading texts, such as graphic novels, which meet the needs of today's predominantly multimodal learners (Jennings, Rule, & Zanden, 2014; Kist & Pytash, 2015). This qualitative study explores through interviews and a questionnaire the perceptions of pre-service teachers about the effectiveness of the comic book series known as TOON comics in guided reading with struggling readers and writers, from kindergarten through fifth grade. Pre-service teachers have expressed positive views concerning the use of these comic books in guided reading instruction with their struggling readers and writers. They plan to use this comic book series in the classroom in the future and they offer suggestions for addressing the challenges this genre may bring to their students.

## **Keywords**

comic books, guided reading, teacher preparation, struggling readers and writers

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## **Pre-Service Teachers' Perceptions about the Effectiveness of the TOON Comic Books in Their Guided Reading Instruction**

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**Abstract:** Recently, education and literacy researchers have acknowledged educational merit in guided reading that incorporates interactive and authentic reading texts, such as graphic novels, which meet the needs of today's predominantly multimodal learners (Jennings, Rule, & Zanden, 2014; Kist & Pytash, 2015). This qualitative study explores through interviews and a questionnaire the perceptions of pre-service teachers about the effectiveness of the comic book series known as TOON comics in guided reading with struggling readers and writers, from kindergarten through fifth grade. Pre-service teachers have expressed positive views concerning the use of these comic books in guided reading instruction with their struggling readers and writers. They plan to use this comic book series in the classroom in the future and they offer suggestions for addressing the challenges this genre may bring to their students.

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## **Pre-Service Teachers' Perceptions about the Effectiveness of the TOON Comic Books in Their Guided Reading Instruction**

Struggling readers need access to strategies and the reading material that can both engage them and improve their reading and writing skills (Allington, 2003; Harvey & Goudvis, 2007). Guided reading that incorporates interactive and authentic reading texts such as comic books and graphic novels is a strategy that can help accomplish these goals. It also meets the needs of today's learners who are accustomed to receiving and creating content that encompasses different modes of representation (Jennings, Rule, & Zanden, 2014; Kist & Pytash, 2015).

Despite an extensive body of literature regarding guiding reading (Deegan, 2010; Denton, Fletcher, Taylor, Barth, & Vaughn, 2014; Suits, 2003) and an increased interest in comic books and graphic novels to teach literacy (Cirigliano, 2012; Lindquist, 2014; McTaggart, 2005; Rapp, 2011; Seglem & Witte, 2009), empirical research on these two topics paired together (Ross & Frey, 2009), especially from the perspective of teachers, is limited.

To address this gap, this qualitative study explores through interviews and a questionnaire the perceptions of pre-service teachers about the effectiveness of the comic book series known as TOON comics in guided reading with struggling readers and writers, from kindergarten through fifth grade. We begin with the review of the literature on comic books in teaching reading and writing as well as the literature on guided reading, to establish the larger context for this research.

### **Literature Review**

#### **Comic Books in Reading and Writing Instruction**

Comic books have been found effective in teaching reading to a wide range of learners, from emergent readers to high school students (Cirigliano, 2012; Gavigan, 2012; Ward &

Young, 2011), struggling readers (McTaggart, 2005), students with disabilities (Karr & Weida, 2013; Smetana & Grisham, 2012), and English language learners (Boatright, 2010; Popa & Tarabuzan, 2015). For example, Ranker (2007) observed that using daily read-alouds from comic books, such as *Spider-Man*, *Wild Girl*, and *The Hulk*, along with writing workshop instruction increased a number of literacy skills among English language learners. Those were recognizing a central problem and resolution in a narrative text, identifying textual differences between narration and dialogue, analyzing texts from different perspectives, and recognizing stereotypical representations of gender and race in the texts students read.

Comic books also have been judged to be a promising alternative for teaching grammar (McVicker, 2007), and they have been used successfully to facilitate deep comprehension of different text types (Rapp, 2011; Rodríguez, Ferreras, & Pérez, 2009; Seglem & Witte, 2009). Specifically, Seglem and Witte (2009) observed that providing two versions of the same poem (the traditional poem and the comic strip version of it) helped their students to see “the ways in which poetry can be interpreted and illustrated differently by each reader” (p. 223). The students in this study also were encouraged to create and illustrate poetry comics, and in this manner present their own interpretations of the poetry they studied in the literature class. As a writing activity, this form of comic book exploration resulted in deeper understanding and appreciation of poetry.

Like Seglem and Witte (2009), Lindquist’s (2014) study also examined the impact on students’ reading scores in seventh and eighth grade English classes reading a graphic novel version versus the traditional form of an Edgar Allan Poe story. Specifically, the study reported an average of 77% on the post-test for the graphic novel group and an average of 74% for the

traditional text group, suggesting altogether that the graphic novel reading approach shows promise.

Relatedly, Brenna (2013) identified two types of comprehension strategies that help students improve comprehension of text generally, and graphic novels specifically: “master keys” comprehension strategies and “keys” comprehension strategies (Brenna, 2013, p. 91). “Master keys” are generic reading comprehension skills that apply to any text type, such as “making connections to self, other texts and the world,”; “monitoring meaning by self-questioning,” or “making inferences based on content,” among other skills (p. 91). “Key” comprehension competencies (Brenna, 2013, p. 91), on the other hand, are the skills applicable specifically to reading and processing graphic novels, including “interpreting lettering style, format and color, applying purpose for depth of field choices to comprehension, responding to meaning embedded in types of speech bubbles, locating narration, examining narrative distance provided by visual information, and identifying time changes through explorations of visual information” (p. 91).

Furthermore, educational research has linked the use of comic books and graphic novels to positive outcomes in reading performance in various content areas. For instance, Ardasheva, Bowden, Morrison, and Tretter (2015) studied implementation of reading strategies paired with summary writing strategies for teaching science concepts with comic books, cartoons, and picture trade books. They reported gains in their students’ vocabulary development, comprehension skills, and attitudes toward learning science.

In addition, a wide variety of graphic formats, including comic strips, comic books, cartoons, graphic novels, manga, and digital comics have been recognized as effective for

teaching basic writing abilities and for promoting advanced literacy composition skills (Bitz, 2010; Gatta, 2013; Wissman & Costello, 2014; Yuan, 2011).

Similarly, Wissman and Costello (2014), in a recent study with older students, reported that incorporating a digital comics format for reading fiction helped to elicit creative, deep, and multi-representational written responses to scenes from the novel, *The Outsiders* (Hinton, 1967), reporting on 17 eighth grade students enrolled in the Academic Intervention Support (AIS) Reading classes.

### **Classroom Teachers' Perspectives on Comic Books and Graphic Novels**

Although there is much promising research on student experiences with comic books and graphic novels (Rapp, 2011; Rodríguez, Ferreras, & Pérez, 2009; Seglem & Witte, 2009; Wissman & Costello, 2014; Yuan, 2011), there are fewer studies on teachers' perceptions and experiences with these text formats. In one such study by Lapp et al. (2011), the researchers found that 77.6 % of the surveyed teachers do not read graphic novels and that many did not read them as children (55.-2%), which led the researchers to conclude that “the majority of these teachers have very limited knowledge or experience related to reading graphic novels” (p. 25). In addition, the researchers noted that although more than half were interested in reading graphic novels, their use of these texts in the classroom was limited; and it was more frequent among the upper elementary teachers. More than 75 % of those who used graphic novels in the classroom did not use them though as “primarily reading” but rather as “supplemental reading and as a motivational tool” (p. 27), and they did not think they were helpful in the writing program.

Similar findings were reported in a study on teachers' perceptions of graphic novels among elementary and middle school teachers, grades 3-8 (Block, 2013). Specifically, the teachers in this study did not read graphic novels as children (82 %), and they don't read them

now for their own enjoyment. Importantly, 82 % and 64 % of the teachers did not receive training on using graphic novels in instruction during pre-service teacher education and professional development respectively.

Although no teacher indicated that they “hated them” or that “other people could use them, but I never will” (p. 18), only 16 % reported to use them in the classroom while the majority either did not use them at all (38 %) or used them only once per year (24 %). Those few who read graphic novels with students in the classroom used them to foster independent reading or to help struggling readers.

Teachers who used digital comics to improve English as a Second Language (ESL) writing shared their perspectives as well. Specifically, they saw the potential of this tool in language-learning and ESL writing development primarily though for “low-achieving ESL students” (Yunus, Salehi, & Embi, 2012, p. 3462). In addition, they found using digital comics in ESL classrooms to be “time consuming” (p. 3466) and as such “impractical” (p. 3467) for use with other groups of ESL students. The study did not explore, however, these teachers’ own experiences of reading comic books or graphic novels.

Alternatively, Matthews (2011) explored pre-service teachers’ reactions to the use of graphic novels as an interdisciplinary literacy in the social studies classroom. Similar to the findings in Lapp et al.’s (2011) and Block’s (2013) research, the pre-service teachers in Matthews’s study valued graphic novels, especially as a source of alternative perspective to traditional texts or as a motivator for emerging or struggling readers. However, these pre-service teachers objected to using graphic novels with violent images or controversial topics. The researchers interpreted the latter response as reluctance to “encourage their students to take a critical stance on social studies content” (p. 416). They argued that some teachers might have



been influenced by the “stereotypical reactions to controversial issues in the communities they live or teach” and had hesitancy “to provoke these reactions in their teaching” (p. 435). The researchers also surmised that other teachers might have been motivated by their “political perspective or sociocultural background” (p. 434).

As a solution, the researchers recommend that these pre-service teachers receive training in teaching controversial topics with graphic novels, as they “have not had much experience practicing these literacy skills in their own educational experience” (p. 436). As a result, the researchers hypothesized that the teachers might be less unwilling to teach them to their students in the future.

Taken together, these studies suggest classroom teachers' overall positive attitudes toward using comic books and graphic novels with students. They report mixed results as to the teachers' own experiences with reading or using these texts in teaching reading and writing, which is the purpose of this study. Still, a common concern these classroom teachers shared was a feeling of discomfort due to newness to the comic book genre either as a literacy practice or as a form of instruction. We wondered if combining the opportunity to explore comic books with a well-known instructional approach such as guiding reading may or may not affect pre-service teachers' perceptions and future classroom practices. This was another area of interest in our study.

### **Guided Reading Instruction**

Some literacy researchers have linked positive outcomes in reading comprehension and related literacy skills to guided reading instruction. For instance, in a study using both qualitative and quantitative data, Deegan (2010) found that four second grade classrooms, with a total of 73 students, increased performance in the area of comprehension on a state assessment, the

Developmental Reading Assessment (DRA), after the implementation of guided reading instruction.

Suits (2003) also reported that guided reading instruction has been especially effective with second language learners who participated in 15-20 minute guided reading lessons in regular classrooms. The students in this study, grades one through three, improved their reading skills, with an average growth of 3.5 reading levels on the benchmark assessment from the beginning to the end of the school year assessments. In explaining this growth, the researchers stated that “guided reading groups enabled children to read books at their level, to work together, to share and clarify ideas with other children, and to develop self-confidence in a non-threatening environment” (p. 33).

Schirmer and Schaffer (2010), who explored the effectiveness of the guided reading method in a single subject experimental study with the population of deaf students in grades one through five over a period of two school years, reported that all students were making progress in reading comprehension, as measured by teacher running records.

Other researchers have, however, argued that there is limited empirical data on the effectiveness of guiding reading instruction (Denton, Fletcher, Taylor, Barth, & Vaughn, 2014). For example, in comparing explicit instruction (EX) and guiding reading (GR) treatments over typical school reading instruction (TSI), Denton et al. (2014) concluded that “EX is more likely to substantially accelerate student progress in phonemic decoding, text reading fluency, and reading comprehension than GR” (p. 268).

In another study, Wall (2014) reported that teachers who used guided reading daily strived to make this approach work for many struggling readers. These students were found to “have stagnated at the mid-year point,” and they were “not making more progress when teachers

were working so hard” (p. 135). In searching for the answer to why guided reading was unsuccessful with helping these students, the researcher found that “guided reading instruction needed to focus more on changing student behaviors and less on their mastery of skills” (p. 136). The researcher recommended giving students more opportunities to problem-solve and try out different strategies before teacher intervention.

In addition, inadequate descriptions of guided reading treatments in previous research (Denton et al., 2014) and inconsistencies in the implementation of guiding reading have been noted. Some of these are variability in grade-level texts, grouping techniques, and the nature of existing instruction and assessments. These inconsistencies have been reported in a national survey of guided reading practices among K-12 teachers and also referenced in a review of the 50-year history of practice in this approach at schools (Ford & Opitz, 2008; Ford & Opitz, 2011). Such critiques have made it difficult to determine the actual efficacy of guiding reading as an instructional method, which warrants further investigation.

### **Guided Reading Instruction and Graphic Novels**

Recently education and literacy researchers and practitioners have taken note of approaches to guided reading that incorporates interactive forms of reading and authentic reading texts. These authentic texts include visual texts, such as graphic novels. Today’s learners acquire information and make sense of text predominantly through visual modes of communication (Jennings, Rule, & Zanden, 2014; Kist & Pytash, 2015). For instance, Ross and Frey (2009) investigated guided reading instruction with graphic novels in a Studio Arts class. A teacher incorporated explicit strategies for reading and interpreting graphic novels, such as partner reading and analysis of the visual techniques unique to narratives. To test the students’ performance on reading comprehension, the students responded to reading comprehension

questions. They also were asked to create a storyboard for a graphic novel depicting memories from their childhood and to incorporate into the story the techniques they studied in class. The researchers reported that the students had no difficulty in creating their own storyboards using the graphic novel techniques they learned in class. The researchers attributed this level of mastery to systematic and purposeful instruction during guiding reading; however, no numerical data were provided in support of these conclusions.

Smetana and Grisham (2012), in a formative experimental design study, examined the use of graphic novels combined with a traditional Tier 2 intervention program. Tier 2 interventions are supplemental instructions beyond the regular classroom Tier 1 instructions. These Tier 2 interventions are based on the individual needs of the students. This study specifically included guided reading lessons with elementary students who were struggling readers scoring below the 50th percentile on the fifth grade benchmark, The Dynamic Indicators of Basic Early Literacy Skills (DIBELS). The findings from this study indicate that the students increased their reading fluency skills from between 75 and 83 words per minute before the intervention to between 101 and 115 words per minute after the intervention. In addition, an analysis of student work samples revealed gains in comprehension and vocabulary development, as evident in the data gathered during guided reading writing and reading activities. The researchers also reported an increase in student engagement and motivation.

Given these positive outcomes, the researchers called upon teachers to incorporate into traditional intervention programs guided reading instruction with authentic and visual reading materials, such as graphic novels, to make them more appealing to struggling readers. The current study responds to this call as it explores the use of the comic book series known as

TOON comics in guided reading with struggling readers and writers, from kindergarten through the fifth grade.

## **Methodology**

### **Participants**

In the current study, the participants were pre-service teachers who attended *Early Literacy* and *Literacy Assessment and Applications* courses at a comprehensive university in the southeastern part of the United States. These participants pursued majors in early childhood education or early childhood special education. At the time of the study the participants were in their junior and senior years in the respective education programs. Six participants were female and one was male. All participants were between 20 and 25 years of age, and they identified as Caucasians. All participants agreed to be in the study.

### **Guided Reading Procedures**

As part of the *Early Literacy* and *Literacy Assessment and Applications* course requirements, all participants tutored kindergarten through fifth grade children who were struggling readers and writers as identified by their parents and/or classroom teacher. The tutees were enrolled in the university literacy center literacy program that served local communities.

The goals of the guiding reading program that these pre-service teachers had had for their students were multiple. These goals included: to encourage positive attitudes towards reading; to increase motivation and confidence; and to help the tutees improve their literacy skills. Beyond these program goals the pre-service teachers determined specific reading and writing goals based on the needs of the child they were tutoring.

The pre-service teachers employed guided reading (Fountas & Pinnell, 1996) and the TOON comic book series (Appendix C) in their work with their tutees. According to Fountas and Pinnell (2012):

[Guided reading] is an instructional context within which the precise teaching moves and language choices are related to the behaviors observed, moment by moment, and which guide the reader to engage in problem solving that expands his or her reading power....

Each element supports readers in a different way, with the goal of helping them think and act for themselves. (p. 279)

The pre-service teachers in this study were required to plan and implement effective word attack strategy instruction, fluency strategy instruction, and comprehension strategy instruction before reading, during reading, and after reading (Jaquinta, 2006). This type of instruction set up the tutees for success as they read new books.

Before reading, the pre-service teachers implemented a book introduction that helped the tutees to build background knowledge of the new book, as well as previewed any “tricky” words prior to reading. The term “tricky” relates to any word that may be difficult to decode because the words have non-phonetic spellings or are multi-syllable words. “Tricky” words can also be any word that the tutee will need to know the meaning of as it relates to the context or message of the story in order to possibly increase the tutees comprehension of the text.

The pre-service teachers modeled how to read a small section of the book in order to build fluency strategy use. They also implemented various comprehension strategies (i.e. making predictions, making connections, generating questions, and completing an anticipation guide) to give the tutees a purpose for reading and to help them become actively engaged during the reading process. In addition, the pre-service teachers reviewed word attack strategies prior to

reading such as: “What would make sense?”; “Look at the pictures,”; “Look at the beginning of the word,”; and “Do you see any parts of the word that you know?”

During reading, the pre-service teachers continued to prompt the word attack strategies as the tutees came to “tricky” words (e.g., cheeky, vicious, or embarrass) that were difficult for students to decode, pronounce, or understand. They also continued to implement fluency strategy instruction (i.e., index card slide, phonics phones, and re-reading) as well as followed up with the comprehension strategy already started. For example, if the tutee made predictions, the pre-service teacher would have stopping points throughout the book to stop and have the tutee verify or deny the initial prediction as well as to make new predictions based on what had been read to that point.

After reading, the pre-service teachers again followed up with the comprehension strategy. As in the example above, the tutee would use evidence from the text to verify and/or deny the predictions. At this point, the pre-service teachers also could implement a comprehension extension activity such as a writing extension (i.e. write a different ending, write a letter to the author asking questions about the character in the book or the decisions made regarding the events, problem, and resolution in the book, etc.). The pre-service teachers would also instruct the tutee to go back and reread a section of the text that was a little “rough” or “choppy” in order to help build fluency as well as comprehension. The pre-service teacher would end the lesson by reviewing the different word attack strategies used and prompted throughout the reading.

The structure of the tutoring was one-on-one instruction to promote optimal literacy development. Normally guided reading instruction is implemented with a small group of students who are all reading at the same instructional reading level and have similar reading needs. For

this semester each pre-service teacher was randomly assigned to one tutee to work with throughout the semester. No other children were enrolled in the tutoring program, so small group instruction was not a factor for the pre-service teachers when planning lessons. Tutoring took place on Mondays, Wednesdays, and Thursdays for six consecutive weeks through the months of June and July. Each tutoring session lasted from 2:30 to 3:20 p.m.

### **Text Selection Process**

The TOON comic book series was selected, because it had been recognized in the field of children's literature for its high quality (Ito, 2014). The series has received awards such as the comic book field's Eisner Award, The Library Association's Theodor Seuss Geisel Prize, and The School Library Journal and the American Library Association Award, among others.

For tutoring purposes, the researchers purchased multiple copies of every TOON comic book that was available for purchase at <http://www.toon-books.com/>. Each TOON comic book did have online supplementary materials available for the teacher, but the pre-service teachers in our study did not use these materials for their lessons. There were 26 different titles (see Appendix C), and these books ranged from Level E for emergent readers to Level P for more advanced readers. The books were mostly fiction, but some of them had informational material weaved throughout them. The grade equivalents for these book levels were approximately first through fourth grades, while the tutees' grade levels ranged from first through fifth grade.

In the beginning sessions of tutoring, the pre-service teachers had to first assess their tutee's current reading levels by administering the Classroom Reading Inventory (Wheelock, Campbell & Silvaroli, 2009) and completing running records. After the teacher participants determined their tutee's instructional reading levels (with a 90% - 94% accuracy rate), they carefully chose a TOON comic book that was at that particular reading level. The book chosen



also had enough supports and challenges within the text to help the tutee apply important word attack strategies they had been learning during the guided reading lessons. After the pre-service teachers chose the books that had the right amount of supports and challenges, they planned their guided reading lessons to include important concepts and word attack strategies to be taught and applied before, during, and after reading.

### **Data Collection and Analysis**

The data obtained for this qualitative analysis included individual interviews (see Appendix A) and focus group interviews (see Appendix B) with pre-service teachers. The purpose of the interviews was to understand the pre-service teachers' opinions and perceptions regarding the effectiveness of the TOON comic book series in guided reading instruction. For the purpose of this study the term "effectiveness" is defined as the worth or value in promoting literacy development. A Likert-type scale of 1-5 was used to determine the pre-service teachers' perceived view of the value of TOON comic books to promote literacy development. The interview questions the pre-service teachers were asked drew from the relevant literature on guided reading, guided reading practices and models, and the evaluations of the guided reading program by others (Simons, S., & the Toon Team, 2013; Sonnenschein, Baker, Katenkamp, & Beall, 2006). The questions aimed at collecting both quantitative (numerical Likert-type scale) and qualitative (descriptive) data.

The quantitative interview questions (see Appendix A) asked the pre-service teachers to rate the effectiveness or value of the TOON comic books to promote literacy development taking into account the following criteria:

vocabulary difficulty or struggle to understand word meanings. This could be due to non-phonetic spellings, multi-syllable word complexity, unfamiliarity with the concepts the

words represent, and the contexts in which they are used. Examples are homonyms, which are words that are spelled and pronounced in the same way but have different meanings as in bear (the animal) and bear (verb: to tolerate) or homophones, which are those that have the same pronunciation but different spellings and meanings, as in “there” and “their”;

overall effectiveness of the visuals and/or pictures in the TOON comic books to support comprehension of the text. We purposefully kept this question open, without narrowing it down to a particular area of visual rhetoric or meaning-making process, because we wanted the pre-service teachers to watch and report on the meaning making and visual information processing that they observed in children.

As such, the pre-service teachers could consider the degree to which visuals and/or pictures aided students in “extracting and constructing meaning” in general (Sweet & Snow, 2003, p. 1). The pre-service teachers could also consider if the visuals and/or pictures helped the students in particular areas of reading such as literal, inferential, and critical reading skills; fluency and expression; as well as the ability to communicate understanding with expression, detail and accuracy. These were the areas targeted during guided reading;

the student interest in the series; and

teacher interest in using these comic books in the future.

The pre-service teachers were instructed to answer a set of questions that used a Likert-type scale ranging from 1 to 5 to complete each of their evaluations. For example, for questions about vocabulary difficulty the Likert-type scale score ranges included: 1 being “very difficult” to understand and 5 being “very easy” to understand. The qualitative interview questions asked

the pre-service teachers to justify their ratings and provide examples of how they perceived the comic book series scored on each rating criterion.

The quantitative data from the interviews with the pre-service teachers were analyzed using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) statistical software to obtain mean and frequency counts of the pre-service teacher ratings on the relevant rating categories. The qualitative interview data were analyzed beginning with a basic level analysis of transcriptions, that is, open coding, which involved reading through all the data, identifying, labeling, clustering, and developing codes (data chunks) that captured what we saw in the pre-service teachers' justifications of their ratings that related to the research questions (Creswell, 2009). As a result of these initial steps of open coding, we were able to obtain "a *general sense* of the information" (Creswell, 2009, p. 185) related to the pre-service teachers' overall impressions about the effectiveness of the TOON comic book series in guiding reading with struggling readers and writers. We also recorded examples of quotes from the interviews that reflected these general understandings.

This process was followed by axial coding, which involved identifying and analyzing the relationships among open codes, which allowed for a more interpretative analysis of the data (i.e., why and how the specific ratings were provided by the teachers) and theme extraction. For example, we noticed that open codes that expressed concerns, worries, and apprehensions were connected to the codes that captured the feelings of discomfort, unease, or even hesitation to use comic books with students. The open codes that expressed concerns, worries, and apprehensions were also related to the codes that described the challenges the pre-service teachers believed the comic book texts posed to their students during guided reading. Examples of the latter codes are "difficult vocabulary," "too many pictures," or "difficult to follow/understand."

The latter analytic processes allowed not only for “description and theme identification” but also for exploring “theme connections” (Creswell, 2009, p. 189); all these steps were necessary for “moving deeper and deeper into understanding” and “making interpretation of larger meaning of the data” (Creswell, 2009, p. 183) collected for this study.

### **Limitations**

We note that our cohort was small; only seven pre-service teachers completed the rated questions. The study also focuses on pre-service teachers’ impressions of the comic books’ effectiveness and does not report data on the students, (whether they felt the books were effective for them). Although the findings reported from such a small sample cannot be generalized to other populations, they do represent a snapshot of the pre-service teachers’ experiences (and indirectly of their students’ experiences) with the TOON comic book series in an authentic educational context. As such, we believe they offer valuable insight about the use of this comic book series during guided reading instruction.

### **Findings**

#### **Pre-Service Teachers’ Perspectives on Comic Books Prior to Teaching with Such Texts**

Initially, most pre-service teachers were rather uncertain, or as they put it, “hesitant” about teaching with comic books. The reasons for their distrust and uneasiness varied. One pre-service teacher thought that comic books “aren’t really popular anymore.” Another source of worry was the tutees and their ability to read (process) and understand the complex text structure characteristic of comic book genres. For example, this pre-service teacher was uncertain “if [her] student would need to know how to read it or, um, you know, if she would understand that an actual person is talking like that.”

Other pre-service teachers were concerned about other challenges the comic book genre might pose for their readers. One such element was the pictorial material and the cognitive load such material might require from the reader: “I figured that there would be too many pictures or there would be a lot going on and they wouldn’t be able to understand it, and I was kinda like worried about that difficult aspect of it.”

Some pre-service teachers believed that the visual aspect of the comic book genre would be especially difficult for readers with special needs. This pre-service teacher elaborated on the nature of such challenge: “My student has ADD, and even to this day, he gets really involved with the pictures, and he, I felt like, he would get more absorbed with the pictures rather than the text, but um, that was just my overall concern, the distractedness, I guess he might have gotten.”

Still other pre-service teachers’ early apprehension about using comic books with students stemmed from their own discomfort with the genre, and a lack of experience reading or teaching it to students. One pre-service teacher related her discomfort thus: “I was worried at first too. I thought it was going to be too difficult to follow, because I feel like I might get confused on a really hard comic, and be like, I don’t know where to go.” This pre-service teacher worried about her inability to help the student process a comic book text:

I was kinda hesitant too because I figured you know I’m gonna have to teach him to how to read this and I’m gonna have to teach him like, you know, what to read first and what to read next. Sometimes it is really difficult going to, well, what bubbles do I read first and everything?

Another pre-service teacher was not sure at all if a comic book text was the appropriate teaching tool for her student, and she doubted if it would help improve in his areas of weakness.

I was hesitant also just because I felt like there is only so much that you can do with a comic book, and I wasn't going to be able to cover everything that was supposed to be covered for him to actually get better and be able to reach his goals.

Despite these fears, this pre-service teacher was open to try out teaching with comic books. This willingness is because she also saw the educational potential of comics: "At the same time, I thought it would be better because of the speech bubbles because he could actually see who is saying what, and I thought that would help a little with comprehension." The two pre-service teachers who had had prior experience with reading comic books shared with her excitement and confidence about comic books in the classroom. One pre-service teacher was really excited because "me and my kid, we both like comic books, and we talk about superheroes a bunch. I was really excited." Another pre-service teacher envisioned a great potential in them for teaching dialogue in narrative writing.

I think for younger kids it is a cool way to introduce storytelling, and really emphasizing like who is saying what at what time, instead of having to use quotation marks all the time. You can look at the bubbles and say, you really see that this character is saying this, and this character is saying this and the pictures are cooler.

We returned to these pre-service teachers after they had the opportunity to use comic books with their struggling readers and writers during guided instruction. We share these findings next.

### **Vocabulary Difficulty in TOON Comic Books**

The pre-service teachers were asked to rate vocabulary difficulty in the TOON comic books that they used with their students during guided reading instruction, using a scale of 1 to 5, with 1 being "very difficult" and 5 being "very easy" (See Table 1). Specifically, three of the pre-service teachers (See Table 1) chose the rating of 3, "a somewhat difficult vocabulary" and

two pre-service teachers chose the rating of 4, “easy.” One pre-service teacher’s comment offers a typical rationale for rating the vocabulary in TOON comic books midway between two extremes (difficult and easy), which we interpreted as a neutral response.

I think I would have to say right in the middle at 3. There were sometimes that I felt like, especially like that part of the lesson plan that asks for tricky words, I found myself sitting having to pick words that were tricky, when I really didn’t think that there was anything tricky to him.

The possible reason for this response may be a result that there were no higher levels TOON books to choose from for this reader. That is, as is evident in this excerpt, the student needed a higher level of the text (potentially with more complex vocabulary and syntax) to meet his instructional needs but since such a text was not available at the time of the study, it is understandable why the pre-service teacher could not find words challenging enough in the available text for his student, and as a result, he rated this item at 3.

Table 1

*Vocabulary Difficulty in TOON Books*

Scale	Rating <sup>1</sup>	Frequency	Percent
difficult	2	1	14.3
somewhat difficult	3	3	42.9
easy	4	2	28.6
very easy	5	1	14.3
Total		7	100.0 <sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Throughout this data set, respondents never selected the choice “1.”

<sup>2</sup> Because of the limitation to a single decimal place, rounding produced a result slightly higher than the total.

## Overall Effectiveness of the Visuals and/or Pictures in TOON Comic Books

The pre-service teachers used the rating scale of 1 to 5, with 1 being “not very effective” and 5 being “very effective,” to evaluate the overall effectiveness of the visuals and/or pictures in TOON comic books. As shown in Table 2, six of the pre-service teachers’ ratings were at the upper end of the scale, with three pre-service teacher respondents indicating a rating of 5 and three indicating a response of 4. These responses indicate that the pre-service teachers in this study found the visuals and/or pictures in the TOON comic books to be effective tools to foster student meaning making and reading comprehension in the more general sense and student storytelling, which is, constructing meaning and communicating it to others. In this excerpt, the pre-service teacher justified such evaluation in these words:

I would say 5, the pictures weren’t muggy. They weren’t really, I call it artsy-fartsy, where you kinda really have to look at it to know what it is; you know they are very clear. Oh, that’s the mother. Oh, that’s the child. Oh, that’s the villagers. There wasn’t any real misinterpretation of what the artist was trying to try to draw or illustrate.

Another pre-service teacher, on the other hand, commented on how the images in the TOON comics served as contextual clues in support of student meaning making by drawing inferences and synthesizing information across the pictorial and text-based content. The visuals also provided this pre-service teacher with a way to scaffold student meaning making:

Most of the time it was broken up to where, you know, a certain bubble would have one picture, so she could look at that specific text and that picture and move on. So, I remember that especially in *A Trip to the Bottom of the World* she could not figure out diving but the picture was of a whale diving, so, I kinda made the motion of diving and she got it right away.



Still this pre-service teacher noted that the incorporation of pictures was a powerful tool for enhancing decoding skills as the words and pictures worked together to help make a story meaningful for her student:

So in the Toon books, he really uses it in his reading, he uses pictures a lot to decipher what is going on. If he gets to a word that he doesn't know, he uses the pictures and the words around them. So the pictures definitely helped in the Toon books and made it [instruction] really effective.

Table 2

*Visuals/Pictures Effectiveness in TOON Books*

Scale	Rating <sup>3</sup>	Frequency	Percent
somewhat effective	3	1	14.3
effective	4	3	42.9
very effective	5	3	42.9
Total		7	100.0 <sup>4</sup>

**Overall Student Interest in TOON Comic Books**

The pre-service teachers also rated the overall student interest in the TOON comic books they read during guided reading instruction. A scale of 1-5, with 1 being “not interested at all” and 5 being “very interested,” was used in this particular rating category. As shown in Table 3, five of the pre-service teachers' ratings were at the upper end of the scale, with four indicating a rating of 5 and one pre-service teacher respondent indicating a rating of 4 and two pre-service teacher participants assigning this item a score of 3. These results imply that most of the pre-

<sup>3</sup> Throughout this data set, respondents never selected choices “1” and “2.”

<sup>4</sup> Because of the limitation to a single decimal place, rounding produced a result slightly higher than the total.

service teachers deemed the TOON comic books to be appealing to their students, as evident by these evaluative comments from the pre-service teachers in this study:

He loved when I pulled those books out. He was like what are we going to read about today. With other books, he's like ugh, I don't care.

He definitely looked forward to it every day, and wanted to jump right into guided reading.

Table 3

*Student Interest in TOON Books*

Scale	Rating <sup>5</sup>	Frequency	Percent
somewhat interested	3	2	28.6
interested	4	1	14.3
very interested	5	4	57.1
Total		7	100.0

**Pre-Service Teachers' Interest in Using TOON Comic Books in the Future**

To conclude the quantitative portion of the interview, the pre-service teachers were asked to indicate whether or not they might be interested in using the TOON comic book series in the future. As shown in Table 4, six of the seven pre-service teachers expressed interest in using the TOON comic books again, by assigning this rating category the upper level ratings of 5 (four participants) and 4 (two participants). One participant expressed a possibility, "Maybe." This mostly positive evaluation of the comic book series was true for both the pre-service teachers who were new to the comic books as a genre and those who had been familiar with it. In addition, the interview data confirmed that these pre-service teachers intended to use these comic books in the future, because they came to see them as a highly motivating reading material for

<sup>5</sup> Throughout this data set, respondents never selected choices "1" and "2."

their struggling readers and writers. This representative comment attests to this common desire among the pre-service teachers in this study:

I would want to use it again because, after working with students with just regular books and seeing their interest level and the effectiveness of using the books, I think that with the Toon books, the interest goes up and the effectiveness goes like crazy up.

Another reason that these pre-service teachers came to see the pedagogical value of comic books was the fact they realized that they have a great potential for enhancing reading fluency and comprehension skills by their students. The latter evaluation is evident in this pre-service teacher's comment about the growth in these areas by one of her students:

I think that it was very helpful and even just starting the post-tests, I can already see there is lots of improvement, um, especially in fluency and comprehension. I haven't even calculated those, but I can tell that it's jumped lots from the beginning to now even with the short period of time, with just the summer.

Finally, according to this pre-service teacher, guided reading instruction with comic books supported their students' development of oral fluency, expressive reading, and auditory perception, as evidenced by this comment:

With the fluency, with his reading with expression during the pretest it was very monotone and not at all. But when we started the Toon books, he saw each character and read with great expression each time, even from the first lesson, even from the beginning. Um, he got the characters, he read their names, and then made up their own little voice.

Table 4

*Would Want to Use TOON Books Again*

Scale	Rating <sup>6</sup>	Frequency	Percent
maybe	3	1	14.3
yes	4	2	28.6
very much	5	4	57.1
Total		7	100.0

### Discussion and Implications

Although our data sample for this study was small, we found certain emerging trends to be true for this group of pre-service teachers and their tutees. Specifically, the pre-service teachers found the vocabulary in the TOON comic books to be neither too difficult nor too easy. According to the guided reading text selection guidelines (Fountas & Pinnell, 1996), this is an optimal reading level for the student. An exception to this finding was when the students read a lower leveled text than their ability level because the higher leveled text was not available. However, even in such situations, the students were learning to interpret both images and text, and in this way, they were improving critical thinking and analysis skills.

From the perspective of language acquisition theory (Krashen, 1982), these comic books thus provided “optimal comprehensible input” for the readers in this study. That is, these texts gave the students an opportunity to acquire new vocabulary and concepts beyond their “current level of competence ( $i + 1$ ).” This was done “with the help of context or extra-linguistic information” (Krashen, p. 21). As the pre-service teachers commented in the interviews, the visual design components of the TOON comic book series such as images, artwork, or graphics

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<sup>6</sup> Throughout this data set, respondents never selected choices “1” and “2.”

proved to be particularly helpful sources of context and extra-linguistic information for the students when they encountered difficult vocabulary or new ideas in the texts they studied.

On a cognitive level, similar to the findings in previous research (Aisami, 2015; Birch & Belmont, 1965; Lohr, 2008), the visual and contextual elements in the comic books in this research aroused the readers' imagination and increased their motivation to read, leading to what the pre-service teachers perceived as progress in developing reading comprehension and recall of information skills.

The pre-service teachers' firsthand observations of the positive effects of the TOON comic books on their students' literacy skills development mattered. In fact, the experiences they had had with using comic books during guided reading with their struggling readers and writers contributed to a paradigm shift in their thinking about comic books in general and about the value of comics in the classroom. The initial fear, unease, and apprehension about using comic books to facilitate student learning were subsequently replaced with excitement, confidence, and resolution to want to use TOON comic books in their instruction in the future. Such change in thinking has the potential to impact the effectiveness of these pre-service teachers' guided reading instruction with comic books in their schools.

These pre-service teachers needed to experience the day-to-day effects of comic books in working with their struggling readers and writers in order to embrace the use of these tools in the classroom. This need is because of the "subjective reality of change" (Fullan, 1991, p. 32). That is, in order to use comic books as an instructional innovation, these pre-service teachers needed to have had the opportunity for personal involvement with these texts in instruction. As Fullan (1991) notes, "the implementation of educational change involves a 'change in practice,' " and

this, in turn, requires “coming to grips with the conceptions or beliefs underlying the change” (p. 37).

In this study, the conceptions and beliefs that the pre-service teachers needed to “come to grips with” were their initial doubtful beliefs about comic books in general (recall the comment about comic books not being popular anymore) as well as their assumptions that comic books might/would not be effective for guided reading. It is likely that these aspects of change will also be critical for other teachers when they choose to incorporate comic books into their teaching.

Teacher education and professional development programs will need to provide teachers with opportunities to experience reading comic books and graphic novels as well as training in using these forms of text in teaching students. The findings in this study and previous research indicate that teachers often lack such training in education or the workplace (Block, 2013; Lapp et al., 2011-12; Matthews, 2011). It is never too late though to open such opportunities for teachers and their students to enrich their teaching and learning.

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## Appendix A

### Individual Interview Questions

1. Whom did you work with today? (Please use only first name or pseudonym.)
2. At what grade level?
3. Which of the leveled TOON comic books have you used in your guided reading lessons? Please provide information related to the following items: Title, Reading Level.
4. What are the main reading goals you focus on during guided reading?
5. How do you use the TOON comic books in your guided reading lessons?
6. Rate the overall effectiveness of your guided reading lessons while using the TOON comic books on a scale of 1 to 5, with 1 being not very effective and 5 being very effective.     1     2     3     4     5
7. Explain why you rated the guided reading lessons the way you did. Provide examples to support your response.
8. What specific aspects of the TOON comic books did work, or did not work, and why? (Feel free to refer to plot, story elements, characters, conflict and resolution, vocabulary, visualization, funny elements in the comic book if present, comic language, etc.)
9. Rate how difficult the vocabulary is in the TOON comic books on a scale of 1-5, with 1 being very difficult and 5 being very easy.     1     2     3     4     5
10. Explain why you rated the vocabulary difficulty in the way you did. Provide examples to support your response.
11. Rate the overall effectiveness of the visuals and/or pictures in the TOON comic books to guide students in their reading of the comic book on a scale of 1 to 5, with 1 being not very effective and 5 being very effective. 1   2     3     4     5
12. Explain why you rated the overall effectiveness of the visuals and/or pictures in the TOON comic books to guide students in their reading of the comic book in the way you did. Provide examples to support your response.
13. Rate the overall student interest in the TOON comic books on a scale of 1-5, with 1 being not interested and 5 being very interested.     1     2     3     4     5
14. Explain why you rated the student interest in the way you did. Provide examples to support your response.

15. Indicate whether you would want to use the TOON comic books again, responding on a 5-point scale ranging from 1, not at all, to 5, very much. 1 2 3 4 5
16. Explain why you would want to use or not use the TOON comic books again.
17. Do you have any other comments and suggestions that you would like to add to this interview?

## **Appendix B**

### **Focus Group Interview Questions**

1. What were your thoughts about using comic books in teaching, prior to this tutoring experience with the leveled TOON comic books during the guided reading lessons?
2. Have you ever used comic books in your own teaching prior to this tutoring experience? If so, describe briefly how you used them in your own teaching.
3. When you started using the leveled TOON comic books during the guided reading lessons, how do you think the students responded to this experience and the comic books genre? Were you surprised by this kind of response?
4. Have you noted any improvement in the student's reading and/or writing skills as a result of using the leveled TOON comic books during the guided reading lessons? Why do you think so?
5. What kind of connections have the students made during reading leveled TOON comic books during the guided reading lessons?
6. If you were to re-teach the guided reading lessons using the leveled TOON comic books next semester, what changes would you make?
7. How would you respond to the critics who consider comic books as not "real" literature?
8. What are the benefits for using comic books in the classroom?
9. What kind of challenges do you see in the use of comic books in the classroom?
10. Do you have any other comments and suggestions that you would like to add to this interview?

## Appendix C

<b>Title</b>	<b>Level</b>	<b>Author</b>	<b>Book Summary Link</b>	<b>Price</b>
Barry's Best Buddy	1	Renee French	<a href="http://www.toon-books.com/barrys-best-buddy.html">http://www.toon-books.com/barrys-best-buddy.html</a>	\$12.95
Chick and Chickie	1	Claude Ponti	<a href="http://www.toon-books.com/chick--chickie-play-all-day.html">http://www.toon-books.com/chick--chickie-play-all-day.html</a>	\$12.95
Jack and the Box	1	Art Spiegelman	<a href="http://www.toon-books.com/jack-and-the-box.html">http://www.toon-books.com/jack-and-the-box.html</a>	\$12.95
Little Mouse Gets Ready	1	Jeff Smith	<a href="http://www.toon-books.com/little-mouse-gets-ready.html">http://www.toon-books.com/little-mouse-gets-ready.html</a>	\$12.95
Silly Lilly and the Four Seasons	1	Agnes Rosenstiehl	<a href="http://www.toon-books.com/silly-lilly-and-the-four-seasons.html">http://www.toon-books.com/silly-lilly-and-the-four-seasons.html</a>	\$12.95
Silly Lilly in What Will I Be Today?	1	Agnes Rosenstiehl	<a href="http://www.toon-books.com/silly-lilly-in-what-will-i-be-today.html">http://www.toon-books.com/silly-lilly-in-what-will-i-be-today.html</a>	\$12.95
A Trip to the Bottom of the World with Mouse	1	Frank Viva	<a href="http://www.toon-books.com/a-trip-to-the-bottom-of-the-world-with-mouse.html">http://www.toon-books.com/a-trip-to-the-bottom-of-the-world-with-mouse.html</a>	\$12.95
Benjamin Bear in Bright Ideas	2	Philippe Coudray	<a href="http://www.toon-books.com/benjamin-bear-in-bright-ideas.html">http://www.toon-books.com/benjamin-bear-in-bright-ideas.html</a>	\$12.95
Benjamin Bear in Fuzzy Thinking	2	Philippe Coudray	<a href="http://www.toon-books.com/benjamin-bear-in-fuzzy-thinking.html">http://www.toon-books.com/benjamin-bear-in-fuzzy-thinking.html</a>	\$12.95

Benny and Penny in Just Pretend	2	Geoffrey Hayes	<a href="http://www.toon-books.com/benny-and-penny-in-just-pretend.html">http://www.toon-books.com/benny-and-penny-in-just-pretend.html</a>	\$12.95
Benny and Penny in Lights Out	2	Geoffrey Hayes	<a href="http://www.toon-books.com/benny-and-penny-in-lights-out.html">http://www.toon-books.com/benny-and-penny-in-lights-out.html</a>	\$12.95
Benny and Penny in The Big No-No!	2	Geoffrey Hayes	<a href="http://www.toon-books.com/benny-and-penny-in-the-big-no-no.html">http://www.toon-books.com/benny-and-penny-in-the-big-no-no.html</a>	\$12.95
Benny and Penny in The Toy Breaker	2	Geoffrey Hayes	<a href="http://www.toon-books.com/benny-and-penny-in-the-toy-breaker.html">http://www.toon-books.com/benny-and-penny-in-the-toy-breaker.html</a>	\$12.95
The Big Wet Balloon	2	Liniers	<a href="http://www.toon-books.com/the-big-wet-balloon.html">http://www.toon-books.com/the-big-wet-balloon.html</a>	\$12.95
Luke on the Loose	2	Harry Bliss	<a href="http://www.toon-books.com/luke-on-the-loose.html">http://www.toon-books.com/luke-on-the-loose.html</a>	\$12.95
Maya Makes a Mess	2	Rutu Modan	<a href="http://www.toon-books.com/maya-makes-a-mess.html">http://www.toon-books.com/maya-makes-a-mess.html</a>	\$12.95
Nina in “That Makes Me Mad!”	2	Hilary Knight	<a href="http://www.toon-books.com/nina-in-that-makes-me-mad.html">http://www.toon-books.com/nina-in-that-makes-me-mad.html</a>	\$12.95
Patrick Eats His Peas and Other Stories	2	Geoffrey Hayes	<a href="http://www.toon-books.com/patrick-eats-his-peas-and-other-stories.html">http://www.toon-books.com/patrick-eats-his-peas-and-other-stories.html</a>	\$12.95
Patrick in A Teddy Bear’s Picnic	2	Geoffrey Hayes	<a href="http://www.toon-books.com/patrick-in-a-teddy-bears-picnic.html">http://www.toon-books.com/patrick-in-a-teddy-bears-picnic.html</a>	\$12.95



Stinky	2	Eleanor Davis	<a href="http://www.toon-books.com/stinky.html">http://www.toon-books.com/stinky.html</a>	\$12.95
Mo and Jo Fighting Together Forever	3	Jay Lynch	<a href="http://www.toon-books.com/mo-and-jo-fighting-together-forever.html">http://www.toon-books.com/mo-and-jo-fighting-together-forever.html</a>	\$12.95
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