Engaged in Graphic Novels with Fifth Graders

Thesis

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Abstract

This study explores the possibilities of graphic novels with young readers. I examined the question: *In what ways do readers engage while reading a graphic novel?*

Throughout the 2009-2010 school year, four fifth grade students from a private Catholic school in the Midwest were selected to participate in two book discussions revolving around two graphic novels. After these discussions, each student was interviewed, one-on-one, about their experience. This was followed by intense analysis of the data collected. Based on my own teacher journals, as well as transcripts from the videoed book discussions and interviews, I was able to index and outline three emergent themes. During this study, readers engaged with the graphic novels discussed by connecting them to the film medium, by calling on personal experiences and relating them to the text, and by noticing and discussing literary devices found in the graphic novels. These themes show three diverse and important ways that these student readers engaged in graphic novels. Ultimately, it is my conviction that there is great value in reading graphic novels, based on the wide-ranging discussion topics, as well as the enthusiasm they are met with in an academic setting. The graphic novel is a powerful medium, and I challenge teachers, students, librarians, researchers, and readers everywhere to engage in a graphic novel and experience what it has to offer.
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Fields of Study

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Introduction

Although the idea of comics can date back as far as the Middle Ages (Sabin, 1996), it is only recently that comics and graphic novels have been more widely suggested as legitimate literature, rather than the dumb-downed, illustrated stories they had been considered in the past. Graphic novels are a more recent form of comics. Simply put, comics are pieces of stories; when compiled, they create a complete story known as a graphic novel. Graphic novels use images and text to engage readers and tell a story. But the images from a graphic novel change the reading experience. Instead of creating a picture of a character in readers’ heads, the character is standing in front of us. As readers, we walk with characters, see what they see. The text and the images become equally important, both providing essential information to the story. Instead of textual imagery, we get images. These are a few of the many things that make graphic novels unique.

Throughout the past century, comics, and more specifically, graphic novels, have gained popularity and acknowledgement. In 1992, Art Spiegelman’s *Maus* (1986, 1991), a graphic novel, won the Pulitzer Prize. Even in 1997, librarian Gagnier rallied for more comics and graphic novels in the libraries. He believed that comics provide heroes and strong values through stories and images and therefore should be readily available. He writes that “superheroes who fight evil give teenagers hope that what seems uncontrollable in their lives is indeed manageable. Teens are amused and delighted by superheroes’ resilience, humor, cunning, and always, their heroism” (1997, p. 143). More recently, though, more people have spoken out on behalf of comics and graphic
novels. In 2008 the New York City Department of Education began conducting in-
services for school librarians, to help them build graphic novel collections. According to
the School Library Journal, the school district is “embrac[ing] graphic novels as a
valuable reading and learning tool for libraries and classrooms” (Whelan, 2008, ¶ 1).
And currently, I am able to walk into my public library branch of Columbus, Ohio and
see a giant screen on the wall asking the question, “Looking for a hero?” accompanied by
drawings of popular comic book characters. Comics and graphic novels are now being
seen by many as literature that is not simply entertaining and popular, but valuable to an
academic setting such as classrooms and libraries.

Many readers find graphic novels to be an exciting medium that appeals to a wide
range of readers and age groups, but there are just as many readers who would tell you
that graphic novels are simply dumb-downed stories for people who don’t like to read
‘real’ books. Both are arguably true. But to understand that, first you have to understand
that comics and graphic novels are not a genre, but a medium of literature. There are
mysteries, biographies, comedies, etc., and among them there are well written and badly
written graphic novels. There are complicated graphic novels that challenge readers and
deal with social issues, much like the ones used in this study, and there are light reads
that are meant to entertain, only. Of course, the same can be said for more traditional
literature too. There are good books and bad books, and books to fit any purpose.

Regardless of the genre of the comic or graphic novel, the images are what make
them unique, setting them apart from textual based literary mediums such as text books,
textual novels, articles, or handouts. The ability to read images, or visual literacy, is a
valuable skill, especially today. Most any media source, whether it be the television,
computer, a magazine stand, or a graphic novel, requires one to be visually literate. Many have argued that images create a distinctive reading experience that challenges the reader in new ways. Schwarz (2007) notes the value of graphic novels and their images when she quotes Burmark, writing: “Welcome to the age of images. The signs are everywhere – for those who can read them” (¶ 2). The overall consensus on defining visual literacy focuses around the ability to understand or ‘read’ and create visual messages (Burmark, 2002). It is the opinion of many researchers that students are better served when given several modes, including visual, in which to give and receive information, otherwise known as multimodality. Kress (2003) agrees with Schwarz, writing:

We can no longer treat literacy (or ‘language’) as the sole, the main, let alone the major means for representation and communication. Other modes are there as well, and in many environments where writing occurs, these other modes may be more prominent and more significant. (p. 35).

Kress notes the importance of multimodality, especially when it comes to visual literature (2003). Comics and graphic novels lend themselves to this concept, as they are multimodal, transferring information through image and text. With that in mind I don’t believe a graphic novel is a book you should hand to a struggling or reluctant reader in the hopes that they will move up to traditional text later. It is not something that should be hidden behind a classic novel during silent reading time. And it cannot replace other important mediums in a classroom, either. Graphic novels are a different way to engage with information and another medium in which we, as teachers, can use to reach our students.
Graphic novels use images as an integral part of story telling. Images show emotion, give details, and can push a story plot forward. It has been said already that the ability to read images is a skill, and is one of no lesser importance than reading text. Sipe (1998), in “How Picture Books Work,” explores the text-picture relationship and its effect on the reading process. By using Sendak’s *Where the Wild Things Are*, Sipe describes the influence images and text can have over each other, through transmediation, or moving from one sign system to another (1998). He describes the need to oscillate while reading, moving back and forth from image to text in order to understand the story. Sipe writes:

> The resulting process is a type of oscillation, as we adjust our interpretation of the pictures in terms of the words, and our interpretation of the words in terms of the pictures. And, because the meaning of the signs are always shifting… this oscillation is never-ending. The possibilities of meaning in the word-picture relationship are inexhaustible. (1998, p. 103).

This back and forth between text and image engages a reader. It also shows the influence that text and images have on each other, as they work together to create a story.

Sipe’s idea of oscillation suggests that there is an intimate relationship between, not only the image and the text, but also the reader, the image, and the text. Sipe outlines several concepts regarding texts and images that describe such a relationship. One concept is that of Iser, who sees “a reader participation in the production of textual meaning” (1998, p. 99) as the reader-text relationship. In other words, the reader helps create meaning as he reads, by filling in gaps in text. Sipe suggests that images can be a part of the gap that needs to be filled in, or vice versa. Rosenblatt’s (1982) theory of
reader-response, where a reader is always bringing something of themselves into a reading of a piece of literature is also relevant to this argument. McCloud, author of *Understanding Comics* also shares a similar opinion when it comes to reading comics and graphic novels. Comics and graphic novels are made up of panels filled with text and images and are divided by blank space, called gutters. He writes that as you are reading a graphic novel, “what you see is seldom what you get if all you are seeing is just ink and paper. In the end, what you get is what you give” (1993, p. 136-137). A reader must contribute to the story, participate, in order for the story to take place. While reading a graphic novel, the reader agrees to read panels in order, connect text and dialogue with facial expressions and action in images, and fill in what goes on between each separate panel.

The ideas of McCloud, Sipe, and Iser, supported by previous research from Rosenblatt, are what started my thinking about the active participation, or engagement, of the reader while reading a graphic novel. Sipe’s ideas on oscillating while reading a picture book can help us look at how graphic novels and comics can be read. In a graphic novel, both the text and the images provide essential information to move a story forward, therefore the oscillation process could become more complex. McCloud supported this conclusion. I began to wonder what it might look like to truly engage in a graphic novel. I found that the literal gaps (gutters) in a graphic novel provided ample opportunities for a reader to engage and contribute to the story telling. Iser’s suggestion that the reader participates in the creation of a story by filling in the gaps is what ultimately informed the creation of my research question: *In what ways do readers engage while reading a graphic novel?* Throughout this paper I suggest several ways in
which engagement, or as Iser and McCloud describe it: participating, takes place. First I examine the scholarship on comics and graphic novels, as well as that which shapes my understanding of engagement and motivation. Next, I outline the methods of my research and describe my research participants. I continue by describing the ways the participants engaged with the graphic novels we read and discussed. In the findings section I argue that students’ connections to film, personal experiences, and literary devices were all a part of engagement. Finally, I discuss the classroom implications that this study points to.
Literature: The What and the Why

The majority of the literature dealing with graphic novels focuses on two broad topics: what graphic novels are and why they matter. I will outline theorists’ definitions and explanations of graphic novels first. This background knowledge informed my research vocabulary as well as my writing. The articles that speak to the why of graphic novels summarize the numerous values they have for a reader and an academic setting. The summaries of these conceptual articles, along with a few empirical studies, ultimately discuss why comics and graphic novels are becoming important to librarians, teachers, and students.

The What

It is essential, first off, to know what comics and graphic novels are. Throughout my readings, I have come across many different definitions for graphic novels. In his book, *Comics and Sequential Art*, Eisner (1985) defines comics as just that: sequential art. Drawing from Eisner, McCloud (1993) defines comics as “juxtaposed pictorial and other images in deliberate sequence, intended to convey information and/or to produce aesthetic response to the viewer” (p. 9). Said another way, comics are images set side by side to give information. Comics consist of several boxes, called panels, containing images and often dialogue. Each panel is framed, showing the perspectives in which a story can be told and the forms a character can take. Framing is basically the point of view of a comic (Eisner, 1985). The simplest form of comics appears in the form of
comic strips, like what one finds in newspapers. Compounding those comic strips creates a comic book; it’s longer, but not a complete story. Comic books often run in a series, continuing a story line over long periods of time. Graphic novels contain all of these parts, but in a complete story. Graphic novels, in particular, are a complete story, often resembling a novel in length, told in the comic form (Graphix of Scholastic, 2005). One could combine a series of comic books into a graphic novel, or break apart the chapters of a graphic novel into several comic books. In a graphic novel there is often a stress on text and images working together to tell a complete story. Often, both text and image are equally important (Goldsmith, 2005). It is important to remember, though, that the graphic novel is still a new medium with many things fitting under the umbrella definition. Eisner wrote the first graphic novel, *A Contract with God* in 1978. Since then, Eisner, McCloud, and many others have written their own graphic novels or added their opinion to what one actually is. For the purposes of my research, my definition of the graphic novel is as follows: a complete story told in a visual way. Visually, a graphic novel may include not only images, but symbols and changes in writing fonts or the absence of text to add to the visual affect of the story.

Because there are so many different kinds of graphic novels, I choose to use four different graphic novels throughout this research project, all of which fit into my definition of a graphic novel. Each one is unique, representing the broad spectrum of graphic novels. Some graphic novels only use images to tell a story, such as *The Arrival*. On the opposite end of the graphic novel spectrum is the visual, but mostly textual graphic novel. In these stories, authors rely mostly on text to tell the stories, but change fonts and page set-ups and use small illustrations. The page, then, becomes a more visual
experience. From this category, my students read *Amelia's School Survival Guide*. Finally, there is what I understand to be the classic graphic novel, which involves texts and images together. One relies on and informs the other. Readers must not only read the text, but the images as well to completely understand the story. Both *Bone* and *American Born Chinese* fit this definition. For my whole class work, I leaned towards the more text based graphic novels, reading *Amelia’s School Survival Guide* and *Bone*, but read *American Born Chinese*, and *The Arrival* with my small group of reading participants. While I think any of these four books could have a place in whole class instruction or small group work, I was interested in hearing discussion based around the images and their influence on the story. Both *American Born Chinese* and *The Arrival* are very unique in format, so I felt more comfortable teaching them for the first time with a smaller group, while using something more familiar for the whole class. For more information about these graphic novels, see appendix B.

Both Eisner and McCloud define comics and their parts but also give strong opinions about in importance of them as well. Eisner (1985) describes the many applications for comics, not just for entertainment, but as a teaching and instructional tool, advocating their use in academic settings. McCloud also addresses the uniqueness of the comic, as it requires the reader to collaborate with the writer and participate in the story telling. Both of these ideas are reiterated in the academic articles reviewed (Bucher and Manning, 2004; Carter, 2007; Connors, 2007; Heath and Bhagat, 2004; Jewitt, Kress, Ogborn, and Tsatsarelis, 200010, Kress, 2003,2004; Schwarz, 2002, 2007) as well as my own findings.
The Why

Scholarship on graphic novels and comics in the classroom gives suggestions and references for selecting a good graphic novel. More importantly, it promotes comics and graphic novels in libraries and academic settings, citing their popularity, as well as their academic benefits as support. The following reviewed articles focus on that popularity and engagement that graphic novels have, as well as the academic benefits graphic novels provide. Few articles, though, provide empirical research as a basis for these opinions.

Popularity

Throughout the past decade, the popularity of comics and graphic novels had increased dramatically. Whether in the libraries, in classrooms, or even on the movie screen, comics and graphic novels are popping up everywhere. This popularity also fed my curiosity of reading engagement with my students and graphic novels. Bilton (2004) found that approximately ninety-five percent of the books in the juvenile comics section of her library are checked out at all times. In 2001, Ivey and Broaddus conducted an empirical study about what makes students want to read. Ivey and Broaddus’s study revealed choice as a top motivator and listed comic books as one of the top ten types of books students choose to read. The authors concluded that classrooms and libraries needed to carry a larger variety of books, including comics in order to present that choice. This conclusion was echoed in McKool’s (2007) empirical study of fifth graders outside of school reading habits, saying,

These data reveal the importance of parents and teachers realizing the power of series type books, comics, and magazines. If promoting voluntary reading is a goal of parents and teachers, then it appears that introducing and encouraging the
Both of these studies in motivation and engagement reveal the importance of choice and variety; and both include the comic as an important part of the selections.

The explanation for the popularity of comics and graphic novels is varied. Some label them as accessible and even easy reading, while others focus on the power that images have in story telling. Freeman (1997/98) argues that the comic is a medium that offers something for every age in any genre, making them more accessible and popular. Crawford (2004) focuses on their popularity, tagging comics and graphic as ‘light reading,’ to mark the appeal. I believe that it is true that some comics are light, easy reads, but many, such as the ones chosen for this study, are not. Graphic novels and comics have the ability to challenge readers and allow them to make connections with many aspects of their world. Swartz (2007) negates Crawford’s ideas, writing that “the graphic novel can sometimes communicate the human reality better than an academic text or strategy report,” (¶ 41). Foroohar (2005) also references the value of comics and supports Swartz’s claims. He writes of the power of images given to us in comics, power that can out last much of the media images we receive.

The popularity of graphic novels and comics has also made its way to the big screen. Both Roberts (2004) and McAllister, Gordon, and Jancovich (2006) reference the surges in movies based on comics and graphic novels. Roberts writes that, “in the world of blockbuster movies, the summer of 2003 ushered in a watershed era of movies based on comic book and graphic novel art and story lines,” (p. 210). McAllister et al (2006) echoed this, but referring to the summer of 2006. The participants in this study also drew
on the connections between film and graphic novels. Film became a prominent theme during our discussions. It is clear that during this millennium, comics and graphic novels have made their way into the mainstream continuously. And while the initial popularity of the medium got them to the movies, the movies also provide excellent motivation for reading the medium.

**Academic Resource**

Although the popularity of comics and graphic novels is clear, popularity alone does not warrant their use in academic settings. However, the academic use of graphic novels is a topic that has been widely discussed. Bucher and Manning (2004) make a clear argument for the value graphic novels have in the classroom. They write that because interest in graphic novels is so high, using them in classroom will only promote reading. Students must use many literacy skills to decode images and text to read graphic novels. Swartz (2002) has a similar argument, saying that graphic novels not only attract readers to literature but also require them to use more complex reading skills to interpret images. Jewitt, Kress, Ogborn, and Tsatsarelis (2001) would agree with this as well. These four conducted an empirical study of the benefits of using text and image together in a science classroom lab. They suggest that “visual realization of meaning is important. Learning can no longer usefully be considered a purely linguistic accomplishment” (p. 17). It was clear by comparing the written and the illustrated portions of the lab sheet that each mode gave a different perspective of the lesson. The illustrations reflected student’s knowledge of cell structure, while the written work showed an understanding of the lab format. And what was provided in illustration could not have been provided in writing and vice versa. Kress (2003) argues that multimodality
is critical in communication, and that images specifically are significant not only in a classroom setting but in any social format. Many agree in the value of reading images in a classroom. The graphic novel provides that opportunity.

On top of reading images in graphic novels, the storylines also provide many opportunities for learning in a classroom. Graphic novels offer possibilities across content areas or while discussing social issues. Heath and Bhagat (2004) remind us that by combining visuals and text, comics model the way young children learn to read with picture books. With that in mind, we are able to see how graphic novels could be linked to so many content areas. Bucher and Manning (2004) claim that graphic novels can be useful as historical literature. Books like *Maus* (1997) and *Cartoon History of the Universe* (1997) provide visual histories that are rich with detail and description. Foroohar (2005) uses Persepolis as an example; it is required reading at West Point, as it discusses racial and historical issues in Iran. The language arts classroom is another space for graphic novels. Schwartz (2002) proposes using graphic novels to teach dialogue, since it is neatly divided into speech bubbles. It brings a unique way to teach dialogue development to a language arts classroom. Heath and Bhagat (2004) discuss the educational benefits to reading comics, noting the use of strong vocabulary, showing another value for a language arts classroom. Schwartz (2002) continues to suggest graphic novels for science and math classrooms, such as *The Cartoon Guide to Statistics*. She even notes the options of studying the graphic novels as art forms themselves. Students can look at the affects of colors and how images are portrayed by different graphic novelists, just as they might any other piece of art. Discussions of social and cultural issues will also take place, in any content area. Bucher and Manning also note
that there are many graphic novels that can be used when teaching social issues, such as being homeless, rape, or incest. *The Tale of One Bad Rat* (1995) is one such graphic novel that visually depicts these difficult themes. Connors (2007) discusses experiences he has had teaching with *Persepolis* (2003). Using cultural criticism as the vantage point and *Persepolis* as the novel, Connors created ways for students to deal with tension in cultural differences and strong connections in similarities that seemed buried, previously. Connors suggests that graphic novels such as this one provides great opportunities for journaling and in depth discussion. Connors (2007) believes he brought his class to a higher understanding to a new culture by using a graphic novel. Whether in a content area or a critical topic of discussion, there are multiple graphic novels to fit the purpose.

Graphic novels also allow for new or different strategies and skills (for both teachers and students) to be used in academic settings. Carter (2007) asserts that graphic novels require visual and critical literacy. He gives teaching suggestions through the chapters he has collected and edited, saying that graphic novels will aid a teacher in coming away from whole-class novels, while finding novels to fit the needs of all of his or her readers which he sees as a benefit. Heath and Bhagat (2004) agree with the complex and critical nature of many graphic novels that Carter (2007) explores. They write that reading comics necessitates multiple reading strategies and layers of attention. They write, “Comics give voice to parts of young readers’ experience and imagination; they play a key role in cross-media theme development, and they illustrate multiple ways of presenting information – verbal, visual, and graphic” (p. 591). They conclude by saying that comics provide literature that is as complex as the media that surrounds the
reader. Comics and graphic novels mirror a readers’ world, from their first picture book to the constant media that surrounds their everyday life.

Scholars have shown that comics and graphic novels are valuable literature that should be used in academic contexts. They require complex reading and the use of many literacy modes. Ultimately, the popularity of graphic novels gains the attention of the students, and the literature is full of suggestions on how to use graphic novels once you have that attention. Unfortunately there is little empirical research that supports the claims that graphic novels do what everyone says they do. Unless noted, all of the scholars’ work reviewed for this study was conceptual. My study addresses this gap in the literature.
Methods of Research

My methods for data collection and analysis took place in four parts. Each part informed and influenced the subsequent part. First, I worked with my entire class, reading two graphic novels as part of our regular curriculum, after which I reflected and analyzed in a teacher journal. Secondly, after selecting study participants, I had two small group book discussions that I led and then analyzed. Following the book discussions, I conducted one-on-one interviews, which concluded my data collection. Finally, this was followed by intense, overall analysis and ultimately the development of themes relating to the participants’ engagement.

Part one: whole class work with teacher journal reflection

During the 2009-2010 school year, I worked with fifth graders from my school. Our school is a private, catholic school in the suburbs of a mid-sized Midwestern city. The school holds about five-hundred-seventy students, with the average class size being thirty. Student ethnicity is primarily Caucasian and the majority of the school’s families are middle class. This fifth grade class of seventy (thirty-five students per classroom) matches the school’s demographic. These fifth grade students are between the ages of ten and eleven, and the class is about half female, half male. There were no severe learning disabilities or atypical academic accommodations for this class.

I read a total of four graphic novels during the 2009-2010 school year. The first two, Amelia’s School Survival Guide and Bone were part of my regular class curriculum and became part one of my data collection and analysis. They are referenced here for
two reasons. First, their presence in my everyday classroom speaks to the fact that I value the comic and graphic novel in a classroom setting. Second, these two graphic novels gave my participants important experience and background knowledge with this medium that influenced our book discussions and interviews. I also used this teaching time to keep a teacher-journal in preparation for conducting this study of graphic novels and engagement. This journal, combined with my lesson plans and materials, served as foundational data for my study. I analyzed this data after reading each of the books and wrote analytic memos based on this preliminary analysis. This analysis helped me to prepare for the book discussions to come, as I was able to write outlines to get discussions started, that would build on what we had started as a whole class.

**Part two: selecting the participants**

Before beginning my book discussions, I needed to find participants for them. I knew that I preferred to keep the group small (ten participants or less) so that each participant would have a voice and have time to share. With too many participants in book discussion setting, it is possible that some students would not speak out. So, in the spring of this school year, I chose four students to participate in my study. By using my criteria, which I describe below, I choose the participants from the seventy fifth graders at my school. I teach reading to all seventy students, so by the spring of that school year, I had a strong background on all of them. First, I wanted the student to be an avid reader, meaning that during silent reading time and free time, they were consistently reading material appropriate to their individual reading level. It was my hope that working with avid readers meant that there would be a greater chance of reading engagement, therefore providing me with more data to analyze. Second, I wanted students to be able to
communicate well, both orally through their writing. This is important since the participants were expected to discuss and give opinions in front of me, their peers, and a video camera. I also felt that written communication skills should be strong as well, so that the students could easily make notes as they were reading, as well as when they respond to my surveys and notes. Students were given to opportunity to take notes on post-its, as well as respond in writing on a survey and later on during member checking. Strong writing communication skills from these participants made analyzing these data easier. Finally, I looked for students that actively shared their reading materials with me. I have several students who make a point to discuss their reading with me. This led me to believe that these students would be comfortable to continue that discussion on camera. I also needed participants who were available a certain number of hours after school, in order to participate in the study. There were a total of three after school meetings, plus time spent outside of school reading the novels. While I worked with many avid readers, only a small portion of my students have both strong oral and written communication. Out of that narrowed group of students, I pinpointed the ones who discussed their reading with me. With these criteria in mind, I chose four students that met them.

Of course, these criteria excluded many students. Struggling and reluctant readers were not considered for this study, as I was counting on students to do the reading outside of class time. The criteria also excluded students who performed below average academically, simply based on written communication. In the future, exploring the ways in which struggling students engage with graphic novels is a topic that deserves attention. However, it did not meet the needs of this study.
I felt very confident in the potential group of four students that were chosen. I knew all of them very well and felt they had the skills needed, based on their performances in class, as well as one-on-one conversations I had had with them throughout this school year. I was also confident that these students, while at the top of my classes, academically, would be challenged by these graphic novels. After receiving parental consent, I gave each student a survey (see appendix A) to judge his/her interest in graphic novels, comfort in book discussions, and interest in participating in the study. Based on the enthusiasm indicated on surveys, (all four students marked that they were very interested in participating in the study and comfortable or very comfortable discussing the books with their peers and teacher), I gained assent from all four students and began the study.

Participating in my study were Shannon, Jason, Laura, and Gina (pseudonyms). Shannon is a Caucasian female who is always vocal in class. Her comments are usually well thought out and well spoken. Shannon, has always been comfortable challenging ideas of teachers and peers. This year was her first real exposure to graphic novels. Jason is the only boy who participated in the study, and is also Caucasian. While he wished there were another boy in the group, Jason did not let the girls affect his behavior. He never held back during discussions, never complained of being surrounded by girls. He, instead, participated constantly in discussions and acted as the Jason I was familiar with in class. Jason was very comfortable asking questions and letting me know if he is lost or confused. He also works well in groups. Most important, Jason loves to read and is always recommending books and series to me. Jason also expressed great interest in the medium of graphic novels, even though he has not had much experience with them.
Laura, a Caucasian female, is a little quieter in class but always seems to be thinking. She consistently knows what is going on in class and usually takes time to think through things before answering or commenting. Finally, there is Gina, who was not only an avid reader, but an avid graphic novel reader. Gina is known as the class artist, so the medium of the graphic novel speaks to her. Gina is African, but was born in the United States.

**Part three: book discussions and videotape footage**

During the spring quarter I met with my participants as a group twice, once for each graphic novel. These book discussion meetings were part two of my data collection and analysis. Prior to our meetings I gave each student a copy of each book and a packet of post-its. I asked the students to read through each book, and suggested that if they had time, they reread parts they were particularly interested in. Then, I asked them to mark any parts that were interesting, confusing, beautiful, or worth talking about for any reason with the post-its. The participants had about a week to read each book.

Our book discussions took place after school in my classroom. Both discussions were video taped. Videotaping seemed to be an appropriate visual collection method for such a visual literature medium. As students reacted to a visual piece of a story, they would often react with their bodies, acting things out, mimicking body language and facial expression. I wanted to be able to capture all forms of engagement, not just the verbal ones, therefore the video camera became the perfect method for data collection. Each discussion lasted about an hour.

During our first meeting we discussed *The Arrival* by S. Tan (2006) (See Appendix B for a full description). *The Arrival* tells the story of an immigrant in a new world that is just as unfamiliar to the reader as it is to the main character. The reader
follows his journey and experiences all of the new things he encounters. We went through the book together, talking through the story. It is a wordless story, so one major point of discussion was describing the story being told and how that was coming across. I asked students to read and think out loud as they look at the pages, explaining where they looked and how they came to conclusions about each page and the information it gives. I had specific questions that I had predetermined, based on my analysis from my whole class work, but I generally let the students guide conversations with their comments, questions, and the sections they had marked with post-its.

During our second meeting, we discussed G.L. Lang’s (2006) *American Born Chinese* (See Appendix B for a full description). Lang’s story is actually three stories in one, all combining under the theme of being yourself. In each of the stories, a character struggles with who they are and where they came from. Again, the students had read the book before our meeting. It is a longer book, so was impossible to read through the entire thing in an hour long book discussion. I let the sections the students had marked prior to our discussion guide our discussion, skipping over the sections that the group had not noted. This discussion also lasted about an hour and was of similar format to the first discussion.

Before the third part of my data collection and analysis, I took time to reflect and analyze what had already been collected. This analysis helped me to develop interview questions for part three’s collections. After each book discussion session, I watched the videotape footage. First, I created an outline of main events and discussion topics that occurred through our meeting. I then determined which parts of the discussion are pertinent to my research question and began to outline potential categories and emergent
themes, continuing to take notes in my teacher journal. Based on this reflection, I outlined several questions for each of my students.

**Part three: one-on-one interviews and videotape footage**

The third part of my data collection and analysis can during the one-on-one interviews. I videotaped these interviews in the same manner as the group discussions. Each interview lasted about forty minutes, during which time I asked each question I had developed previously, as well as asked follow-up questions and probing questions when necessary. As I mentioned previously, several questions where formed for a particular participant. For example, I spent time during Jason’s interview asking him about a graphic novel being a ‘mind movie,’ because that was the title he had given in during our group discussions. I interviewed Gina about her personal culture and the similarities she found while reading *American Born Chinese* because she discussed a connection to the main character previously. During the student interviews, I tested, as Hubbard and Power wrote, my tentative categories and themes developed during the part two’s analysis. Through this process, I was able to narrow the emergent themes down to three reoccurring themes.

**Part four: analysis**

By the end of my data collection, I had three major sources of data to analyze: my own teacher journal, the videos of student book discussions, and video of student interviews. To support the theory using Webb’s term, triangulation (Hubbard & Power, 2003) I used my teacher journal, transcripts from two book discussions, and transcripts from student interviews. By having support from three sources, my themes are more valid. After the interviews were complete I began the most intense portion of analysis:
watching the video footage again, taking notes and highlighting the three emergent themes that were supported throughout all three sources of data. All of the data collected supported, or at least did not negate, my findings. As I was writing the multiple analytic memos of each experience, I was indexing in order to find these common and emergent themes. Following the advice of Hubbard and Power in *The Art of Classroom Inquiry*, I went back through all of my indexing and integrated these themes into conceptual categories (2003). Doing this helped to connect all that I was seeing and experiencing with my students; it also helped me to narrow my focus. I was able to meet with my participants with an outline of these emergent themes. I then did member checks on my potential findings. The participants, being fifth graders, were old enough to understand this research concept and had already expressed a comfort level to speak thoughts and opinions out loud. In order to make my results as reliable as possible, member checking was an important step to my research. I walked my students through my findings and took notes on their comments, questions, and corrections. I also asked them to read along with the outline and make any marks or suggestions that they felt better represented their process. Students read the stated results and theories and signed their names, agreeing accordingly. All four students validated my outline of themes. I used my notes and the questionnaires to polish my results and to support them. With validation from my participants, I began transcribing the video footage that spoke to the emergent themes and moving forward with my analyzing. Once three themes had been outlined, tested against the rest of my data collected, and then supported by member checks, I was able to adjust them accordingly and draft my three emergent themes in my findings.
Findings

As I analyzed our book discussion and interview videos, as well as my own notes, I noted three major themes. First, the students drew similarities between the graphic novels we were reading and the cinematic medium. It was also clear that reading graphic novels was, for them, a very personal experience, calling on both imagination and past memories. Finally, students noticed and discussed literary devices in our graphic novels. These themes show three diverse and important ways that these student readers engaged in graphic novels.

Graphic novels connect to films

Images, lenses of perspective, movement, and action are all listed as things the reading group particularly enjoyed about reading graphic novels. These characteristics very closely relate graphic novels to film. What is more, these characteristics invite a reader inside the story, to contribute to the story telling, to bring something of them self to the reading.

We were only about twenty minutes into our first book discussion when the group brought up that fact that they didn’t feel like they were always reading, as they read a graphic novel. Instead, the four agreed that reading a graphic novel often feels like watching a movie. We spent a good deal of time discussing this idea as a reading group, as well as during one-on-one interviews. This connection has been made by others as well. Both Roberts (2004) and McAllister, Gordon and Jancovich (2006) have noted the
influence that comics and graphic novels have had on the film industry.

McAllister et al write, “Comic art – especially comic books – has played a key role in this evolution of the Hollywood blockbuster” (p. 110). The authors’ say that in the 1930s and 40s, films used the episodic nature of comic books in films, showing chapters at a time and ending with cliff hangers in films. They suggest that this eventually “indirectly influenced the episodic and cliffhanger nature of the action film genre” (2006, p.110). Roberts (2004) agrees, pointing out the many graphic novels that have been made into films and have such a strong influence on current media. With their influence in the past and present, graphic novels have a strong connection to film. This connection is something the reading group picked up on.

One connection the readers made between graphic novels and films is the images. Both mediums fit the description of sequential art, showing a progression of action through the images. The reader is able to watch action unfold, see what a character looks like, and experience the setting illustrated in the background while reading a graphic novel. And in a graphic novel, these images are not additions to the story; they are part of the story. Each image in a graphic novel gives important information to the reader and pushes the plot forward. For example, in American Born Chinese, Yang not only uses facial expressions but also stars and lightning bolts to show the inner emotions of his characters. All four reading group members called attention to these images and discussed the added information the images brought to the story. We went back and forth about what those lightning bolts could mean during our discussions. Jason saw them as a jolt of confidence to talk to the girl he liked, while Shannon couldn’t put her finger on the exact emotion she saw in the symbol. “It kind of looks more like a
smirk than a twitch [on his face]…it’s still kind of confusing. Like, in Bone you’d see hearts, but with him you see lightning bolts.” We agreed, as a group, that the lightning bolts showed some sort of energy or chemistry between two people, giving room to all of our individual interpretations. This energy, which is only shown in images, eventually leads the main character to make some bold decisions as the novel continues pushing the plot forward, such as attempting to talk to a bully or kiss his best friend’s girl friend.

How these images were drawn within their panels was also discussed in our book discussions. Schwarz (2007) writes that the “visual point of view or ‘camera shot’ is significant in a story told by pictures,” (¶ 13). Angles, perspectives, and distances are all characteristics that the reading group noted during discussion and related to things one could do with a video camera. In *The Arrival*, for instance, Tan uses close-ups on characters’ faces to show changes in perspectives or points-of-view. In *American Born Chinese* a character may be drawn as very small, as if a camera has backed up to show how alone the character is. Often, during our discussions, students would hold up their own invisible video camera, imitating a camera zoom or angle, as we discussed a particular set of actions such as these. Shannon notes, while holding an imaginary video camera on her shoulder, that the repetition of an image as it zooms in, not only imitates a camera moving in for a close up, but also creates intensity within the story. The readers enjoyed the variety that the ‘camera lens’ could give them and the sense of action and movement it created. It also clued them in to changes in mood or point of view. For instance, in *The Arrival*, the images would create a close up moment when a different character began to tell his or her story. Moreover, the idea that they were watching the story through the eyes of a camera involved the students in the story telling in a very
unique way. This camera invites readers to participate in the story, to look through a lens and experience the story as it happens. Shannon illustrates this happening as she describes a particularly intense page from *American Born Chinese*. She says, with her invisible camera on her shoulder, “You know how if somebody gets intense, sometime, they’ll come in <she moves her camera forward>? Well, there’re starting to back out…and instead of seeing him backing out with him in the picture, you see him alone <Shannon puts down the invisible camera and is now imitating the main character’s facial expression and body language from the panel in the book>. He must feel like, ‘oh no.’” By the end of her description of the camera angles, Shannon is inside the story, speaking as the character, rather than a camera operator or an outside observer.

The readers continued to be involved in the storytelling through the connection between the panels on a page of a graphic novel and a strip of film that is fed into a projector. During our book discussions, the students pointed out that visually, the panels are similar to strips of film. Blocks of images drawn on a page also act in the same way a strip of video film does, only the reader must be the projector. As the students read the graphic novels, they described running the panels through their minds, imagining the action as it happens from block to block. McCloud (1993) has also referenced this connection. He explains that the frames of film and comics are only different in one way. In comics, the frames are side by side, but in a film, they run together in one space. “Space does for comics what time does for film! However you might say that before it’s projected, film is just a very, very, very, very slow comic!” (p. 8). Before a film is projected, each frame is lined up side by side, much like a comic strip is. In thinking about this connection the students were making, I thought about the fact that I had never
seen an actual film strip before, and odds are, neither had my students. I believe that it is possible that they have seen film strips and projectors in other movies or television and made the visual connection that way. In reading class, we also looked at story board for a movie and discussed their close relationship to comics and graphic novels. It is possible that they drew the connections between comics and storyboards and then made the connection to film strips. Either way, this connection was something that the readers came to independently and easily. For example, as students described their favorite scenes, they would add very specific details that were not shown in the panels on the page, filling in the gutters that speed by on strips of film. Gina pointed out that there was such a large amount of detail in each image, she could almost make it into a flip book, animating the story and eliminating the gutters. It was Jason that labeled this “the mind movie.” As he “watched” a graphic novel, Jason described the mind movie that happened in his head, as he filled in what happened between each panel on the page, creating movement and action. “Just like everybody’s saying read between the lines. It’s watch between the pictures!” The mind movie theory of Jason’s illustrates one big way that readers engage with a graphic novel. The reader must be active as they read, filling in the information between the panels and creating each scene in their mind. Jason and the rest of the reading group were very aware and quick to point out the importance of the panels and what comes in between them.

Students engaged with graphic novels by interacting with them as they would a film. Readers connect to the images in graphic novels and receive information from them, just as they do when watching a film. The camera angles in a film also act much like the perspectives that readers picked up on in the framing of each panel of a graphic
novel. Finally, those panels in our graphic novels seemed to move in the readers’ minds, much like filmstrips move through a projector, ultimately telling a story. All of these connections between film and the graphic novel also connected the readers to the story. They were able to interact with the novels in a new and exciting way.

**Reading a graphic novel is personal**

The personal invitation to participate and imagine is another important way that readers engage. The members of the reading group keyed into the sense of wonder and imagination the graphic novel seems to invite. Laura described reading *The Arrival* in this way: “…With these pictures, I think they’re so, like, well, like, illustrated that you can just put the words to every picture….but the author left it open to you to see what you would put words to.” Kress (2004) would agree, pointing out that when looking at text, the order of reading is fixed, but the order of reading an image is partially up to the reader. The same goes for design. Kress writes that a designer of a textual and image-based page in a text book or website “is no longer the ‘author’ of an authoritative text, but is a provider of material” (p. 114). Kress suggests that reading images is not only quite different from reading text but allows readers to be more involved. Laura felt that there was so much detail in the illustrations, that they told much of the story. And because she and the other readers were able to choose what words went along with the pictures, the reading experience became just hers. In reading both *The Arrival* and *American Born Chinese*, the readers believed that the images left much open to the interpretation of the reader. In fact, the students believed that it would be nearly impossible for a wordless
book, such as *The Arrival* to be part of their Accelerated Reader program because, as Shannon said, “no one can be right or wrong [in their interpretations].” Because a reader would interpret the images, they would choose a way that made the most sense to them, personally. Each reader may make their own meaning of the story. The readers saw no way to give a multiple choice test on something they created as they read.

I found evidence of this idea during my one-on-one interviews. While reading pieces of each graphic novel out loud, the readers had individual experiences with the story. Each read aloud felt and sounded differently, depending of the reader. While reading *The Arrival* aloud, each student was forced to create the words to describe the story that only existed in images. Students used their own words to describe the main events of the story, but each student focused on different details in the images. Laura described only actions in the pictures, while Jason was the only reader to create dialogue between the characters. Both Gina and Shannon described the actions, adding descriptions of the emotions the characters must be feeling. While each reader created the same plotline, the details of the story were unique to the reader.

Even with words provided, each reader also made *American Born Chinese* their own while reading it aloud. Laura chose to read only pieces of the text provided, to paint a broad picture of the events. The other three readers read all of the text out loud, but each added their own details. Gina pointed out what she thought the Chinese characters meant and both Gina and Jason provided physical movement for what they saw in the text. The plot was the same, but the details belonged to the reader. These graphic novels invited these readers to interpret what they were seeing and to focus on images and
details that were important to them. Setting descriptions, dialogue, and detail all had an element of choice for the readers.

The process of reading a single page of a graphic novel was also something that belonged to each individual reader. I asked the where they started reading on a particular page, and Laura quickly answered, “Well, actually, I didn’t read it first, I looked at the picture of the mountain.” Jason began reading the text in the top, left hand corner, while Shannon scanned the whole page with her eyes to get the main idea of the story before she moved to the text. Gina aimed to read the text first, but would sometimes ‘sneak’ a look at the pictures, as she read. Each reader read the page in a different way, yet agreed that no one was right or wrong. Again, reading a graphic novel becomes quite a unique experience to each individual reader, because the page set up of a graphic novel offers so many choices of what to focus on and where to start. Even the images themselves can be open to interpretation. Jason explained that in reading *The Arrival*,

They [readers] can interpret pictures other ways and get a different story. Like, I was saying that they were sad that they were leaving and I interpreted the supposed dragon’s tail thing as sorrows, but someone else could call it, like, poverty or legal problems.

The single image of the dragon’s tail represented whatever made the most sense to the reader, connecting them even more closely to the graphic novel. This was something that Jason not only noticed through his reading and our discussions. He also liked that this interpretation was his choice.

This level of choice and uniqueness creates a relationship between the reader and the story. The graphic novels we read became personal experiences with the readers not
only because of the openness and choice they allow, but also because the reader could connect to the books in a personal way. This relationship, Rosenblatt would label as a transaction or a “two way process involving a reader and a text” (Rosenblatt, 1982, p. 268). After seeing the personal connections that students made to their home life, their world, and even their academics, it is clear that Rosenblatt’s theories of reader-response carry over into the graphic novel medium.

Students made constant personal connections as they interacted with the text. Students often referenced connections to their home life as they connected with familiar images as they read and discussed. While looking through *The Arrival*, we came to a dinner party scene. Although the food, dishes, and surroundings look foreign, each reader connected with the image of sitting around a table, eating with people. Shannon immediately began describing the page as if it were in her own home, saying, “I could see that exact frame, like, I could see that on my dad. Because, he’s like, he’s about to say, ‘Let me tell you about that…’” Shannon imitates her father’s voice and body language as she talks about the dinner parties her family has at home. She now has a connection with the main character, engaging her with the characters and story.

Another wonderful personal connection to home was made by Gina, as she read *American Born Chinese*. The main character, Jin, is born in America to Chinese born parents. Gina was also born in the states, but to two African parents. Both fictional and real parents came to America for school, met, married, and started a family. Gina becomes so closely connected to Jin and the story, because of these similarities. She references the image of Jin eating lunch at school as she connects. “We can’t really pack the food we eat… it’s hard to pack…But anyways, if I did, some people, I’m pretty sure
someone would say something similar to that. Maybe not the exact words, but something like, ‘What the heck is that?’ Gina also discussed the few times she has been teased or put down because of her race. Although she had never experienced anything to the extent that Jin does in the book, she related to his feels and his reactions throughout. This was a connection that not only engaged Gina in her reading, but also was a connection that was unique and personal to her.

The readers were also able to bring their connections outside of themselves and into the world around them. A language barrier, a global subject, was a very obvious problem in *The Arrival*. As the main character arrives to a new country, the reader realizes that he does not speak the language as he shows confused looks on his face and lifts his hand to his ear, trying to understand what is being said to him. Each student was able to relate to his situation in some way, whether by traveling to another country, as Laura had, or having conversations with someone with a thick accent, as Shannon has. And it was the images of the character’s confusion that students related to. As Shannon puts it, “I think a graphic novel, um, words could have told me that he didn’t understand what they were saying. But…the hand movements helped me understand, because I’ve done this {she lifts her hand to her ear, imitating the image} more times than I can remember.” It was the familiarity of the situation in the image that connected and engaged Shannon and the other in the story.

Another example that stood out to me also came from our discussion of *The Arrival*. In the story there are shadows of dragon tails throughout the village from which main character migrates. Each reader had ideas about what this tail could symbolize. However, most of these ideas related to problems they have heard about in current events.
such as the economy and financial problems, which was a significant problem in the news and households throughout the past two years. The reoccurring image of the tail left the idea open for interpretation, allowing the readers to make a connection that makes sense to them.

As we continued to discuss the tail from *The Arrival*, students also connected ideas that they had discussed in past social studies classes, such as the potato famine in Ireland. The readers connected the stories to their schoolwork with ease. Immediately, in our discussion, students drew on their immigration unit from the previous year in their reading of *The Arrival*. Shannon explains, “Before I was a little confused, and it was a lot, um, vague. But, um, this we learned about in social studies, so it was really easy to recognize.”

Jason chimes in, “Yeah, the Ellis Island!”

“The Ellis Island!” Both Gina and Laura had made the connection as well. All four readers agreed that this story was about Ellis Island. And it is interesting that Shannon didn’t just make a connection, she *recognized* it, showing how powerful those images are to her.

Students also connected academically to the story in a more traditional sense. In our fifth grade classroom, we study many literary terms and devices. The readers not only recognized those literary devices in the graphic novels, but also used them to connect the graphic novels to other pieces of literature. Gina pointed out the use of slang and jargon in *American Born Chinese* connecting it to work by Jerry Spinelli. During the school year the fifth grade had read his book, *Maniac Magee* and completed a mini lesson on jargon and how and why Spinelli used it. She believed that Spinelli and Yang wrote
the way the people actually spoke, “It’s actual people talking, so there’s, there is some, um, slang.” The readers also connected plot lines to other stories they had read personally. These literary connections are just one more way these readers engaged in their reading.

The fact that students made so many academic connections was no accident. In fact, the readers informed me that they believed they work harder than the average reader while reading these books in order to perform for me, their teacher, and impress the camera. And although all of the students agreed to an openness that a graphic novel provides, they also believed that there were rules and ways to read a graphic novel. Jason explained it this way:

If this is your first graphic novel, you really won’t understand it… because if you don’t know that a graphic novel is pictures and panels, um, showing you the story, while telling you the plot at the same time, if you haven’t read a graphic novel before, you won’t, you won’t understand it as much as everyone else, because some of the pictures show action, and like, um, it shows emotions…they wouldn’t know to look at the facial expression or what they are doing or what he’s surprised about or what he’s thinking…

Jason’s insightful observations show how complicated he believes a graphic novel can be. But at the same time, he knows the ‘rules’ to reading one, so he understands the story. The juxtaposition of the openness and the rules of reading a graphic novel creates an interesting dichotomy. While there is much to interpret, there are also concrete and academic pieces to graphic novels.
Almasi, McKeown, and Beck (1996), in their empirical study write that readers become cognitively engaged when “relating the content of the text to personal experiences, movies, or other books” (p. 119). Those relationships happened here. Students brought their own personal stories to the discussions. Whether it was their own version of the story in the graphic novel itself or a story from elsewhere in their life that related to what they saw in the graphic novel, reading and discussing these books got personal.

**Literary devices in graphic novels**

As I said previously, the readers acknowledged that they may have been reading graphic novels differently than what they thought a typical reader would. As Shannon put it, “They [the reader] might just be slacking and not really care and not really thinking much about it, like we did, because we kind of had to, because it’s our book club and we have to impress the camera.” Although it was made clear to them that there would be no grades, the readers continually brought up literary devices found as they read. Writers such as Schwarz (2002), Bucher and Manning (2004), and even Graphix of Scholastic (2005) all reference the literary devices that can be found in graphic novels. All of these devices discussed were also part of my fifth grade lessons through out the year; some were taught while reading graphic novels, while some where taught while reading traditional novels. The participants’ added effort to impress made for some wonderful discussions.

During the year, my fifth grade class read two graphic novels: *Amelia’s School Survival Guide* and *Bone*. During the reading of both books, I took time to focus on literary devices. Point of view was one device we discussed while reading *Bone* that
came up during our book discussions. The readers took information from my reading class and applied it during our discussion. While discussing *The Arrival*, it was Gina who posed the question to the group: what point of view is this drawn in? Shannon’s answer was, “It can either be third person limited or third person omniscient, because even when you do see him [the main character], you don’t see through his eyes, you see him.” The readers showed a clear understanding of the different types of point of view and what they might look like in a graphic novel. They also acknowledged the point of view changing as different characters told their stories. The group pointed out changes in color and close up drawings of faces to be clues of a change in point of view for the story.

There were also many literary devices that we discussed during the school year with traditional literature. Symbolism and morals were two devices that led to great discussions of *American Born Chinese*. First we talked about the stereo-typical Chinese character, Chin-kee, and what he symbolized. You could see the wheels turning in the readers’ heads as they realized the symbolism. Jason said, “It could be two parts of himself, the American half and the Chinese half.” We identified what all of the characters symbolized in the large picture, which led to the moral: be yourself, or as Gina put it in her interview, “You can’t take…away yourself, because you are yourself!”

Mood was also a very present part of our discussion, especially as we read *The Arrival*. One student asked what the changes in color around the boarder meant. Jason answered with, “Like Shannon said, a little bit of it is like the mood, like the part of the story.” The color changes marked changes in mood, giving the readers visual clues as they read the story. In the beginning of the story, the pictures are shaded darkly because the main character is packing to leave. Laura points out that the colors show us, “they’re [the
character’s family] sad that he’s leaving.” Once he arrives to a new, safer place, the
colors brighten.

Some of the literary devices came about in a very visual way, such as point of
view and mood. Others came about simply because of the plot of the story. The moral or
the theme, for one, became a topic of conversation, not because we could see it, but
because it was part of the storyline. Regardless of how the devices were presented, it is
clear that they were present and noticeable in graphic novels. It has been noted that these
readers put more effort into their reading than what is typical, therefore bringing these
literary devices to light in our discussions. Even so, graphic novels, such as those used
for this project, are rich with elements of literature.
Implications

The engagement this study’s participants experience is clear evidence of the value of graphic novels. Whether one looks at the elements of literature, the strong themes that help students to have personal experiences, or the fun and critical connection between film and graphic novels, it is clear that graphic novels like the ones used in this study engage students in their reading. Engagement occurs in many ways and on many levels, evidenced by the variety of discussion topics during our book discussions and interviews. My findings also agree with research that had already been completed, noting especially the connections to film and the plethora of literary devices found and discussed in these graphic novels. Based on what I experienced with these books and these readers, I believe graphic novels to be a valuable tool in a classroom. Graphic novels offer options for suggested personal reading. A graphic novel provides something for both a reader who struggles and one who is looking for something new and different. During instructional time, teachers can use graphic novels to engage students in a new visual medium, one that is proven to grab attention. Graphic novels offer many learning opportunities for the discussion of personal and critical issues. And they include critical content, not just through themes, but in literary devices. These things offer many teachable moments through graphic novels.

As a reading teacher, I have recommended graphic novels to readers of all varieties, including parents. I have found that they do indeed grab the attention of
reluctant readers. Many of my struggling students have gone on to read the next eight books from the *Bone* series, after reading the first one with the class. I have also recommended graphic novels (such as the ones read for this study) to skilled readers who feel like they have read everything there is. Graphic novels, for those readers, can provide something new and challenging.

Graphic novels also offer possibilities to teachers as a whole class novel. I have had the opportunity to teach *Bone: Out from Boneville* for the past several school years. When teaching this graphic novel, I have found opportunities to present mini lessons on point of view and setting, as those are two literary terms that become visual in a graphic novel. We have also looked at allusions the images make to other characters, books, or situations, such as Bone’s constant references to *Moby Dick* (1851) and similarities to older comics, such as *Uncle Scrooge* (Caswell & Filipi, 2008). It also gives great opportunities for dramatization, as the characters’ dialogue is divided within speech bubbles, making it easier to students to take on a character. Teaching *Amelia’s School Survival Guide* during this school year also gave many opportunities for artistic and visual responses to the story. Students illustrated ‘ideal’ models of themselves and their teachers, taking inspirations from the art in the graphic novel.

While the book discussions in this study took place with only four students, they too, give suggestions for a classroom of students reading a graphic novel. It is obvious from the deep conversation that happened during our book discussions that there are many rich discussion topics within a graphic novel. The four students I worked with, because of the criteria I set, were incredibly intelligent, well read, and well spoken. And while these students represented the higher level thinkers of fifth grade, they also found
these books to be challenging and thought provoking. Topics such as theme, race, stereotyping, loneliness, and self-appreciation are just a few of the things the students brought up during our talks. Put in small groups, I am confident that students in a whole class could be challenged in taking part in a similar discussion. Higher level students will be challenged. But at the same time, all students will be able to engage. I would recommend dividing students in to small discussion groups and providing a list of discussion prompts and questions, in the same way I did to begin my small book discussions.

Discussing the artwork, images, and visual techniques within these discussions can also add to the richness. In small groups, my students brought up the coloring of the skin in *American Born Chinese*, as yellowed skin is a negative stereo-type of the Chinese culture. The images in graphic novels are full of discussion topics and layers of literary devices. The tone of the author has also become an interesting teaching opportunity as we, as a class, examine the font and how it darkens or changes with the tone or mood.

While many have written of the benefits of graphic novels, there is still much to be learned about their use in academic settings. This study focused on small group discussions with avid and skilled readers. Further research is needed for graphic novel use in a whole class setting, as well as use for struggling readers.

This paper doesn’t claim that graphic novels will solve all of our reading problems or that they can replace another story medium in the classroom. What it does show is that they engage readers in many different and meaningful ways. There are many opportunities for reading graphic novels in any classroom, but they also require more researchers to take interest. The graphic novel is a powerful medium, and I challenge
teachers, students, librarians, researchers, and readers everywhere to engage in a graphic novel and experience what they have to offer.
Reference List


Appendix A: Student Survey

Name ________________________________

1. Do you enjoy reading comic books and graphic novels?
   
   Very Much  Sometimes  Not at all

2. How often do you read comic books and graphic novels?
   
   Very Often  Sometimes  Not at all

3. Do you enjoy reading out loud?
   
   Very much  Sometimes  Not at all

4. Are you comfortable discussing a book with a teacher and a small group?
   
   Very Comfortable  Comfortable  Not Comfortable

5. Are you comfortable talking about your reading process with a teacher and a small group?
   
   Very Comfortable  Comfortable  Not Comfortable

6. Would you be interested in being part of a graphic novel reading club that meets several times after school?
   
   Very Interested  Interested  Not Interested
Appendix B: Annotated Bibliography


*Books for Young Readers.*

*Amelia’s School Survival Guide* walks students through preparing for the start of the school year. She talks about how to deal with all types of teachers, sets up quizzes that will tell you what kind of homework student you are, and gives advice for studying in all subject areas. The pages look like notebook paper filled with notes, thoughts, and funny comments. There are details and comments in every corner. This graphic novel uses text primarily, with visual images as embellishments.


Bone follows three cousins from their initial banishment from Boneville though an epic adventure in a far away land. The cousins face danger, dragons, and the Lord of Locusts, who is hunting for them. Along the way, the Bone brothers befriend Thorn, Grandma Ben, Dragon, and the creatures of the forest. They all work together to defeat the Lord of the Locusts and his rat creatures, and Thorn eventually takes her true place as queen. Jeff Smith’s thirteen hundred page graphic novel, with vivid imagery and strong allusions, tells a fictional and fanciful tale that any reader could connect to.

Tan’s wordless story takes readers through a journey of one man to a foreign and fictional land. He leaves his wife and daughter behind and travels to a new place to find shelter, food, and work. On his journey he meets several people who share their stories and helps him along his way. Eventually, our main character is joined with his family in this new world, once he has made his place in it. Tan’s whimsical and, at times, eerie illustrations connect emotionally with the reader. This is a beautifully drawn story of a world full of new and confusing things that helps readers of any age connect with ideas about immigration, new worlds, and the struggles that come with them.


*American Born Chinese* is a set of three stories that crossover one another. It includes the old Chinese Fable of the Monkey King who no longer wants to be a monkey, the story of young Jin Wang, a Chinese American, and Chin-Kee, a negative caricature of a Chinese teenager. All of these characters suffer stereotypes and struggle with being comfortable with their identities. Near the end of the book, all of the stories overlap and merge together, forcing all of the characters to face themselves, their culture, their identities. *American Born Chinese* uses both text and images together to tell the story.