

Empowering Youth to Become Global Citizens through Graphic Novels: A Critical Content Analysis

Kasey Garrison, Ph.D.

kgarrison@csu.edu.au
Charles Sturt University

Karen Gavigan, Ph.D.

kgavigan@mailbox.sc.edu
University of South Carolina

Keywords: *critical content analysis, graphic novels, social justice, diversity, young adult literature*

Abstract

How we teach youth about social justice issues, and promote diversity in books, is crucial to supporting global citizenship and building cultural empathy. This research posits that graphic novels are useful tools to teach social justice topics given the duality of text and illustrations and the focus of diversity and social justice issues of many graphic novel titles. Using a critical content analysis approach, researchers examine examples of graphic novels giving marginalized communities a voice and targeting social justice topics and explore best practices in using graphic novels to empower youth to become global citizens. Preliminary findings are presented.

Introduction

When asked, “Why can’t you let social justice go?” Christina Torres (2015), a middle school teacher in Hawaii, wrote that students:

...need to understand society as it is. They need to face the conversation happening in our world right now with frankness and honesty. Teaching “social justice” must occur not simply because it’s relevant, but so my students can explore how their stories fit into the larger tapestry of a national and global story. Anything less is a wasted opportunity to challenge and expand not only their minds, but mine as well.

Helping youth understand and unpack social justice issues is more critical than ever as the *Documenting Hate* database, which records racist, xenophobic, and homophobic acts in the news, reports hundreds of acts in K-12 schools since 2015 (Vara-Orta, 2018). These bullying incidents targeted religious and racial groups, mirroring violence and issues in US news like the white supremacist rally and resulting riots in Charlottesville in 2017, and multiple shootings at churches, synagogues and mosques. Teachers and librarians working with youth are in a strategic position to help the next generation understand the historical significance of these events, why they are important, and what we need to change for our future to support equality (Ishizuka, 2018).

As Torres (2015), Vara-Orta (2018), and Ishizuka (2018) recognize, the ways in which we teach children and youth about social justice issues and allow them to see diverse characters in books is crucial to supporting global citizenship. Movements such as “We Need Diverse Books” (WNDB), #OwnVoices (Yorio, 2018), and the “Reading Without Walls Challenge” (Yang, 2016) have made the publishing industry, librarians, teachers, parents and other stakeholders even more aware of the pressing need for access to more diverse books, both for recreational reading and in support of the curriculum.

Statement of the Research Problem

The purpose of this research is to identify and document social justice themes in graphic novels published for young adults in the United States and Australia. The researchers are evaluating graphic novels that focus on social justice events and issues, both in historical and contemporary contexts, and are developing a selective list of titles on different themes, such as civil rights, racism, addiction, issues in the LGBTQIA community, immigration, indigenous communities, poverty, etc. They are also examining professional graphic novel titles and teacher guides to include in the list of resources, lesson plans, and activities for use by librarians and teachers to teach topics related to social justice. This toolkit of instructional resources will enable librarians and other educators to teach social justice topics effectively with young adults. The toolkit includes annotated bibliographies of graphic novels on a variety of social justice topics, as well as lesson plans and instructional activities that librarians and teachers can use as both recreational and educational resources.

In order to identify graphic novels on social justice issues, and to develop instructional resources for their usage with young adults, the following research questions guide this study:

1. What are some quality examples of graphic novels for children and young adults addressing social justice topics and issues?
2. What types of social justice topics and issues are addressed in graphic novels for children and young adults?
3. What are best practices for using social justice graphic novels in culturally relevant ways with today’s youth?

An exploration of social justice graphic novels for young adults, as well as the ways in which educators can use them, can inform social justice education. The results of this study can help to justify the purchase and use of social justice graphic novels in schools, by identifying quality resources and instructional strategies that librarians and educators can use with increasingly diverse populations of patrons and students.

Literature Review

To date, there are few empirical studies pertaining to the identification and use of graphic novels for social justice education for young adults. The limited studies that are available have identified graphic novels that include content, or address themes, related to social justice, as well as equality issues related to race, immigration, sexual orientation, gender, and disability. However, these studies were limited to the examination of graphic novels on professional associations’ awards lists. For example Moeller and Becnel (2018) found over three-quarters of the titles on YALSA’s 2015 Great Graphic Novels for Teens list included “characters of color” and over a quarter of those featured a character of color as the main character of the story. Betts-Green and Latham (2017) found positive depictions of characters from the LGBTQ community in graphic novels included on the Rainbow List, Stonewall Awards, and Lambda Literary Awards. Conversely, research on disability in graphic novels (Irwin & Moeller, 2010; Moeller &

Irwin, 2012) demonstrates that there is room for improvement in this area, since many of the titles these researchers analyzed contained negative or stereotypical portrayals of individuals with disabilities.

Graphic novels can be an effective teaching tool for illustrating diversity, social justice, and identity issues pertinent to young adults. The combination of pictures and text in graphic novels can provide an engaging lens for students to examine and understand the diversity, challenges, and injustices of the world around them. The variety of social justice themes presented in graphic novels provide instructors with opportunities to have meaningful discussions with diverse student populations, and those with varying learning styles and abilities. However, while many educators recognise the value of graphic novels for instructional purposes in their libraries and classrooms, they need support for using them (Pagliaro, 2014). For example, individualized education plans (IEPs) often identify students as visual learners, and recommend multimodal forms of instruction, but few educators are familiar with visual literacy pedagogy, and they lack the confidence to implement these practices with their students (Newkirk, 2002).

When examining the literature regarding graphic novels in educational settings, it is important to explore national and international standards and guidelines. For example, the American Association of School Librarians (AASL) Standards state that, “The school librarian’s role in maintaining a quality selection of curated resources in a variety of formats is essential” (AASL, 2017, p. 98). Further, one of AASL’s six Shared Foundations that frames these standards is “Include”, which highlights the role of the school librarian in developing students’ empathy and sharing diverse perspectives with students representative of the global learning community. Also, in the United States, the Common Core English Language Arts (ELA) Standards emphasize the significance of visual literacy in various ways across grade levels, including the evaluation and integration of knowledge from diverse media and formats (e.g., visual) to aid students in developing and presenting their own knowledge and understandings (National Governors Association Center for Best Practices, 2010). The Australian Curriculum identifies “Visual Knowledge” as a key element to the General Capability Literacy and notes that students must understand how images and text work together to create and enhance meaning (Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority, 2015). Finally, the International Federation of Library Associations (IFLA) *School Library Program Guidelines* (2015) also supports the use of visual literacy and diverse formats like graphic novels to promote literacy and reading promotion as well as socio-cultural issues (p. 39). This focus on visual literacy and the importance of understanding multimodal texts gives strong support for using graphic novels to study social justice issues and address these important standards.

Methodology

The primary purpose of this qualitative study is to identify graphic novel titles that authentically represent social justice issues. For the purpose of this study, the researchers used WNDB’s definition of social justice which notes the marginalization of certain groups of people and “recognize(s) all diverse experiences, including (but not limited to) LGBTQIA, Native, people of color, gender diversity, people with disabilities, and ethnic, cultural, and religious minorities” with special emphasis on disability, including “physical, sensory, cognitive, intellectual, or developmental disabilities, chronic conditions, and mental illnesses” (WNDB, n.d.). We used a variety of resources to find the books including conversing with publishers at conferences and symposia, exploring graphic novel listservs, searching through award-winning graphic novel lists, and visiting state and national libraries and special collections. We examined graphic novels and graphic novel professional resources in special youth collections in the following libraries in the US and Australia:

- Baldwin Library of Historical Literature - University of Florida - Gainesville, FL;
- Children’s Literature Center- Library of Congress - Washington, DC;

- Reinberger Children’s Library Center- Kent State University - Kent, OH,
- South Carolina Center for Children’s Books and Literacy - University of South Carolina - Columbia, SC;
- National Centre for Australian Children’s Literature at the University of Canberra- Canberra, ACT;
- National Library of Australia- Canberra, ACT;
- State Library of New South Wales- Sydney, NSW; and
- State Library of Victoria- Melbourne, VIC.

After reviewing the books, we have begun to compile a master list of potential graphic novels to be investigated in more detail. The study focused on graphic novels published since 2000 in order to analyze titles dealing with contemporary socio-cultural, political and economic events. We have been reading the graphic novels, using a critical content analysis method as described by Beach, et al. (2009) and Short (2017) to address the research questions. This method was used by Forrest, Garrison, and Kimmel (2015) and Garrison (2019a, 2019b) in similar research examining culture in youth literature. “Critical content analysis differs from content analysis in prioritizing a critical lens as a frame for the study” (Short, 2017, p. 5). Both of the researchers in the present study are independently reading each of the graphic novels, closely examining the images and the text. After reading the books, we write descriptive notes in a spreadsheet that included headings such as Subject, Summary and Cultural Connections. Then, the results are compared to determine a final list of titles for a more detailed analysis. Next, each graphic novel is read again and coded separately by the researchers, identifying themes and cultural connections between images and text. Best teaching practices based on this framework are also examined, including activities honoring the children’s language and funds of knowledge and promoting cultural understanding.

Findings and Discussion

Currently, this research is in the data collection stages; however, diverse themes related to a variety of social justice topics are emerging from the graphic novels, including issues regarding immigration, racial discrimination, and mental health. Immigration issues are reflected in titles such as *The Arrival* (Tan, 2006), *Ubbi’s Underdogs* (McKenna, 2013), and *Poppies from Iraq* (Findakly, Trondheim, & Dasher, 2017). In the beautifully illustrated and wordless title *The Arrival* (Tan, 2006), readers can feel the pain the immigrating main character shows when leaving his family and home and the curiosity and confusion he experiences in his new land as an immigrant. Further, being a wordless title makes *The Arrival* (Tan, 2006) a useful teaching tool as reading levels and traditional literacy issues are not an issue. Forced immigration stories are told through the perspectives of refugees and asylum seekers like Amina in *Escape from Syria* (Kullab, Roche, & Freiheit, 2017) written by reporter Samya Kullab from the English-language Lebanese newspaper *Daily Star*. Kullab writes Amina’s story using stories Syrian refugees shared with her from 2013 to 2017 as they poured over the Lebanese border seeking a better life still close to their homeland. The introduction and endnotes give the real-world context of specific situations from Amina’s story like child marriage and refugee sponsorship in Canada so young readers can better understand the political and social background of this ongoing conflict.

Social justice issues related to racial identity and discrimination are represented in *American-Born Chinese* (Yang, 2006), *I am Alfonso Jones* (Medina, 2017), and the *March* trilogy (Lewis, Aydin, & Powell, 2013). The critically acclaimed titles in the *March* trilogy received a wealth of awards, including the National Book Award in the US. This series, based on Congressman John Lewis’s life during the civil rights movement, can be used by educators to enhance curriculum units on the civil rights movement. Tony Medina tackles more contemporary racial issues, such as those associated with the

Black Lives Matter movement, in *I am Alfonso Jones*. In this powerful graphic novel, Alfonso is killed by a policeman mistaking his clothes hanger for a gun (Medina, 2018). The graphic novel format of these titles will encourage young adults to ask questions that lead to important discussions about racial discrimination.

Topics with mental health issues are illustrated through characters in autobiographical graphic novels like *Lighter Than My Shadow* (Green, 2017) and *Inside Out: Portrait of an Eating Disorder* (Shivack, 2009). Green details her dark battle with eating disorders, and the struggles she faced throughout her recovery, in *Lighter Than My Shadow*. The grayscale, often grotesque body images effectively demonstrate how Green viewed herself while in the grips of her disorder. The combination of frank text and stark images in graphic novels like these, and others, shed light on often-hidden and stigmatizing mental illnesses that affect the lives of many young adults. They can be effective teaching tools to help these struggling young adults, and those around them, come to grips with their disorders. These are some preliminary findings from the data collection stages; our final paper will include additional details regarding the study's findings and present best practices for librarians and educators to use graphic novels in ways that present social justice issues to youth.

Implications and Conclusions

Today's adolescents have grown up in a mediasphere filled with visual images such as the Internet, television, and video games; therefore, they eagerly embrace multimodal formats such as graphic novels that combine visuals with text. As Flynt and Brozo (2010) stated, "...moving beyond content instruction based on traditional print media is one significant step teachers and schools can take toward stemming the tide against the large number of disengaged students" (p. 528). Despite the fact that many literacy theorists, librarians, and teachers support the use of graphic novels with young adult readers, there is a need for additional research to support their use in classrooms and libraries.

The findings from this study have promising implications for using graphic novels to teach social justice issues in today's classrooms. Through this study, librarians and teachers will learn about graphic novel titles that reflect the challenging world in which young adults live. In addition, they will learn how to develop graphic novel activities to help students explore important social justice issues. Furthermore, once these strategies are determined, they can be used with pre-service teachers and librarians in their curriculum classes. Finally, if, as this study indicates, graphic novels are a promising format for facilitating social justice learning with young adults, additional studies on this topic are warranted.

REFERENCES

- American Association of School Librarians. (2017). *National school library standards for learners, school librarians and school libraries*. Chicago: ALA Editions.
- Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority. (2015). *General Capabilities: Literacy*. Retrieved from: <https://www.australiancurriculum.edu.au/f-10-curriculum/general-capabilities/literacy/>
- Beach, R. et al. (2009). Exploring the 'critical' in critical content analysis of children's literature. In *58th Yearbook of the National Reading Conference*, ed. Richard Leander, (Oak Creek, WI: National Reading Conference, Inc., 2009), 129-143.

- Betts-Green, D., & Latham, D. (2017). Drawing queerness: Evaluating notable LGBTQ graphic novels for teens. *Journal of Research on Libraries and Young Adults*, 8(2). Retrieved from: http://www.yalsa.ala.org/jrlyya/wp-content/uploads/2017/12/Betts-Green_Latham_Drawing-Queerness.pdf.
- Findakly, B., Trondheim, L., & Dasher, H. (2017). *Poppies of Iraq*. Montreal, QC: Drawn and Quarterly.
- Flynt, S., & Brozo, W. (2010). Visual literacy and the content classroom: A Question of now, not when. *Reading Teacher*, 63, 526-528.
- Forest, D.E., Garrison, K.L., & Kimmel, S.C. (2015). "The university for the poor": Portrayals of class in translated children's literature. *Teacher College Record*, 117(2), 1-40.
- Garrison, K.L. (2019a). What's going on down under? Part 1: Portrayals of culture in award-winning Australian young adult literature. *Journal of Research on Libraries and Young Adults*, 10(1). Retrieved from: http://www.yalsa.ala.org/jrlyya/wp-content/uploads/2019/03/Garrison_WhatsGoingOnDownUnder_AustralianYA_FINAL.pdf.
- Garrison, K.L. (2019b). What's going on down under? Part 2: Portrayals of culture in award-winning Australian young adult literature. *Journal of Research on Libraries and Young Adults*, 10(2). Retrieved from: http://www.yalsa.ala.org/jrlyya/wp-content/uploads/2019/07/Garrison_What'sGoingOnDownUnderPart2_FINAL.pdf
- Green, K. (2017). *Lighter Than My Shadow*. St. Louis, MO: Roar, An imprint of Lion Forge.
- IFLA School Libraries Section Standing Committee, & International Association of School Librarianship Executive Board. (2015). *IFLA School Library Guidelines*. (2nd ed.). The Hague, Netherlands: International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions.
- Irwin, M., & Moeller, R. (2010). Seeing different: Portrayals of disability in young adult graphic novels. *School Library Research*, 13. Retrieved from http://www.ala.org/aasl/sites/ala.org/aasl/files/content/aaslpubsandjournals/slr/vol13/SLR_SeeingDifferent.pdf.
- Ishizuka, K. (October 22, 2018). Can diverse books save us?: In a divided world, librarians are on a mission to save us. *School Library Journal*. Retrieved from: <https://www.slj.com/?detailStory=can-diverse-books-save-us>.
- Kullab, S., Roche, J., & Freiheit, M. (2017). *Escape from Syria*. Buffalo, NY: Firefly Books.
- Lewis, J., Aydin, A., & Powell, N. (2013). *March: Book One*. Marietta, GA: Top Shelf Productions.
- McKenna, B.E. (2013). *Ubbly's Underdogs: The Legend of the Phoenix Dragon*. Broome, WA: Magabala Books.
- Medina, T. (2017). *I am Alfonso Jones*. New York: Tu Books, an imprint of Lee & Low Books.
- Medina, T. (2018). Perspectives on practice: Alfonso Jones Matters. *Language Arts*, 59(5), 346-348. Retrieved from: <http://www.ncte.org/library/NCTEFiles/Resources/Journals/LA/0955-may2018/LA0955Perspectives.pdf>.

- Moeller, R.A., & Becnel, K. (2018). Drawing diversity: Representations of race in graphic novels for young adults. *School Library Research*, 21. Retrieved from http://www.ala.org/aasl/sites/ala.org/aasl/files/content/aaslpubsandjournals/slr/vol21/SLR_DrawingDiversity_V21.pdf.
- Moeller, R., & Irwin, M. (2012). Seeing the same: A follow-up study on the portrayals of disability in graphic novels read by young adults. *School Library Research*, 15. Retrieved from: http://www.ala.org/aasl/sites/ala.org/aasl/files/content/aaslpubsandjournals/slr/vol15/SLR_SeeingtheSame_V15.pdf.
- National Governors' Association Center for Best Practices & Council of Chief State School Officers. (2010). *Common Core State Standards*. Washington, D.C.: National Governors' Association Center for Best Practices & Council of Chief State School Officers.
- Newkirk, T. (2002). *Misreading masculinity: Boys literacy, and popular culture*. Portsmouth, N.H.: Heinemann.
- Pagliaro, M. (2014). Is a picture worth a thousand words?: Determining the criteria for graphic novels with literary merit. *English Journal*, 103(4), 31-45.
- Shivack, N. (2009). *Inside Out: Portrait of an Eating Disorder*. New York: Atheneum Books for Young Readers.
- Short, K. (2017). Critical content analysis as a research methodology. In H. Johnson, J. Mathis, & K. Short (Eds.), *Critical content analysis of children's and young adult literature: Reframing perspective* (pp. 1-15). New York, NY: Routledge.
- Tan, S. (2006). *The Arrival*. Sydney: Hachette Children's Books.
- Torres, C. (March 5, 2015). Why teaching about social justice matters. *Teaching Tolerance*. Retrieved from: <https://www.tolerance.org/magazine/why-teaching-about-social-justice-matters>.
- Vara-Orta, F. (August 6, 2018). Hate in schools: An in-depth look. *Education Week*. Retrieved from: <https://www.edweek.org/ew/projects/hate-in-schools.html>.
- We Need Diverse Books.Org (n.d.). About We Need Diverse Books. Retrieved from: <https://diversebooks.org/about-wndb>.
- Yang, G.L. (2006). *American-born Chinese*. New York: First Second.
- Yang, G.L. (May 13, 2016.) Reading Without Walls Challenge. Retrieved from: <http://geneyang.com/the-reading-without-walls-challenge>.
- Yorio, K. (October 24, 2018). #Ownvoices not familiar at all. *School Library Journal*. Retrieved from: <https://www.slj.com/?detailStory=ownvoices-not-familiar-all>.

Biographical Notes

Dr. Kasey Garrison is a lecturer in Teacher Librarianship at Charles Sturt University in Australia. Her research interests include diversity in children's and YA literature.

Dr. Karen Gavigan is a professor in the School of Library & Information Science at the University of South Carolina in the United States.