

Recommended Reading

Comparing Elementary/Middle School Graphic Novel Collections to Recommended Reading Lists

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Booklists created by library and education professionals can be valuable tools for librarians as they develop collections. Based upon the perceived discomfort felt by many school librarians in selecting graphic novels, this research analyzes the extent to which a population of elementary and middle school libraries' collections in the Southeastern United States reflects the lists of recommended graphic novels annually produced by the Association for Library Service to Children (ALSC).

This study also examines trends among those books that are most and least collected and assesses the extent to which graphic novels that are frequently challenged are added to collections. Findings suggest that most of the books that appear on the ALSC lists are not found in this population of elementary and school libraries.

Given the appropriate resources, school librarians enjoy the exciting, and potentially overwhelming, opportunity to purchase materials for those who patronize the school library.

Generally, materials are purchased to support the school's curriculum and to appeal to students' reading interests.

Many school librarians have discovered that graphic novels are the most circulated material in their collections.¹ Gavigan noted, "The explosive growth in the publication of [graphic novels] has made it easier for school librarians to locate quality titles that support the curriculum."² Regardless of how easy it is to find certain materials, librarians often struggle to find balance between adhering to professional collection development practices, considering their communities' values, and possibly even their own subjectivity when determining which materials to purchase for their libraries' collections.³

The American Library Association's (ALA) interpretation of its own Library Bill of Rights as considered through the lens of the school library notes, "Students and educators served by the school library have access to resources and services free of constraints resulting from personal, partisan, or doctrinal disapproval. School librarians resist efforts by individuals or groups to define what is appropriate for all students or teachers to read, view, hear, or access regardless of technology, formats, or method of delivery."⁴ The extent to which school librarians are able to resist those efforts, however, is largely determined by the extent to which they feel supported by their school community.⁵

For some librarians, the visual nature of graphic novels has created a sense of uneasiness, which might stem from what Cary called "the naked buns effect."⁶



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“It’s the rare student or parent who objects to the words ‘naked buns,’ but an image of naked buns can set off fireworks.”⁷ In our previous research, we heard from school librarians who indicated that they were not as familiar or comfortable with developing a graphic novel collection, compared to collections of traditional print materials.⁸ Given school librarians’ competing priorities of encouraging leisure reading and avoiding criticism from parents and administrators, we wondered to what extent elementary and middle school librarians were collecting graphic novels for their collections.

Conceptual Framework

The importance of visual literacy in education is becoming more established as technology becomes increasingly prevalent in students’ lives. Educators have realized that literacy no longer includes traditional text alone, but that students encounter different modes of information in their day-to-day reading.

As such, it is imperative that school libraries provide opportunities for students to engage with various types of literacies, including visual. As Samet stated, “Even for strong readers proficient in English, visual materials promote representational (symbolic) learning, or what we refer to as ‘visual literacy.’ If a picture is worth a thousand words, as the saying goes, how much are graphic novels worth to students?”⁹

Friese noted that the inclusion of popular culture texts into the school library’s collection reflects the librarian’s understanding and response to the interests of students. It also provides support for new and traditional literacies.¹⁰ Various studies have demonstrated the potential that graphic novels have for reading enjoyment,¹¹ intrinsic reading motivation,¹² literacy engagement,¹³ reading comprehension,¹⁴ and vocabulary development.¹⁵

Other research has uncovered additional educational advantages of student engagement in visual literacy. Boerman-Cornell found that second, third, and fourth graders’ readings of graphic novels suggested that the students drew meaning from the format’s use of intersection of word and image, which helped engage the students in interpretive activity and had the potential to encourage critical thought.¹⁶ Sloboda, Brenna, and Kosowan-Kirk, working with students from grades 5 and 6 who needed reading remediation, used reading comprehension strategies with graphic novels to help students become more active and avid readers—readers who focused on their reading while other distractions were occurring.¹⁷

Likewise, Brenna found that the more that a group of fourth grade students became fluent in graphic novel reading, the more interested they were in reading graphic novels, including those students who had been previously identified as reluctant readers.¹⁸ It is clear from this body of research that graphic novels are able to serve the interest and educational

needs of students as they move through a multimodal world of information.

Literature Review

The market for graphic novels, particularly for youth, has grown exponentially in the past decade. Graphic novels have become such an important factor in the publishing market that many major houses now have their own graphic novel imprints. Imprints that publish graphic novels for youth, such as First Second, Toon Books, Graphix, and Papercutz, have experienced financial growth,¹⁹ and the general market for graphic novels sales in North America has grown from about \$805 million in sales in 2012 to more than \$1 billion in 2017.²⁰

Not only are graphic novels in demand for casual reading, but the Common Core State Standards also prescribe the use of graphic novels in the reading curriculum, specifically in analyzing visual images and comprehending meaning from combinations of visuals and text.²¹

The pleasure reading and curricular interest in graphic novels have been reflected in school library collections. Gavigan found that the school library graphic novel collections included in her study were small but the high graphic novel circulation was much larger than holdings suggested.²² Similarly, the authors found that high patron demand placed considerable pressure on librarians to purchase more graphic novels for their collections.²³

Added to traditional considerations that librarians keep in mind during material selection are selection criteria developed for graphic novel selection by Lavin²⁴ and Griffith,²⁵ which ask the selector to pay close attention to the artistic and visual literacy elements of the books. Our own research,²⁶ which examined elementary and middle school librarians’ collection development practices, found that many librarians felt the process of graphic novel selection was very different from that of selecting traditional texts, and that their unfamiliarity with the genre led them to be less engaged in staying abreast of popular and quality graphic novel titles, authors, and trends.

Research suggests that school librarians rely primarily on professional journals, online resources, vendor catalogs, and patron recommendations to make selection decisions.²⁷ For example, in Gavigan’s investigation of the graphic novel collections of six middle schools, she found that “recommendations by students and faculty played a significant role in purchasing decisions.”²⁸

What is lacking in the research is an examination of the extent to which school librarians utilize recommended booklists produced by professional associations such as ALSC or the Young Adult Library Services Association (YALSA) to aid selection.

School community stakeholder misgivings about graphic novels may also make the collection development process more difficult. A bias against graphic novels, compared to traditional texts, has been found in research with preservice teachers,²⁹ teachers,³⁰ and parents and students.³¹ It is reasonable to presume that school librarians may struggle with selecting materials with which they are unfamiliar, understanding that their school communities may not readily accept the educational legitimacy of those materials, despite the interest in those materials shown by their students. Recognizing that many school librarians may experience this kind of tension, we framed four research questions:

1. How does a population of elementary and middle school libraries' graphic novel collections in the Southeastern United States reflect a list of recommended graphic novels produced by the Association for Library Service to Children (ALSC)?
2. Which books are most included in these school library collections? Which are least included?
3. Are there any patterns for those books that are and are not collected?
4. Are frequently challenged books less likely to be collected in these libraries?

Methods

Of the resources elementary and middle school librarians might use as a selection tool in developing their graphic novel collections, ALSC annual lists of recommended graphic novels is one of the most well-known, credible, and readily-available options. Every July, ALSC publishes three lists of recommended graphic novels: grades K–2, grades 3–5, and grades 6–8.³²

These lists include “classics as well as new titles that have been widely recommended and well-reviewed, and books that have popular appeal as well as critical acclaim.”³³ For this study, we combined the grades K–2 and grades 3–5 lists from 2018 into one larger list to represent elementary school selections, since these are the grades most commonly served in elementary schools in the United States. The combined list included fifty-eight titles, while the grades 6–8 “middle school list” included thirty-one titles.

Because most school library catalogs are not available for public viewing online, we reached out to school librarians and asked them directly how their collections matched the lists of recommended books.

Using convenience sampling, the two booklists were distributed in January 2019 to school librarians through Facebook and state school librarians' association listservs in the Southeastern portion of the United States. Our recruitment

message read, “We are looking for school librarians who would be willing to help us in a research project. Specifically, we would like to understand if you have added specific graphic novels to your collection, where those graphic novels are housed, and the extent to which they are made available to students for checkout.” All participants were asked to compare the relevant lists of graphic novels to their collections. Eighty-one school librarians responded to the elementary list survey, and fifty school librarians responded to the middle school list survey.

In our analysis, we examined how many recommended graphic novel titles each library had based on the responses to the elementary or middle school list. We also cross-tabulated the titles on the ALSC lists with those featured on the ALA's list of frequently challenged books to determine the frequency with which challenged books are collected.³⁴

To determine if there were potential patterns in the most and least collected graphic novels, we analyzed the top 30 percent and bottom 30 percent of the results, looking specifically at the following characteristics of each book:

- Publisher
- Copyright date
- Library of Congress subject headings
- Popularity and familiarity of the author
- Gender of the protagonist(s)
- Whether the book was printed in color or black and white
- Whether the book had received any awards
- Additional information provided by professional book review sources and the publisher's description of the books

We defined “popular” as those books that were bestsellers or written by authors of other bestselling books for these age groups that children and school librarians may readily recognize, such as Dav Pilkey, Shannon Hale, and Raina Telgemeier. These characteristics are freely available and were identified as elements that may inform a school librarian's purchase decision.

Limitation

In this research, we relied on school librarians to have accurately reported on their holdings. The school librarians who participated in this study reported only on the titles we asked about. Since they were not asked to indicate what other graphic novels their collections held or to describe their overall collections, we cannot consider the samples in context of a library's full collection.

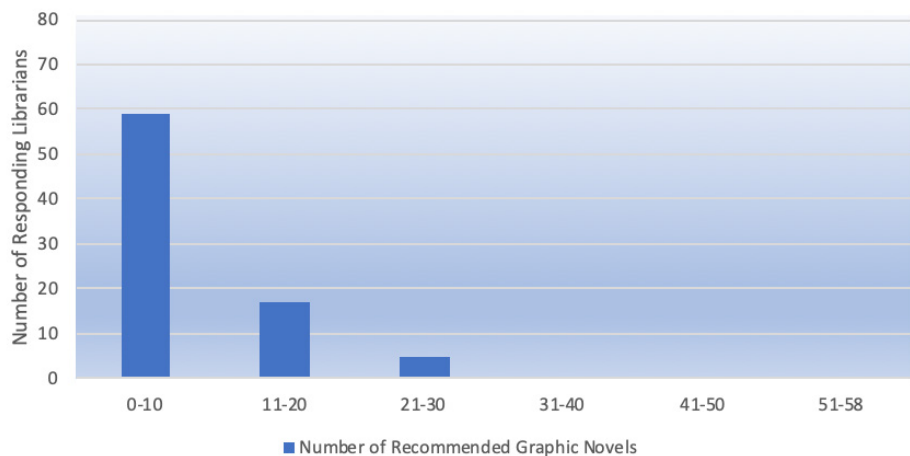


Figure 1. Elementary school library holdings of recommended 2018 ALSC-recommended graphic novel titles.

Although most states in this region require that practicing school librarians hold a master's degree in library science, the education of the reporting librarians in this study was not ascertained. This research is also limited to the responses of school librarians in the Southeastern portion of the United States and may or may not represent those of school librarians in other portions of the country; however, the questions asked of this research are relevant for any elementary school library collection. Additionally, the suggested reading ages of ALA's frequently challenged children's booklist is older than the suggested reading ages of the ALSC list; the former may not precisely reflect the extent to which books on the ALSC list are currently challenged.

Findings

How the Collections Reflect the Lists of Recommended Graphic Novels

Of the eighty-one elementary school librarians who responded to the survey that contained the list of ALSC recommended books for elementary-aged children, none of their libraries held all the recommended titles. Sixty-eight percent of the libraries had between zero to ten titles, less than a quarter of the libraries had eleven to twenty titles, and just 6 percent of libraries had between twenty-one and thirty of the recommended titles in their libraries (see figure 1).

The figures for middle school library holdings show very similar results, with 68 percent of the fifty participating librarians having zero to ten of the thirty-one recommended titles in their collections, about a quarter of libraries having eleven to twenty recommended titles, and 8 percent of libraries having twenty-one to thirty-one titles (see figure 2).

The Most and Least Collected Graphic Novels

Regarding which books were collected most frequently, the elementary school libraries' top five included *Dog Man*, *El Deafo*, *Sisters*, *Super Narwhal* and *Jelly Jolt*, and *Real Friends*. What's most notable in these top five selections, however, is the fact that the most collected book, *Dog Man*, was found in 96 percent (77) of the responding libraries, while the fifth most collected book, *Real Friends*, was found in only 40 percent (32) of the responding libraries. That means that only four titles (7 percent) of the total fifty-eight are found in at least 50 percent of libraries. Of the thirty titles that are held by the fewest libraries, none

was held by more than two school libraries (4 percent of the sample).

As with the elementary school library collection results, the middle school library results reflected popular titles in the majority of graphic novels selected for collections. The top five titles include *Drama*; *Swing It, Sonny*; *All's Faire in Middle School*; *Awkward*; and *Any's Ghost*. The results of the participants' responses suggest that seven (23 percent) of the thirty-one recommended graphic novels were held in at least 50 percent of the responding libraries. Within the data set represented the least collected items (the bottom 30 percent, or eighteen items), no library had more than six (19.35 percent) of ALSC's recommended middle school-aged graphic novels.

Patterns Apparent in the Most and Least Collected Graphic Novels

The strongest trend in the data seemed to be that in both elementary and middle school libraries, items by established and popular authors are acquired more frequently than those by new or less well-known authors. In the elementary data set, one-third of the items in the least collected list were authored

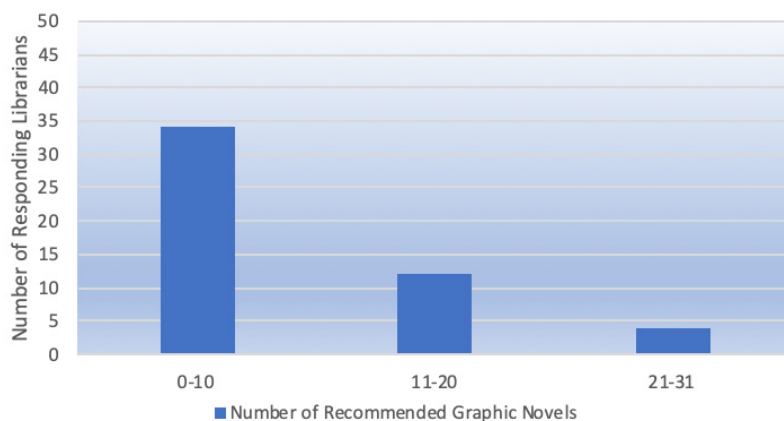


Figure 2. Middle school library holdings of recommended 2018 ALSC graphic novel titles.

by new authors, while the remaining two-thirds were produced by established authors. In the most collected data set, only one item was written by a new or less well-known author, with the remaining items associated with established and/or popular writers. In the middle school data set, all of the items in the most collected list were written by solidly established and/or popular authors, while only one of the ten least collected items was authored by a popular or established writer. Those items identified as “popular” were 48 percent of the middle school data set and 19 percent of the elementary school data set.

A few less significant trends were also observed. In the elementary school library list, the set of most collected titles included slightly more companion or series titles (eleven items; 61 percent) than did the least collected list (seven items; 39 percent). The gender configuration of main characters was a bit different as well, with the most collected list including four items with female protagonists only, nine items with male protagonists only, and five items with both male and female main characters. In comparison, the least collected list includes seven books with female protagonists, eight with male protagonists, and two with female and male protagonists. This suggests that elementary school libraries are slightly more likely to collect items that feature male or a combination of male and female main characters than they are to collect titles that feature female protagonists only.

In the middle school data set, slightly more items in the most collected list (three items; 30 percent) had earned a starred review from a major professional publication than those in the least collected list (zero). Also interesting to note is that the most collected list included just one nonfiction title (10 percent), while the least collected list included three nonfiction selections (30 percent).

No discernable patterns or trends were found in either the elementary or middle school data set based on publisher, copyright date, awards given, or whether the book was printed in color or black and white, suggesting that these characteristics do not strongly influence selection.

The Collection of Frequently Challenged Graphic Novels

The only two graphic novels from the ALSC recommended lists found on the ALA lists of most frequently challenged children’s books were *Drama* by Raina Telgemeier and *This One Summer* by Mariko Tamaki and Jillian Tamaki.

Drama was identified as the fifth most challenged book in 2018 for “including LGBTQIA+ characters and themes.”³⁵ This book was also awarded the 2013 Stonewall Book Award “for exceptional merit relating to the gay/lesbian/bisexual/transgender experience.”³⁶ *Drama* was the most frequently found graphic novel in middle school library collections, included in forty-two (84 percent) of the responding middle school libraries.

The other frequently challenged book in this sample, *This One Summer*, was identified as being a “frequently challenged book with diverse content,”³⁷ and it was the seventh most challenged book in 2018 for reasons related to “profanity, sexual references, and certain illustrations.”³⁸ *This One Summer* was also the recipient of the 2015 Caldecott Honor.³⁹ This book was found in only seven (14 percent) of the middle school libraries from our population.

Discussion and Implications

Our first research question asked how a population of elementary and middle school libraries’ graphic novel collections in the Southeastern United States reflect a list of recommended graphic novels produced by ALSC? The data suggests that library collections in this population did not closely reflect the ALSC lists. In fact, 68 percent of elementary libraries and 68 percent of middle school libraries held zero to ten titles in their libraries’ collections.

Next, we examined which graphic novels were most and least included in these school library collections. Best-selling graphic novels such as *Dog Man*⁴⁰ and *Dram*,⁴¹ were among the most collected graphic novels. Best-selling titles are neither difficult to identify nor locate, so the fact that these are among the most collected graphic novels neither confirms nor refutes the idea that librarians are using the ALSC lists.

Also, literature suggests that patron recommendations are a top consideration in selection, so titles of which students are aware and want to read, such as best sellers, are understandably purchased more frequently.⁴²

With just two books to consider, *Drama* and *This One Summer*, it’s difficult to answer the research question focused on whether frequently challenged books are less likely to be collected than other similar titles. The popularity of Telgemeier’s other graphic novels for youth may have led to the inclusion of *Drama* in more collections. School librarians might be relying not only on the author’s popularity, but also on the fact that the items they already own by Telgemeier have had relatively high circulation and no complaints or challenges.

Generally speaking, popularity may have held more sway in selection than consideration of a book winning an award, like the Caldecott Honor. Indeed, author popularity was a prevailing factor that emerged in our analysis of patterns in the most and least collection graphic novels, with popular and established authors’ books appearing frequently in the most collected graphic novels for both elementary and middle school data sets.

Our overall findings suggest that elementary and middle school library collections in this population do not reflect the ALSC lists of recommended graphic novels. Their selection sources—students, teachers, online resources, professional

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reviews, or vendor catalogs—do not seem to provide the same recommendations as the ALSC lists.

Alternatively, these libraries have not used any professional selection tools for graphic novels at all because they have not had a budget that allowed them to add many, or any, graphic novels to their collections or they have added only those items specifically requested by students or teachers. Similar research that examines this issue in school libraries in other geographic locations would help develop a clearer picture to prove or disprove these findings.

In discussing the reasons for a particular graphic novel being banned at a high school, Masticolo described a lack of professional reviews as “a common problem graphic novels face.”⁴³ Whether because of a lack of sufficient professional reviews or librarians’ uncertainty about how to locate and use these reviews, librarians seem to find selecting graphic novels a challenge.

Use of the ALSC lists may help librarians find less popular but high-quality, high-interest graphic novels which, once added, would help to balance a library collection intended to appeal to the interest and curricular needs of students and teachers. Further research is required to understand the extent to which school librarians are familiar with ALA-associated lists, like those developed by the ALSC.

Perhaps library science master degree programs need to make a more concerted effort to introduce these lists to students as resources for quality collection development selections. Conducting similar research that examines the extent to which traditional book and audiobook lists are utilized as well as the role of ALA-associated book lists in librarians’ collection development decisions may be helpful for ALA to determine if and how it might better market these tools to school librarians. &

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