Literacy UKLA

How graphic novels support reading comprehension strategy development in children

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Abstract

This qualitative case study explored the relationship between comprehension strategies and graphic novels in one Grade 4 classroom, utilising children as informants. The primary research questions related to children's applications of metacognitive reading comprehension strategies as well as the potential for graphic novels to support the students' development as readers. Findings demonstrated that the children were able to apply two types of strategies to their reading of graphic novels: 'keys' that supported form-specific comprehension strategies and 'master keys' that supported more general comprehension strategies that could be applied to other types of texts. Student preferences for graphic novels aligned with their preferences for reading narrative novels and non-fiction, and did not align with preferences regarding comics or cartoons. Student preferences for reading graphic novels increased throughout the study. Fluent student responses to graphic novels through process drama were identified. Implications of the study involve the employment of graphic novels to support metacognitive strategies for reading and writing as well as to facilitate process drama.

Key words: metacognitive reading comprehension strategies, graphic novels, child as informant, process drama

Introduction

This qualitative exploratory case study research operated to illuminate the particular points of connection between comprehension strategies and graphic novels. The study was conducted as classroom research in one rural Grade 4 classroom at 'Cloverdale School'. The results of the study, while contextualised within the group of participants, offer implications related to classroom teaching and teacher education in terms of the value of graphic novels as classroom resources.

Cary (2004) positions graphic novels under the umbrella of 'comics'. Carter (2009) describes graphic novels as "sequential art narratives", building on Eisner's (1985) definition of comics as 'sequential art'. Graphic novels can be considered as classroom resources that address the wide range of what it means to teach English Language Arts – listening, speaking, reading, writing, viewing and representing – in addition to developing critical literacy skills that may be related to visual culture (Park, 2010). Although Carter offers evidence to suggest that graphic novels are increasing in popularity with students, studies exploring the graphic novel form with elementary students are limited.

Isolated studies support the use of graphic novels in secondary classrooms for the purposes of extending struggling readers' comprehension skills, including inferencing (Smetana et al., 2009) and critical literacy (Chun, 2009). One case study of a qualitative nature, conducted with Grade 3 students, currently seeks to explore how a multimodal literacy approach anchored in graphic novels can enhance English Language Learners' legitimacy and peripherality in small-group literacy discussions (Bomphray, 2011).

While some research has been conducted to connect particular metacognitive strategies with various genres (McTavish, 2008), there are no studies with elementary school children that deeply explore metacognitive comprehension monitoring related to the reading of the graphic novel form. In my study, children's metacognitive knowledge regarding comprehension strategies (Baker and Brown, 1984; Brenna, 1995a,b; Flavell, 1979) was explicitly explored in relationship to the classroom sets of graphic novel texts and the manner in which students responded to these texts.

Research questions

The primary research questions were as follows:

1. What comprehension strategies can students in a Grade 4 classroom learn to apply to a study of age-appropriate graphic novels?
2. In what ways might graphic novels support students' development as readers?

The research framework

Theoretical and conceptual underpinnings

Constructivist theory, specified by understandings regarding metacognition, underpins the idea that readers build their own meaning during reading (McTavish, 2008). Social constructivism contributes to the image of readers as problem solvers by reminding educators of the importance of mediation in learning (Vygotsky, 1978). As a central element of school reading programmes, research related to reading comprehension is critical as educators seek to discover further what occurs 'behind the eyes' (Smith, 2004) of young readers and facilitate meaning-making through the supported application of particular strategies before, during and after reading. Cantrell et al. (2010) identify that reading comprehension relies on multiple skills and strategies including text-based decoding and lexical skills, domain knowledge, topic knowledge and interest and cognitive monitoring and strategy use. Various active reading strategies, applied consciously and flexibly to the reading situation, have become central in elementary teaching curricula, yet many of these strategies have not been explored fully with multimodal texts, developed to their full potential in terms of teaching methodology or addressed as 'master keys' that have the capacity to work across a variety of textual settings. Such "master key strategies" could unlock meaning embedded in narrative text as well as graphic text, and support the development of students' writing as well as reading processes.

My employment of children as informants related to their own cognitive processes follows other work in educational research related to literacy (Brenna, 1995a,b; Strickland et al., 1991). The conceptual lens utilised by my study involved metacognitive comprehension strategies specifically related to a knowledge of self as well as a knowledge of task and text. The research involved a textual form that has been steadily making its way into schools and where the reading of images is as important as comprehensive decoding of, and personal response to, written language.

Methods

The study was conducted during 10 1-hour-long sessions, over a period of 5 weeks, in a Grade 4 rural classroom at Cloverdale School. The classroom contained 21 students, one experienced teacher who was also a part-time librarian and one intern – a supportive student–teacher ratio for small-group work during the project. We were thus able to run three concurrent ability groups related to strategy teaching, with each group focusing on a different text selected on the basis of themes and level of difficulty. The classroom teacher's main English Language Arts teaching goals involved supporting the development of reading strategies and reading for pleasure.

The class of students exhibited varied reading interests, abilities, cultures and languages in addition to offering diversity in terms of different socio-economic family backgrounds. Three students in the classroom had recently immigrated from Germany and spoke English as a second language, while one other student spoke both Chinese and Mandarin at home. Some of the students came from farming families, some from families working in the nearby city and some from families working in local businesses such as a nearby potash mine.

During each of my research visits, I worked with small groups of students within a teaching framework facilitated by the classroom teacher. The teacher utilised Booth and Lundy's (2007) resource manual as well as drawing on Thompson's (2008) teaching suggestions. In general, a particular comprehension strategy was introduced to the whole class by the classroom teacher, and then practised by students in their small groups in the context of the graphic novel selected for their group's ability level. Multiple student copies of the graphic novels – all animal fantasies – were available through the support of a research grant provided by the University of Saskatchewan. These texts included Spires' (2009) *Binky the Space Cat*, Holm's (2005) *Babymouse: Queen of the World* and Smith's (2008) graphic novel adaptation of *The Tale of Despereaux*. A box containing 50 additional age-appropriate graphic novels (some multiple copies) was also placed in the classroom for mini-lessons and independent reading (see Bibliography for a list of titles). The titles provided to the students for independent reading ranged widely across various genres.

The study utilised classroom observation, informal discussions with students, participatory small-group activities supported by the researcher and semi-structured protocols in the form of written questionnaires to explore the students' application of comprehension strategies to graphic novels as well as student preferences in relation to the graphic texts provided in class. Results of the study, due to the nature of case study research, are tentative and contextualised (Merriam, 1998).

Results, conclusions, interpretations

Reading preferences for graphic novels

At the beginning of the study, the Grade 4 students did not show any particular preferences for the graphic novel form, and it is important to note that it was a new form to many of them. "There's less words" was a common comment from the children as they worked to provide an early descriptor of graphic novels. As the study progressed, the students began to demonstrate preferences for graphic novels within a practice of reading for pleasure, and particular graphic novels were cited as offering an opportunity for what

Table 1: Preferences regarding form at the close of the study (N = 21)

Reading preferences	*First choice*	*Second choice*	*Last choice*	*Second-last choice*
Novels	6	2	1	2
Short stories	0	3	5	2
Poetry	0	1	8	3
Comics	3	2	2	4
Cartoons	3	0	1	5
Graphic novels	5	10	1	1
Non-fiction	4	3	3	4

Sturm (2001) calls 'entranced reading' (p. 98). Comments from students reflected the depth of their personal response, as in Anton's statement related to an initial scene from *The Tale of Despereaux*: "I was born with big hands and feet (too)!" exclaimed Anton. "Both my hands and feet weighed at least one pound!"

The classroom teacher noted sustained interest from students in self-selecting graphic novels from the classroom box, and at times had to remind the students to put these books away during other subjects. The students' interest in reading was quietly celebrated as their teachers had hoped that interest in the graphic texts would increase time spent reading and subsequently reading skill level, the application of comprehension strategies and instil a habit of reading for pleasure. One interesting comment from the classroom teacher reflected her observations that boys in the class overcame gender stereotypes and began reading and enjoying the Babymouse series.

At the close of the study, students were surveyed in terms of preferences related to the reading of regular novels, short stories, poetry, comics, cartoons, graphic novels and non-fiction.

Table 1 illustrates the results of this survey, identifying the diverse range of preferences within this study classroom. This suggests that graphic novels provide a positive context through which to teach important reading skills and strategies.

Intriguingly, individual preferences for graphic novels were most commonly preceded or followed by regular novels and non-fiction, rather than other illustrated forms. The results that young readers may see comics and graphic novels as different in terms of a hierarchy of reading preferences may work as a contradiction to Cary's (2004) definition that positions graphic novels under the umbrella of 'comics'.

Comprehension strategies

'Master key' comprehension strategies suitable for a variety of textual forms. During the study, I noted that many comprehension strategies appropriate for use with other textual forms were modelled and utilised with respect to the students' current graphic novel reading. Observations were triangulated with students' own responses on the questionnaires regarding their reading process, and these 'overarching' comprehension strategies can be examined as 'master keys' – suitable for unlocking meaning from a variety of textual forms. Students' general reading comprehension strategies, presented in Table 2, are wide-ranging. These strategies were taught and modelled by the classroom teacher, and then practised by her pupils, who worked independently to make sense of them. One group, for example, reflected on the use of prediction:

> *'Why do we do these predictions before we read?' Ellary said. 'Wait – so we can compare them to the book to see if they're right . . . and so you get all excited!' His thoughts turned to the text at hand, and Miguel interrupted: 'I'm curious to see if the mouse lives in a castle or outside'. The focus group talked about the fact that everyone has different answers when it comes to predicting. "'Cause we have different opinions', Andy said. 'Nobody's right and nobody's wrong.'"*

Another group, exploring the splash page of a graphic novel new to them, offered the following commentary:

> *"A mouse with a sword, in clothes!"*
> *"That's not a sword, that's a pin!"*

The details noted on the splash page prompted a discussion about genre, and the group deliberated on what kind of story this would be. The idea of animal fantasy was easily elicited by the teacher from student comments that mentioned 'talking animals!' and that "fake things happen!" While particular topics for analytical thinking, such as a determination of genre, are intentional on the part of the teacher, it is important to note that an emphasis on genre was elicited by student comments, rather than presented as part of a preprogrammed package of study.

Summarising previous plot and character details during the graphic novel studies, stopping to predict coming events in the respective stories and making inferences based on given information in the illustrations as well as in the text were other comprehension strategies supported in, or added to, these young readers' reading comprehension repertoires. A lesson beginning with student inferences about what will happen next concluded by revisiting these inferences: "In your journals, let's look at what you first thought . . . " said the teacher. "And now complete the statement 'Now I think . . . ' about what is going to happen in this book." Students were also invited to draw illustrations as evidence for their thinking.

Synthesising skills were encouraged as the teacher asked students to 'burst the bubble' (Booth and Lundy, 2007) and bring characters out of the text and into

Table 2: Comprehension strategies non-specific and specific to graphic novels

Comprehension support	*Master comprehension keys suitable for a range of textual forms*	*Graphic novel keys*
Strategies based on awareness of self	• Making connections to self, other texts and the world • Responding through drama • Monitoring meaning by self-questioning	
Strategies based on awareness of task	• Previewing and predicting • Rereading for meaning • Summarising • Reading to understand characters • Making inferences based on content • Synthesising through drama	
Strategies based on awareness of text	• Conducting word repair • Exploring parts of the book (i.e. Table of Contents) • Interpreting onomatopoeia • Summarising plot and character details • Identification of 'flashbacks'	• Interpreting lettering style, format and colour • Applying purpose for depth of field choices to comprehension • Responding to meaning embedded in types of speech bubbles • Locating narration • Examining narrative distance provided by visual information • Identifying time changes through explorations of visual information

dramatised real-life contexts. "Sometimes somebody wants to be Queen of the Classroom!" said Olivia, working with a group to bring a book character from *Babymouse: Queen of the World* into real life. This group had responded to the idea of girl bullying in their focus group's text, and went on to present a brief classroom drama that exemplified a similar situation in the context of their own world.

Teacher-directed work further promoted synthesising, as students worked to dramatise between-the-panels action. Particular frames in the graphic novels elicited student participation by providing a clear beginning and end to their drama, within which careful thinking based on textual information supported the invented action. In addition to synthesising, teacher direction also prompted a variety of shared reading opportunities (Wason-Ellam, 1991), including choral reading, echo reading, readers' theatre and simultaneous listening and reading as well as silent reading. As well, deeper themes from the target graphic novels were highlighted in teacher-facilitated discussion, offering a rich context in which to explore concepts related to bullying, the value of the imagination and acceptance of diversity.

One interesting feature of the small-group work was the students' response to round-robin reading. Such a format is useful for teacher assessment of children's reading strategies, but is often uncomfortable for children due to varying reading rates and differential wait time. It was interesting to note how the weaker readers, Roge, for example, a self-professed 'slower' reader, prepared for his own oral reading while at the same time keeping track of what was going on in the story. When Roge's turn came to read aloud, he rose to the occasion in full dramatic tone: "I don't want to hear you – your – little stories about princesses!" said Roge commandingly, skilfully self-correcting. Generally a word-by-word reader, Roge had the time to check his upcoming speech bubble, rehearse and then present on cue. Meanwhile, the other students prepared their own portions to read aloud, in addition to skimming and scanning the illustrations. It appears that students can multi-task during round-robin reading with graphic texts, and in this study, such oral reading – useful for the teacher in terms of informal assessment for learning – did not present with boredom or anxiety in any of the participants.

Key comprehension strategies for use with graphic novels. In addition to comprehension strategies suitable for application to other types of texts, the students were learning and practising a variety of graphic novel form-specific strategies (also included in Table 2). These strategies were self-disclosed on the final questionnaire in terms of students' metacognitive knowledge regarding graphic novel reading as well as observed in their reading and their writing during class time. The students identified that they were connecting lettering style, format and colour of text with the emotional climate of the story. The students also reflected on purposes for particular panels such as full-page panels, two-page spreads, overlapping pages and floating panels. These Grade 4s also noted the importance of paying attention to speech bubble format,

including broken, tiny, jagged and wobbly lines. Most of the students were aware of conventions to disclose narration, such as text boxes at the top of each panel:

> *"'Why is the narrator always in a box?' asked Charles. The students deliberated. 'So it stands out', said Becky. 'And we know where the narrator is'".*

Some of the students mentioned depth of field as important to understanding the story, including explanations of the uses of middle view, close-up, panorama, distance and long shots.

After a teacher explanation of middle distance, long shot, panorama and close-up perspectives, students were asked to skim through the books to find examples. Immediately, the students were eagerly engaged as detectives:

> *"Is this long shot?" asked Allie.*
> *"Yes!" said the teacher.*
> *"Found a close up!" called Brittany.*
> *"I found a long one! A long shot!" cried Anthony.*
> *"I found my first panorama!" said Roge.*
> *"Middle distance is the most common!" called Ellary, perceptively.*

It should be noted that such a discussion of narrative distance is generally reserved for mature students at the senior high school and university levels, in a context of classic narrative texts. That such a discussion could occur at this grade level is a tribute to the students' deep involvement in the reading and the richness offered within the graphic texts at hand.

Table 2 includes information about the types of strategies demonstrated by students, categorising them in terms of their basis in awareness of self, awareness of task and awareness of text, three categories within which metacognitive reading comprehension processes have been delineated in children's reading (Brenna, 1991). In addition, Table 2 identifies which strategies are suitable for a variety of textual forms, referring to these as 'master keys', and which strategies are intended for specific use with graphic novels, identifying these as "graphic novel keys".

Literary techniques discussed by these Grade 4 students included an identification of onomatopoeia as a common inclusion in the textual 'sound track' of graphic novels, as well as other literary techniques brought to life through the graphic texts. As we discussed the antics of Holm's (2005) Babymouse, one student pointed to a phrase she correctly identified as an 'idiom', while another student spoke comprehensively of 'flashbacks'. It appeared that textual features could be adeptly explained and internalised in the context of the graphic novel texts.

The students also explored depictions of time in the graphic novels noting illustrator techniques such as fade-outs – 'and changing seasons!' as Brittany analysed. Not only did students cite their learning in this regard but, on numerous occasions during assignments requiring student authorship, the children demonstrated application of knowledge through specific choices in illustration. A few days later, an original segment of illustrated text appeared in Brittany's portfolio demonstrating the passage of time – her paper was divided into four quadrants, and a tree in the top right section of each depicted spring, summer, fall and winter.

It appeared that students had learned, and were excited about learning, a wide repertoire of form-specific comprehension strategies in the context of this study of graphic novels, and it is anticipated that these strategies could consciously be applied to the reading of visual images outside the classroom, heightening students' critical literacy 'beyond words' and related to aspects of popular culture, including Internet use. It is also possible that the direct teaching and application of form-specific strategies related to graphic novel explorations could serve as placeholders for the direct teaching and learning of other comprehension strategies related to other types of texts. In addition, some of the particular cues noted in the 'visible' format of graphic novels, such as narrative distance, have the potential to be applied in other more abstract contexts, and may prove helpful to developing writers as well as developing readers in terms of executive functioning related to the reading and writing process.

An inconclusive thread in the data relates to a potential link between a tendency to skip words while reading and preferences for graphic novels. Further research is needed here. Graphic novels display variety in visual sequencing, with panels straying from the traditional left to right mode, as well as texts that utilise an economy of words. Therefore, it is possible that skimming and scanning may hinder reading comprehension of this textual form, and that people who tend to employ skimming and scanning while pleasure reading may have lower preferences for graphic novels than readers who do not skim and scan. Skipping difficult words may affect reading comprehension unless readers recognise that context includes visual images as well as words, and are quickly able to scan correct sequences within collections of images.

A range of responses occurred regarding the question of whether or not students make pictures in their heads during reading, with seven students indicating 'always', two students indicating 'most of the time', nine students indicating 'sometimes' and three students indicating 'not at all'. There did not appear to be a link between visualising during reading and preferences for graphic novels. This is an interesting finding as it addresses a common stereotype that reading graphic novels hampers children's ability to

visualise. If graphic novels limit visualisation, children who commonly visualise during reading might tend to reject graphic novels as a preferred textual form, or discuss a shifting related to the use of visualisation.

In terms of the potential for graphic novels to support process drama extensions, the Grade 4 students demonstrated alacrity in presenting tableaus related to their reading, participated easily in improvisations on subject material occurring 'between frames' and improvised dialogue between characters as well as 'hotseating' particular characters. Group work and classroom presentations occurred fluently, a finding that may reinforce the potential of graphic novels as bridges into dramatic response activities. I conjecture that graphic novels may offer particularly apt fuel for responses through process drama because of the inclusion of visual information, dialogue and 'spaces' in text that suggest action but leave details to the imagination. This sentiment was echoed by one student, who reported on the final questionnaire that graphic novels were particularly 'good for drama'.

In terms of whether graphic novels help us become better readers, two students were unsure, three students said 'No', while the rest of the students affirmed that graphic novels taught a number of things. The following are a summation of comments on this section of the questionnaire: "graphic novels are a good start for weak readers, you keep reading graphic novels and you can understand the words better and you can read faster without making a mistake; yes and how: it's the WORDS you read; read and read 'til you get better; you get to read in a fun way; possibly because you are reading; it helps me . . . switch to chapter books". Students also enthusiastically mentioned learning 'clues' to reading the graphic novel form, and cited ideas that connected story understanding with style of speech bubbles, the text format and the order of panels. One student said that graphic novels "make you think" while another said, "some make you think hard".

The classroom teacher indicated that she was very pleased with the 'voracious reading' that had occurred throughout this study. "To start off a year like this – to get them going on reading – was a wonderful opportunity." She also indicated that avid readers as well as reluctant readers were motivated by the study, and reported that "so much more was accomplished in terms of the teaching of reading" than she had anticipated.

Educational importance

This graphic novel study appeared to be a worthy classroom event, full of learning potential with regards to reading comprehension techniques 'beyond words' that are strictly applicable to graphic texts as well as 'master key' strategies applicable to other, wider reading and writing situations. It was evident that direct teaching of particular reading strategies was well tolerated by these students, worked in terms of their ability to practise and later acknowledge what was taught, and was necessary for a full understanding of the complex messages wielded by the graphic novel form as well as enjoyment of this form. As a teacher new to exploring graphic novels with students, I benefited greatly from the partnership of the classroom teacher, who was willing to scan resource books and conduct mini lessons outside the small-group activity time. Assistance through resources and opportunities to team-teach emerge as important supports if teachers inexperienced with the graphic form are to use graphic novels to their fullest potential. It is recommended that pre-service education programmes include graphic novels as classroom resources for elementary students, as graphic novels appear to offer richness in terms of a context for teaching reading comprehension.

Further research

A number of specific research questions emerged from the study, including the following. Do any of the following subcategories of readers have a preference for or against graphic novels: readers who tend to be skimmers or scanners; readers who rely mainly on graphophonemic cues during reading; readers who report a lack of visualisation during reading; readers who prefer reading orally to reading silently?

Another question that guides us further into relatively unexplored terrain relates to whether the lessons readers learn when attending to the format of graphic novels are useful 'placeholders' for transferring skills to other types of reading and writing (i.e. narrative distance). A further related question involves students whose reading is on 'cruise control' and who do not use thinking as part of the process: will work with graphic novels nudge students into consistent thinking activity during reading?

As future studies connect graphic novels to classroom practice, observing and questioning students regarding their comprehension of this textual form will offer more information to further guide and shape our understanding of how children read these multimodal texts. In addition, further exploration of reading behaviours related to graphic novels may refine our understanding of the kinds of 'keys' and 'master keys' these texts might support, related to the potential metacognitive strategies readers may employ to assist their comprehension of a variety of textual forms. Further research is recommended to deepen understandings of multimodal comprehension strategies that work with words, and beyond words, in our quest to support the development of readers.

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