“I’m Conflicted about My Shelf of Censorship”: High School Library Graphic Novel Collection Development in North Carolina, USA

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Introduction

The North American graphic novel market for has been exploding, growing from about “$805 million in sales in 2012 to more than $1 billion in 2017” (Reid, 2018) and “thriving across all age groups” (McHale, 2019). At a recent New York Comic Con panel, the panelists attributed some of this growth to “a new generation of comics-loving librarians and comics shop owners, the bookstore market, and the ever-growing popularity of graphic novels for middle grade and young adult readers” (Reid, 2018). Osicki (2018) wrote: “Now, more than ever, graphic novels are the air pop culture breathes, providing the source material for today’s biggest events in film, TV, online/digital content, and publishing in general, as sequential art steadily infiltrates the literary and academic worlds.” She adds that “[l]ibraries and their patrons are greatly responsible for this rising popularity, as evidenced by the swell in circulation and sales of graphic novels across digital and print platforms (p. 34). Unfortunately, the growing popularity of graphic novels and comics in North American has led to increased scrutiny of these items and more attempts at censorship (MacDonald, 2017). Writing about censorship and comics, Mastricolo (History, 2019) noted that “sequential art is censored at a rate that far exceeds its market share.”

Graphic novels, and the comic books from which they evolved, have a long history as the target of zealous censors. In fact, in 1954, the Comics Code Authority was established in response to pressure from the United States Congress, which had recently held hearings regarding the danger of comic book reading. The concerns from Congress stemmed from a book titled The Seduction of the Innocent by child psychologist Fredrick Wertham who was concerned that children who read comics would become juvenile delinquents (Comic Book Legal Defense Fund, 2018). The Comics Code served as a guide for comic book creators as to what would morally be appropriate to show in a visual format. Essentially, the comic book industry created the Comics Code in order to keep the medium from being banned.
Slowly, creators would decide to publish outside the Comics Code, and the birth of the graphic novel was a product of that movement. Graphic novels have since earned the accolades awarded to traditional novels and books of non-fiction, but the visual nature of the graphic novel seems to continue to raise the ire of some library patrons. As the Comic Book Legal Defense Fund (CBLDF) noted, “Because comics thrive on the power of the static image, a single page or panel can be the impetus for a challenge in a way that’s different from a passage in a book” (Gomez, 2018). Not only that, there are some people, including some in the educational arena, who “still believe that comics are low value speech.” There is a growing body of research that contradicts this notion, demonstrating the educational and literary value of graphic novels (Cook, 2017; Hoover 2011; Nyberg, 2010; Hammond, 2012). Most librarians are aware of this, yet the combination of the visual nature of graphic novels, content that some may find objectionable, and the perception that these materials have little to no literary value can make them wary of starting or growing graphic novel collections.

The American Library Association (2017) pointed to legal rulings at the federal level, including Brown v. Board of Education, Island Trees Union Free School District v. Pico, and Tinker v. Des Moines Independent Community School District, establishing that youth have First Amendment rights that do not cease to exist within the context of school. These rulings indicate that librarians who prevent or restrict access to materials because of potentially objectionable content, rather than developmental or pedagogical concerns, are engaging in acts of censorship. It is, however, the librarians’ role to exercise professional judgement for the purposes of curating a collection that is age appropriate for the school’s population and consistent with the mission and vision of their educational institution. The question, then, of what constitutes selection and what constitutes censorship is a thorny one. Asheim’s seminal article, “Not Censorship but Selection,” (1953) provided perhaps the clearest way to understand the difference: “the selector’s approach is positive, while that of the censor is negative.” Asheim elaborated, arguing that selection:

begins with a presumption in favor of liberty of thought; censorship, with a presumption in favor of thought control. Selection’s approach to the book is positive, seeking its values in the book as a book, and in the book as a whole. Censorship’s approach is negative, seeking for vulnerable characteristics wherever they can be found—anywhere within the book, or even outside it. (p. 67)

The purpose of this research study is to examine the extent to which high school librarians have developed a collection of graphic novels and the strategies they use to create and curate these collections. In the United States, these schools serve students in grades nine through twelve, who are generally fourteen to eighteen years of age. Further, we hope to better understand the ways in which school librarians are interpreting the distinction between selection and censorship as they shape their collections.

Research Questions

1. Do high school libraries in North Carolina include titles on the CBLDF challenged and banned graphic novel titles?
2. More specifically, do these libraries include titles from the CBLDF list which are of particular interest to young adults/teens and which have been deemed to have high literary quality and/or popular appeal by the professional community?
3. From the school librarians’ perspective, how are graphic novels perceived by students, parents, teachers, and administration?
4. How do high school librarians select, organize, and provide access to graphic novels?
5. How frequent are challenges or complaints regarding graphic novels, and what is the nature of these complaints?
6. Are school librarians engaging in censorship? How are they interpreting the distinction between selection and censorship?

**Literature Review**

**Graphic Novels**

Graphic novels have now become a firmly entrenched element of libraries of all types, where they drive up circulation and provide fodder for programming including book clubs, anime clubs, comic cons, and more (Gavigan, 2014; Nyberg, 2010; MacDonald, 2013). While their popularity cannot be denied, graphic novels still face stigma in some areas. Clark (2013), for example, writing about the experiences of preservice teachers, reported that while these teaching candidates could see connections between curriculum and graphic novels that would justify their use in the classroom, they worried about how the use of these materials would be perceived by others in their school settings.

This negative perception of graphic novels is slowly changing, in part due to the growing number of studies demonstrating the value of reading and studying graphic novels. For instance, Hoover (2011) argued that important information literacy skills can be taught through the use of graphic novels and offers strategies for how to accomplish this. Hammond (2012) contended that graphic novel study helps students develop multimodal literacy as they learn to interpret and analyze textual and visual elements in combination. Lalremruati (2019) posited that the format can be helpful for developing reading skills and can help readers retain information they read long-term. In a comparative study, Cook (2017) found that students who “read the graphic novel significantly outperformed their peers who read only the traditional text. Moreover, many students self-reported being engaged with the graphic novel, finding benefits from the images, and preferring the graphic novel adaptation to more traditional texts” (p.42). Garrison and Gavigan (2019) described ways in which social justice issues can be studied with compelling graphic novels. Chun (2009) and Croomer (2007) identified ways in which graphic novels can be an asset in the teaching of critical literacy and history. Finally, in an article titled, “Graphic Novels Surge in the Educational Market,” Maughan (2016) acknowledged the increasing popularity of graphic novels in schools and libraries and discusses their use by teachers and librarians to engage struggling or reluctant readers.

**Censorship**

In a 2002 study, Coley found evidence of self-censorship practiced in 82% of the high school librarians in Texas that he studied. Although he did not explore motivations for self-censorship, Coley (2012) found that “criteria normally relied upon during the collection development process, (e.g., number and quality of reviews, reputation of the author, recommendation lists, awards won by the work itself), are ignored when a work might prove controversial enough to provoke a challenge” (n.p.). Whelan (2009) reported on a survey that found that 87% of librarians censor materials for sexual situations, 61% for language, 51% for depictions of violence, 47% for LGBTQIA content, 34% for racist material, and 16% for religious concerns. In a study conducted in Ohio, Garry (2015) looked at self-censorship regarding LGBTQ materials and found that “school libraries tended to have significantly fewer LGBTQ-themed books than titles with other kinds of controversial content” (p. 73). In contrast, Rickman’s 2010 study on self-censorship by school librarians reported no evidence of self-censorship across the study population. However, the study did identify the following characteristics as associated with the practice of self-censorship: age of 60-69, working at a secondary school library media center, lacking a degree in the specific field of education, and “having fifteen or fewer years of education experience. (p. 15).
Jacobson (2016) compared self-reported censorship data from 2008 and 2016 and concluded that more school librarians in the United States “report that they have decided not to purchase a book because it includes subject matter that could be controversial, such as sexual content, profanity, or other ‘non-age appropriate’ material,” (p.21), including 75 percent of high school librarians. In her study of North and South Carolina librarians, Dawkins (2018) explored the motivations behind self-censorship, finding that school librarians are motivated to censor “if they perceive their community as rural, conservative, or likely to challenge such choices” (p. 12). Librarians are also more likely to censor materials if “a principal or school administrator expresses concern about a topic or if they even think a principal might be unwilling to back them in a challenge” (Dawkins, 2018, p. 12).

**Method**

Through multiple email lists, an electronic survey was distributed to high school librarians in North Carolina to determine whether their library collections held copies of the most frequently challenged and banned graphic novels. The titles on the survey were taken from the Comic Book Legal Defense Fund’s list of frequently challenged and banned graphic novels, regardless of intended audience age (Comic Book Legal Defense Fund, 2019). A full list of titles on the survey can be found in Appendix A. Survey participants could remain anonymous; however, they were also asked to provide their contact information if they were willing to speak with researchers about their graphic novel collections and collection practices.

Twenty-seven responses to the survey were collected. Of the respondents who indicated via the survey a willingness to be interviewed, researchers selected, at random, 10 school librarians and conducted a 30-45 minute interview with each, audio-recorded and guided by a series of predetermined questions that queried respondents about perceptions of graphic novels in their schools, their selection and cataloging process for graphic novels, and their experiences with formal and informal challenges. The authors analyzed each interview individually, grouping the responses to each question into categories and identifying relevant themes that emerged in the conversations. The authors then reviewed and compared observations, resolved any differences in coding, and re-analyzed the data.

**Findings and Discussion**

**Survey Responses**

Table 1 lists the titles on the survey that are, according to professional review sources, appropriate for young adult or older teen audiences. In addition, each title has been recognized for high literary quality and/or mass appeal by earning a starred review in a professional journal; receiving a nomination or award such as the Hugo, Eisner, or Alex Award; or inclusion on a professionally created list such as Popular Paperback for Young Adults or Great Graphic Novels for Teens. The table shows the number of respondents who reported that each title is part of their collection and the percentage of the sample that number represents.
The appendix includes additional information about each title. As a result of their reviews, accolades, and/or popularity, all of the titles in the above table are candidates for inclusion in a high school library’s graphic novel collection. The relatively small number of libraries collecting these titles—which all include potentially objectionable content as indicated by their presence of the CBLDF list—suggests that a closer look into collection and self-censorship behaviors is warranted. *Persepolis*, the most collected title, is also the only one in the list to have received the Young Adult Library Services Association (YALSA) Alex Award and, due to its focus on the fundamentalist regime in Iran, appropriate for use in high school history, government, or English courses.

As Figure 1 illustrates, no surveyed libraries reported owning more than 40% of listed titles, while nine libraries owned fewer than 10% of the titles on the survey. A full list of titles appears in the appendix.

![Percentage of CBLDF Challenged/Banned Titles Owned by Surveyed Libraries](image)

**Figure 1. CBLDF Challenged/Banned Titles Owned**

**Interview Findings**

**Cataloging and Physical Arrangement.** Most respondents (nine of 10) reported creating a special section for graphic novels to facilitate access, locating the section in a highly visible area of the library. Most also stated that they placed labels on the spines for easy identification of the format. These steps both stemmed from and likely contribute to the popularity of graphic novels in their school libraries. As a study done in public libraries (Jones, McCandles, Kiblinger, Giles, & McCabe, 2011)
illustrated, the location of items in visible, easily accessible areas increases the circulation of those items.

**Perceptions of Graphic Novels.** While respondents reported that graphic novels are very popular with students in their libraries, the reactions of teachers seemed to be mixed. Respondents reported that their schools included teachers who are indifferent to or dismissive of the format as well as advocates for graphic novels who are often English teachers and/or personal fans of the genre. One librarian, for example, described an “English teacher who touts reading graphic novels as extra work because students have to read facial expressions and actions” as well as traditional print text.

Regarding administration, librarians reported that administration expressed no opinions regarding graphic novels. They observed that administrators were not involved in or knowledgeable about the library’s collection. Similarly, librarians reported hearing little from parents about graphic novels, though when they did hear from parents, it was with concerns about, rather than support for, these items. One librarian, for example, reported multiple parents requesting limits on the number of graphic novels children check out because the students are spending what parents felt was too much time with these materials. Another described one parent who contacted her with concerns that reading manga, some of which she considered “creepy,” might be contributing to her child’s depression. The school librarian reported that manga provided an important conduit of social interaction for the daughter, but felt obligated to honor the parent’s wish that the student not have access to manga.

**Reconsiderations and Restricted Collections.** When participants were asked if they had ever received a graphic novel that they had ordered and then determined that it was not appropriate for the school library, six indicated that they had, and further explained that they sent it back to the vendor (n=1), kept it behind the desk (n=1), sent it to the public library (n=1), donated it to Goodwill (n=1), or shelved it nevertheless (n=2). They indicated that this is the same procedure they would follow with a traditional print item that they had ordered but deemed inappropriate for their collection once received. When asked about challenges, formal or informal, that they had received regarding a graphic novel or any item, most (80%) reported none. Two respondents reported having received challenges to traditional print titles, *To Kill a Mockingbird* and *Brave New World*, specifically.

Six respondents noted that they do not have any areas of the collection to which access is restricted by age, grade, or permission. One reported having a professional collection for staff, another has class sets of certain items, and a third responded that she has a small collection restricted to faculty, which contains a few books on local history, a book on school history, and a yearbook collection with historical value. Another respondent reported that one particular book about animal abuse was pulled for a time, with only students conducting research on the topic allowed to check it out. Notably, the librarian who described class sets as her only restricted collection indicated later that she also has a “shelf of censorship” behind the desk where she stores graphic novels that she considers potentially problematic.

**Selection Process.** Participants reported that their process for collecting graphic novels was very similar to the process they employed to select other materials. However, one librarian remarked that the graphic novel selection process could be described as more “patron-directed,” and this characterization was supported by other participants’ discussions of their extensive reliance on suggestions from teachers and students for graphic novel titles to purchase. Typical selection tools like Junior Library Guild subscriptions and professional review sources were also employed for graphic novels; however, participants expressed some concerns about these tools. In particular,
several participants remarked that the graphic novels provided by Junior Library Guild were not those desired by their patrons and that review sources did not reliably provide information they deemed necessary, such as notations about nudity, off-color language, etc.

Another reason for the patron-directed nature of the graphic novel collection development process seems to be a lack of familiarity and comfort with the format. Several librarians explained that while they were voracious readers of traditional print, they did not enjoy graphic novels and did not spend their personal time engaging with them. One respondent explained: “I have to rely on students because it’s a genre I don’t know enough about. They’re not my favorite because I like lots of words but I know a lot of students who that’s their favorite, and I think it’s great.” Another offered, “For me, it’s something I really have to rely on students to choose which to read.”

While librarians rely heavily on student suggestions, they did exercise professional judgement about the titles that students requested. When asked if there were items students requested that they chose not to acquire, librarians reported 50 Shades of Gray (n=4) and graphic novels that are rated “adult.” One librarian described having purchased A Harmless Little Game based on a student request but chose not to add it to the collection based on sexual content.

Right to Read. Two of the 10 interview participants articulated a strong “right to read” stance. One reflected on her long career as an English teacher before entering the world of librarianship and exclaimed: “The thought of telling anybody they can’t read a book, or that all the world’s books aren’t open to them is so opposite of the way my brain works as a teacher, that’s so foreign to me. I can’t imagine censoring things.” She receives books from Junior Library Guild with issues such as LGBTQIA concerns, refugee situations, and stories that include sexual assault. “Let it flow in,” the librarian said, “The kids are going to read it or they’re not going to read it.” Another participant expressed a similar sentiment: “I can’t think of anything in the collection that I wouldn’t fight tooth and nail to keep because though some of it might be objectionable, they don’t have to read it!”

Selection Versus Censorship. Two other participants described instances in which they opted not to include items in their collection based on their professional judgement of the age appropriateness of the items. For example, one librarian reported that she opted not to include an item in her collection because the level of interest was considerably below that of her population. Another described her experience exercising professional judgement with a title that vendor ratings indicated would be appropriate for the age group of her student population. However, once she saw the item, she disagreed with the vendor’s assessment of the age range the item was suited for, and sent it back. “Don’t trust the labels,” she advised.

One librarian reported that she does not have a restricted collection and insisted that she does not “police” reading; however, she said that she “warns” students about certain books, such as Girl with a Dragon Tattoo. Steering certain students away from certain items is a gray area, and whether it can be considered censorship or not likely depends on the librarian’s intentions. In this case, it isn’t clear whether the librarian is attempting to guide students to materials that are age-appropriate or restrict certain students from accessing content she feels inappropriate for them.

One respondent’s comments regarding use of professional reviews in the selection process revealed another ambiguous process. While many collection policies dictate that librarians should have located one or two positive reviews of items that they will purchase, some of the librarians interviewed seem to be using professional reviews to spot potential problems. This appears to be an example of searching for vulnerabilities in an item, instead of evaluating its appropriateness overall, which amounts to self-censorship. One librarian explained: “I read a lot of book reviews and it seems like they don’t talk about what you’d want them to talk about with regard to graphic novels: language, lack of
clothing, situations….Canterbury Tales had really good reviews but some of the drawings are a little too much.”

Another librarian provided the following example of how she handled a complaint:

I received the first volume of My Hero Academia and a teacher picked it up and flipped it over to comment on the female’s short dress attire and pose. I told her it was fine and placed the barcode label on top…She didn’t comment further. It’s on the shelf and has been checked out and in without any issues.

While the librarian seems to perceived this resolution as a positive one, her decision to place the library barcode over the image that had been identified as problematic is, according to the National Coalition against Censorship (2019), consistent with censorship, because its “central characteristic [is] the suppression of an idea or image because it offends or disturbs someone, or because they disagree with it.”

One librarian reported limiting access to certain graphic novels in her collection, explaining: “I have a shelf of censorship under my desk with graphic novels that reviews really let me down on; content that is mature/not fabulous/teachers have alerted me to. This includes things like Habibi and The Canterbury Tales.” This librarian explained that teachers might find these titles useful, but that they were “not great for being out all the time for everyone.” She continued, saying “I don’t always know who’s checking out what so I feel better not having it on the shelf.” This calls to mind Asheim’s (1953) argument that “Selection seeks to protect the right of the reader to read; censorship seeks to protect – not the right – but the reader himself from the fancied effects of his reading” (p.79). The desire to control what her patrons read results in self-censorship, a behavior she justified: “Part of my job is making evaluative decisions about materials and user access.” This librarian revealed that she was grappling with her role and what she views as her responsibility to the students and families her library serves, saying: “I’m conflicted about my shelf of censorship.”

Two of the interviewees’ comments indicated the ways in which their own personal preferences influenced their collection choices. One respondent discussed her thinking on a particular item: “That Summer is a little edgy but I feel that it’s…read it, I liked it, it had a good message, I thought it was excellent, it was on our reading list at one point so I kept it.” This participant did mention the fact that the book was once on a school reading list, but did not refer to any professional literature or opinions other than her own in her justification for keeping this title. Reflecting on the autonomy she experienced regarding collection development, another participant noted that if a student requested a title, she can usually get that title for her. “But then,” she added, “I can also do-oh, this is who I like; I like Kate Atkinson, I can order all her books!”

The danger here becomes easier to see when we consider the reverse of what these librarians are saying; what happens when they do not personally like the material they are considering? Is this reason not to collect it?

Limitations

The sample size of the collection survey was small, and thus limits its generalizability. Nonetheless, this study does provide a glimpse into whether and to what degree high school libraries are collecting—and maintaining in their collections—popular graphic novels that are frequently banned or challenged. Further, researchers acknowledge that the librarians who volunteered to be interviewed for this project might be comfortable with and/or interested in graphic novels than the general population of high school librarians, so we should be cautious in making generalizations from this data as well. Further, there are geographic limitations to consider, as the survey and interview respondents all live and work in North Carolina, USA.

Conclusion
I’m Conflicted about My Shelf of Censorship

As Bohnenkamp noted, “Comic books—long scorned by highbrow readers, banned from library summer reading programs, and generally hidden away among more serious looking works—are in the midst of a heyday” (2019, p. 38). School librarians are starting graphic novel collections or building upon the ones they already have in a struggle to fulfill the student demand for these materials. Though none of the librarians interviewed had experienced a challenge to a graphic novel, the anxiety that they might is ever present. One librarian reported that “you really have to be careful because we’re in the school environment,” a sentiment echoed by others, such as the librarian who revealed that when she first started her job, she didn’t realize that graphic novels were so “mature” and “wasn’t as careful in choosing them” until “it came to [her] attention that there were some things” that might be problematic, a sentiment that was very closely echoed by another interviewee. Though a small (two of 10) of librarians interviewed were strong proponents of children’s right to read, the majority of the interviewees seemed to believe that part of their jobs involved creating a “safe” collection to which no one could object.

One likely reason for this anxiety and tendency to avoid risk is the isolation that school librarians face, as represented in the following statement from one interviewee, reflecting on her decision to purchase Adolf Hilter’s Mein Kampf in fulfillment of a request: “Sometimes I question if it should be there or not. I’ve become more conservative about putting things on the shelf, more careful, the longer I’ve been here.” She continued, “A lot of this is personal preference, but what else can you do? It’s just me in here. It comes down to me and what I think should be on this shelf.” Significantly, all interviewees reported that administration were not involved in the library in any meaningful way; neither did they have committees or teams helping with collection decisions. The only time that administration and other teachers become involved in the collection is to deal with a problem, and that situation creates a context in which any expressed concern about the collection is seen as a failing on the part of the librarian. According to Adams (2009), school librarians can never make a collection “challenge-proof,” no matter how hard they try.

Since no one can predict which books or other resources will be challenged or who will express a concern, a more effective approach is to take proactive steps toward creating a climate where the principles of intellectual freedom are understood and the legal right of minors to receive information in the school library is acknowledged (p. 48).

Challenges should not be seen as the librarian’s failure. In fact, in a healthy school culture, discussion about materials in the library should be robust, regular, and welcome. In such an environment, librarians—free to look for strengths, rather than potential vulnerabilities, in potential acquisitions—would be better poised to create diverse, engaging, thought-provoking collections for the students they serve.

References


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Appendix. Titles Listed on Survey

Amazing Spider-Man: Revelations by J. Michael Straczynski, John Romita, Jr., and Scott Hanna
Barefoot Gen by Keiji Nakazawa
Batman: The Dark Knight Strikes Again by Frank Miller and Lynn Varley
Batman: The Killing Joke by Alan Moore and Brian Boland
Blankets by Craig Thompson
Bone by Jeff Smith
The Diary of a Teenage Girl by Phoebe Gloeckner
Dragon Ball by Akira Toriyama
Drama by Raina Telgemeier
The Color of Earth by Kim Dong Hwa
Fun Home by Alison Bechdel
The Graveyard Book by Neil Gaiman and P. Craig Russell
Ice Haven by Daniel Clowes
In the Night Kitchen by Maurice Sendak
League of Extraordinary Gentlemen: The Black Dossier by Alan Moore and Kevin O’Neill
Maus by Art Spiegelman
Neonomicon by Alan Moore and Jacen Burrows
Palomar by Gilbert Hernandez
Persepolis by Marjane Satrapi
Pride of Baghdad by Brian K. Vaughan and Niko Henrichon
Saga by Brian K. Vaughan and Fiona Staples
Sandman by Neil Gaiman and various artists
SideScrollers by Matthew Loux
Stuck in the Middle, edited by Ariel Schrag
Stuck Rubber Baby by Howard Cruse
Tank Girl by Alan Martin and Jamie Hewlett
This One Summer by Jillian Tamaki and Mariko Tamaki
Watchmen by Alan Moore and Dave Gibbons
Y: The Last Man by Brian K. Vaughan and Pia Guerra