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**Exploring Comics in the Classroom: A Qualitative Research Proposal**

***Introduction***

Since the 1930s our culture has attached negative stigma to the comic book medium (Hajdu, 2008). Anti-comic campaigns in the 1940s and 1950s by youth groups and articles published in popular magazines warned about the dangers of reading of comic books and their link to juvenile delinquency (Hajdu, 2008). These campaigns were brought to national attention when psychologist Frederic Wertham published his anti-comic treatise, *Seduction of Innocence*, which purported scientific proof that comic books caused juvenile delinquency (Nyberg, 1998). Spurred by these claims, the United States Senate Subcommittee on Juvenile Delinquencybegan hearings on comic books (Nyberg, 1998). Though no significant legislation resulted from these hearings, public perception that comic books were harmful to the literacy and the psychology state of children grew in force (Nyberg, 1998). As a result of this pressure, the comic book industry was forced to impose a comic book code used to self-regulate the stories allowed to be published in comic books (Nyberg, 1998). This limited the type of stories that could be printed and had a lasting negative impact, which reduced what was a flourishing industry to a few publishers (Nyberg, 1998). Though the medium has grown much since that time and only a few comic book publishers continue to use the code to regulate their publications, the negative stigma surrounding comic books persists.

I originally became interested in this topic when I ventured into the world of comics as an undergraduate in college. I have been reading graphic novels for many years now, and being a member of the comics community has exposed me first hand to the stigma that comics books continue to have. Additionally, working in the children’s department of a bustling urban public library has given me another perspective. On a daily basis I see children rush to our graphic novel section, looking for their next great read. I witness a light they get in their eyes when they are truly excited and engaged with reading. With goals of being a children’s librarian, this love of books, especially comic books, gives me great joy and hope for the future.

Despite the ongoing negative beliefs about comic books and graphic novels, the format is more popular than ever. More works are being produced in a variety of subject areas which include nonfiction informational books. In this research study proposal I outline my intent to understand the ways that comic books and graphic novels are being used in classrooms as a learning tool. It is my hope to provide evidence and concrete data that can shed light on the ways that comic books are being used by students to facilitate learning and to move away from the idea of comics as harmful. My intent for this research is twofold; to add to the growing field of comics’ research and to provide data and analysis to combat the negative stigma the medium continues to garner. The remainder of this proposal provides the specific research questions that will guide the study, an overview of the current literature surrounding this topic, a discussion of how this proposed study builds upon and forwards the goals of the field, and a detailed overview of the data collection and analysis methods that will be used to explore the research questions.

***Research Problem and Questions***

This research study proposal is based on the following questions:

Central research questions: How do youth use comics and graphic novels in the classroom? Are comics and graphic novels an effective teaching tool in the classroom?

Subquestions:

* Is there a place for comics and graphic novels in classrooms?
* Are all types of comics and graphic novels suitable for classroom use, or are only specifically created comic textbooks appropriate?
* Will the use of comic books in the classroom harm or help the learning process?
* Can the use of comics and graphic novels be incorporated to curricula that reply upon strict adherence to institutional educational standards (i.e. Common Core)?
* What are the personal experiences of youth who use comics and graphic novels in the classroom?

***Literature Review***

A review of the literature in the field of comics in education highlights the varied ways that they have been used in classroom. These writings shed light on many of the ways that comics have been used by students and educators in education and the potential benefits and flexibility of the medium. Broadly, comics have been used in the classroom to support new forms of literacy, as an educational tool for all ages, a tool to scaffold learning, and to support institutional teaching standards.

Scholars argue that literacy as it exists traditionally is being challenged by 21st century technologies. Researchers (Brozo & Mayville, 2012; Hassett & Schieble, 2007) argue that today’s world is saturated by many forms of media which rely on visual modes of communication. This in turn has led to a transformation of the concept of literacy that is framed as “more than just basic proficiency with written text to include other types of texts and sign systems” (Lapp et al., 2012, p. 23), which is needed to navigate these evolving forms of media. The issue turns to how these new literacies are being addressed in education to prepare the students of today with the skills and proficiencies they need to succeed. Hassett and Schieble (2007) contend that though these new forms of communication are pervasive in our everyday lives, “back at the school, literacy instruction is dominated by traditional texts and alphabet print” (p. 62). Graphic novel advocates (Dallacqua, 2012; Hoover, 2012; Rapp, 2011) believe the format is ideally positioned to be added to classroom curricula to support these emerging forms of literacy. They argue that not only do comics appeal to students, are useful to the curriculum, and promote literacy, but they may even “require more complex cognitive skills than the reading of text alone” (Schwarz, 2002, p. 263).

Research in classrooms that have used comics have combated the prevalent stigma surrounding comic books that wrongly miscategorizes them as “unsophisticated, disposable entertainment, or material written to the lowest common denominator” (Rapp, 2011, p. 64). Indeed, the literature demonstrates that comics have been used with a diverse and wide array of students of varying ages. The majority of research (Dallacqua, 2012; Brozo & Mayville, 2012; Norton, 2003; Ranker, 2007; Vassilikopoulou et al., 2011) has been done with students in primary education, which spans kindergarten through eighth grade. The use of comics with older students (Hosler & Boomer, 2011; Hughes et al., 2011) and in adult education (Hammond & Danaher, 2012) has been less than in primary education, but it has not been completely absent. This varied use of comics with different educational levels suggests that the format is adaptable to students of all ages and can promote lifelong learning.

Comics have also been used as a tool to scaffold learning of different content areas and to engage and motivate learners. Comics have been used by educators to introduce students to complex literary devices (Dallacqua, 2012), to scaffold learning about scientific topics (Brozo & Mayville, 2012; Hosler & Boomer, 2011), to teach visual literacy (Hughes et al., 2011; Vassilikopoulou et al., 2011), and to teach English to immigrants (Hammond & Danaher, 2012; Ranker, 2007). Comics have been used in a myriad of ways to help scaffold learning of different content and to teach students the skills needed to meet challenges both in and out of the classroom. The use of graphic novels in each of these studies was successful with students because they were able to engage and motivate them which helped to keep their interest in the subject matter.

As scholars have thus far advocated for the use of comics in education, a question arises of how educators can incorporate comics into their classrooms when they may have little control over institutional teaching and other standards imposed upon them. Scholars have outlined specific ways that comics can be used to meet the learning standards of the American Association of School Librarians (Gann, 2013), the Common Core Standards (Monnin, 2013), and the Association of College and Research Libraries Literacy Competency Standards for Higher Learning outcomes (Hoover, 2012). These explorations of learning standards and the ways that graphic novels can be used to support them is a key argument in the use of the format in education. While these pieces each discuss different standards, they also illustrate how graphic novels are flexible and can adapt to different styles of education and learning.

Thus, the literature shows evidence of how comics and graphic novels have great potential to be used in the classroom to support new forms of literacy, by learners of all ages, to scaffold learning, and yet are flexible enough to meet institutional educational standards. This indicates the possibility of comics in education as a tool that can support the skills students need to navigate and be successful in our 21st world.

***Significance of Research to the Field***

Through survey, interviews, and observation with today’s youth and educators, the proposed research seeks to add to the growing body of research that exists on comics in education and to stimulate a change in the negative stigma surrounding the format. As can be seen by the literature, a majority of the current research done in this field is relatively recent, only occurring within the past decade or so. This indicates the field of research is still relatively new, and though many strides have been made in the field, there is still much ground to be explored.

The popularity of comics and graphic novels is booming today and there is much discussion about the expansion of comic for educational use. What seems to still be unknown about this field of research is if these works are suitable for educational use, if there are benefits of the use of the format in the classroom, and how educators actually incorporate comics into their classrooms. While the review of the literature seems to suggest that such works are beneficial, much of this assumption is based on anecdotal evidence rather than on research data and analysis. This proposed study seeks to fill in that gap and to meet the plea of fellow researchers in the field for more research in this area. Specifically, an exploration of the views of students who currently use or have used comics and graphic novels in their classrooms, in addition to the views of educators who feel these works merit inclusion in their curricula is the goal of this proposed study. The proposed research seeks to give a voice to the perspectives of students and educators who use comics and graphic novels in their classrooms. Finding out how students approach learning through the use of comics and graphic novels and why teachers have chosen to use the format will shed light on the impact of the medium in education. This knowledge will help current educators and stakeholders involved in the instruction of all learners to better equip students with the tools necessary to be successful in the classroom and in society.

***Plan for Data Collection and Analysis***

*Research Design*

In order to explore how youth use graphic novels and comics in the classroom, a qualitative research design is proposed for this research study. Characteristics of qualitative research are important in shaping strategy of inquiry and data collection, analysis, and interpretation (Creswell, 2009). These unique characteristics include data collection in a natural setting where the research problem takes place, the researcher as key instrument in collecting data, and an inductive data analysis where patterns and themes emerge through organizing the data and abstracting units of information (Creswell, 2009). The research will be guided by a social constructivist worldview in which it is the intent of the researcher to “make sense of (or interpret) the meanings others have about the world. Rather than starting with a theory… inquirers generate or inductively develop a theory or pattern of meaning” (Creswell, 2009, p. 8). The proposed study seeks to learn directly from youth and educators about how they use graphic novels and comic books in the classroom through their own words, ideas, and thoughts. The strategy of inquiry that will be used is case study in which, “the researcher explores in depth a program, event, activity, process, or one or more individuals. Cases are bounded by time and activity, and researchers collect detailed information” (Creswell, 2009, p. 13). The proposed case study will be an in depth exploration of a classroom in which students and educators use comics. Several methods of qualitative data collection will be utilized in order to provide abundant collected data to create a rich description of the classroom to shed light on the proposed research problem and questions.

*Participant Identification*

The target populations for this research proposal are students in the middle grades, categorized in the United States from grades four to six. Part of the justification for these targeted grades is to build upon the current body of research in this field which has focused on the primary grades. It has also been suggested by scholars (Kim, 2006) that “fourth-grade presents a key transitional point in school because it is often assumed that students have mastered the foundational skills to decode individual words” (p. 338). Therefore, students are no longer focused on phonics in the classroom but rather reading to learn. As the proposed methodology for this research study is qualitative, the selection of research participants is not a product of random sampling nor includes large number of people, which are generally characteristics of quantitative research (Creswell, 2009). In qualitative methods, researchers seek to “purposefully select participants or sites that will best help the researcher understand the problem and the research question” (Creswell, 2009, p. 178).

First, schools that use graphic novels and comics in their classrooms must be located. As public schools must adhere to strict teaching guidelines because they receive government funding, it is possible that many have not incorporated comics into their classrooms. It will be important to explore alternative types of schools such as private and charter. Letters and e-mails will be sent to principals and educators outlining the research, data collection methods, impact, and the benefits of participating in the case study. Meetings with these gatekeepers will include copies of the research proposal and a brief presentation about the study in easy to understand language. Steps will be made to convey this same information to participants themselves in order to convey what participation in the study will entail and why it is important. An incentive system may be set up to encourage participation by students which may include items such as bookmarks, stickers, a free book, or a collective incentive such as pizza and ice cream party. Informed consent forms will be distributed to students and must be approved by their parents/guardians in order to participate. Though permission by gatekeepers is paramount to securing a research site, steps will be taken to inform participants throughout the research process that they always have the choice to not participate if they so choose, even if permission has been granted by the school and the parent.

*Data Collection*

Once research participants have been identified, three methods will be used to collect data: survey, interviews, and observation. Data collection will occur over the course of one school semester in order to collect data in the classroom from a period when comics are being use and are not being used, in order to provide a holistic picture. A survey will be given to all student participants upon the researcher entering the field. It will include both close-ended and open-ended questions. Close-ended questions will be used to obtain demographic information (age, race, gender, etc.) and open-ended questions will gather data about reading habits and preferences both in and out of the classroom that will guide the direction of the interviews and to select interview participants. Due to unknown factors such as class size, it may not be possible for each student to be interviewed but analysis of completed surveys will be used to select a diverse representative sample. An example of the survey can be found in Appendix A.

Interviews will occur at the end of the semester. A pre-interview activity will be used to facilitate recall, analysis and reflection by student participants surrounding the use of comics in their educational experience (Ellis, 2006). Students will be asked to draw three pictures showing what it was like for them at the beginning, middle and end of their experience with comics in their classroom (Ellis, 2006). A discussion about the drawings will facilitate rapport between researcher and participant, and will allow for participant to express themselves in a visual manner. This will allow the research to gain “a sense of wholeness and complexity of the child’s life in order to interpret the significance of what the child says or shows regarding the research topic” (Ellis, 2006, p. 118). After the activity, students will be asked to answer a series of open-ended questions in a semi-structured interview. The teacher will also be interviewed but with different questions and will not require a pre-interview activity. Sample interview questions for students and educators can be found in Appendix B. Interviews will be conducted in person and one-on-one, and interview notes will be taken by the researcher. Interviews will be audio and video recorded to capture both verbal and nonverbal aspects of the interview process.

Lastly, observation will be used throughout the case study by the researcher. A journal of field notes on the behavior and activities of participants in the classroom will be kept by the researcher throughout the semester. The notes will be both descriptive (description of participants, setting, and events) and reflective (thoughts, feelings, and ideas of the researcher) to capture multiple aspects of the classroom environment and to allow for a rich description of the case study to emerge during data analysis (Creswell, 2009).

*Data Analysis*

Analysis of the survey will happen immediately after it is assessed in order to guide the selection of interview participants and the questions to be asked in the interviews. The data from close-ended questions will be gathered and assessed to understand the demographics of the student participants. The use of the computer program Microsoft Excel will help to store and analyze this data. Open-ended questions will be analyzed for themes and perspectives, and similar themes will be grouped together in broad categories. These themes and categories will guide the formulation and/or revision of interview questions.

The next step in analysis will be of the data collected from interviews and in field notes. A data-driven code will be developed. In a data-driven code themes are not predetermined but rather emerge from the data itself (Hammond & Danaher, 2012). The data must first be prepared through interview transcription and the typing up of field notes (Creswell, 2009). All produced data will be read and reviewed to reflect on its overall meaning (Creswell, 2009). Next, thematic analysis of the transcripts will occur, where comments are summarized and common elements are grouped together (Hammond & Danaher, 2012). Each theme is then assigned a code and transcripts are further interpreted and coded and then divided into broad categories (Hammond & Danaher, 2012). A qualitative PC program, such as MAXqda may be used to help code, organize, sort, and interpret information if there is too much data to hand-code (Creswell, 2009). Rich description and theme identification in addition to complex theme connections that arise from the data will be presented in the research report. Lastly, the analyzed data will be interpreted in light of the research problem and questions, and suggestions for new questions raised by the data will be posed to advance future research (Creswell, 2009). Steps will be taken to insure that the identity of participants remains anonymous through the assignment of pseudonyms, that their responses remain confidential, and that all research data is secure by storing it a manner in which it cannot be comprised.

***Conclusion***

Comics and graphic novels face great negative stigma which stems from a complicated history in which they were framed as harmful to the literacy and development of children. Today comic book advocates, scholars, and researchers have found new evidence that the 21st century is presenting new types of visually dominant media that demand a change of the concept of literacy to meet these new types of communication. These individuals believe that comic books are uniquely positioned to be used in education as a tool to teach the students of today the skills they need to succeed, both in and out of the classroom. Despite these beliefs and the body of literature that currently exists, there is still much to be discovered and learned about this growing field of comics in education. Specifically how students use comics in education, how educators have incorporated the use of the format in their classrooms, and if they are beneficial to students still need to be explored further. This proposed research case study seeks to explore these questions in an in-depth, rich descriptive, and time and situation specific manner. The words, ideas, experiences and views of students and educators who use comics in their classrooms will be explored in order to shed light on the proposed research problem and questions. The goal of the study is not only to advance the knowledge and research data and analysis of this growing field, but also to further distance the medium from the negative stigma it continues to have. It is the hope of the researcher to produce meaningful data and analysis for the field and to discover new avenues of understanding and further questions to be explored by future researchers.

**Appendix A**

*Sample survey for student participants*

Age:

Grade:

Race:

Gender:

1. What kind of activities do you enjoy outside of school?
2. What kind of activities do you enjoy at school?
3. What kind of books do you usually read for fun?
4. What kind of books do you read for school activities (homework assignments or studying)?
5. Have you ever read comic books outside of school?

If yes, please list titles of the books.

1. Have you ever used comics in your classroom?

If yes, please list titles of the books.

1. Do you like reading?

Why or why not?

**Appendix B**

*Student participant interviews questions*:

1. Can you tell me about the last book that you read?
2. What kinds of book do you like to read for fun?
3. Can you tell me about the last book that you read for fun?
4. Can you tell me about the last book that you read for school that you liked?
5. Can you tell me about the last book that you read for school that you disliked?
6. Can you tell me about what you did in school today?
7. Can you tell me about your favorite subject in school?
8. Can you tell me about a good learning experience you had in class?
9. Can you tell me about a bad learning experience you had in class?
10. Can you tell me about a time you did well on an assignment?
11. Can you tell me about a time you did not do well on an assignment?
12. Can you tell me what it was like when you read, (title of graphic novel from class)?
13. Can you tell me what it was like when you read, (title of non-graphic novel from class)?
14. Is there anything else you would like to tell me?/Is there anything else that I should know?

*Educator/teacher participant interview questions:*

1. How do you decide what on what types of books to use in your classroom?
2. Why did you decide to incorporate comics and/or graphic novels into your classroom curriculum?
3. What subject areas would you feel comfortable incorporating comics or graphic novels?
4. What subject areas do you think would not be suited for comics or graphic novels?
5. How do you devise your lesson plans when using graphic novels?
6. What resources must you use to incorporate graphic novels?
7. What challenges have you faced with using comics in your classroom?
8. How is learning facilitated by the use of comics in your classroom?
9. Is there anything else you would like to tell me? Is there anything else that I should know?

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