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Assessing the High School Graphic Novel Collections in Northeast Mississippi High Schools: A Collection Analysis

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Introduction

Illiteracy within the United States has not improved over the years with an average of approximately 19 percent of high school graduates not being able to read (Crum, 2013) or reading below the limited English standards. It is no wonder that more public schools have found that grasping the attention of their students with more vibrant, attractive reading material is now at the forefront. Graphic novels have long been confused with simple comic books where fiction is the central cadre, but these stories can come in different genres from fiction to nonfiction and their pictures are just as detailed and eye-appealing as its counterpart, the comic book.

With the installation of the Common Core State Standards (CCSS), high-quality mathematics and English/Language Arts standards that were created in 2009 to enhance student learning statewide (commoncore.org, 2016), the usage of literacy-promoting material like graphic novels is important for public school libraries to incorporate them into their collections. The American Association of School Libraries (AASL) has provided a crosswalk to show how school librarians can enhance the learning standards set by the CCSS and link them with their *Standards for the 21st-Century Learner*. For instance, Common Core standard CC.9-10.R.1.3 says that high school students in grades 9-10 should be able to “determine a central idea of a text and analyze its development over a course of a text...” (AASL, 2010). This connects directly to standard 4.1.3 of the *Standards for the 21st-Century Learner*, which says that these same students must be able to “respond to literature and creative expressions of ideas in various formats and genres” (AASL, 2010). The different formats and genres are available in the domain of graphic novels especially with its array of titles that may appeal to many high school students.

Statement of Problem

This study examines graphic novels collections with genres and themes that may be appealing to both males and females in six Northeastern Mississippi high schools as well as how many (and what percentage) of these items are on YALSA's “Great Graphic Novels for Teens” lists from 2010 through 2015 in both nonfiction and fiction.

Research Questions

- R1. What is the graphic novel genres presented in the collection lists received from the six high school libraries in this study?
- R2. Based on those genres presented in the collection lists, which are more geared towards males versus females based on the main character's gender?
- R3. How many (and what percent) of the non-fiction graphic novels listed on YALSA's “Great Graphic Novels for Teens” lists from 2010-2015 are in the collections of the six high school libraries in this study?
- R4. How many (and what percent) of the fiction graphic novels listed on YALSA's “Great Graphic Novels for Teens” lists from 2010-2015 are in the collections of the six high school libraries in this study?

Definitions

Graphic novels—cartoon drawings that tell a story and are published as a book (Merriam-Webster, 2015).

Common Core State Standards (CCSS)—The Common Core is a set of high-quality academic standards in mathematics and English language arts/literacy (ELA). These learning goals outline what a student should know and be able to do at the end of each grade (corestandard.org, 2016).

Standards for the 21st-Century Learner (associated with the American Association of School Librarians)— offer vision for teaching and learning to both guide and beckon [the] profession [of school librarians] as education leaders. They will both shape the library program and serve as a tool for school librarians to use to shape the learning of students in the school (corestandard.org, 2016).

Limitations of the Study

This study is limited to the collection information furnished by the six high school libraries serving grades 9-12 at the beginning of the 2015-2016 school year.

Assumptions

It is assumed that the lists of graphic novels in each of the high school libraries in this study are accurate and current at the time of this study (fall 2015).

Importance of the Study

This study adds to the body of scholarly LIS research and builds upon previous research related to examining the extent to which graphic novels are incorporated into public school library collections.

Literature Review

Visual Learning Effects on Reading Comprehension

The literature available on the genre of graphic novels is well-documented as it relates to their usage in the K-12 culture. However, the first connection with graphic novels is their appeal to the visual senses of the reader. Exploring the visual learning style shows how important the graphic novel is to a reader's growth simply because of its comic book-like nature. As Werner (2004) explains, "pictures frame the events, issues, and values of our collective experience" which is unique in the essence of helping children become more engaged in their reading. Most children recoil at having to read a novel or textbook because they invoke loathsome feelings with their loquacious wording. In addition to the wording, the style of those texts lack interesting effects that appeal to the eye. One previous study on the effects of visual learning on students showed that "the artwork [in graphic novels] is composed of meaningful elements which have been purposefully

selected and designed to convey information..." (Pantaleo, 2014, p. 38-39).

Thus, having pictures and other selected artwork helps students to become more engaged in what they are reading simply because the appeal is there to entice them to read. In addition to engagement, this causes critical thinking skills to become a ubiquitous element to the child's reading abilities, which is the ultimate goal of any educator. Although Pantaleo used motivational quotes about perception as a starting point and student reminders within the study to encourage how the students' viewed a popular graphic novel, *Sidekicks*, it did not deter from the overwhelming response from the students on how the artwork enhanced its appeal. This study's content and affirmation of visual literacy being an important context of reading comprehension explained the students' written responses about the visual elements in the graphic novel. It showed that they understand terms like *mood* and *atmosphere* more because of those visual elements depicting them within the storyline rather than just reading the definition of the terms in a textbook and applying it to a story (Pantaleo, 2014, p. 45).

Reinforcement of skills is needed to survive in a society where critical thinking is paramount to survival. Children must be exposed to and equipped with texts with visual interest such as graphic novels in order to convey messages that may otherwise become obsolete. Thus, public schools would do well to incorporate and maintain such texts into their collections as it can truly make them aware of the "interaction pictures may have with the text [which] can also support comprehension" (O'Neil, 2011, p. 215). Comprehension, retention, and engagement all are important to a child's lifelong learning beyond high school graduation.

Graphic Novel Usage in Different Content Areas

Different content areas approach the matriculation of subject material in different ways. The English/language arts curriculum is most widely known to have employed the use of graphic novels in fiction. However, the social studies curriculum has seen an increase in their usage of nonfiction graphic novels as well. As the Common Core State Standards

have increased the standards by which children must be able to think critically and analyze a given work for implicit details, the social studies curriculum has suffered tremendously in retention of historical facts by students. Thus, the incorporation of nonfiction graphic novels is vital to a better success rate in reading comprehension and retention in nonfiction content areas such as the Social Studies curriculum. J. Spencer Clark (2013) writes that “many graphic novels hold potential for the classroom because [...] they present complex historical events in a narrative form that is detailed and multi-layered” (p. 489). Major concepts within the social studies curriculum are implicitly detailed to an extent where students must be able to string events from one part of history to the next phase of history which can be quite difficult. Thus, nonfiction mediums like graphic novels have been cause for a reevaluation of their importance in social studies curriculums.

For example, one previous study was conducted where graphic novels were used by fifth grade students to break down the intricacies of the American Revolution (Bosma, Rule, & Krueger, 2013). The term “generalizations” was noted as a specific term to know for the overall understanding of the subject matter by the students where “generalizations supported by evidence are particularly powerful aspects of social studies learning because they permit prediction and explanation of events” (Bosma, Rule, & Krueger, 2013, p. 62). The methodology of this study had some generalizations that students were expected to know about the American Revolution including, but not limited to the Boston Massacre and Paul Revere. Twenty-two students were evaluated for this study by using graphic novels for some generalizations and some other generalizations with regular nonfiction texts. They were instructed to rate their reading enjoyment on a scale of one to ten of each medium, the graphic novel or the regular text, with a numerical value of one being considered the least enjoyable. Additionally, the students were asked to recall specific generalizations they learned from reading both types of texts. The data revealed through this study showed that there was a greater

recall of the generalized facts from the graphic novels rather than the regular nonfiction texts and a significantly higher level of enjoyment was achieved as well.

Similar Collection Analysis Studies

Karen W. Gavigan (2014) conducted a similar study of statistical collection analysis of graphic novels in school libraries. Her focus on the circulation and collection of graphic novels in six middle school libraries is what inspired this study by looking specifically at high school libraries and their collections. The methodology in her study used both qualitative, quantitative, and descriptive methods which included a survey, field notes, and audiotapes of conducted interviews of the librarians of the middle schools. Gavigan used the Relative Use Factor (RUF) that was developed by Bonn to help show the percentage of circulation over the percentage the collection represents. In doing so, the study showed that a RUF lower than 1 suggested that the collection is not being fully used to its potential; whereas, a RUF of greater than 1 suggests the circulation of materials is greater than the collection and therefore a high demand for them. Of the six middle school libraries, all of them showed a high RUF percentage as high as 5.2 percent. The lowest RUF averaged out to 1.1 percent. This represents a strong graphic novel collection and circulation within these six middle school libraries.

In addition to the previous quantitative statistics, Gavigan also conducted a qualitative analysis of the participating librarians through a two-part, detailed survey with questions related to the resources used by the librarians for collection development and the characteristics of the patrons who generally use the graphic novel collection. The first part of the analysis found that all of the librarians chose their graphic novels from reading reviews in professional journals as well as input received from students and teachers. For the second qualitative analysis portion, Gavigan found that the characteristics range dramatically from struggling readers who used the collection to no classroom teachers using the collection at all. The findings from this similar study fueled the desire to conduct a study that moved into the high school

realm to examine the extent to which graphic novels have been incorporated into the collections of higher level public school libraries.

Another similar study to Gavigan's involves the collection analysis of poetry. Sarah J. Heidelberg (2013) analyzed the African-American poetry for children and young adults found within the de Grummond Library at the University of Southern Mississippi. Using the checklist method, similarly used for this study, Heidelberg consulted a 1991 listing of African-American poets as well as an online site, poets.org. The results showed that the university library's repository was lacking in specific areas as it related to African-American children's and young adult poetry. Only 25 percent of titles reflected the list used to compare the collection's holdings. For the online site, the percentage numbers were even lower. Only 19 percent reflected the extent to which the collection had available.

Heidelberg's study concludes that the de Grummond Library could acquire other works from African-American poets to help facilitate a stronger, more well-rounded collection (2013, p. 8). Additionally, Heidelberg states the university's library is frequented by children and young adults and this study helps to provide data that will assist librarians in their future collection development endeavors in this genre. In essence, this study expresses the notion that collection analysis is a trustworthy and reliable research method that would enhance any collection for the better.

Brooke A. Bolton (2009) conducted an alternative checklist evaluation study where she evaluated the literature of Women's Studies available at institutions across the United States. According to Bolton, Women's Studies programs have become "infamous for being a field in which developing a comprehensive library collection is nearly impossible" (p. 221). Thus, the need for an evaluative study such as this one was imperative. She used an online resource that provided a listing of all Women's Studies programs. Additionally, she used a directory that listed the same program as well as library resources. The results

indicated that of the thirty-seven institutions who offered Women's Studies degrees, ten held between 80 percent and 89 percent of books geared directly to the program. Another eight institutions held between 90 percent and 100 percent of Women's Studies' related material in their respective program.

Bolton found that although libraries might find it rather difficult to secure materials for this prominent program, the results of the checklist study show that they have strategically acquired the necessary materials to support their individual programs to some extent (p. 224). In essence, the checklist method used in her study provided data that librarians could find valuable as they develop collections of graphic novels in their public school libraries by checking them against such dependable lists to see what others may deem necessary or prominent to include in this type of genre.

Lastly, a more recent study involves the content analysis of female character depiction in graphic novels. Emily Simmons (2015) conducted this study to determine how female characters are represented in popular graphic novels and how female protagonists have changed over time in their depiction in graphic novels (p. 1). Simmons also looked at other factors such as race/ethnicity and the disabilities that the female character displayed. In her findings, she noted that there was a significant disparity in the amount of female readers as compared to male readers of graphic novels. The largest disparity found that most graphic novels depict more male protagonists (48%) than females (24%) which make female readers less likely to become as enthralled with graphic novels as their male counterparts. Through this content analysis, Simmons found that although graphic novels are becoming more popular, the lack of more female depictions causes a proportionately large discrepancy in the amount of female readers overall of graphic novels. However, with those graphic novels that did represent female characters, the female readership connected more strongly with those they could identify with the most which connected closely to them in race/ethnicity or in disabilities. This study could confirm to public school libraries that their

collections may be of a more balanced collection of graphic novels depicting both male and female protagonists.

The methodology of this study is similar to the studies in this review as it seeks to determine the usage of graphic novels in public school libraries and its importance to the overall readership of adolescents. With readership being of the utmost importance, this study takes into consideration the availability of titles within school library collections for both boys and girls. The variety of characters depicted in graphic novels is also an important factor within the parameters of this collection analysis as it might convey the lack or shortage of readers due to the titles geared towards the two genders. In essence, the information found in the other studies will help guide this study to its results to the amount of graphic novels in public school libraries that help to increase reading skills, fluency, and overall enjoyment in reading by youth.

Methodology

Typically, high schools range from nine through twelfth grade with ages ranging from 14-18 years of age. The schools selected were located in northeast Mississippi within both cities and counties where the size of each high school varies with the overall population. In order to gain a variability of data, the schools were specifically chosen to represent different sizes of school populations. Schools were also chosen based on their active library participation from both students and teachers in which the library provides reading material in all genres.

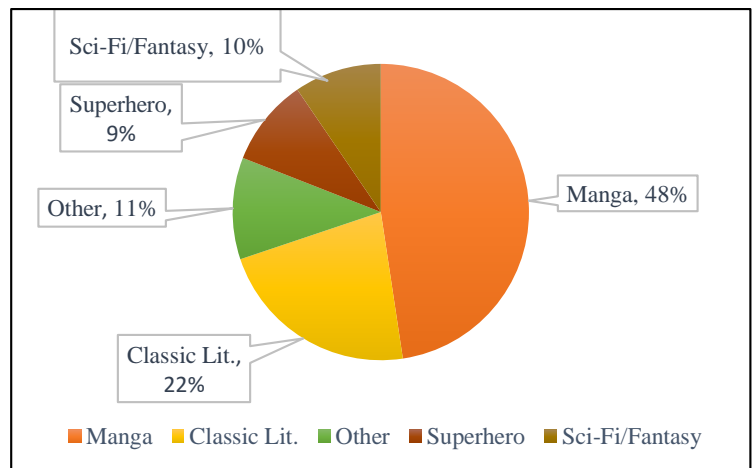
A bibliographic listing of the collection of graphic novels in each library was requested. The list items were then categorized by nonfiction or fiction. The popular bookseller Web site, *Amazon.com*, was consulted to determine if the item was either nonfiction or fiction as well as the specific genre category it was labeled. The graphic novels were then checked against the Young Adult Library Services (YALSA) lists of "Great Graphic Novels for Teens" from 2010-2015. Data were compiled in an Excel file and analyzed to address each research question. Tables and figures are used to display the results.

Results

R1. What is the graphic novel genres presented in the collection lists received from the six high school libraries in this study?

The number of graphic novels in the six libraries that submitted their statistical collection data was low. Four out of the six libraries offered ten or more graphic novels in the collection whereas the other two libraries offered less than five graphic novels with one library only carrying one title. In all, the six libraries held 90 titles of graphic novels across their collections. By using *Amazon.com* to check the titles for correct genres represented as well as whether it was considered nonfiction or fiction, it was determined that the genres most carried were titles focused on manga (48%), adaptations of classic literature (22%), superhero (9%), sci-fi/fantasy (10%), and other titles (11%) as illustrated in *Figure 1*. Titles considered "other" contained genres focused mostly on horror, history, or friendship/social skills.

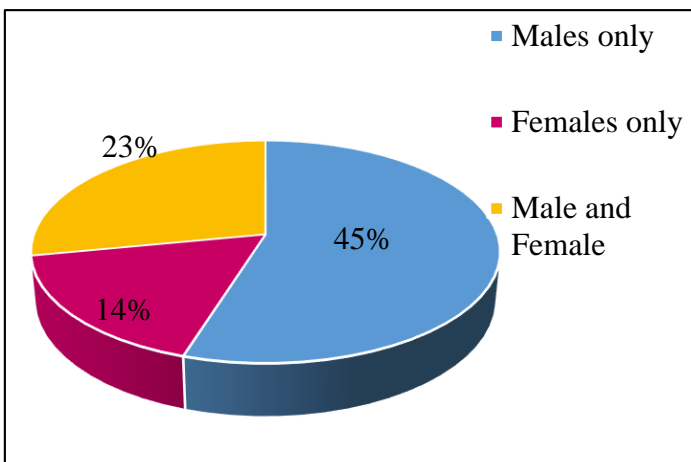
Figure 1: Graphic Novel Genres



R2. Based on those genres presented in the collection lists, which are more geared towards males versus females based on the main character's gender?

As indicated in *Figure 2*, it found that 45 percent of the graphic novel titles submitted by the libraries were found to be geared mainly towards males as their main characters were of the same gender. Female main characters of the 90 titles reviewed made up only 14 percent of the genre themes with characters of the same gender.

Figure 2: Gender of Main Characters



Additionally, there were those titles (23%) that included more than one storyline or were adaptations of classic literature that could be of interest to both males and females. Popular titles more geared towards males or that have a male representation as the main character include such manga titles as *Naruto*, *Dragon Ball Z*, and *Fruits Basket*. The popular titles more geared towards females or that have a female representation as the main character included manga titles as well. In the category associated with both male and females as main characters and thus a possible interest to both genders included titles connected to classic literature adaptations.

R3. How many (and what percent) of the non-fiction graphic novels listed on YALSA's "Great Graphic Novels for Teens" lists from 2010-2015 are in the collections of the six high school libraries in this study?

Of the ninety titles submitted by the six high school libraries, there were not any nonfiction titles included from YALSA's "Great Graphic Novels for Teens" lists from 2010-2015. A notable title, author, and publication year from YALSA's "Great Graphic Novels for Teens" nonfiction lists that could be considered a significant one geared towards academic subject matter are recorded below in *Table 1*.

Table 1: Notable Nonfiction Titles

YALSA List Year	Nonfiction Title
2010	<i>Gettysburg: The Graphic Novel</i> by C.M. Butzer (2008)
2011	<i>The Odyssey</i> by Hinds Gareth (2010)
2012	<i>Gandhi: A Manga Biography</i> by Kazuki Ebine (2010)
2013	<i>Trinity: A Graphic History of the First Atomic Bomb</i> by Jonathan Fetter-Vorm (2012)
2014	<i>March: Book 1</i> by John Lewis et.al (2013)
2015	<i>Woman Rebel: The Margaret Sanger Story</i> by Peter Bagge (2013)

R4. How many (and what percent) of the fiction graphic novels listed on YALSA's "Great Graphic Novels for Teens" lists from 2010-2015 are in the collections of the six high school libraries in this study?

As shown in *Table 2*, Library C (4%) and Library E (22%) represent the two libraries, of the six libraries used in this study, who have graphic novels in their collection that are also on YALSA's "Great Graphic Novels for Teens" lists from 2010-2015. The other four libraries did not have titles from YALSA's lists, but they did have at least one graphic novel in their collection that had a publication date between the same years used for this study. One popular graphic novel title (not included in the table), *Maus* by Art Spiegelman, was represented in each of the four libraries who did not have representing titles in their collections on YALSA's lists (Library A, Library B, Library D, and Library F). Surprisingly, YALSA's lists from 2010-2015 did not list *Maus* as one of their "Great Graphic Novels for Teens" in any of the years that were chosen for research. Another detail that is not represented in the table is Library C and Library E did not have that particular title in their collection either even though they had the largest percentage of titles from YALSA's lists.

Table 2: Library Ownership of Fiction Titles from the Lists

List year	Library A	Library B	Library C	Library D	Library E	Library F
2010	0	0	0	0	0	0
2011	0	0	0	0	0	0
2012	0	0	0	0	0	0
2013	0	0	0	0	1	0
2014	0	0	1	0	1	0
2015	0	0	1	0	0	0
TOTAL TITLES	0	0	2	0	2	0
No. of Graphic Novels						
	10	16	50	4	9	1
Total % of titles from YALSA's lists	0%	0%	4%	0%	22%	0%

Of the two titles carried by Library C, one represented the classical adaptation of Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet* and the other title, *Barbarian Lord* by Matt Smith, represented the sci-fi/fantasy genre. Library E also had a representation of a classical adaptation, Homer's *The Odyssey*. The other title, *Drama* by Raina Telgemeier, was represented by the friendship/social skill genre.

Discussion and Conclusion

The findings from this study affords the opportunity for school librarians in Northeast Mississippi to understand the significance of having graphic novels of different genres in their library collection. One important find noted in this study was the lack of nonfiction titles held by any of the libraries. As mentioned in the literature review, there are graphic novels being used in different content areas across the school curriculum that could be very beneficial to student learning. In this age of the Common Core State Standards (CCSS), it would be an excellent instrument for teachers to have access to for their students as they tackle difficult or monotonous subject matter. Graphic novels provide the necessary color, pictorials, short-spurred narration that could appeal to high schoolers intellect rather than the usual white and black page of script found in a textbook.

For example, in "Table 1: Notable Nonfiction Titles" the first two titles that distinctly connect with the

history and English subject matter taught in high school are *Gettysburg: The Graphic Novel* and *The Odyssey*. In graphic novel form, the subject matter in these two graphic novels could be the difference between grasping and holding the attention of a high school student or losing their focus and retention of the details presented in each one. Although funding for reading materials can be a tedious task for school librarians to procure in a time where resources are limited, the data from this study could be shared with other school librarians state-wide to encourage allocating a portion of their granted funds to securing nonfiction titles of graphic novels instead of fully investing a larger portion toward fiction titles that are read mostly for pleasure.

In Gavigan's (2014) study she conducted with middle school libraries, she also found that the library holdings of graphic novels was relatively low in relationship to the statistics of their complete collection. The use of the Relative Use Factor (RUF) allowed her research to more accurately reflect the usage of the graphic novel collection. Although this study does not incorporate RUF, perhaps future studies on this topic could include this method to further detail graphic novel circulation for not only fiction titles, but also for nonfiction titles as well. Also in congruence with this study, Gavigan listed the top ten circulation data for the graphic novel collection for each library. The titles reflected are all fiction titles. In future research studies, it could be

beneficial to furnish data that represents the top ten or all of the nonfiction graphic novel titles that certain school libraries possess in their collection.

As it relates to the 90 fiction titles held in all by the six school libraries, the data give an indication that there is some collection of graphic novel titles that encourage the general practice of reading for high school students. With 26 percent of the libraries' collections being represented in at least one of the listed years of YALSA's "Great Graphic Novels for Teens" lists, these data reveal the need for these Northeast Mississippi school libraries to possibly consult a stronger exemplification of young adult fiction literature that may adequately express the interests of its readers. YALSA's lists are not the only medium by which school librarians could consult for ideas in graphic novel purchases; however, it does provide a reputable point of access that could be beneficial during decision-making.

The benefits of having graphic novels in school libraries far outweighs the lack of them if encouraging student reading is paramount to the success of students passing such state-mandated tests as relegated in the Common Core State Standards. The fact that high school students tend to recoil most at having to read more difficult subject matter as well as to retain it makes incorporating them into library collections a must. With Mississippi's illiteracy rate being one of the lowest in the nation, librarians, educators, and even parents may want to look for other mediums to spark different perspectives for students for the often daunting or monotonous subject matter taught in high school. Graphic novels provide a diverse collection of reading material that could tackle that illiteracy rate head-on and consequently see a rise in high school student graduation with solid statistics showing an increase in reading abilities.

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