

2019

## School Libraries Get "Graphic": An Analysis of Graphic Novels in the School Library Collection

Rebecca Lacoste

Follow this and additional works at: <https://aquila.usm.edu/slisconnecting>



Part of the [Archival Science Commons](#), [Collection Development and Management Commons](#), [Information Literacy Commons](#), [Scholarly Communication Commons](#), and the [Scholarly Publishing Commons](#)

---

### Recommended Citation

Rebecca Lacoste (2019) "School Libraries Get "Graphic": An Analysis of Graphic Novels in the School Library Collection," *SLIS Connecting*: Vol. 8 : Iss. 2 , Article 6.

DOI: 10.18785/slis.0802.06

Available at: <https://aquila.usm.edu/slisconnecting/vol8/iss2/6>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by The Aquila Digital Community. It has been accepted for inclusion in SLIS Connecting by an authorized editor of The Aquila Digital Community. For more information, please contact [Joshua.Cromwell@usm.edu](mailto:Joshua.Cromwell@usm.edu).

# School Libraries Get "Graphic": An Analysis of Graphic Novels in the School Library Collection

By Rebecca Lacoste

Masters Research Project

May 2019

Readers: Dr. Teresa Welsh

Dr. Stacy Creel

## INTRODUCTION

Children are born with a natural desire and excitement to grow, learn, and read. According to the High Scope Educational Research Foundation, the greatest brain growth occurs between birth and age five. When this information is compared to the traditional education system of K-12 schooling, children begin learning directly after the major brain growth of early childhood slows (HSERF, 2005). Collier (2015) elaborates on this idea, "For many young children, school is an exciting place. Kids in primary grades—especially kindergarteners, first and second-graders—are eager to absorb new ideas and information. But how many of them still feel that way about school by the time they've grown into teenagers?" (p. 1). Collier notes that statistical research on student interest in reading and school indicates it diminishes significantly after the primary years. Collier gathered additional research from Dr. Eccles, an education professor at the University of California. "For kids, motivation and engagement in school on average drops as they move from the elementary school into the secondary school system" (p. 2). As research shows, student disconnect is common and expected. It is something that is not going away anytime soon. The question is, how can librarians and teachers work together to help rekindle the love students may have lost for reading and school?

Graphic novels have been recognized by many professionals, researchers, and educators as a major factor in increasing student engagement. When looking at statistical data illustrating the growth of graphic novels since the first publication of the format, *A Contract with God* (Eisner, 1978), it is clear that these texts have grown increasingly popular among children and teens. While there is no doubt graphic novels are highly revered among adolescents, adults are still unsure about the format's contribution

to education and curriculum. According to Gavigan (2014), graphic novels are not just attractive reads for teens and adolescents, but they align directly to many standards and curriculums. "One way that librarians can justify using graphic novels [to teachers and administrators] in schools is articulated in national guidelines such as the *Standards for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century Learner*, which emphasizes using a variety of formats, like graphic novels, with students" (p. 97). She continues this idea by mentioning the alignment to *Common Core State Standards*, as they, too, draw a great deal of attention to the importance of using various texts and media in a wide range of formats (CCSS, 2018, p. 10). Graphic novels have the potential to develop a student's mind into that of a reader as it encourages and grows inference skills, fluent vocabulary, and comprehension. As students become better at reading, they can begin to truly enjoy it. Reading graphic novels can help students build skills like drawing conclusions, making connections, using a character's body language to draw conclusions from nonverbal communication, etc.

Forty years later, a reader can walk into just about any public library and find graphic novels. However, in school libraries, there is somewhat of a disconnect. The numbers of graphic novels to the total number of books in the library collection do not match. In some cases, a school library's graphic novel collection may only consist of a single shelf. There are school libraries all over the country with little to no graphic novels in the collection. MacDonald (2013) reflects on the size of graphic novel collections in school libraries compared to their circulation. At a school library in Brooklyn, New York, a high school librarian reported that although her library's graphic novel section only accounted for 3 percent of her collection, it was responsible for 30 percent of her circulation (p. 20). With the format's notable success,

what is keeping graphic novels from growing and expanding to the volume of teen fiction in school libraries?

Christian Zabriskie, assistant coordinator of young adult services at the Queens Public Library in New York, believes that lack of interest is not the reason for low numbers in the graphic novel collections among libraries, both school and public. "Challenges include building and developing collections... and declining budgets" (Gavigan, 2013, p. 22). Most librarians reported that although many patrons interested in graphic novels, space or budget cuts were responsible for their absence in the collection. However, with the success of graphic novels, how can librarians justify cutting them from the shelves with space or budgets get low?

The research conducted in this study gathers quantitative data by examining a middle school library's collection for circulation statistics, collection data, and library visits. This school serves 750 students ranging from age 11 to 15 in grades 6<sup>th</sup> through 8<sup>th</sup>. The library circulation statistics and collection data were pulled from the schools' Follett Destiny online catalog system. Similar research studies, articles, and texts were reviewed, and bibliometric data were gathered to provide insight on publication trends over time of the literature related to graphic novels and school libraries.

### **Purpose Statement**

The purpose of this research is to analyze a middle school library's statistical data before and after the addition of graphic novels into the library collection. The study also analyzes the growth of scholarly literature related to graphic novels and school libraries. The compilation of this research should provide insight to school librarians, teachers, administrators, and researchers on the value and successes associated with the inclusion of graphic novels in the school library collection.

### **Research Questions**

R1. How much (and what percentage) of growth, if any, has the school library in this study seen in patron visits since the integration of graphic novels?

R2. How much (and what percentage) of growth, if

any, has the school library in this study seen in check-outs since the integration of graphic novels?

R3. How much (and what percentage) of all check-outs in the school library in this study are graphic novels? Does this percentage increase as the number of graphic novels in the school library increases?

R4. What grade level checks out the most graphic novels?

R5. What is the publication trend over time of literature related to graphic novels and school libraries?

### **Definitions**

*Graphic Novels:* A term coined by Will Eisner to describe his semi-autobiographical novel *A Contract with God* (1978), written and illustrated in comic book style, the first work in a new format in which an extended narrative is presented as a continuous sequence of pictorial images printed in color or black and white and arranged panel-to-panel, with the text given in captions and dialogue usually enclosed in balloons. A precursor can be found in the picture story albums of the 19th-century Swiss writer Rodolphe Topffer, who wrote novels in conventional form. This new literary form is viewed with suspicion by traditionalists who regard it as a marketing ploy to attract adult readers to comic books by removing the stigma attached to them (Reitz, 2018).

*Bibliometrics:* The use of mathematical and statistical methods to study and identify patterns in the usage of materials and services within a library or analyze the historical development of a specific body of literature, especially its authorship, publication, and use. Prior to the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century, the quantitative study of bibliographic data and usage was known as statistical bibliography (Reitz, 2018).

*Quantitative Research:* An objective approach to research adopted in the natural (and, to an extent, the social) sciences that requires the researcher to "stand back" from their subject and answer questions impartially. This usually involves identifying variables and measuring quantities or frequencies of things (Griffis, 2018).

*School Library:* A library in a public or private elementary or secondary school that serves its students' information needs and the curriculum needs of its teachers and staff, usually managed by a school librarian or media specialist. A school library collection usually contains books, periodicals, and educational media suitable for the grade levels served. Synonymous with learning resource center, library media center, and school library media center (Reitz, 2018).

*Young Adult Book:* A book intended to be read and enjoyed by adolescents 12 to 18 years of age. It also refers to a book intended for adults but considered suitable by reviewers and librarians for mature ninth- to twelfth-grade readers. Public libraries usually maintain a separate section for young adult literature managed by a librarian specializing in YA services, including collection development (Reitz, 2018).

*Young Adult Literature:* Generally described as books written for an audience of 12-20 year-olds. It may also include books primarily written for adults but have appealed to younger readers (LibGuides, 2018).

### **Delimitations**

This study is limited to statistics from a middle school library populated by 759 students grades 6-8. The only texts included as "graphic novels" are those that fit the description of graphic novels defined by the *ODLIS* (Reitz, 2018) and cataloged in the nonfiction 741.5 section. Texts with graphic novel features but are considered fiction texts such as *Diary of a Wimpy Kid* and *Captain Underpants* are not included.

### **Assumptions**

It is assumed that the library check-out statistics and library visit data used in this study are accurate and complete. It is further assumed that the database used in this study are accurately indexed so that relevant articles on graphic novels and school libraries are received.

### **Importance of the Study**

Graphic novels have been identified as strong, reliable resources that enhance reading comprehension, reading fluency, and inference skills. It is a format that many students genuinely enjoy

reading in their spare time. This study will add to the body of scholarly literature related to graphic novels in school libraries, and it will perhaps inspire more school librarians to add graphic novels to the libraries' collection.

### **LITERATURE REVIEW**

In MacDonald's article published in 2013, she reviewed previous research similar to this study. Pawuk, a librarian in Cuyahoga County, Ohio, reports that even though graphic novels only make up 10 percent of the library collection, they account for over 35 percent of the circulation that happens in the library. In Marine Park, Brooklyn, a school librarian comments, "in our library, it's 3% of the collection and 30% of our circulation" (p. 22). MacDonald comments that this pattern is continuing across school, public, and even academic libraries. "Graphic novels are the most frequently requested material in our Ivy League request system," reported Karen Green, a librarian at Columbia University (MacDonald, 2013 p. 20).

In addition to reporting success stories, MacDonald (2013) identified the major issue with the growth of graphic novels in school libraries. "Despite the circulation statistics, school libraries... are the slowest in building graphic novel collections" (p. 22). After reviewing a number of statistics, the assistant coordinator of young adult services at the Queens Library in New York commented that "building a graphic novel collection can pull up the circulation of an entire section of the library" (p. 22).

In 2008, graphic novels had been slowly but steadily growing in popularity, and their future looked bright. Gorman (2008) noted, "after years of fighting for shelf space in libraries and classrooms, graphic novels have finally become an acceptable alternative to their prose-packed counterparts—and kids can't seem to get enough of them" (p. 43). She mentioned that the monetary expenditures on graphic novels in 2006 were \$330 million, and libraries accounted for only 10 percent of this spending.

Rather than focusing on graphic novels gaining shelf space in school libraries, authors have begun to focus on the connection graphic novels can make in the classroom. Authors have indicated that these texts

are successful for students' personal use and have switched their focus to what graphic novels can contribute to classroom instruction and curriculum. There also seems to be a major shift in book reviews pertaining to graphic novels. Instead of reviewers focusing on graphic novels, they switched the focus to books about graphic novels and how they can be used in schools.

Smith and Pole (2018) discussed what graphic novels are, how they can fit into any school library regardless of the student population, and how teachers can use these powerful tools to enhance their classroom instruction. They noted how graphic novels could be used with students of all ages to teach and remediate instruction on "Interrelation between words and illustrations, complexity of text in speech balloons, and the analysis and inference required to translate information" (p. 170). In the article, they report the tremendous growth of graphic novels over the past two years. "In 2016, graphic novel sales increased 17.2 percent for public libraries and 14 percent for school libraries. Reporting a whopping 64 percent growth in digital lending from 2015 to 2016, *OverDrive's* Hadie Bartholomew noted in *Library Journal* that public libraries were set for another record-breaking year in 2017" (Rednour, 2017, p. 40).

An article on graphic novels in school libraries by Rudiger and Schliesman (2007) provides insight into how graphic novels can serve in schools beyond recreational reading. While the authors mention in great detail their successes in gaining reluctant readers and integration into the classroom curriculum, she offers insight into why the format struggles to gain respect from school heads (p. 57). Administrators and teachers often fail to recognize the successes of graphic novels because they are misinformed about the format and what it can be. Whenever they hear the word "graphic" they immediately think of it as a word used to describe mature or violent instead of its actual meaning—visual, descriptive, and artistic. If librarians work to disconnect this word with its stereotypical meaning, a higher percentage of teachers and administrators would be on board with not only building a collection in the school library but allowing these titles to overflow into the classroom.

Gann (2013) identified the misconnection between graphic novels and their definition. "Perhaps no other single format causes more questions and even 'raised eyebrows' than does the graphic novel in school library collections. While many educators have realized the value of graphic novels in the curriculum, some teachers and administrators still doubt the quality of graphic novels. Some educators may view graphic novels as inferior literature or substandard information sources and certainly not something for a school library collection" (p. 76). Throughout this report, Gann addressed many of these inaccurate beliefs and common misconceptions by using state standards and evidence that supports the idea of graphic novels belonging on the shelves of school libraries and classrooms.

Administrators must be not only informed of what it takes to grow a library media center, but they must also be on board. Parr (2012) recognized this concept to stress the importance and necessity of school libraries in individual student and school-wide academic success. "...a library media specialist must have support from school administrators who have had proper training related to library specialists; collaboration with and cooperation from teachers in lesson planning, teaching, and collection development..." (p. 18). When administrators are informed and educated on the importance of diversity in genre and representation in the school library collection, the popularity and acceptance of graphic novels as both recreational and educational tools in the school library media center will continuously grow.

## **METHODOLOGY**

This study's research was based on quantitative and bibliometric research methods, including gathering data from circulation statistics. This information was collected over the course of the 2017-2018 and 2018-2019 academic school years.

### **Data Collection and Analysis**

Quantitative data were gathered from a middle school library that serves 759 6<sup>th</sup>-8<sup>th</sup> graders. This library contained no graphic novels at the beginning of this school year. In October, 48 graphic novels were integrated into the library collection. In

December, 126 additional graphic novels were ordered to enhance the collection further. All statistical data concerning circulation information were gathered using the Destiny Follett OPAC. The library visits were compiled from time-stamped Google forms that students use to check in as they visit the library.

The bibliometric data used for this research were gathered using *Academic Search Premier* from the University of Southern Mississippi Library website. The publication time period was limited to 1998 to 2018. All publications were considered, including articles and reviews. Reviews were included because they give insight into the popularity of graphic novels at that time.

### Procedures

First, circulation reports from 2016-2017, the time period prior to obtaining graphic novels, were run, then 2018-2019, the time after graphic novels were added, was run. In these reports, the focus was on overall check-out statistics, graphic novel check-out statistics, and circulation lengths. The statistical data

gathered prior to the addition of graphic novels into the collection were compared to those after the addition of graphic novels. Any public advertisements of graphic novels in the library were noted.

Circulation and check-out statistics, as well as bibliographic data from the database search, were compiled and analyzed in an Excel spreadsheet to address each research question and illustrated with tables and figures.

### RESULTS

#### **R1. How much (and what percentage) of growth, if any, has the school library in this study seen in patron visits since the integration of graphic novels?**

Table 1 provides insight on when students visited the library media center during the 2018-2019 school year. Table 3 is organized by month of the school year as well as time period: before school, during school, or after school. Although there was no increase in library visits, the number of visits remained high and consistent throughout the school year.

**Table 1. Student Library Visits 2018-2019 School Year**

<b>2018-2019</b>	<b>Before School</b>	<b>During School</b>	<b>After School</b>	<b>Total</b>
August	294	183	47	524
September	307	158	78	543
October	312	216	81	609
November	288	247	72	607
December	285	225	56	566
January	212	204	67	483
February	284	208	70	562
March	297	149	75	521
April	215	122	56	393
<b>Total</b>	<b>2494</b>	<b>1712</b>	<b>602</b>	<b>4808</b>

**R2. How much (and what percentage) of growth, if any, has the school library in this study seen in check-outs since the integration of graphic novels?**

Table 2 details the library's collection before and after the integration of graphic novels. This table represents the total number of items in the library collection, the total number of graphic novels in the collection, and the percentage of graphic novels in the collection. This table also shows the total number of circulations in the last two school years. Overall circulation increased 4,006 (116%).

**R3. How much (and what percentage) of all check-outs in the school library in this study are graphic novels? Does this percentage increase as the number of graphic novels in the school library increases?**

Table 3 details student check-outs in the school library. Outlined by month, graphic novel check-outs and total check-outs are recorded. With these statistics, the percentage of graphic novel check-outs are documented for reference. While not a steady, even increase, the percentage of graphic novel check-outs from November to April increased from 20.5 percent to 26 percent.

**Table 2. Library Collection Analysis: Circulation Statistics**

School Year	# Total Items	# Graphic Novels	Collection %	Total Circulation	Graphic Novel Circulation	Graphic Novel Circulation %
2017-2018	8,752	0	0%	3,453	0	0%
2018-2019	8,843	152	1.7%	7,459	1,225	16.4%

**Table 3. Student Library Check-Outs: Total Collection & Graphic Novels**

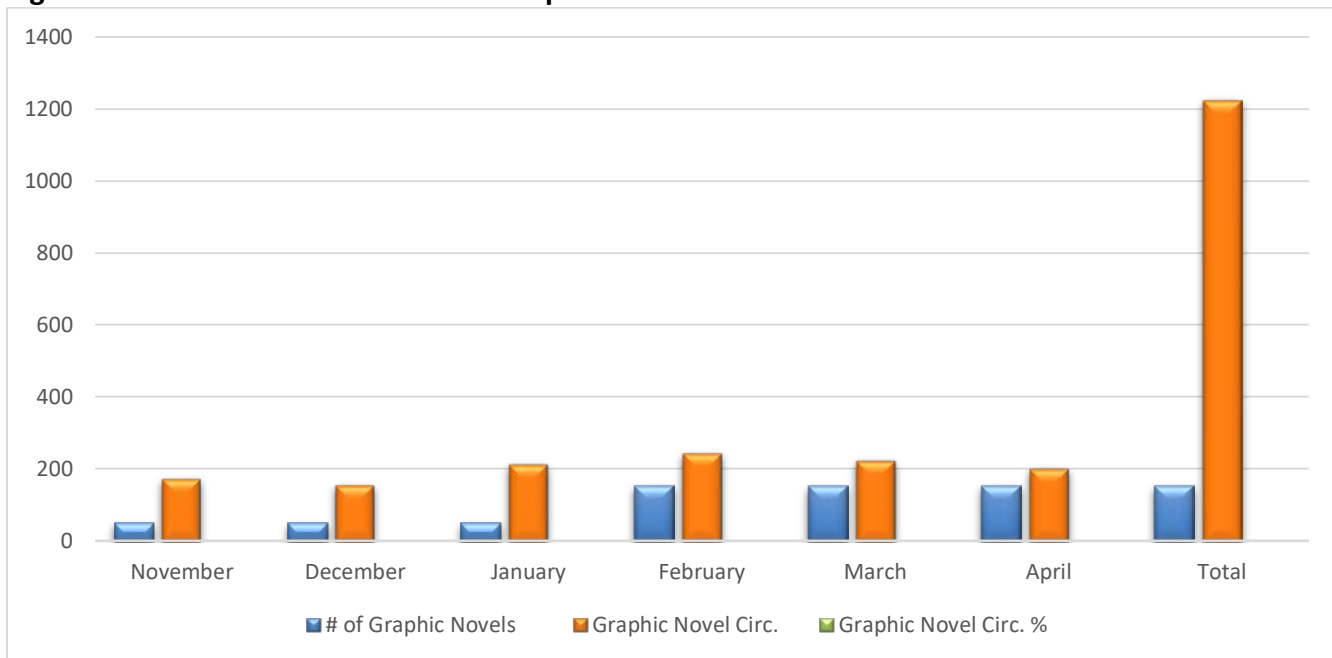
2018-2019	Graphic Novel Check-Outs	Total Collection Check-Outs	% Graphic Novel Check-Outs
August	0	1047	0%
September	0	742	0%
October	0	781	0%
November	175	850	20.50%
December	158	471	33.50%
January	216	852	25.40%
February	247	997	24.80%
March	225	933	24%
April	204	786	26%
<b>Total</b>	<b>1225</b>	<b>7459</b>	<b>16.40%</b>

Figure 1 visually depicts the collection and circulation statistics of graphic novels in the school library. When graphic novels were integrated into the collection in November, statistics were recorded each month, including how many books were in the graphic novel collection and how many times graphic novels were checked out for circulation.

#### R4. What grade level checks out the most graphic novels?

Table 4 provides statistical information on grade level check-outs. Organized by 6<sup>th</sup>, 7<sup>th</sup>, and 8<sup>th</sup> grades, the data indicate that 7<sup>th</sup> grade students checked out the highest number and percentage of graphic novels, and the 6<sup>th</sup> grade students checked out the least number.

**Figure 1. Collection vs. Circulation of Graphic Novels**



**Table 4. Check-Outs by Grade Level**

Grade Level	Graphic Novel Check-Outs	Total Collection Check-Outs	% Check-Outs Graphic Novels
6 <sup>th</sup> Grade	374	2,953	12.7%
7 <sup>th</sup> Grade	457	2,285	20%
8 <sup>th</sup> Grade	394	2,221	17.7%
<b>Total</b>	<b>1,225</b>	<b>7,459</b>	<b>16.4%</b>

#### R5. What is the publication trend over time of literature related to graphic novels and school libraries?

In this quantitative study, bibliometric research was used to enhance and expand the idea that school libraries thrive off graphic novels. Using the search keywords, "graphic novels" and "school libraries" in *Academic Search Premier*, there are 1,252 search

results that populate over the last twenty years. These populated results contain a number of articles published in *School Library Journal*, *Library Media Connection*, *Booklist*, etc. These search results also include a number of book reviews that provide useful information regarding graphic novels in school libraries.



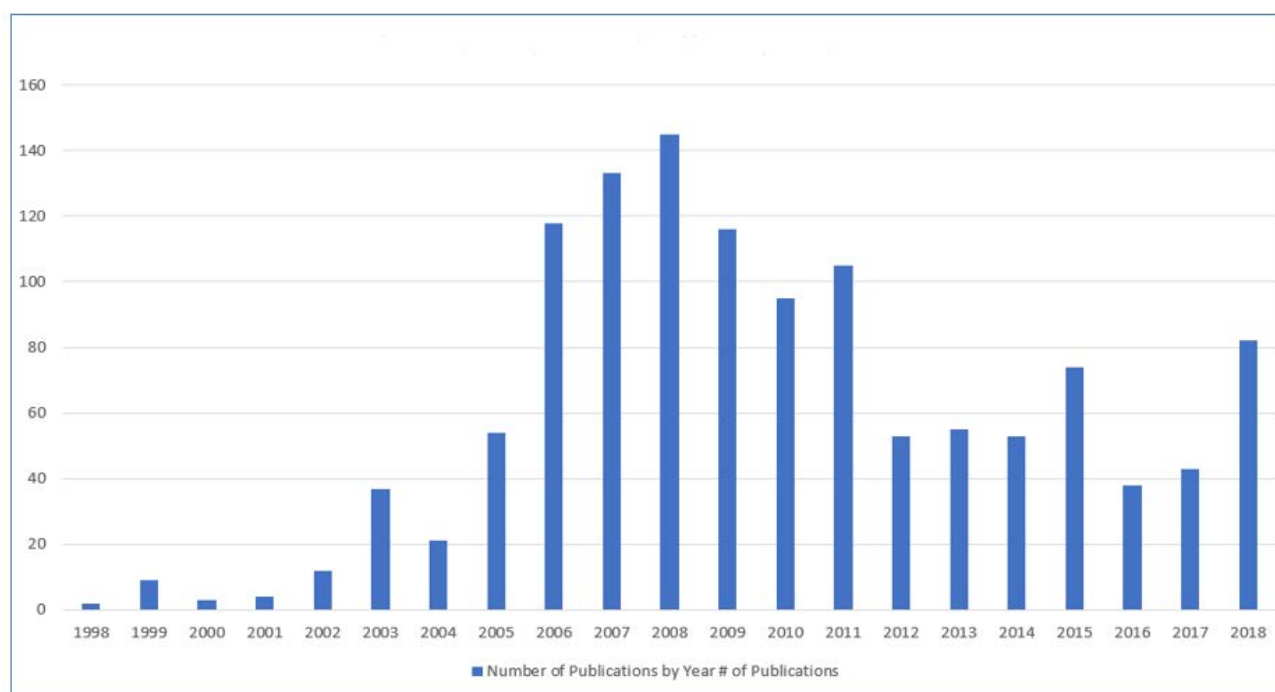
When the results for the search terms "graphic novels" and "school libraries" were limited to one year at a time from 1998 to 2018, it was easy to see the growth in popularity of graphic novels over time. In 1998, only two publications were retrieved from *Academic Search Premier* concerning graphic novels and school libraries. This number jumped to four publications in 2000, and then to 12 in 2002. In 2003, this publication number jumped to 37. For the first

four years, publications were only found in *School Library Journal*, but in 2003, articles and book reviews are found in different journals and publications.

Table 5 illustrates the number of results retrieved using the search terms "school libraries" and "graphic novels" in the *Academic Search Premier* database, organized by year of publication.

<b>Publication Year</b>	<b># of Publications</b>
1998	2
1999	9
2000	3
2001	4
2002	12
2003	37
2004	21
2005	54
2006	118
2007	133
2008	145
2009	116
2010	95
2011	105
2012	53
2013	55
2014	53
2015	74
2016	38
2017	43
2018	82
<b>Total</b>	<b>1252</b>

**Figure 2. Number of Publications per Year**



In Figure 2, the bar graph shows the academic search results for the search terms "school libraries" and "graphic novels" in *Academic Search Premier*. These data show the growth of graphic novels from the early 2000s, which reached a peak in 2008, and the continuing interest in the format.

## **DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION**

Throughout this research, multiple articles discuss the benefits of graphic novels being integrated into the collection. These titles are beneficial to students for recreational reading purposes, and they align with state standards, classroom instruction, and curriculum. Just as students could benefit greatly from these titles, teachers could grow their classroom instruction with this unique format that connects visual elements to enhanced texts. In one of the first articles about integrating graphic novels into school libraries, Kan (2003) highlights the excitement educators experienced toward the beginning years of graphic novel hype. She notes that, in 2002, the ALA Annual Conference 2002 Teen Read Week Theme was "Get Graphic @ the Library," and attendance was recorded as the highest it has ever been. This article highlighted this moment and celebrated it by detaching graphic novels from their "inappropriate" stigma and associating it with success through student reading in the school library.

This research provided some evidence that graphic novels can increase the circulation of a school library collection and offered insight on the success that graphic novels can have with students. It is a format that can engage students in reading and provide them with excellent instruction while doing so. A review of the patron visits and circulation data collected and the bibliometric research conducted indicate that graphic novels are undoubtedly a successful format for library media specialists to include in the library collection. This research may serve as a reference for librarians looking to review and assess their collections in terms of graphic novels. The methodology and research questions may serve as a model for librarians and media specialists to conduct research in their library collections.

While the data are useful for collection development policies and decisions, it may also serve as a resource to present to stakeholders involved in the library community and program. Presenting this information during school board meetings or budgeting meetings could provide support for librarians to gain additional funding or justify their selections for the school library collection.

Even though graphic novels have been around for a

little over forty years, they are still young compared to other literature formats. While their importance in the collection is evident, additional research will need to be conducted to support and build upon the results of this study.

## References

Andera, S. (2007). Graphic novels in the school library to help promote literacy for boys. *PNLA Quarterly*, 71(4), 5-8.

Bartholomew, H. (2017). Comics Cross Over. *Library Journal* (2017)

CCSS. (2018). Common Core State Standards for English Language Arts. Retrieved from [http://www.corestandards.org/wp-content/uploads/ELA\\_Standards1.pdf](http://www.corestandards.org/wp-content/uploads/ELA_Standards1.pdf).

Collier, L. (2015). Grabbing students. *American Psychological Association*, 46(6). Retrieved from <https://www.apa.org/monitor/2015/06/grabbing-students>.

Downey, E. (2009). Graphic novels in curriculum and instruction collections. *Reference & User Services Quarterly*, 49(2), 181-188.

Eisner, W. (1978). *A contract with God and other tenement stories*. Princeton, WS: Kitchen Sink Press.

Foster, K. (2004). Graphic novels in libraries: An expert's opinion. *Library Media Connection*, 22(5).

Gann, Linda. (2013). A graphic view of school library standards. *Knowledge Quest*.

Gavigan, K. (2014). Shedding new light on graphic novel collections: A circulation and collection analysis study in six middle school libraries. *School Libraries Worldwide*, 20(1), 97-115.

Gorman, M. (2008). Graphic novels rule! *School Library Journal*, 54(3), 42-47.

Griffis, M. (2018). Quantitative research. *Quantitative Methods*. LIS 668 class notes, fall 2018.

Griffith, P. (2010). Graphic novels in the secondary classroom and school libraries. *Journal of Adolescent*

*& Adult Literacy*, 54(3), 181-189.

HSERF. (2005). Lifetime effects: The high/scope Perry preschool study through age 40. High Scope Educational Research Foundation.

Kan, Kat. (2003). Getting graphic at the school library. *Library Media Connection*, 21(7): 14.

Kern, D. (2016). Teaching "real books" versus graphic novels in the classroom. *New England Reading Association Journal*, 51(2), 121-122.

MacDonald, H. (2013). How graphic novels became the hottest section in the library. *Publishers Weekly*, 260(18), 20-25.

Parr, K. (2012). The importance of school libraries in student achievement and success. *Mississippi Libraries*, 75(1), 18-22. Spring 2012. Retrieved from <http://www.misslib.org/Resources/Documents/MLarchive/ML2012Spring.pdf>.

Rednour, D. (2017). Comics cross over. *Library Journal*, 142(11), 40-48.

Rudiger, H. & Schliesman, M. (2007). Graphic novels and school libraries. *Knowledge Quest*, 36(2), 57-59.

Reitz, J.M. (2018). *Online Dictionary for Library and Information Science. ABC-CLIO*. Retrieved from [https://www.abc-clio.com/ODLIS/odlis\\_A.aspx](https://www.abc-clio.com/ODLIS/odlis_A.aspx).

Smith, J. & Pole, K. (2018). What's going on in a graphic novel? *International Literacy Association*.

Snowball, C. (2010). Teenagers: our future readers. *InCite*, 31(3).