Chapter 8
Preservice Teachers' Critical Analysis of Features and Messages in Graphic Novels:
Implications for Teachers and Teacher Educators

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ABSTRACT

With more widespread use of online and multimodal texts, and evolving attitudes toward cultural and linguistic differences, critical literacy has re-gained importance in classroom instruction. This chapter describes research conducted in two middle grades education methods courses. Pre-service teachers were first asked to critically analyze traditional and graphic novels for explicit and implicit messages promoting ideologies and biases. They were then asked to develop their own graphic stories to include expository/narrative elements that addressed middle grades students' social and emotional needs (e.g., self-identity, empowerment, and resilience) and provide suggestions/models for positive resolution. The analysis activities heightened their awareness of the implicit messages communicated by texts and transformed their ideas for teaching and creating texts that consider diversity, equity, and inclusion.

Graphic novels are experiencing strong book sales due to readers' increased interest in this unique format (Green, 2021). Recent graphic novels cover a range of topics including fantasy (*Nimona*, Stevenson, 2015), self-identity (*New Kid*, Craft, 2019), social injustices (*They Called Us Enemy*, 2019), understandings of disability (*El Deafo*, Bell, 2014), historical content (*March*, Lewis, Aydin, & Powell, 2016), and curricular content (*Coral Reefs, Cities of the Ocean*, Wicks, 2016). Interestingly, the awareness of this format is growing, and it is being frequently selected by readers of all ages.

The challenges for us were that many pre-service teachers were not familiar with graphic novels and felt they were only for recreational reading. The pre-service teachers did not realize the potential of graphic novels for their uses in developing content area knowledge, attending to social-emotional concerns, and examining sociopolitical issues. At the same time, the diversity of the schools and general population has increased in cultural and linguistic composition. The wide range of graphic novels that is now available offers appealing narrative stories, informational nonfiction texts, sociopolitical topics, and themes that appeal to a diverse group of readers. Taken altogether, there appeared a need to address pre-service teachers' (PSTs') lack of familiarity with graphic novels, to increase their knowledge of the uses of graphic novels in education, and to promote critical analysis of graphic texts. To accomplish this, we required pre-service teachers to select, read, and critically analyze the content of this these texts.

The purpose of this study was to introduce pre-service teachers to the history and structure of the new format of graphic novels, to have them discover the difference in reading demands for a multimodal format, and to have them develop their own graphic novel using appropriate development of personal story and social justice themes for young adolescents. As prospective teachers, they can benefit from a deeper understanding of the elements of graphic texts that dominate the attention and enjoyment of many students and adults. Teachers (and readers) who possess the background knowledge needed to approximate the role of the implied reader are capable of engaging with graphic novels in ways that readers who lack experience with the form are not (Conners, 2012). In addition, we wanted the PSTs to find and create texts with "characters that they [felt their students] could relate to, characters that [might] look like them but also characters that will help them understand the lives and experiences of people who don't" (Griffith, 2021, p.12).

The inquiry questions guiding this investigation into graphic novel content and development were as follows: What impact does a critical literacy intervention have on PSTs' analysis of traditional children's novels versus graphic novels? How well do pre-service teachers replicate the format of powerful graphic novels and send clear messages of problem resolution related to social-emotional learning through multimodal (print and visual) representations? Examples of the pre-service teachers' graphic novels and suggestions of websites for comic composition will be shared for idea development for classroom applications.

FRAMEWORKS FOR CONSIDERATION

Historical Background

Our project was informed by the history of comics and graphic novels and an understanding of the differences and similarities of the two formats. For example, using the terms *comic books* and *graphic novels* interchangeably can seem like a simple mistake, but the terms are not synonymous. Graphic novels are extensions of comics (Master Class staff, 2021). Although both formats feature illustration-based storytelling, they have distinctions that reveal substantive differences. Scott McCloud (1993) defines this format as "juxtaposed pictorials and other images in deliberate sequence intended to convey information and/or produce an aesthetic response in the viewer (p.20). As a format, comics initially tackled social justice, equity, and politics, as in the works of Thomas Nast (Halloran, 2021). Creators' personal views were presented in the comics of the Depression and WW2 years as were reactions to the moral panic of the 1950s. These early precursors to graphic novels heightened the relevance of political content in the

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