Experiencing Historical Fiction Graphic Novels to Teach Social Studies: Preservice Teachers Learn Why and How

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A small study was conducted to determine how preservice teachers in a social studies methods class responded to reading an historical fiction graphic novel in an in-class literature circle followed by an authentication project. Role/task sheets, reading journals, and one-on-one interviews provided data. Analysis showed that all participants were successful at some level in navigating the unique aspects of the graphic novel and all felt the graphic novel experience could be successfully translated to their classrooms. Results also suggested that participants with prior experience with graphic novels appeared to have a more positive experience with the project.

While graphic novels of various kinds and sorts have found their way into the hearts of children, young people, librarians, and some teachers over the last two to three decades (Brozo et al., 2014; MacDonald, 2013; Schneider, 2014; Williams & Peterson, 2009), many teachers—and preservice teachers—have been reluctant to consider the benefit of them in their classrooms (Clark, 2013a; Lapp et al., 2011/2012; Laycock, 2019), perhaps most especially in elementary schools (Thompson, 2008). This is unfortunate because graphic novels offer a myriad of benefits to both students and teachers (e.g., Boerman-Cornell, 2016; Hughes et al, 2011; Lawn, 2011; Moeller, 2011; Monnin, 2010; Schwarz, 2010). Researchers have pointed to their successful use with struggling readers (Fenty & Bryden, 2019; Hughes et al., 2011; Smetana, 2010) and emergent bilinguals (Boerman-Cornell et al., 2017; Danzak, 2011; Krashen, 2004; Park, 2016; Rapp, 2011/2012), as well as offering engaging resources for normally progressing readers (Brown, 2013; Carter, 2007; Mathews, 2011). Other researchers have identified how graphic novels can be used to teach literary devices (Dallacqua et al., 2015; Monnin, 2010) and reading strategies, both general and disciplinary (Brozo, 2012, 2013; Brugar et al., 2018; Clark, 2013b; Mathews, 2011).

However, there seems to be little incentive or opportunity for preservice teachers to be exposed to the benefits of using graphic novels in their classrooms. For example, a recent review of textbooks used with preservice teachers to teach reading and literacy found very little mention of graphic novels, much less a detailed exposition of how to teach children to read them effectively (McClanahan and Nottingham, 2018). And there is mounting evidence that graphic novels are not as easy to read as many think (Connors, 2012; Jimenez & Meyer, 2016; Meyer & Jimenez, 2017). How can these teacher candidates adopt a positive mindset toward graphic novels if they are not being exposed to them in a positive way, nor taught how to read them and utilize them effectively in the classroom?

Due to the close connection between literacy and social studies (Farris, 2012; Parker & Beck, 2017), social studies methods are sometimes taught by reading/literacy faculty. This is the arrangement in place at the university where the author teaches. This methods course is taught by the author every spring, and she realized that the course afforded an opportunity to introduce graphic novels to her teacher candidates in an experiential way. She had already built into the course a literature circles activity with a historical fiction text followed by an authentication project to evaluate the accuracy and authenticity of the books the students read. Simply having the students read a historical fiction graphic novel rather than a traditional print text would enable her to introduce them to a graphic text as a tool for learning social studies content and practice. This article describes how she went about that in a methodical way and what was learned in the process.

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As indicated in the introduction, many graphic novel researchers have established the benefits of incorporating graphic novels in classroom instruction at essentially all grade levels. In the second edition of Krashen's *The Power of Reading* (2004), he makes the case for the importance of free reading as the "cure" for poor comprehension and other literacy problems by encouraging, among other things, what he calls "light reading." In one compelling quote, he says:

> Perhaps the most powerful way of encouraging children to read is to expose them to light reading, a kind of reading that schools pretend does not exist, and a kind of reading that, for many children, for economic or ideological reasons, are deprived of. I suspect that light reading is the way nearly all of us learned to read. (p. 92)

Among the kinds of light reading he suggests are comic books and, specifically, graphic novels; he commends their "subtle, complex, and often fascinating plots" (p.95).

Beyond light reading, however, dozens of researchers have investigated graphic novels to support struggling readers and emergent bilinguals in either learning to read or learning content despite reading issues (Boerman-Cornell et al., 2017; Danzak, 2011; Fenty & Bryden, 2019; Hughes et al., 2011; Smetana, 2010; Thompson, 2008). The images are believed to relieve some of the cognitive load such students may experience in print text (Brugar et al., 2018; Clark, 2013a). One of the most powerful reasons to include graphic novels in classrooms is centered on their ability to help students navigate life in the 21ˢᵗ Century; the overwhelming presence of images in the media to which students are exposed, especially through digital technology, necessitates that teachers instruct them in how to read images and how images do or do not intersect with text (Brozo et al., 2014; Cook, 2017; Mathews, 2011; Monnin, 2010; Rice & Dallacqua, 2019).

Regarding the social studies in particular, Brozo and colleagues (Brozo et al., 2014) studied a teacher using read-alouds of historical graphic novels paired with a Socratic Seminar as well as graphic novel book clubs to master historical content; both approaches were deemed successful. While their study was carried out in an English Language Arts classroom, Brugar et al. (2018) reported on a 7-day unit taught in a sixth-grade class in which the students were engaged in reading a historical fiction book situated during the Revolutionary War. The researchers concluded that "historically accurate graphic novels can help build vocabulary and prior knowledge needed to scaffold students' engagement with historical texts" (p. 201). Thinking beyond specific content, Boerman-Cornell and colleagues (Boerman-Cornell et al., 2017) suggested that graphic novels offer the opportunity to develop the skills and strategies of historical thinking and practice.

Literature circles is an approach to teaching literature/reading that has been widely accepted among teachers in grade levels from kindergarten and up for 3 decades (Daniels, 1994; Kasten, 1995; Reutzel & Cooter, 2000; Sampson et al., 2003). The typical literature circle process involves (1) the teacher offering two to four reading options, previewing each with a book talk, (2) allowing the students to form their own reading groups based on their book choices, (3) allowing students to read the book independently in sections, each carrying out a specific role or task to share with the group when they meet, (4) meeting a set number of times for an extended period of discussion around the completed tasks, (5) some sort of group reader response activity after the reading is completed. Typical roles that literature circle participants enact are Discussion Director (a required

role for every session), Vocabulary Enricher, Literary Luminary, and Checker (Fink, 2021), but other roles are possible depending upon the nature of the text being read. Some practitioners add Summarizer, Connector, Character Analyzer, Illustrator, and/or Predictor as well as others (Daniels, 1994; Worksheet Place.com, 2021), according to the need. The positive attributes of using literature circles include independent reading, student choice, and deep conversations about literature led by students that expand critical thinking (Daniels, 1994).

While implementation of literature circles in most Reading or English Language Arts classrooms initially centered around fiction texts, as graphic novels gained traction in educational settings, some researchers pointed to their use for informational texts in content areas (Stien & Beed, 2004). Beginning with fiction texts to learn the procedures, Stien and Beed next exposed their third graders to nonfiction texts in literature circles, making some adjustments in the task roles to accommodate what the students would find in informational texts. At the end of the study, the researchers found that 21 of 22 students viewed themselves as good readers compared to 17 at the beginning. The number of students who reported enjoying reading rose from 16 to 20, and "dramatically" more students reported they would choose a nonfiction book over a fiction book to read, climbing from 7 to 18. Finally, 21 of the 22 were able to clearly articulate the difference between fiction and nonfiction compared to 14 at the beginning.

Daniels (1994) and other reading researchers began to suggest the use of literature circles in social studies environments (e.g., Farris, 2012). Farris stated that texts could include both fiction and nonfiction texts, but also recommended some adjustments in the roles to accommodate the topic and type of text read; for example, the addition of Geographer as a role might be appropriate for some social studies texts. In fact, there has been somewhat extensive discussion as to whether fiction texts in particular should be used in the service of learning history (Clark & Sears, 2017). After a lengthy discussion of the pros and cons of using fiction in the history classroom, Clark and Sears (2017) confidently asserted that fiction should be used with the following caveat:

> It is the job of the teacher who chooses to use fiction in the history classroom to help
> students note discrepancies between nonfiction historical narratives and fictional
> narratives about the same place and time (p. 636).

The rise in popularity of graphic novels (MacDonald, 2013; McTaggart, 2008; Williams & Peterson, 2009) led several reading researchers to explore their use in content area classrooms. Brozo and colleagues (Brozo et al., 2014) provided specific recommendations for graphic novel use

in all the major content areas. Regarding the teaching of History using graphic novels, these researchers offered several approaches, including a detailed example of book clubs, a term often synonymous with literature circles. Boerman-Cornell and colleagues (2017) turned the discussion to using graphic novels in a disciplinary literacy approach, also targeting middle and upper-level classrooms.

Some researchers, however, shifted their attention to the use of graphic novels in elementary classrooms. Dallacqua and colleagues (2015) shared how they used the graphic works of author Shaun Tan to effectively engage third and fifth grade students. Boerman-Cornell (2016) used a book club approach to involve second, third, and fourth graders with graphic novels. Because of the young age of the students, the researcher posed the discussion questions himself during club meetings. He found that the students were able to interpret the texts and engage in critical thinking around them. Recognizing that graphic novels presented new aspects for interpretation in the literature circles environment, researchers Low and Jacobs (2018) offered new task roles better adapted to the unique affordances of graphic novels. For example, they developed such roles as Palette Cleanser to allow students to explore how the graphics and artwork in a text supported meaning-making; Superfan, similar to the old Connector but from more of a critical literacy perspective; Synergizer whose job is to determine why the author chooses to use images to make points rather than words and how the images, words, layout, color etc. work together to develop the meaning of the text; and Text Maven, a role that focuses on the actual text found in or outside of speech balloons and how they add to meaning.

Despite many positive results with graphic novels reported across the curriculum and most grade levels, many researchers report a reluctance or fear on the part of teachers to accept graphic novels (Carter, 2008; Clark 2013a; Connors, 2015). Many report that teachers are, or feel, unprepared to read or teach with them (Connors, 2012; Lapp et al., 2011/2012; Laycock, 2019; McClanahan & Nottingham, 2018; Rice & Dallacqua, 2019). While it is important to offer professional learning to inservice teachers that will allow them to develop their appreciation for and use of graphic novels in their classrooms (Barbre, 2018; Laycock, 2019; McClanahan & Nottingham, 2021), it may ultimately be even more productive to do so with preservice teachers. The impetus to acquaint preservice teachers with the affordances of graphic novels in the classroom is not new. A number of researchers over the last decade have reported such efforts, including Spencer Clark

(2013a), Sean Connors (2012), Ewa McGrail and colleagues (2018), Rick Marlatt and Ashley Dallacqua (2019), among others.

This body of literature led to the questions this research sought to explore:

(1) In what ways do preservice teachers navigate the process when they are asked to read and analyze a graphic novel historical fiction text and evaluate its accuracy?

(2) How, at the end of the process, do they perceive the use of graphic novels as a potential tool for teaching social studies?

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The study took place in a Social studies methods course that is part of an Elementary Education (ELED) Program and was taught at a branch campus of a small regional university in a midwestern state. The course itself has no prerequisites beyond junior status, so potentially any student at any level of the program can enroll in the course. The course itself is built on the premise of the close, even reciprocal, connection of literacy and social studies and is taught by ELED faculty. To communicate the benefits of the social studies-literacy connection, the instructor/researcher had for several years included a literature circles project in which she used a book talk about each of three or four different historical fiction novels and allowed the students choice in which ones were selected to be read in groups of four to six students. The students set up their literature circles in the usual manner, meeting four times in class to discuss the section read the previous week and choosing the roles they felt would be most productive for them. When the books were concluded, each group engaged in an authentication project (McTigue et al., 2013) to use disciplinary and critical thinking strategies to determine whether the books were accurate in terms of representing the setting, historical events, and the values and beliefs of the characters (Clark & Sears, 2017).

In previous years, students responded quite positively to the literature circle/authentication project. The instructor, having become interested in graphic novels, wondered whether or how using graphic novels in the historical fiction genre for the project might change the responses of the students to the activities. She began a search to locate three or more such historical fiction graphic novels written for elementary students up to grade 8 to give her students as wide a range as possible to choose from. She discovered that historical fiction graphic novels that met the criteria were not as easy to locate as were nonfiction historical graphic novels. She was finally able to find three that she felt would be appropriate: *Sword of Fire and Ice* by John Matthews, a rendition of the King Arthur

stories; *A Land Remembered: A Graphic Novel*, adapted by Andre R. Frattino from the book by Patrick D. Smith, the story of the fictional McIvey family set in early Florida; and *White Bird* by R. J. Palacio, the fictional story of a young Jewish girl living in France as the Nazis took over during World War II.

The section of the course taught in the spring of 2021 as the site of the study was taught in a face-to-face environment with seven students enrolled. As it happened, six of the seven students had taken previous literacy courses with the instructor, in which they were given a brief introduction to and some instruction about graphic novels, including some read-alouds of selected graphic texts. The seventh student, Bonnie (all student names are pseudonyms), was an emergency-certified individual teaching a second-grade class at a local school and was enrolled in the social studies methods course as part of her state-administered deficiency program to achieve eventual alternative certification. The other six students could be considered nontraditional students as well; in other words, their high school careers had ended some years earlier, and they were coming back to finish a degree. One of these students declined to participate, leaving five participants: Abby, Amanda, Alicia, Beth, and Ben.

The students were introduced to the project and asked to sign an informed consent letter if they were willing to participate. It was made clear to the students that nothing involving the study could or would impact their individual grades in the course. It was also explained that the only difference during this section of the course from previous sections would be that they would be reading a graphic novel rather than a traditional print novel, the assignments they submitted would become data for the study, and they would be asked to participate in a one-on-one recorded interview with the instructor at the end of the course. As stated earlier, six of the seven students agreed to participate. The assignments the students submitted during the project included the role/task sheets completed for each literature circle meeting, a related response journal completed prior to each meeting, and the completed group authentication project. Additional data was provided by transcriptions of the six recorded interviews.

The instructor presented book talks on the three chosen graphic novels and allowed the students to individually indicate their choice. The goal in this exercise is to provide all students with either their first or second choice. As it turned out, the first choice of almost all students was *White Bird*. Because the class was so small, the instructor made the decision at that point to make the entire class a single literature circle. In this way the entire class would be able to have some experience with

a range of the roles available to students when using the literature circles approach. The roles offered to the students included the traditional ones as well as those suggested by Low and Jacobs (2018) for graphic novels. The students held their first meeting, chose roles, and determined how to break up the reading among the three remaining circle meetings. In the remaining meetings, the information compiled and written by the students was shared with the group and discussed. Although sometimes the group members decided to rotate the roles, not all did every time. It was interesting to note that one of the typically popular roles for this activity, Illustrator, was never chosen by a group member. When the book was finished, the class met as a group to plan the authentication project. The rest of this assignment was completed outside of class and presented in class about three weeks later as a PowerPoint. About a week before the semester ended, the instructor scheduled an individual meeting with each participating student to ask the students questions pertaining to their experience (See Appendix A). The interviews were recorded and transcribed.

Analysis of the data was carried out using a constant comparison procedure (Glaser & Strass, 1967; Hallberg, 2006; Merriam, 1998). A matrix was created for role sheets completed by participants that related to the graphic novel aspects of the book and were reviewed multiple times to determine initial and axial codes (Miles & Huberman, 1994). Four codes were developed from these role sheets and will be discussed in the Results section— *Symbolism, Graphic Novel Conventions and Interpretations, Use of Color, Relationship of Color (Image) to Words.* Similar procedures were carried out for the response journals and the recorded and transcribed interviews; response journals yielded an additional code (*Focus on Images and Their Meaning),* while analysis of the interviews resulted in two additional codes (*Background with Graphic Novels* and *Opinion toward Graphic Novels in Social Studies after the Project.* No one other than the researcher was engaged to review the process, but member checking was employed.

RESULTS

The group authentication project submitted by the students as a PowerPoint addressed the background of the author/artist, two specific historical events/situations mentioned in the text, and six comments found in the text that related to values and beliefs of Jewish people as well as the Nazis. A review of the submission revealed no direct influence of the choice of a graphic novel on how the students approached or completed the activity. For that reason, nothing from the Project itself offered usable data pertaining to the research questions.

How Students Responded

Data from individual role sheets, journals, and interview transcripts did offer clear indication of the students' responses to reading a graphic novel and participating in the authentication project to learn social studies content and disciplinary thinking and skills, all of which are related to Research Question 1. These are discussed next primarily by the somewhat overlapping codes developed during analysis, specifically, *Background with Graphic Novels, Symbolism, Graphic Novel Conventions and Interpretations, Use of Color, Relationship of Color (Image) to Words, Focus on Images and Their Meaning,* and *Opinion toward Graphic Novels in Social Studies after the Project.*

Background with Graphic Novels

On being asked in the end-of-study interviews about prior experience with graphic novels, all students reported never having read a graphic novel on their own before. Five of the six had been in courses where they were exposed to graphic novels through read-alouds by the instructor and had been required to read, with support, Monnin and Bowman's (2013) *Teaching Reading Comprehension with Graphic Texts;* this was intended to teach them how to read graphic novels. Bonnie, who was not in the previous courses, stated that she had no experience with them. She elaborated further: "I'm—in my opinion, I don't like graphic novels, but it's more of I feel like I'm not like a child anymore, like I don't need pictures and words to get me through a book, so I'd always go, 'No, I don't want to read a graphic novel.'" Bonnie clearly regarded graphic novels as not adult fare.

Symbolism

Each student chose a role for each of three book discussion sessions. Of the eighteen role sheets submitted, five were for roles related directly to the graphic novel choice. Text Maven was chosen twice, once by Amanda, and once by Beth. Palette Cleanser was chosen three times, once by Alicia and twice by Bonnie. Amanda noted on a Text Maven role sheet, "While I read the final part of *White Bird,* I noticed that a white bird showed up during certain moments in the book." She then cites some of those moments with page numbers, but she does not speculate as to what the white bird might symbolize, despite the fact that the name of the text is *White Bird.* On her one Palette Cleanser role sheet, Alicia noticed that the soldiers were all one color, "[l]ike they don't matter

because they were so horrible." Her comment suggested she was perhaps thinking of the color as a symbol.

Graphic Novel Conventions and Interpretations

Beth paid close attention to the speech balloons on a Text Maven role sheet. She recognized that different kinds of balloon styles combined with actions in the images allowed her to understand what was going on or to make inferences, synthesizing text and image.

On her first Palette Cleanser role sheet, Bonnie felt the muted coloring applied mostly to the background for the purpose of foregrounding the important action, and she felt it was appropriate for the story being told. She concluded that the colors were appropriate for the darker aspects of the story, perhaps a reference to tone or mood with some connection symbolism as well.

Use of Color

In terms of use of color, Alicia's opinion differed from Bonnie; she noted on her Palette Cleanser role sheet that the portions of the book where the narrator is sharing memories had less color than when the setting is present time. Bonnie further responded, again on her Palette Cleanser role sheet, regarding her perceived relationship of the color of the panels to the words in the speech balloons: "I feel like the colors tell an important part of the story that words can't touch. The use of dull subtle colors in the background help show the people are most important in the bubble," she said. However, she also stated, "The background is important, but it can't be overwhelming to the point it takes away from the main characters. The colors are there to help paint the picture that goes along with words but not to the point it overtakes the words." In her final Palette Cleanser role, Bonnie proclaimed, "The colors didn't have any affect [sic]on the storyline. The colors are dull and blank. The colors aren't what makes the storyline. The words are what makes up the storyline."

In their journal entries, all six students made at least one comment related specifically to the graphic novel aspects of the book they read, and some made multiple comments. Bonnie's only graphic-novel-related comment in her journal submissions occurred after reading the first third of the book and related again to color; she wondered if "the drawings and pictures will stay the same color or brighten up." She made no further comment in her journal related to this, nor did she appear to attempt to synthesize the meaning of words and images. It seems clear that Amanda, Alicia,

Abby, Ben, and Beth were gleaning more meaning from the graphic aspects of the text, both conventions and color, than was Bonnie.

Focus on Images and Their Meaning

Most journal comments made by other students, however, focused on an attempt to create the synthesis between images and words that Bonnie was not. For example, after reading the first section, Alicia made a journal entry analyzing the image of Vincent hollering out the window to conclude he is a "jerk" and questioned whether that can be "accurate." After the second section of reading, Beth notes in her journal that despite the few words, she is vicariously experiencing Sara's experience in the barn. She calls this "a well-written book." Alicia regards this section as her favorite; "even though it basically only took place in the barn, so much happened." Both Beth and Alicia seem to be dependent upon both words and images to make these interpretations. In their final journal entries after finishing the book, four students made comments related to their attempts to mesh words and images. For example, Amanda referenced an image of Julian holding up the sign as an indication that he had learned his lesson.

However, students were not always able to create satisfying syntheses. Alicia questioned the accuracy and authenticity of the story because of the appearance of the wolf, introduced almost solely through images. "I also wonder how accurate the wolf story is, just seems kind of wild . . .," she wrote. Ben was also surprised by the appearance of the wolf; "I did not expect the wolf to save her in the woods but was glad it did." He then noted that he wanted to discuss "Vincent getting killed by a wolf" in the final circle meeting. Abby was also puzzled by the wolf's appearance; she wondered "where the wolf came from and why it appeared."

Interestingly, while Alicia, Ben, and Abby remarked about the appearance of the wolf, none of them suggested the wolf might be symbolic. Even so, they were clearly attempting to resolve the image of the wolf, something neither Bonnie nor the others mentioned at all.

Opinion Toward Graphic Novels in Social Studies After the Project

When asked if their opinion about graphic novels had changed over the course of the project, the five participants with some exposure to graphic novels all reported strong favorability toward them. Amanda reported buying her own for a lesson plan she was writing in another class. Since the question asked if her opinion about graphic novels had changed because of the experience, Alicia

answered, "Not really, because before the literature circle, I knew that I liked graphic novels from previous, from the previous ones we had read, so I still like them." Beth reported that the graphic novel made history "super interesting in that it was fun to read it as a graphic novel 'cause we read a historical book, and sometimes history can be flat." Ben said he liked them better than he thought he would because they allow students to "have the best of both worlds. They have good text and pictures. Students are able to pick up on comprehension in more than one way." Abby stated emphatically in answer to the question, "Oh, it definitely has. I mean, before I would have never thought about even using it in a classroom, and now I see that they are actually a really good thing to use. And I really enjoyed reading them. Too, they're really easy for me to read, and I know it'd be really easy for other students to read, too." Bonnie, however, who had indicated in her Text Maven role that all she needed as an adult reader was the words, replied in a single word, "No."

The evidence provided through the role sheets, journals, and interviews suggest important findings related to Research Question 1. First, through both the role sheets and the journals, most of the participants with some prior knowledge of graphic novels attempted to utilize what they had learned in reading *White Bird* to construct a satisfying reading experience. Bonnie, however, seemed fearful that images (particularly the use of color) might lessen the priority of the words and appeared unable to benefit from the images in terms of comprehension. Second, the five participants with prior knowledge of graphic novels all reported strong favorability toward their use, whereas Bonnie reported that her opinion toward graphic novels had not been changed by the experience.

POTENTIAL FUTURE USE OF GRAPHIC NOVELS IN TEACHING SOCIAL STUDIES

Three codes provide insight into answering Research Question 2 regarding how the students perceived use of the graphic novel/authentication project combination as a tool for teaching social studies after having experienced it, *Opinion on Literature Circles in Social Studies, Opinion on Historical Fiction Graphic Novels for Use in Social Studies Literature Circles with Authentication Project,* and *Future Use of Graphic Novels.* The first two codes arose based on the nature of the questions asked in the interviews, while the third appeared spontaneously. One code based on a question, *Opinion on Literature Circles in Social Studies,* while of interest to teaching social studies in general, does not provide insight for the research questions and will not be discussed.

Opinion on Historical Fiction Graphic Novels for Use in Social Studies Literature Circles with Authentication Project

All six students felt that the use of graphic novels with literature circles and authentication projects could be productive. Ben felt that graphic novels "complement it very well 'cause it gives . . . another point of view, another, another angle to look at the topic and learn about it . . . we're looking at it from a graphic novel that has—it's worded more for children, and it has pictures for children, so it gives them a whole other angle to learn the topic." Alicia reported, "I'm not a big history fan, so reading it in a graphic novel made it a lot easier for me to get a lot more interesting when it was in story form and coming from a perspective of someone that walked through it rather than reading it in the history book." She said it "definitely" complemented her understanding of history. Abby stated, "I think that graphic novels make them more interesting, and I think easier to comprehend, too, especially the pictures and stuff. I think it makes the . . . topic easier to, like, understand and kind of grasp onto the concept of what social studies is exactly—especially the one that we read, because I learned a lot out of it even though it was a graphic novel. I mean it was a really—like, I just enjoyed that book a lot . . . it [reading a fiction book in the literature circle] actually helped me better understand and kinda gave a lot of inside view, what was happening to the people that was [sic] there."

Four of the six mentioned the authentication project as helpful as well. When asked if the process of the graphic novel fused with the authentication project was an effective combination, Amanda replied, "Yes. I do because we learned about the Nazis and the Jewish and . . . their values and beliefs. For instance, I learned that some of them really did happen or some of the beliefs really were true versus they weren't. It actually taught us some things." When the researcher asked whether everything in the novel was indeed accurate, she said somewhat excitedly, "No. No, but it was cool for us to find out if it wasn't." Beth said thoughtfully, "I guess, in a way, doing the authentication project kind of got—we kinda went a step further with our knowledge." Ben shared, "I think . . . [future students can] benefit [from the authentication project with a graphic novel] as well because it just—you can—instead of only having text, you now have pictures that you can see if these pictures are authentic. Was this real? Did this really happen in this picture in this place? So, it gives another angle for authentication projects as well." Bonnie, however, felt that the authentication project was less effective, at least as it was carried out in this instance, because she felt not everyone participated at an appropriate level; she was also annoyed that some of her classmates used Wikipedia as a source. She seemed focused more on her personal experience of the project than how it might benefit her students if implemented more effectively.

Future Use of Graphic Novels

Although not directly asked about it, three students commented in some way on how they saw graphic novels as a tool for teaching social studies. Amanda reported that she liked them and had bought her own for use in a lesson plan she was writing for another class. She also reported reading them with her four-year-old daughter. "She'll look at the pictures while I'm reading it, and she'll ask me what it means, so . . . I think it's really cool, because the pictures tell a story, so she'll tell her own version with me," she said laughing. Abby explained how surprised she was to learn that graphic novels are actually useful in the social studies classroom. She commented, "I mean, before I would have never thought about even using it in a classroom, and now I see that they are actually a really good thing to use. I'm definitely going to use them in my future classroom." Ben, who was doing his student teaching while taking the course, reported that he had been reading *White Bird* to his third-grade class. He explained, "I don't know for sure how long it took, maybe four weeks, just in our free time. I read it to them, put it on a projector where they could see it in front and read it to them. And today we started trying to write what they learned from it and how that story made them feel. So, we were taking notes as a group today . . . They were begging me to read every chance they got." His opinion was that graphic novels should definitely be used in the classroom. Bonnie, the emergency-certified teacher, acknowledged that graphic novels can be a motivator for students and can promote engagement in learning. While she made no direct comment on her own future use, she did say, "kids today—they prefer graphic novels, and when you have a topic that you think is going to be boring to some that—'cause you know there are topics that kids don't get excited about— the graphic novel helps their excitement level come up because they're reading it and they can see it and they can imagine it in front of their little brains. And then they can connect it back to what they're learning about."

Summing up the evidence for Research Question 2, all six participants saw *some* benefit for using the graphic novel/authentication project approach. Nevertheless, there are stark differences between Bonnie and the other five participants as to how much benefit they saw. Bonnie saw motivation for bored children as the only benefit, while the others suggested that the combination deepened their understanding of the historical background of the book and raised questions that could be explored during the authentication portion that led to greater comprehension of the historical issues faced by the characters in the story. The experience of the five "predisposed"

participants led them to conclude that they would be likely to utilize a similar process with graphic novels in social studies in their own classrooms.

DISCUSSION

Research Question 1 asked how students navigated the reading of a historical graphic novel in a social studies literature circle. It was clear from the comments made on the graphic-novel-related role sheets and the journals that all students were reacting to and interpreting the unique aspects of graphic novel texts, specifically the use of symbolism in images, graphic novel conventions related to speech balloons, and the relationship of color to overall meaning, most in a highly favorable way.

INCHING TOWARD FULL ACCEPTANCE

The graphic-novel roles (Low and Jacobs, 2018) were selected for use by participants only 5 out of 18 possible times. The Synergizer role, which requires students to consider why the author uses images to convey meaning, was never chosen. This may suggest that more information about how the students were responding to and interpreting those unique aspects might have been gleaned had the instructor required more use of those roles. The students may have been somewhat intimidated by the graphic novel roles as they may demand more challenging thinking than the traditional roles, which provides even more reason to require them.

. . . Of Graphic Novels Historical Fiction in Social Studies

All six of the participants made at least one comment in their response journals regarding some aspect of the format of the graphic novel. Most comments related to images in specific panels, pondering their meaning. The fact that three participants challenged the author's introduction of a wolf to resolve the plot shows that they were deeply engaged in the text.

Analysis of the interviews, however, provides even deeper understanding as to how the students were responding throughout the process. For example, five of the six participants reported they had had some prior exposure to graphic novels in previous coursework. Those who had that exposure appeared to draw on that knowledge to read the graphic novel in this study. They also seemed more open to the experience. They reported enjoying the book and found it helpful in

understanding the time period and the characters. Beth's comment that she felt this was "a well-written book" demonstrates that the fact that it was a graphic novel did not hinder her appreciation of it from a literary standpoint.

The majority of the students clearly felt that the use of the graphic novel, even as historical fiction, was not only engaging but a productive learning experience. Ben's and Beth's comments regarding how using historical fiction graphic novels offers students multiple entry points to comprehension, for example, suggest that the students overall had come to appreciate the value of the graphic novel as a learning tool.

. . . Of the Authentication Project as Part of the Process

In terms of the authentication project, most of the participants felt it was a good way to culminate the reading experience by going deeper into the social studies concepts behind the novel. Ben pointed out the opportunity to evaluate the images for authenticity as well as the words, providing additional motivation to investigate the history behind it. Amanda reported that the Authentication Project "actually taught us some things" and was excited to learn whether the things they read about were true or not. As Beth said, "we . . . went a step further with our knowledge," which, after all, is the goal.

Thus, the responses found in the role sheets, the journals, and the interviews provide deep insight into how the students navigated the reading of the graphic novel in the literature circle process and utilized the Authentication Project to extend learning. What can certainly be said is that all students were making a genuine effort to utilize the unique aspects of the graphic novel to comprehend the text, relating it to social studies, and they seem to have done so with some degree of success, so much so that most of them expressed a willingness, even a desire, to use them in their future classrooms.

Insight was gained about Research Question 2 regarding how the students perceived the use of graphic novels as a tool for teaching social studies as well. Without prompting, three of the six students described benefits they could see for their students in using graphic novels to teach social studies. They clearly saw graphic novels as a productive tool for teaching social studies, with comments ranging from just anticipating their use in the future to incorporating them in a lesson plan for a course while still an undergrad to actually reading one in a student teaching class and carrying out a writing activity on the book at the end of it.

Contrasting Bonnie

Given the fact that Bonnie's reactions and comments throughout the study can be seen in stark contrast to the other five participants, it is worth exploring the extent of that contrast and ponder its source. Bonnie, unlike the other participants, had not been exposed to previous teaching on graphic novels and expressed a very negative attitude toward them from a personal standpoint; she regarded them as books for children that held no interest for her for personal reading. It is interesting, however, that despite professing not to like graphic novels, she chose a graphic novel role twice; it is possible that she was trying to have an open mind during the process, but she still was concerned that the graphic aspects were lessening the priority of the words, where she seemed to feel the "real" meaning lay. For example, the five students who had some exposure to graphic novels seemed to be able to more effectively synthesize words and images to glean more meaning from the entirety of the reading experience than did Bonnie, who wanted to remain focused on the words. Bonnie did ultimately acknowledge that graphic novels are a motivator for students and can promote engagement in learning. Nevertheless, Bonnie's repeated contention that she does not like graphic novels is a concern. McKool and Gespass (2009) found that "teachers' own personal reading habits do influence their instructional practices" (p. 273). Since the study did not change Bonnie's mind regarding her personal taste for graphic novels, she is not likely to be a role model for her students in using them, and it is more likely that she would actually choose other, more traditional, print books for instructional purposes. It is possible that had Bonnie had the benefit of earlier learning about graphic novels, her attitude might have been different; that, of course, is only conjecture. Nevertheless, prior exposure does seem to have set the others up to get more out of the experience.

LIMITATIONS

There are clear limitations to the generalizability of this study. For example, it took place over a single semester in a very small class of seven students, only six of whom participated in the study, although all participated in the class activities. Researcher bias may also be considered a limitation since the instructor and the researcher were the same person, and no one else reviewed the data or analysis. Nevertheless, the insights gained seem to, at the very least, provide a basis for further research.

IMPLICATIONS

The findings of this study seem to support the idea that incorporating the use of historical fiction graphic texts in literature circles as part of a preservice social studies methods course can be productive in terms of supporting the teacher candidates in becoming aware of the possibilities of

using such texts in their future classrooms and providing some strategies as to how that can be done. The fact that the students who had the most positive experiences were those who had been previously exposed to graphic novels, even in a limited way, and the student who had not had that benefit did not have as positive an experience strongly suggests that a single exposure to the use of graphic novels in such a situation is not enough. This corroborates earlier findings that preservice teachers tend to have a reluctance to adopt graphic novels into their repertoire (Clark, 2013a). However, the prior exposure of most of the participants seemed to lessen any reluctance. That exposure had involved explicit teaching on visual literacy (Frey & Fisher, 2008), as well as dual coding theory (Sadoski & Paivio, 1994) and multimodal theory (Mayer & Sims, 1994), that emphasized the importance of constructing meaning from (reading) images and encouraging retention and transfer of learning, using strategies such as Visual Thinking Strategy (Yenawine, 2013). It also specifically taught graphic novel and comics conventions as well as demonstrating effectively that words and images must be synthesized for reading of a graphic novel to be successful (McClanahan & Nottingham, 2019; Monnin, 2010; Monnin & Bowman, 2013; McCloud, 1993). It emphasized that rereading is essential for deep comprehension. All these aspects should be part of practice in the basic literacy courses and content literacy courses in our teacher preparation programs.

At the end of this study, all participants, even the one who did not personally like graphic novels, professed a willingness to incorporate them in a literature circle framework to teach social studies, and some seemed very excited about it. That was a very satisfying result that provides encouragement to continue the effort to make more preservice teachers aware of the value of the historical fiction graphic novel approach and to continue research in this area. Nevertheless, this is also a cautionary tale suggesting that detailed and repetitive graphic novel learning opportunities need to be offered across the entire teacher preparation program to have an appreciable impact, not just in a single course. If we truly want preservice teachers to incorporate graphic novels in social studies learning or in any other part of their curriculum, we cannot expect a one-and-done approach to be effective.

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APPENDIX A: LIST OF INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

1. What has been your experience with graphic novels prior to this course?

2. Has your opinion of graphic novels changed over the course of this study? If so, in what ways?

3. How do you feel about using literature circles as a strategy for teaching social studies concepts?

4. How well do graphic novel historical fiction texts complement teaching social studies concepts in literature circles and authentication projects?