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# **Graphic Novels in the English Language Arts: Teacher Use of Multiple Texts and Literacies in the Classroom**

Emmy Talian

Senior Honors Thesis, Special Major in English Literature and Educational Studies

Advisors: Diane Anderson and Peter Schmidt

Spring 2015

## **Acknowledgements:**

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## **Abstract:**

This thesis examines the how and why of use of graphic texts in the teaching practice of six secondary English teachers. Through a semi-structured interview study, I investigated how they discussed their use of graphic texts, focusing on how they taught the visual portions, why they chose the texts they did, as well as how these texts fit into their larger curriculum. I found that teachers' attention to visual and multimodal potential in graphic texts exists on a spectrum, ranging from a lack of focus to primary focus in the course. Their reasons behind using these texts included the importance of the visual, accessibility, content, and transferability of skills. Teachers articulated the paradox of adherence to and a resistance of hierarchical notions of text and literacy within the classroom. Finally, while most saw the incorporation of graphic novels as a resistance of traditional hierarchies of literature, their use of these texts often reflected hierarchical notions of text forms and literacies, demonstrating the inescapability of hierarchical organization of texts and knowledge of text within the English discipline. However, I ultimately conclude that the inclusion of graphic texts into the curriculum and teachers' practice can result in expanded opportunities for students to engage with a range of texts as well as increase teachers' creativity and intentionality in their teaching.

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## **Part 1: Graphic Novels: An Introduction to the Medium**

### **Chapter 1: Introduction**

When one picks up a graphic novel, one first notices the artwork and the size and shape of the book. Whether in black and white or striking color, the artist's unique style is previewed in the cover art. Opening the first page, the title page draws the reader into the thematic content of the story, often dominating the full page with the main characters or key visual motifs. The table of contents provides a creative space for the artist, who may choose to use words, images, or a combination to communicate the significance of each section of the work. The chapter page can either be plain, with a minimal design and the title, or can provide a key opening scene that occupies the entirety of the page. When one encounters the first actual page of a chapter, one is usually met by rows and columns of boxes, called panels, each containing a moment, which, read sequentially, tell the beginnings of the story. From there, the reader is swept up into a reading act that involves the balancing of word and image and the relationship between the two modes in order to enter into multiple possible story worlds with a range of content. The unifying feature of a graphic novel is not its thematic content or artistic style, but its form.

Graphic novels represent a diverse medium that has steadily grown in general popularity over the past decades that have a rich but troubled history. Common misperceptions narrowly define graphic novels as a juvenile genre limited to superhero POWs and graphic violence (Dorrell, Curtis, & Rampal, 1995). Alternatively, these texts have been cast as useful scaffolds to transition students into reading "real" books (Haugaard, 1973; McCloud, 1994). Recent popular recognition of graphic novels such as

Art Spiegelman's *Maus*, awarded a Pulitzer Prize Special Citation in 1992, and Gene Luen Yang's *American Born Chinese*, awarded a Michael L. Printz Award in 2007, has signaled a shift in both the general public's as well as educators' vision of the literary worth of works in this medium. Recent calls by the NCTE Executive Committee to expand the definition of literacies in the modern technological era have raised questions regarding the need to diversify the text forms studied in the English language arts classroom to include increasingly diverse communication mediums (National Council of Teachers of English [NCTE], 2013). Graphic novels are seen as perfectly positioned to provide the kind of rich visual reading experience to help students build the skills and competencies needed in the 21<sup>st</sup> century (Monnin, 2013).

Entering into this discourse as a perspective ELA teacher, I bring my own history and interest in graphic novels to my research. As an avid reader throughout childhood and adolescence, I found English class in high school to be a comfortable place to engage with reading in a new but congruent way with my out-of-school reading. When I saw graphic novels on young adult novel blogs I followed or *manga* (Japanese graphic texts) in the hands of my friends, I made a conscious choice not to engage with texts in these "genres" because it would distract me from my "real" reading. It wasn't until my sophomore year in college and an enthusiastic comic book reader roommate that I actually picked up a graphic novel to understand what was so interesting about the form. I checked *Maus* by Art Spiegelman out from the library over winter break and found myself riveted by his moving recount of his father's experience in the Holocaust, as well as his complex portrayal of their father-son relationship. This reading experience sparked my curiosity into the form as a reader but also as a novice educator. My interest in the



form led me to teach a weeklong unit on graphic texts to middle and high school students. While my teaching of graphic novels is not the subject of this thesis, it does situate my interest in questions of how to best utilize these texts in the classroom as well as inform this research study.

In light of the interest in the field of literacy education and ELA in the expansion of educators' conceptions of literacies and text, I was interested to see whether teacher who use graphic novels were responding to these calls for the increased use of visual texts in the classroom or whether they used graphic novels for other purposes.

Additionally, graphic novels do not currently occupy a place within the canon of English literature and only in the past few decades have begun slowly making their way into the classroom. This fact led me to wonder how teachers incorporate non-traditional texts into their curriculum. These questions resulted in an interview study with six teachers who use graphic novels in their English classrooms designed to understand the teachers' motivation for and process of including graphic novels into their curriculum.

### **1.1 Research Questions**

My questions began with the broad question of how teachers teach graphic texts, in particular how the visual portions of the texts shaped their pedagogy. As I read, the literature provided clarity regarding my interest in the concept of multiple literacies, expanding beyond just ideas around teaching visual literacy to include the ideas of critical literacies and the difference between personal and school literacy (Gallego & Hollingsworth, 2000; New London Group, 1996). I began to look at my data with an eye for how teachers shape which literacies are developed within the classroom, examining

how attitudes about the worth of various texts and different kinds of reading are translated to students through classroom pedagogy. I analyzed my data with the questions of what place teachers see graphic novels occupying in their classroom, their students' literacy activities, the broader discipline of ELA, and in larger society. With such framing in mind, the following questions guided my attention as I conducted my research:

- How are graphic novels taught in the ELA classroom? To what extent do teachers engage students with the visual and multimodal aspects of these texts?
- To what purpose do teachers use graphic novels/texts in the ELA curriculum?
- Does the incorporation of these texts represent a shift in the teaching paradigm around text, analysis, and literacy?

## **1.2 My Thesis Statement**

This thesis sets out to investigate the how and why of teachers' use of graphic texts in the secondary English language arts classroom. By discussing with teachers what they see as the value of using these texts, I uncovered both teachers' conceptions of these texts, how these texts are incorporated into the existing curriculum, and what such use reflects about the various goals of the English language arts.

## **1.3 Methods**

First, I will review the form of graphic novels in order to situate the medium within its historical and cultural context, as well as present possible frameworks for analyzing the form. I then will present key educational frames around expanding definitions of literacy, as well as review the literature on the incorporation of graphic

texts into the curriculum. Finally, I present the results of my interview study, conducted in order to learn how and why teachers incorporate graphic texts into the classroom.

## **Chapter 2: History of Graphic Novels**

In order to understand the significance of teachers' current use of graphic novels in the classroom, I will first establish what texts qualify as a "graphic novel" and the layered meanings of that terminology, as well as their historical significance. The history of graphic novels within the United States both frames and mirrors some of the current attitudes towards these texts held in popular culture as well as in the classroom, namely the degradation of graphic texts as lesser than print-based texts by members of the general public as well as educators and librarians. In order to counter some of these perceptions, I will explore how graphic novels have been analyzed in academia and to demonstrate how they have gained legitimacy both in the academy and in the secondary classroom. To begin, I start with the history of graphic novels in the United States from the turn of the century to the present in order to contextualize the medium that is the focus of this thesis.

### **2.1 A Troubled Past**

The advent of comics is usually placed at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, when newspaper cartoonists began placing their work in the Sunday papers, or the 1830s, when Rodolphe Töpffer's *histories en estampes* was "the first interdependent combination of words and pictures seen in Europe" (Stein & Thon, 2013, p.5; McCloud, 1994, p.17). McCloud (1994) makes the argument, however, that comics far predate these more modern examples. He uses a pre-Columbian picture manuscript, the Bayeux Tapestry, and an Egyptian tomb painting to claim that comics have existed for much of human history, justified with his more broad definition of comics as "juxtaposed pictorial and

other images in deliberate sequence” (McCloud, 1994, p.10-18)<sup>1</sup>. Most scholars, however, focus in on the modern iteration of comics, tracing their rise in the early 1900s to their current diverse form.

Stephen Weiner (2012) provides a brief history of the form in his book, *Faster Than a Speeding Bullet: The Rise of the Graphic Novel*. He starts by detailing the beginnings of comics in the U.S. at the turn of the century, as newspapers realized that comic strips helped to sell papers. Comic books in the form of magazines began to take off in the 1930s. These contained both reprints of newspaper comic strips and genre stories until the invention of Superman, which sparked the comic book hero tradition (Weiner, 2012). With the arrival of Superman, sales of comic books skyrocketed and with this increased popularity came increased public scrutiny (Dorrell et al., 1995). In the 1940s and 1950s, concerns over the violence and melodrama portrayed within comic books raised questions regarding the content’s effects on “innocent” young minds, as well as their effects on children’s reading (Dorrell et al., 1995). These concerns culminated in Dr. Fredric Wertham’s publication of *Seduction of the Innocent* and testimony in front of the U.S. Senate on his belief in the connection between comics and juvenile delinquency, which led to the political suppression of comics (Williams, 2008). Of primary concern for Wertham was that comic books signaled the death of reading (Jacobs, 2007). He claimed that, ““A very large proportion of children who cannot read

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<sup>1</sup> All quotes from McCloud (1994) come from his text *Understanding Comics: The Invisible Art*, a work written in comic book form (i.e. an combination of words and pictures). Thus, all quoted text is pulled from the word balloons that feature forms of emphasis through size and thickness of line, which I have interpreted as bold text. While I believe that the words alone provide adequate explanation for McCloud’s (1994) theory, to understand the words within the context of their original intention, that is, in combination with the pictures, as well as for further clarification, please refer to the original text not included in this thesis.

well habitually read comic books. They are not really readers, but gaze mostly at the pictures, picking up a word here and there,” (as cited in Jacobs, 2007) perpetuating the idea that readers of comic books are non-readers or bad readers. Such claims reflect a belief that deriving meaning from visual information is, to use Jacobs’ word, “subservient” (p.20) to written information. Such reading was seen as “low-grade literacy” (Wertham, as cited in Dorrell et al., 1995) where students relied on the “easier” images for comprehension rather than the more complex act of reading comprehension of the written word. Thus, the image of the comic book reader as not a “real” reader and the written word as superior to the visual combined with words took hold in the public consciousness. A further discussion of the hierarchy of literacies within school and society around graphic texts will be taken up in the educational theories part of this thesis.

This upset led to the comics industry creating their own Comics Code, a set of regulations regarding acceptable comic book material that was enforced by a semi-autonomous Comics Code Authority (Weiner, 2012, p.8; Williams, 2008, p.14). This Code, adopted by most comic book publishers in 1954, placed restrictions on depictions of sex and violence, as well as explicit criticism of public figures (Hatfield, 2005, p.165). This elective censorship signaled a caving to public and governmental pressure, and yet ultimately served to reinforce public beliefs about comics as juvenile (Hatfield, 2005, p.11). The rise of underground comix in the late 1950s and early 1960s were a direct reaction to the constrictions placed on more mainstream comics by the Code (Hatfield, 2005). The climax of this period arrived in the late 1960s and early 1970s, when underground comix moved from not just producing mature material aimed solely at

adults in underground newspapers, but instead produced comic *books* specifically for adult readers (Hatfield, 2005, p.7). The publication of Will Eisner's (1978) self-proclaimed "graphic novel," *A Contract with God*, published by the trade book publisher Baronet Books, signaled this shift towards a more "serious" form (Weiner, 2012, p.17).

The 1980s ushered in complex mainstream comic books aimed at mature, adult audiences with such titles as *The Dark Knight* and *Watchmen*, as well as such texts as *Maus: A Survivor's Tale*, which appealed to a non-comic book reading public and brought the medium into the public discourse (Weiner, 2012, p. 34-38). As these texts gained prominence, so too did the idea of bringing graphic novels into the classroom as well as the library (Jacobs, 2005). With a rise in prominence also came legitimization of the graphic novel form as literary work, demonstrated when *Maus* by Art Spiegelman won the Pulitzer Prize in 1992 (Chun, 2009). Weiner (2012) ends with the new millennium, documenting the increased public interest in graphic novels as superhero comics serve as fodder for big movie franchises and the American Library Association holds a 2002 symposium on graphic novels in libraries. As trade publishers take increased interest in the form, Weiner (2012) predicts that the medium will expand and diversify further. With this increased focus on graphic novels in the popular discourse as well as the proliferation of a variety of texts for a range of readers, this form demands a seat at the table as a text in academia as well as the secondary classroom.

## **2.2 A Definition**

As the previous history shows, the term *graphic novel* has only come into prominence in the past few decades. The history of the term is contested in regards to origin. It was either coined or popularized by Will Eisner in 1978 to describe his own

work, *A Contract with God*, or created by American comics critic and magazine publisher Richard Kyle in 1964 as a way to “galvanize American creators and readers to aspire to similar ambition and sophistication” (Gravett, 2005, p.8) as European comics. While now embedded in popular usage given the availability of graphic novels in bookstores and libraries, this term has loaded meaning for many theorists. As a term specifically designed to claim greater legitimacy as a form for adults and a distancing from the supposedly more juvenile form of comics, *graphic novel* is embraced by some and rejected outright by others. For Barbara Postema (2013), this terminological change from *comics* serves to erase the connotations and historical associations of the word, spurring her choice to maintain the *comics* terminology (Postema, 2013, p.XI). The definition she offers for the narrative and artistic form of *comics* “is a system in which a number of disparate elements or fragments work together to create a complex whole. The elements of comics are partly pictorial, partly textual, and sometimes a hybrid of the two” (Postema, 2013, p.XII). Her definition serves to highlight both the visual and the linguistic modes of comics, as well as the intersection of the two.

Other theorists have proposed their own terms, such as Will Eisner’s “sequential art” (1985, p.5) and Scott McCloud’s (1994) refining of this term with his definition of comics as, “Juxtaposed pictorial and other images in deliberate sequence, intended to convey information and/or produce an aesthetic response in the viewer” (p.9). Both terms reject the idea that verbal text is necessary for the form and instead choose to highlight the visual component of the medium, both with an emphasis on the sequential nature. The drawback of such definitions is the lack of acknowledgement that many of texts in this medium *do* contain words alongside the images and thus do not provide a space in their



definition for the interaction between these two elements. Still other scholars have put forth the term “graphic narrative” (Stein & Thon, 2013, p.2) in order to provide an even more encompassing term as well explore the narrative potential of these texts more explicitly. The term *comics* is centered too much on Anglo-American forms, while *graphic narrative* opens up the field to discussing non-American work (e.g. Japanese *manga*, Franco-Belgian *bande-dessinée*) (Stein & Thon, 2013). I use *graphic novel* with an acknowledgement of other possible terminology but maintain that the term’s prevalence in educational and literary academia begs its usage. I now turn to defining the term and explaining how I will use it.

I use the term *graphic novel* to refer to a specific medium of communicative text that incorporates both visual and linguistic elements, usually in coordination. Graphic novels do not necessarily need to be novels, in that the term encompasses nonfiction and fictional work, full novel-length as well as short story forms. Syma and Weiner (2013) elaborate on this point in their introduction to the anthology, *Graphic Novels and Comics in the Classroom*, where they explain that, “Sequential art, cartoons, comics, and graphic novels are not a genre, they are a format and a technique for telling a story or conveying information” (Syma & Weiner, 2013, p.1). Eddie Campbell goes as far as to say in his manifesto: “[The] graphic novel signifies a movement rather than a form” (as cited in Gravett, 2005). I use this term to describe a completed and self-contained work of fiction or nonfiction (i.e. memoir, biography, or journalistic accounts) that makes use of images and text in order to create a narrative. I refer to non-narrative (e.g. instructional texts) or non-self-contained works (e.g. serialized works still in production) as *graphic texts* generally or by the name of their specific form (e.g. superhero comics, comic strips, etc.).

By using the more encompassing term of *graphic text*, I include single frame texts that communicate using text and image alongside novel-length works of fiction that draw upon the interplay of picture and verbal-text. My definition of *graphic text* goes beyond just the visual (unlike McCloud's (1994) and Eisner's (1985) terms and definitions), allows for wider inclusion criteria than Postema's (2013) *comics*, and acknowledges the existence of non-narrative texts that would not be included by Stein and Thon's (2013) *graphic narrative*.

### **Chapter 3: Approaches to Analyzing Graphic Texts**

#### **3.1 Brief Review of Comic Studies**

The field of Comics Studies has been on the rise since the new millennium, with more journals and books devoted to analysis through its lens with each year. Such publications represent a diversity of perspectives on the form, with considerations of historical perspectives, craft/art/form, culture, genre, format histories, production, reception, identity, composition studies, literary studies, semiotics, and narrative theory (Heer & Worcester, 2009; Smith & Duncan, 2012; Stein & Thon, 2013). These lines of study fall broadly under three categories: that of form (i.e. how graphic texts as a medium operate to produce meaning), content (i.e. how graphic texts work as narratives or story telling devices), and cultural or historical significance (i.e. the larger contexts in which graphic texts operate, whether that be within the historical development of comics or the cultural context of feminist studies). While an in-depth exploration of this field is outside the scope of this thesis, I will review two key comics practitioner/theorists' works that present an explanation of how comics operate. Using Will Eisner's (1985) *Comics & Sequential Art* and Scott McCloud's (1994) *Understanding Comics: The Invisible Art*, I

will provide key terminology and frameworks for understanding how graphic texts work as a form as well as provide insight into their narrative potential. These particular authors are highlighted because their works have received recognition for their contributions to developing an analytical framework for the comics form as well as for their attention to the medium as an art form. Both texts, particularly McCloud's (1994), are accessible to outsiders of the form while providing useful insights to insiders, demonstrating their potential as bridging texts for educators interested in receiving an introduction to the form.

### **3.2 Overview of Key Frames on the Study of Graphic Texts**

For the purpose of this thesis I will provide an overview of both Eisner's (1985) *Comics and Sequential Art* and McCloud's (1994) *Understanding Comics* in order to establish the common vocabulary for graphic texts that they introduce, as well as their assertions regarding the written and visual functions of graphic texts and how these elements work together. In addition, both works highlight key elements of graphic texts that are unique to the form, such as the role of time, frames, and line. In exploring the complexity of the graphic text form, I assert that graphic texts represent a medium worthwhile for study and analysis, while also offering a framework for entering into such analysis. Such a framework provides useful context and vocabulary for teachers interested in engaging their students in an analysis of this text form.

In order to enter fully into an analysis of the graphic text form, one needs to understand the common vocabulary and means of representation unique to the form. Panels, the key unit of comics, allow for a narrative to be segmented in a sequence in order to convey and capture the flow of time and space within a story (Eisner, 1985).

While the panel acts as a container of the narrative, it can also be used to communicate parts of the narrative. The shape of the panel border can either communicate information about the scene it contains (e.g. jagged edges to convey sound) or even be incorporated as a narrative device (e.g. a panel that both frames the scene but also acts as a door or window within the story). The lack of a frame or the domination of a single scene for an entire page (i.e. the “splash” page) conveys a specific kind of message about the contents, whether it is about its importance or to draw attention to the openness of a space (Eisner, 1985). Other components such as word balloons, thought bubbles and narration boxes provide a space for dialogue and the written portions of text but can also be used with intentionality to convey more meaning than just the words they contain. For example, the lettering of the text can be used to further the story, either to show emphasis through bolding, personality through handwritten text, or more stylized manipulations such as dripping letter to indict violence and blood (Eisner, 1985). McCloud (1994) further explores how the use of line can help “make emotions visible” (p.198). He ultimately calls into question the strict separation between pictures, which supposedly are more representational of the visible, and language, conveyer of the invisible. By seeing that “pictures can, through their rendering, represent **invisible** concerns such as emotions and the other senses—then the distinction between pictures and other types of icons like language which **specialize** in the invisible may seem a bit blurry” (McCloud, 1994, p.127). McCloud (1994) reinforces the idea that in addition to the narrative potential to depict events in the story, the visual elements of a comic can convey the more invisible or emotional aspects of a scene.

McCloud (1994) introduces the additional formal elements of comics of “closure” and “gutter.” Closure, described as, “[the] phenomenon of observing the parts but perceiving the whole,” allows readers to complete an understanding from an incomplete experience (McCloud, 1994, p.63). The idea of closure has been explored in other narrative forms under the name of “gap-filling” (Iser, 1972). Iser (1972) examines how all stories, in his case, literary texts, must by nature contain omissions that require the reader to “bring into play our own faculty for establishing connections—for filling in the gaps left by the text itself” (p.285). This process is what gives the reading act its dynamism and helps in the creation of anticipation (Iser, 1972). Within graphic texts, the gutter creates the need for readers to engage in closure or gap-filling. The gutter is the space in between panels, a gap that requires the reader to use her imagination to “take[] two separate images and transform[] them into a single idea” (McCloud, 1994, p.66). So while the form of comics creates a fracture in time and space as panels create segmented scenes or moments, the act of closure that the reader accomplishes when reading the gutter between panels allows her to “mentally construct a continuous, unified reality” (McCloud, 1994, p.67). These concepts underlie all comics as well as all narrative stories, allowing readers to extract meaning from what would be otherwise isolated moments. A creator can use the gutters in various ways to create different effects on readers or to engage them in different amounts of closure. Iser (1972) explains that most “traditional” texts allow their readers accomplish this task mostly unconsciously. However, some modern texts can exploit this part of the reading activity to force their readers to search for the connections between various fragmented bits, drawing conscious attention to the act of filling in the gap (Iser, 1972, p.285). McCloud (1994) also discusses the level of

difficulty with closure that artists can create through their choices, connecting such work with the specific emphasis or end-goal of the artist (p.91).

Beyond shaping the difficulty of the reading experience, knowledge of the need for closure influences the choices that a creator has to make in the construction of her narrative, especially regarding depictions of time and motion. McCloud (1994) identifies six kinds of panel-to-panel transitions that creators use, which each require varying levels of closure on the part of the reader. These transitions include moment-to-moment, action-to-action (follows single subject), subject-to-subject (remain on same scene or idea), scene-to-scene (movement across time and space), aspect-to-aspect (wandering eye on different parts of same place/idea), and non-sequitur (McCloud, 1994, p.70-2). A creator can use different kinds of transitions to simulate varying time and motion experiences. For example, a moment-to-moment transition with five panels showing the throwing of a baseball provides a different relationship to time passing than a subject-to-subject where the pitcher throws and then the ball has been struck out (McCloud, 1994). Time can also be established within a panel through the strategic placement of dialogue or the inclusion of a clock or sun or moon. Linked to this question of time is the issue of motion, which can both be created through closure in the use of multiple images in sequence, or through motion lines within a panel (McCloud, 1994). With these primary concepts and vocabulary explained, I now turn my attention to the question of the coordination between words and pictures.

Comics require readers to interpret a “language” that relies on an understanding of “the image-word mix and the traditional deciphering of text” (Eisner, 1985, p.7) making the reading of such texts “an act of both aesthetic perception and intellectual pursuit”

(p.8) as readers draw upon the interpretive skills of the visuals of art and the verbal/linguistic of literature. Eisner (1985) asserts that words and images originate from a common source, citing the pictographic nature of early writing systems. Thus, the visual serves a role in communication, one that relies upon the common recognition of the symbolic meaning by both author and audience (Eisner, 1985). Of particular note is the use of human anatomy, where the body's posture and gesture provide a wealth of emotional/character and narrative information (Eisner, 1985). When paired with words, the body in the comic provides the context and the nuance of the meaning, dual texts to be read on-top of one another. McCloud (1994) takes the interplay of words and pictures a step further by providing six different ways in which the verbal and visual texts interact within a graphic text. These general combinations include word specific (pictures illustrate text), picture specific (words provide "a soundtrack to a visually told sequence"), duo-specific (both have same message), additive (where one amplifies the other), parallel (each has a different course that does not intersect), montage (words are part of the picture), and interdependent (words and pictures work together to convey meaning that neither could provide on its own) ((McCloud, 1994, p.153-5).

Such understandings of how graphic texts draw upon the analytical skills needed to interpret both verbal and visual texts, as well as the combination of the two, are needed in order to engage students in the reading of such texts. In order to engage students in an analytical discussion around such works, a comprehension of the unique ways in which one can construct meaning from graphic texts, as well an understanding of where the form overlaps with the disciplines of art and literature in formal analysis, is needed. Thus,

the next part of this thesis will address how the field of education has addressed the question of developing literacies around graphic texts.



## **Part 2: Multiple Literacies in Education**

In this section, I will discuss the educational rationale for the use of graphic novels in the classroom. I begin by exploring the history and development of the English Language Arts (ELA) in the secondary curriculum, as well as the stated purposes and instructional practices of the discipline. I then will provide an overview of recent developments in new literacy studies, specifically regarding the social turn in views on literacy. This section will engage with the New London Group's (1996) "A Pedagogy of Multiliteracies: Designing Social Futures," a document that signals a shift in approaches to literacy pedagogy that has implications for the use of varied texts in the classroom, among other developments. From this concept arises a call for an understanding of multiple kinds of literacies, of which I will be focusing on the ideas of visual and multimodal literacy, as well as the concepts of intertextuality and remediation, specifically regarding graphic texts. Additionally, I will address the question of the hierarchies of literature, text, and literacies that intersect around and shape teachers' use of graphic text. Finally, I will end with a review of the current literature on including visual texts broadly and graphic novels specifically into the ELA curriculum in order to establish how my research is situated in the current ELA scholarly conversations.

### **Chapter 4: Background on English Language Arts**

The current concerns and best practices of ELA shape which kinds of texts are incorporated into the curriculum and how they are used. In this chapter I will provide a brief overview of the developments in and trajectory of ELA, as well as a cursory look into the current concerns of the discipline. In particular, I will highlight the tensions between the call for a more student-centered and experiential approach and the recent

push for standardization and accountability represented by such policy as No Child Left Behind and the Common Core curriculum. Finally, I situate these two competing discourses within the context of the shifting nature of communication in the 21<sup>st</sup> century and the implications that such changes have for the teaching of English language arts today.

#### **4.1 A Brief History of ELA**

Katie Monnin's (2013) *Teaching Graphic Novels: Practical Strategies for the Secondary ELA Classroom* provides a useful overview of the development of ELA in the United States, which I will summarize in the rest of this paragraph. The history of ELA begins in the 1890s, when the Committee of Ten, composed of higher education representatives chosen by the National Education Association, convened to standardize academic curriculum and educational philosophies. The group decided on the core curricular knowledge needed for the primary disciplines, which included key texts from the Classics, English literature, and other modern language, now known as "the Canon." After the turn-of-the-century, progressive education began to take hold so that in 1911 the NCTE (National Council of Teachers of English) instructed teachers to consider students' interests in designing learning activities. The 1920s and 1930s brought reader response theory into the educational literature, which saw students as individual readers capable of interpreting literature in their own way. In 1952, the term *English Language Arts* was coined, a reflection of the push to expand the acts of literacy in classroom to include speaking and listening. With the 1960s, ELA experienced a push to include more diverse literature, the use of popular culture literacies, as well as different critical-reading lenses. Gardner's (1983) theory of multiple intelligences encourages teachers to account for

students' individual learning styles in curriculum development, bringing the idea of different kinds of competencies into the classroom. Masterman's (1985) work on media literacy expanded the scope of ELA even further to ask teachers and students to analyze the various media texts all around them. Monnin (2013) ends with the new millennium, which she sees as, "the greatest communication revolution of all time" (Kress, 2003; as cited in Monnin, 2013) with the emergence of new technology and thus new forms of communication previously unheard of in ELA.

#### **4.2 Various Approaches to ELA**

Within the context of this history, guidance from the field of education for teachers regarding the development of an ELA classroom and curriculum has abounded. I will review a sample of representative texts on the teaching of English language arts at the secondary level, finishing with a discussion of the current iteration of major guidelines in the form of the Common Core.

As reflected in the brief history section, the idea of what competencies and what texts should be addressed by an English language arts curriculum has grown and diversified over the past few decades. With such an expansion, the question raised must be: what defines the English language arts? Peter Elbow (1990) in his book *What is English?* begins to take on this question through his review of the English Coalition Conference of 1987. The conference represents a meeting of the minds of K-12 educators as well as representatives from higher education, all convened to discuss the future and purpose of the English discipline. While most major points generated a great deal of debate, the conference reached a few points of consensus, such as the agreement that a key practice in the discipline is "using language and looking back reflectively at how one

uses it” (Elbow, 1990, p.50). Regarding a second point, he notes that, “People sensed a potential consensus in the profession at large about the centrality of the process of making meaning—and sensed that there isn’t yet even the makings of a consensus in the profession about literature” (Elbow, 1990, p.97-8). The centrality of language and meaning-making emerge as key ingredients to the discipline, ideas supported by other authors/theorists on the teaching of secondary English language arts. Interestingly, Elbow (1990) highlights the fact that the question of what kinds of texts should take primacy remains, a point of contention I will return to in my discussion of the hierarchy of literacies.

A review of a number of manuals and guidebooks for teachers of secondary English language arts reveal the role that the process of meaning-making and the use of language to make that meaning play in the formation of an ELA curriculum. Bomer’s (1995) *Time for Meaning* puts forth a call to redefine literacy as “the deliberate use of language to compose meaning” (p.9), supporting a shift to a meaning, rather than literature, focused curriculum. Nancy Atwell’s (1998) reading and writing workshops draw directly on the idea that meaning is essential to students’ learning. Such an approach places students’ interests and desires at the center of their literate experiences, engaging in writing as an authentic process of meaning-making for a real audience. The reading workshop similarly engages students in reading books that they want to read and encourages them to enter into a literate environment with other classmates. Beach, Appleman, Hynds, and Wilhelm (2006) are similarly influenced by sociocultural theories of learning that see providing students with choices and creating collective experiences as essential to engaging students in “social activities or communities in which students

acquire various practices and tools constituting learning literature” (p.9). Beach et al. (2006) identify these key practices and tools as: Perspective-taking, constructing social worlds, explaining characters’ actions, inferring symbolic and thematic meanings, making connections (e.g. text-to-text, text-to-world), posing questions, problem solving, rereading, and applying critical lenses (p.11-16). While each author highlights meaningful engagement with text, each approach highlights slightly different foci as the center to creating these experiences in the classroom.

While these authors provide visions of what secondary ELA curriculum should include, they also speak of the larger forces that work against such social meaning-making approaches. Internal questions of the role of literature versus other texts aside, “Our more immediate need is to set out a focus or agenda for English that will fight the pressures... to define English as the learning of information that can be measured on mass exams” (Elbow, 1990, p.97). Within the English Coalition Conference, Elbow (1990) identifies a concern over the rising pressure for standardization and quantification of learning that has reached a tipping point in the past decade with the implementation of high-stakes testing as a measure of student learning. Bomer (1995) explains that such policy and the teaching practices it entails represent a transmission model of schooling, where teachers possess a discrete body of knowledge that must be passed along to the students. As Beach et al. (2006) stress, an educator’s understanding of the purpose behind teaching literature (i.e. their theory of learning), will greatly influence the ways in which they approach teaching the subject of literature. When the focus from a policy level remains on producing quantifiable results of student learning, teachers begin to tailor

their teaching to help students pass the tests that measure that learning. Within such conditions, teachers must balance the competing demands regarding the fact that:

We teach in schools still obsessed with efficiency; we still hunger to hear the voices of our students; we still know that literacy is largely an affair of the heart; we still want to seem academically credible to our students and our colleagues in other departments. We will never satisfy all those pressures, nor should we try to or even want to. Teaching is full of choosing, and so we make up our minds about what is most essential about literacy and then work *only* there. (Bomer, 1995, p.15)

With these complexities within the teaching of English language arts, the institution of the Common Core State Standards (Common Core or CCSS) represents the governmentally sanctioned ideas around what is most essential to literacy at the secondary level.

The Common Core represents an attempt by state governments to create a universal set of standards in the core subjects for K-12 education, with a focus on college and career readiness in the modern era. Led by state governors and education commissioners, the development of the Common Core focuses on creating a “clear set of shared goals and expectations for what knowledge and skills will help our students succeed” (Common Core State Standard Initiative [CCSSI], 2015a). The creation of a standard that can be adopted and applied across states allows for the development of standardized textbooks, tools and support for teachers, and standard comprehensive assessments to measure how well students are learning these standards (CCSSI, 2015b).

The standards for particular grades were built off of anchoring college and career readiness standards for each particular subject, which for ELA is broken down into the categories of reading, writing, speaking and listening, and language. For 6-12<sup>th</sup> grade reading standards, the additional categories of reading literature and reading

informational texts are sectioned out (CCSSI, 2015c). The Common Core lists as critical content all students must acquire, “Classic myths and stories from around the world, America's founding documents, Foundational American literature, Shakespeare,” (CCSSI, 2015b) however, no required book list exists. Instead, the Common Core presents “exemplars of high-quality texts at each grade level” (CCSSI, 2015b) so that teachers can either use those texts or select ones of comparable quality and level. In addition to expanding reading beyond just literature, writing has also shifted focus onto functional and informational, rather than creative and narrative, writing:

Though the standards still expect narrative writing throughout the grades, they also expect a command of sequence and detail that are essential for effective argumentative and informative writing. The standards’ focus on evidence-based writing along with the ability to inform and persuade is a significant shift from current practice. (CCSSI, 2015d)

Such functionality focused standards reflect a transmission model of education through idea that students must acquire certain knowledge and skills at each grade, lacking the meaning-making focus of most of the contemporary curriculum materials reviewed earlier. Such an approach reflects a certain orientation towards the complexities of the current demands on students as literate beings. Below I review theories from the field of literacy studies around these questions.

## **Chapter 5: Theoretical frames from New Literacies Studies**

In light of such developments in the field of teaching ELA and the greater context of communication technologies, the NCTE Executive Committee published a “Position Statement on Multimodal Literacies” as well as the “NCTE Definition of 21<sup>st</sup> Century Literacies” (NCTE, 2005; NCTE, 2013). In the first document, published online in 2005, the Executive Committee asserts that,

The use of multimodal literacies has expanded the ways we acquire information and understand concepts. Ever since the days of illustrated books and maps texts have included visual elements for the purpose of imparting information. The contemporary difference is the ease with which we can combine words, images, sound, color, animation, video, and styles of print in projects so that they are part of our everyday lives and, at least by our youngest generation, often taken for granted. (NCTE, 2005)

Such a statement acknowledges both the historical significance of multimodal and specifically visual texts, as well as their changing nature in the contemporary era. Their definition of 21<sup>st</sup> century literacies expands upon this idea. Speaking specifically to the changing nature of literacy in light of changes to technology and society, the Executive Committee explains that, “Because technology has increased the intensity and complexity of literate environments, the 21st century demands that a literate person possess a wide range of abilities and competencies, many literacies” (NCTE, 2013). Such shifts in the view of both professional teaching organizations as well as in the structure of English education itself can be understood through the changing understandings of text and literacy arising from the field of literacy studies. This chapter will provide brief backgrounds into the theoretical frameworks that have shaped the changing nature of education’s understanding of literacy and thus the ELA curriculum.



## 5.1 Multiliteracies

Reflected in the changing goals of ELA, the concept of what constitutes *literacy* has expanded over the past decades. The old notion of literacy as reading and writing has undergone a paradigm shift as a group of scholars has taken a sociocultural approach to the study of literacy. Street (1995) distinguishes these two approaches as an “autonomous” versus an “ideological” model of literacy. As Street (1995) defines these models, an autonomous view focuses on the “technical aspects [of literacy], independent of social context” (p.161), while an ideological view sees “literacy practices as inextricably linked to cultural and power structures in a given society” (p.161). What this dichotomy demonstrates is that the previously dominant autonomous model establishes a division between the technical/cognitive elements of literacy and the cultural aspects, while the ideological model seeks to understand both elements within their cultural and structural locations. The use of the term *ideological* here is important in its acknowledgement of the embedded nature of literacy within existing power structures, a view that seeks to disrupt the commonly accepted notion of literacy as a neutral or autonomous area of study (Street, 1995).

This ideological model, as Gee (1990) explains, arises out of a confluence of ideas from the fields of linguistics, social psychology, anthropology and education to form “the new literacy studies,” where “out of the deconstruction of [the contrast drawn between oral culture and literate culture] comes more contemporary approaches, not to literacy as a singular thing, but to *literacies* as a plural set of social practices” (p. 49). Such a definition of literacies must then account for socially situated nature of literacy and the various kinds of literacies engaged with by a multitude of people, questioning the

psychologically based and narrowly defined understanding of students' in-school reading and writing. A socially situated understanding of literacy sees that literacies and uses of language are implicated in "different ways of knowing, different ways of making sense of the world of human experience, i.e. different social epistemologies" (Gee, 1990, p.62). Within this emerging field, the New London Group's (1996) "A Pedagogy of Multiliteracies" acts as a key document to envision what a pedagogy that encompasses a larger view of literacies could be. This document, along with Gallego and Hollingsworth's (2000) "The Idea of Multiple Literacies," shape the larger educational context in which multiple kinds of texts, such as graphic novels and texts representing a variety of experiences, can be brought into the curriculum.

The New London Group (1996) documents both propose a two-prong expanded understanding of literacies as well as pedagogical suggestions for how to address these new modes in the classroom. First, the literacy pedagogy they define their pedagogy against is summarized as "teaching and learning to read and write in page-bound, official, standard forms of the national language... restricted to formalized, monolingual, monocultural, and rule-governed forms of language" (New London Group, 1996, p.60-1). This definition is associated with school-based literacy that, in the U.S. context, maps onto a white, middle-class experience with text. Their broadened vision, in contrast, calls for an extension of literacy to firstly "account for the context of our culturally and linguistically diverse and increasingly globalized societies, for the multifarious cultures that interrelate and the plurality of texts that circulate" (New London Group, 1996, p.61). This portion of their expanded definition explicitly emphasizes the importance of social context to the new definition of literacy. The second part of the expanded pedagogy

relates to “the burgeoning variety of text forms associated with information and multimedia technologies. This includes understanding and competent control of representational forms that are becoming increasingly significant in the overall communications environment, such as visual images and their relationship to the written word” (New London Group, 1996, p.61). While this particular focus on new communication technologies and their implications for literacy appear in the works of other literacy theorists, fellow theorists critique the New London Group’s (1996) very concentrated focus. I will review these criticisms later in the section.

The New London Group’s (1996) two concepts of expanding literacies are interrelated in that, “the proliferation of communications channels and media supports and extends cultural and subcultural diversity” (New London Group, 1996, p.61). Both dimensions seek to break the hegemony of a narrowly defined literacy (i.e. the autonomous model) that reifies the cultural texts and competencies of one group to the exclusion or degradation of the texts and competencies of other groups. This work is done in the context of a changing global society and the new technologies and communication methods that propel and define it. Thus, the ultimate goals of the redefinition of literacy pedagogy for students are: “Creating access to the evolving language of work, power, and community, and fostering the critical engagement necessary for them to design their social futures and achieve success through fulfilling employment” (New London Group, 1996, p.60). These goals account for the embedded nature of literacies within structures of power, however, the question of what kind of “social futures” and “fulfilling employment” seems to reflect similar functionalist notions

of literacy as the Common Core. The following theorists provide a different approach to understanding a socially situated view of literacies.

Gallego and Hollingsworth's (2000) concept of multiple literacies overlaps with the New London Group (1996), while still providing useful distinctions. Both groups push for an expanded notion of literacy beyond a psychological process of learning to read, write, and speak in standard English. However, instead of a pedagogical framework, these authors present three broad categories under which various literacies may fall: school literacies, community literacies, and personal literacies (Gallego & Hollingsworth, 2000, p. 5). School literacies focus on the "learning of interpretive and communicative processes needed to adapt socially to school and other dominant language contexts, and the use or practice of those processes in order to gain a conceptual understanding of school subjects" (Gallego & Hollingsworth, 2000, p. 5), that is, the ability to operate within the culture of power. Community literacies, in contrast, can act as a critique of such literacies, while also serving as "the appreciation, understanding, and/or use of interpretive and communicative traditions of culture and community" (Gallego & Hollingsworth, 2000, p. 5). The final set, personal literacies, are unique to these theorists, which they define as "the critical awareness of ways of knowing and believing about self that comes from thoughtful examination of historical or experiential and gender-specific backgrounds in school and community language settings" and can stand in contrast to both school and community literacies (Gallego & Hollingsworth, 2000, p. 5). These literacies operate at different levels (e.g. group vs. individual) and in different symbolic locations (e.g. home versus school), providing a framework for understanding the literacies students are expected to learn and utilize in school, those that they may bring

into school from outside communities, as well as specific meanings of these various literacies to individual students.

A pedagogy of multiliteracies, the New London Group (1996) argues, must take into account the different meanings of modes of representation in different cultures and contexts, even as these various “modes of meaning-making” should be integrated into teaching (New London Group, 1996, p.64). The authors propose a framework of “design,” where students and teachers can draw upon the “available Designs—the resources for Design” which are the existent codes of meaning, which then go through a process of “designing” or “the process of shaping emergent meaning” through the use of, but not the pure repetition of, available designs (New London Group, 1996, p.74-5). The outcome of this process is “The Redesigned,” or newly created meaning that “is founded on historically and culturally received patterns of meaning” while also existing as “transformed meaning” (New London Group, 1996, p.76). While the New London Group (1996) offers their concept of design to attempt to encompass the kind of meaning-making conducted in all facets of life, their ultimate pedagogical purpose, or school literacies lens, may limit the explanatory power of their work for community and personal literacies. For example, key to the use of this design concept in the classroom is the development of a meta-language, “a language for talking about language, images, texts, and meaning-making interactions,” focusing the lens of literacies on analytical critique (New London Group, 1996, p.77). Such an orientation is reflected in the “overt instruction” and “critical framing” portions of their “how” of the pedagogy (New London Group, 1996, p.86). These two facets focus on developing students’ abilities to articulate the mechanism behind meaning-making in a particular form, content, or discourse, as

well as the ability to understand the situated meanings (historically, culturally, socially, politically, ideologically etc.) of those knowledge and social systems (New London Group, 1996).

Of interest to this thesis are the “design elements,” the “modes of meaning” from which students and teachers can structure their understanding of organizing meaning. Included in their list are six categories: linguistic, visual, audio, gestural, spatial, and multimodal, where the last encompasses all possible interactions between the other modes. Thus, the interconnectedness of the linguistic and the visual in graphic novels represents possibilities for multimodal meanings to arise, the significance of which will be explored in the next section. While my thesis focuses a great deal on school literacies surrounding visual, textual, and multimodal analysis, I want to acknowledge the critique of such a school-centered view of literacies. Leander and Boldt’s (2013) cautionary revisiting of “A Pedagogy of Multiliteracies” questions the very text-centric focus of the pedagogical strategy (which has been adopted as theoretical reality/orientation for the teaching of literacies) as well as the lack of space for the embodied and unintentional nature of activity in that theory (which instead is concentrated on focused meaning-making). Additionally, their example of Lee, a 10 year old engaging with a *manga* in various ways and to various purposes over the course of a day, brings in the concern of the personal meanings—or “personal literacies” to use Gallego and Hollingsworth’s (2000) term—that students already attach to texts. Furthermore, their inclusion in the school curriculum could never engage the texts in the same ways and could even alienate from those texts, rather than help bring students closer to school, which is the goal (Leander & Boldt, 2013). I keep this caution in mind as I proceed in this thesis to

examine the ways in which visual and multimodal literacy and graphic novels have been addressed in the educational research.

## **5.2 Visual Literacy, Multimodality, Intertextuality, and Remediation**

As emphasized by both the NCTE Executive Council (2013) and The New London Group (1996), the changing nature of technology and learning in the 21<sup>st</sup> century calls for a new understanding of what literacies students must develop to engage in a shifting world. With such concerns in mind, the concept of *media literacy* has grown, with the field of media education looking at how the messages of media are actively produced, presenting sign systems that can be read analytically for their representations of reality (Masterman, 1993). In a school context, media literacy “can help young people challenge information about society, detect prejudice and inequality, seek diverse points of view, and engage with difficult social issues” (Schwarz, 2007, p.1). Proponents of media literacy argue that students absorb messages regarding society, inequality, and diversity from the various media of the new technological age, such as television, the Internet, advertising, marketing, etc. (Schwarz, 2006). Flood, Lapp, and Bayles-Martin (2000) argue that just as students need to be taught the skills of decoding and comprehending print-text explicitly in order to have literacy access, schools must also include explicit instruction in how to “decode and comprehend other texts (e.g. films or advertisements)” (p.68), which happens far less frequently. Schwarz (2006), alongside Monnin (2013), argues that graphic novels are a rich site in which to engage with the idea of media literacy, because graphic novels contain the same visual and verbal interplay as other media forms while still allowing for the more traditional analysis of literary elements.

A major facet of media literacy is the concept of visual literacy. Feinstein and Hagerty (1993) identifies three main components of school-based visual literacy: “(1) the need to visualize internally in response to stimuli that are both a discipline-related and non-discipline related; (2) the need to create visual images that are both art-related and non-art-related; (3) and the need to read visual images in the natural and built environments” (Feinstein & Hagerty, 1993). These different competencies within visual literacy highlight both the receptive side of understanding the messages of images and media and the productive side of creating internal or external visual concepts. Teachers can engage students in developing visual literacy at varying levels. For Burke (2003), bringing the visual into the classroom means providing students with an additional tool in their thought processes, whether it be through the drawing of a concept or the use of outside visual images to bring a new angle to a topic. Burke (2003) asserts that, “We think differently when we transform our ideas into images and patterns than when we use words to express our thoughts. We are using the metaphorical mind that seeks to make connections between the initial idea being examined—for example, freedom, family, gangs—and its associations” (p.237). Instructional approaches that draw upon visual resources can provide students with additional ways to internalize new information, Flood et al. (2000) argue, ultimately resulting in greater access (i.e. the ability to retrieve information from long-term memory). Monnin (2013) similarly offers suggestions of how graphic novels can help students’ reading comprehension by providing multiple strategies, as well as exercises to visualize texts. Thus, visual literacy can mean the use of visualizations to assist in students’ thinking or the teaching of how to analyze the visual aspects of a text.



Vital to graphic novels are the ways in which the linguistic mode and visual mode, as well as gestural mode in some cases, interact to produce meaning. The intersection of these modes is where the New London Group (1996) sees the emergence of multimodal meaning-making, which describes the interaction of various modes within a text. An exploration of graphic novels must take into account both visual and verbal literacies and their interactions, thus attending to these texts' multimodal nature. Barton and Hamilton (2005) list multimodality as a key point for understanding a social practice view of literacy (p.22). They argue that, "New technologies shift the materiality of literacy, profoundly changing the semiotic landscape" (Barton & Hamilton, 2005, p.23). Thus, scholars interested in examining literacy events and practices must also examine the multiple modes of meaning-making that extend beyond traditional notions of print literacy (Barton & Hamilton, 2005, p.22). Graphic novels provide a rich site for understanding how that multimodal meaning can be made within a single text. While the writing and drawing of comics, McCloud (1994) explains, have been historically seen as "different forms of expression" that create "good comics when brought together harmoniously (p.47), McCloud (1994) proposes a different vision. McCloud (1994) calls for us to see "words, pictures and other icons [as] the **vocabulary** of the language called **comics**" (p.47) demonstrating an understanding of the multimodal nature of these texts. He proposes a unified language with its own vocabulary to understand the interrelationship between words and pictures that the medium utilizes (McCloud, 1994).

While multimodality describes the interaction of multiple modes within one text, intertextuality and remediation are concepts that describe the relationships between texts. The concept of *remediation* can be seen as a specific manifestation of intertextuality.

Remediation is the “borrowing” or “repurposing” of story content from one medium into another without explicit reference to or quoting of the original material (Bolter & Grusin, 1999). Bolter and Grusin (1999) claim that “with reuse comes a necessary redefinition, but there may be no conscious interplay between media. The interplay happens, if at all, only for the reader or viewer who happens to know both versions and can compare them” (p.45). The “conscious interplay” they describe would be an explicit acknowledgement in the text that the material borrowed or the content invoked exists as another text. Instead, remediation occurs when a text repurposes content from another text, redefining the meaning of that text for the creator and the reader, while still maintaining a sense of transparency in the reader or viewer’s relationship to the present text. However, some theorists who work with the concept of intertextuality would argue that all utterances (i.e. texts) that a creator might draw upon are already imbued with another’s voice and in its reuse, remain “filled with that voice” (Bakhtin as cited in Todorov, 1984). While Bakhtin is working from the notion of verbal utterance, he applies the concept of the verbal to the written forms in that the artist must draw upon words in order to create written forms, where “the artist receives no word in linguistically virginal form. The word is already impregnated by the practical situations and the poetic contexts in which he has encountered it” (Bakhtin as cited in Todorov, 1984). Ultimately it is the relationship between words, between utterances, and between texts that define intertextuality, where “every utterance is also related to previous utterances, thus creating *intertextual* (or dialogical) relations” (Todorov, 1984, p.48).

This concept of intertextuality becomes particularly important when applied to the study of graphic texts, where creators and readers draw upon the language of the written

word and the language of image, as well as the language of comics, which I, and McCloud (1994), define as the multimodal language that graphic/comic artists have developed to communicate, thus placing their works in dialogic relationship to a multiplicity of texts (i.e. utterances). A question this complicated interrelation between words and images in graphic texts raises is whether these texts inherently embody what Bolter and Grusin (1999) present as a second definition of remediation. Remediation can also refer to “a more complex kind of borrowing in which one medium is itself incorporated or represented in another medium” (p.45). Graphic texts could be seen to borrow from the mediums of the written word as well as the visual arts. While attending to the ways in which it does so can provide a useful vocabulary for teachers, viewing graphic text solely through such a lens would miss the ways in which a language specific to comics/graphic text has developed with its own tradition. Teachers can use these concepts in order to explain the relationships between graphic texts and the larger body of text existent in the world.

### **5.3 The Effects of Hierarchy**

Ideologies around literature, graphic texts, and literacies all coalesce within the arena of education. While these hierarchies operate in different domains and act on varying levels, I see their influence converging in the English language arts classroom, where the notion of what constitutes “literature” and texts worth reading interacts with conceptions of literacy and the competencies one is meant to develop and engage with in a school setting. When graphic texts and their history within the United States are considered through this context, the ways in which texts and literacies are ordered hierarchically within the ELA classroom begins to emerge. Ultimately, teachers wield a

great deal of power regarding student perceptions of these hierarchies based on what kinds of texts are included in the curriculum as well as how they are taught. A brief discussion of the movement to balance these hierarchies within the classroom will conclude this section before the next chapter reviewing recent literature from academic ELA journals on the use of graphic novels in the classroom.

The hierarchy of literature with the discipline of English literature parallels the hierarchy of literacies within the educational system, both of which are mediated through the ELA teachers as these ideas pass down to students. As demonstrated by the review of the history of ELA as well as the Common Core standards, the influence of the canon on the teaching of English language arts persists in the present. Historically, the discipline of English has focused on the “power of high literature” (Elbow, 1990, p.100) as the centerpiece of the ELA curriculum. Versaci (2001) explains that students receive these notions of the hierarchy and the canon simply through what texts are included in the curriculum and how they are taught. They internalize “the sense that certain works are more worthy of serious attention than others... [as well as a] sense of removal from the processes of evaluation that help establish this canon. In their view, decisions about ‘literary quality’—whatever that term means—are made by others” (Versaci, 2001, p.61). This concept of literature, specifically a certain body of literary works, mirrors notions of literacy perpetuated by an autonomous model (Street, 1995). Both rely upon a transmission model of education, where predetermined information is transmitted from teacher to student. In the case of literature, the assumption that a teacher’s literary tastes and interpretations are superior to students’ result in students receiving these notions without question (Atwell, 1998; Versaci, 2001). Similarly, the autonomous model of

literacy assumes a technical and psychological process of skill acquisition of reading and writing, a process that teachers facilitate through instruction as students' development unfolds (Street, 1995). What both these models of literature and literacy ignore is the impact of social context and power relations on the reading and interpretation of literature as well as the act of becoming a literate being (Atwell, 1998; Street, 1995). I will discuss how expanded notions of literature and literacy impact learning below, but first I will explain how the hierarchy around comics fits into this picture.

Historical conceptions of comics as an intermediary or transitional text form to "real" books, as well as perceptions of their lesser worth, influence how these texts have been understood within an educational context. McCloud (1994) begins his work by asserting that a framework for understanding the form of comics needs to be established as separate from the various types of content (e.g. various genres, particular artists, trends/fads, etc.). Such a division has not occurred until recently in the public understanding as well as the educational context. As evidenced in the history of comics in the U.S., opposition and debate around the negative effect of comics on the American youth was centered on the content of comics, which were seen as violent and corrupting (Dorrell et al., 1995). This initial opposition to content soon began to equate content with form, which led to questions of the effects of comic book reading on traditional literacy with the assertion that comic reading degraded students' abilities to read traditional texts (Dorrell et al., 1995).

Such a difficulty in distinction still exists, where only recent works such as *Maus* have undermined the notion that simplicity of style (e.g. cartooning) means simplicity of story/content (McCloud, 1994). However, notions of comics and other visual texts as

intermediary steps still abound in the educational sphere. McCloud (1994) provides a summary of this hierarchy when he states:

Traditional thinking has long held that truly **great** works of art and literature are only possible when the two are kept at arm's length. Words and pictures **together** are considered, at best, a diversion for the masses, at worst a product of crass commercialism. As children, our first books had pictures galore and very few words because that was 'easier'. Then, as we grew, we were expected to graduate to books with much more text and only occasional pictures—and finally to arrive at 'real' books—those with no pictures at all... Words and pictures are as popular as ever, but this widespread feeling that the combination is somehow base or simplistic has become a self-fulfilling prophecy. (p.140-141)

McCloud (1994) explains that these contemporary ideas around the baseness of word/picture combinations arise from the history of how art and literature have developed in the Western world, where art grew to be more representational and focused on the visible realm while the written word focused on the abstract, invisible, and elaborate elements. By the 1800s, attitudes around good art and writing were solidified along these lines and have not changed much since. As the visual arts and the written word are each measured by different standards, some comics hold "the faith that 'great' art and 'great' writing will combine harmoniously by virtue of quality alone" (McCloud, 1994, p.150), leading comics, as a supposedly recent invention, to be judged by the standards of the old. Caught between two mediums and standards, the form becomes envisioned as "an important intermediate step to more advanced forms of textual literacy, rather than as a complex form of multimodal literacy" (Jacobs, 2007, p.20). This inability to measure up to both standards and a lack of recognition of a unified multimodal conception of graphic text places comics on a lower rung of the hierarchy of "great art," thus impacting how educators and the general public view the worth of such texts.

Movements on the part of educators to balance these hierarchies inform the work being done with graphic novels in the classroom today, as well as within the larger framework of the disciplines of English literature and Educational and Literacy Studies. Even as the English Coalition Conference attendees struggled to agree on the place of literature, they “saw the obvious advantage in this move away from literature. Above all it’s a deprivileging move. It helps us see how literature is not some different special entity but just one among many forms of discourse or language” (Elbow, 1990, p.99). Such a widening of views of what constitutes useable text to be examined from a literacy lens marks the social new literacies movement. In a slightly different vein, many ELA educators are not doing away with literature as a primary focus entirely, but are instead expanding the boundaries of what texts are considered “literary.” Versaci (2001) presents an interesting definition of “literary merit,” explaining that, “Great literature surprises us; it makes us pause to consider people and cultures and ideas and conflicts and dreams and tragedies that we have not yet encountered in quite the same way before” (p.66-67). Such a notion of what constitutes “good” literature places the evaluation in the reader’s hands and within the school context, in the student’s power of interpretation. Such a definition also calls for wider representation in the contents of such literature, requiring new perspectives on people and cultures and ideas outside of those that may dominate a student’s life. As I will show in the next section, ELA educators are making the argument that graphic novels can be used to successfully address these two points by decentering traditional print-text-only literacy and expanding the voices from literature in the classroom.

## Chapter 6: Review of Literature on Graphic Novels in the Classroom

My interest in the topic of how graphic novels can be incorporated into the secondary English language arts curriculum was derived from a perception that these texts are not ordinarily used in the classroom. Throughout my education as well as in my placements for education classes, I had never seen a graphic text used as a primary text for analysis. The popularity of graphic novels as well as their increased recognition in literary spheres indicates that these texts might be an important component of a teacher's possible textual resources.

My initial searches for literature on the subject revealed that there is a precedent for using graphic novels in the English language arts classroom, a literature that has expanded greatly in the last decade or so. Most articles in such journals as *The English Journal* and *Journal of Adolescent and Adult Literacy* address how one particular classroom built a lesson around a particular graphic novel or how graphic novels can be used to target a particular student population, whether they be reluctant readers (Crawford, 2004; Haugaard, 1973; Koenke, 1981; Lam, 2011; Snowball, 2005), or English Language Learners (Chun, 2009; Leber-Cook & Cook, 2013). Additionally, I found instructional books targeted towards teachers that address how they could incorporate these texts into their classes (Bakis, 2011; Monnin, 2013).

While individual articles made individual claims for why a particular text worked in a specific classroom with a particular set of students, I found that the education literature on this subject employs two main frameworks for why graphic novels should be included: the engaging and scaffold approach and the new literacies approach. Additionally, I will discuss the concept of "literary" graphic novels, as well as review



literature that uses graphic texts to inspire creative projects. The question of which graphic novels provide fruitful sources for textual inquiry directly reflect the current hierarchy of literacies that privileges certain kinds of texts for academic study over others. This literature reflects prevailing attitudes and quandaries within the field of ELA, especially with the push to include a multiplicity of texts that diverge from the traditional canon of literature. Such questions frame my interview study, which seeks to discover the why and how behind teachers' use of graphic novels, as well as the outside factors that may shape their teaching practice.

### **6.1 Engaging Scaffold Explanation**

When graphic novels and comics first began entering the educational literature, they occupied a place of excitement and novelty in the minds of educators. Haugaard (1973) describes the incredible motivational power of comics for readers struggling with early literacy skills and notes that students who receive the linguistic literacy skills from reading such popular culture fare needed to transition onto more respectable literature. Koenke (1981) too recommends the use of comic books with poor readers due to their engaging nature in order to scaffold students' literacy skills. As Jacobs (2007) explains, while such promotion of comics in the classroom is positive in that it opens up the texts that are available and worked with, such orientations towards graphic texts as “a debased form of word-based literacy, albeit an important intermediate step to more advanced forms of textual literacy” (p.20) fail to recognize the complex ways in which graphic texts allow for “a complex form of multimodal literacy” (p.20). This idea that the word-image coordination of graphic text allows for a complex literacy experience will be expanded upon later, but first, I would like to present what I see as two additional

rationales that can exist in either the scaffold and the multimodal literacy perspectives—graphic novels as inspiration for student writing and graphic novels as “literary” works.

## **6.2 Graphic Novels as Inspiration for Creation**

A subset of the ELA educational articles talk about using comics and graphic novels as inspiration and example texts for students’ own creation in the medium (Bitz, 2004; Morrison, Bryan, & Chilcoat, 2002; Williams, 2008). These authors articulated two main themes for the affordances of this exercise, the provision of student voice and the development of literacy skills. Bitz (2004) and Morrison et al. (2002) both write of the value of developing students writing skills in a medium that students find inherently engaging due to its connection to popular culture. While their writing reflects an “engaging scaffold” model of comic use that sees work within the form as developing students’ traditional literacy skills, both acknowledge what other affordances students’ work in the medium provides. For example, Bitz’s (2004) work in “The Comic Book Project,” designed as an after-school literacy program for inner-city youth, demonstrated the project’s development of students’ reading and writing skills, but also led to unexpected (on the part of the author) themes in students’ writing. Students used the medium to communicate the reality of their lives as urban youth, producing stories on such themes as drug abuse, gang violence, and harsh family conditions, ultimately using the platform for their own voices to be heard. Williams (2008) too saw the power of this form for providing a space for student voice, arguing that “empowering students to produce compelling texts creates an outlet for their need to participate, be heard, explore their own stories, and learn more about relevant social issues” (p.18). Williams (2008), who comes from an art education angle, discusses the use of comics and graphic novels

to help students “explore multiple disciplines that inform their art-making process” (p.15). By exposing her students to a range of example texts, she challenges her students’ conceptions of what this form must look like in order to engage them in the creation of their own texts about range of topics, including preservice teachers’ personal narratives and secondary students’ exploration of human rights issues (Williams, 2008). While the use of graphic text as a medium for students’ own work in the form represents a powerful site for students to act as producers of text, this use can still fall under either of the proposed models of “engaging scaffold” or “new literacies.” Another piece of this puzzle is the question of what kinds of graphic novels are scholars advocating for use in the secondary ELA curriculum.

### **6.3 Literary-ness: Graphic Novels as Literature**

In recent literature, many education scholars have attempted to clear the bad name of comics by advocating for the use of a specific class of graphic texts—literary graphic novels. Most authors begin their article by disclaiming the reputation of comics as childish and badly written by citing recent reviews of graphic novels by major literary reviews such as *Time* or the *New York Times Review of Books* as evidence of their increased literary quality (Schwarz, 2007). What separates graphic novels from comic books for Schwarz (2007) is that “the graphic novel is the individual creation of artists who take their work seriously and seek to do more than entertain” (p.2). For Schwarz (2006), it is this self-contained nature of graphic novels or “a longer and more artful version of the comic book bound as a ‘real’ book” (p.58) that provides legitimacy to these texts for use in the classroom. Many authors explain the specific qualities of the graphic novel or novels they will discuss that distinguish that text as particularly worthy of study.

For example, Chun (2009), in his discussion of *Maus* by Art Spiegelman explains that its significance as an educational text is derived from, “its intellectually engaging content realized through its visual narrative strategies of representing history. It achieves the status of literature with the complexity of its theme, the subtlety of its characterizations, the visual metaphors expressed through its compositions, and its seriousness of purpose” (p.147). Thus, texts must first prove their worth before they can be included within the classroom.

Supporting this idea that there is a specific group of graphic novels deemed literary by the community of ELA educators is the amount of overlap in the texts mentioned more than once in these articles. *Maus* by Art Spiegelman, *Persepolis* by Marjane Satrapi, *The Four Immigrants Manga: A Japanese Experience in San Francisco, 1904-1924* by Henry (Yoshitaka) Kiyama, *Palestine* by Joe Sacco, and *American Born Chinese* by Gene Yang all recur within articles and book chapters on teaching graphic novels. These texts represent a range of experiences and perspectives, providing the kind of diversity in literature represented in the classroom called for in the past decades. While incorporating graphic novels that cover age-appropriate, relevant, mature and complex subject matter is of vital concern for secondary ELA teachers, such a focus brings into question the role of popular culture graphic texts in the classroom. In what ways are these classrooms still providing messages about what texts are legitimate for literary study and what texts should remain in the sphere of personal literacy? In the next section, I will address the educational literature that approaches graphic novel pedagogy from a new literacies stance, either explicitly drawing upon critical literacy, media literacy, or a pedagogy of multiliteracies. Many of these authors maintain a language around “literary”

graphic novels, while a few authors do discuss the uses of more popular culture visual texts.

#### **6.4 A New Literacies Approach**

As mentioned in the history of ELA section, the new millennium and the technological and social changes that accompanied it have ignited conversations among educators about how to prepare students for this new communications era. With the publication of “A Pedagogy of Multiliteracies” by the New London Group (1996), as well as other authors’ discussions of different kinds of literacy needed by students to confront their constantly shifting world, multiple authors have attempted to directly address the question of how to teach these multiple literacies in the English language arts classroom. One answer, and the primary focus of this thesis, is the incorporation of more multimodal texts such as graphic novels and comics. Schwarz (2002; 2006; 2007) addresses the ways in which graphic novels can be used to teach media literacy, defined as “the analytic tools necessary for critically ‘reading’ all kinds of media texts” (2006, p.59). In a visually-saturated world, Schwarz (2002; 2006; 2007) argues that educators need to focus explicitly on how students process, evaluate, and critique visual information, bringing the question of critical literacies and teaching about social issues into the classroom.

Chun (2009) provides a case study of how critical literacies can be taught using the example of teaching *Maus* to English-language learners. He claims that the compelling nature of the narrative and its direct relevance to minority students’ lives through its serious treatment of the issue of racism allowed an ESL teacher to use this text to successfully engage her students in developing their literacy and critical literacy

skills simultaneously. Chun (2009) draws upon Morgan and Ramanathan's (2005) "critical literacy 'tool-kit' in action" (p.156; as cited in Chun, 2009, p.148) to examine the ways in which the use of autobiography as analytical texts allow teachers to use accounts of personal experiences to examine socio-historical power relationships, as well question dominant discourses. Boatright (2010) also addresses the ways in which specific kinds of graphic novels can be a way to bring critical literacies into the English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) classroom. Boatright (2010) focuses on graphic novel portrayals of the immigrant experience, discussing how various representations of this experience and an explicit discussion of such representations with students, can help build critical literacies by countering dominant narratives around immigration. All these authors claim that the multimodal nature of these graphic novels uniquely contribute to their various projects around multiple literacies. Jacobs (2007) demonstrates how a teacher could go about approaching the multiple modes in graphic texts that would engage students in multimodal literacy. He explains that engaging students in the multiple modes of meaning-making incorporated into graphic texts helps to strengthen word-based literacy instruction while also promoting students' visual and other literacies skills. His argument rests on the idea proposed by the New London Group's (1996) design model that by engaging students in multimodal meaning-making, teachers can promote students' active creation of meaning rather than passive consumption of text (Jacobs, 2007).

Emerging from this literature, I wondered to what extent teachers are engaging with this concept of graphic novels as multimodal texts that allow for the development of critical literacies, media literacies, and multiliteracies more generally. Most articles either

addressed this question in the abstract, or provided a case study of how one particular teacher incorporated these goals into his or her curriculum. In my study, I will examine how six different teachers in a variety of contexts explain their rationale for graphic novel use in the classroom.

## **Part 3: My Interview Study**

In this part, I will present the results of my interview study as well as draw conclusions on my findings in light of the existing literature. I begin with an explanation of my methodology, a description of my research subjects, and tensions within the research process. In chapter eight, I present my findings regarding the question of what does the teachers' use of graphic novels look like and to what extent do they address the visual and multimodal aspects of graphic texts. I characterize their use as falling upon a spectrum that reflects both their individual concerns regarding the visual, as well as larger contextual constraints and affordances for the use of graphic texts. Chapter nine delves deeper into my interviewees' discussion of why they use graphic texts, addressing the themes of the role of the visual, accessibility, subject matter and content, and the transfer of skills. Finally, I conclude with chapter ten, which explores the continued role of hierarchies within teachers' practice as well as the question of whether the use of graphic texts ultimately reflects a shift in the teaching paradigm of ELA.

### **Chapter 7: Methodology**

This chapter will provide an overview of my recruitment, data collection, data analysis, and research challenges during the course of my interview study with six teachers regarding their use of graphic texts in their secondary ELA classrooms.

#### **7.1 Overview**

Over the course of the fall semester, I conducted six semi-structured interviews with secondary school teachers of English language arts in the Philadelphia and New York



City areas who identified as using graphic novels in their classrooms. Entering into my interviews, my initial questions asked:

- How do teachers use graphic texts in their classroom?
- What texts do they use and why?
- What kind of organizational, administrative and/or peer support do these teachers have and use, if any?
- What has and has not worked in the teaching of graphic texts (e.g. certain activities, kinds of explanations, kinds of assessments) and how have they adapted their lesson plans/curriculum?
- How do educators teach students to see and analyze the visual component of the text?
- Do teachers see their use of graphic novels as different from or similar to their teaching of more traditional prose novels and stories?
- How have students reacted to these texts? Are these reactions different or similar to other, non-visual texts?
- What do teachers see as their students' background knowledge on graphic novels?
- What do teachers think that students get out of reading these texts?
- What are the affordances and constraints of using graphic novels?

My broad question of how teachers use graphic texts in the classroom led me to recruit any teacher who used graphic texts in some form in a secondary English classroom setting. My purpose in defining use and the context of English broadly was to capture the heterogeneity in the use of these texts English classes. My interests were particularly focused on the role of the visual in teaching graphic novels, however, the variety captured in my data set around this particular question raised more interesting questions about how the context and the curricular goals shape use of graphic texts, leading to fruitful analysis of this broad range of teacher engagement with graphic texts. Below I will provide an overview of the recruitment, data collection, and analysis methods, as well as acknowledge the limits of my study.

## **7.2 Recruitment**

My recruitment process began through the use of potential contacts, alumni working in secondary institutions either in the English department or in some administrative capacity, provided by the Educational Studies Department at Swarthmore College, where I am an undergraduate. I sent an initial recruitment email, describing my study and asking to either conduct an interview with that individual or for the names of colleagues who would potentially be interested. My email said that I was looking for teachers who use graphic novels in their English classrooms and that the research would entail a recorded interview and the potential for a classroom observation. Once my initial contacts had responded and either provided other names of teachers to contact or had agreed to an interview I was able to identify six teachers of middle and high school who agreed to be interviewed regarding their pedagogy with respect to graphic novels (figure 1 contains a brief overview of the demographics of the research participants). I arranged a meeting for up to an hour either at their school, as was the case for the four Philadelphia area teachers, or in a coffee shop or through a phone call (New York City teachers).

Participant name	School name and type	Location	Subject and grade level
Rose	Reach Charter School	New York City	7 <sup>th</sup> grade ELA
Andrew	Lang Prep High School (Public)	New York City	9 <sup>th</sup> -12 <sup>th</sup> literature
Melanie	Everton School (Private Friends K-12, boarding 9-12 <sup>th</sup> )	Greater Philadelphia area	High school ESOL, intermediate
Edmund	Everton School (Private Friends K-12, boarding 9-12 <sup>th</sup> )	Greater Philadelphia area	High school ESOL, intermediate/advanced
Harvey	Cherry Blossom Friends School (Private K-12)	Greater Philadelphia area	9 <sup>th</sup> -12 <sup>th</sup> English
Stephanie	Everton School (Private Friends K-12, boarding 9-12 <sup>th</sup> )	Greater Philadelphia area	8 <sup>th</sup> grade English

Figure 1. Interview participants' demographic information. All names of participants and schools have been changed to protect privacy.

### 7.3 Data Collection

My primary form of data emerged from an audio-recorded single semi-structured interview with each research participant that lasted between twenty minutes to an hour. Any additional information was obtained over email in the form of follow up questions. With a semi-structured interview, I was able to use my prepared questions as a beginning point for a larger and more organic conversation about the how and why behind teachers use of graphic novels. Such a structure allows participants to answer in however much depth they choose and to speak more about elements that most interested them.

My interview protocol contained four different sections that, while distinct in their topic, included a certain amount of overlap. The interview began with questions regarding the origin of teachers' use of graphic novels with such questions as "How did you first start using graphic novels in your classroom?" and "Why do you use these

specific texts?” This section transitioned into questions around how they use these texts in the classroom. The purpose of this section was to ascertain what kinds of approaches, activities, and assessments teachers use in relation to graphic novels. Thus, I included questions centered on curriculum design, as well as the teaching of the visual components of the texts. Of particular interest was the question, “When you teach graphic novels, do you find yourself teaching them differently than how you would teach a novel or story? If yes, then how so?” which asked teachers to assess how graphic novels fit into the rest of their curricular goals. The third section asked teachers about their students’ reactions to these texts, as well as their perception of students’ prior knowledge of graphic texts. The final section assessed teachers’ attitudes with respect to their use of graphic novels. A primary question was, “What are the affordances and constraints of using graphic novels?” This last section provided participants with a chance to discuss any topics omitted in other portions of the interview, as well as provide more concise thoughts on their usage.

For most interviews, I received responses that covered the majority of the questions, with some participants providing information that I had not anticipated. This led to fruitful further questioning (for my full interview protocol, see the Appendix). For example, my conversation with ESOL teacher Melanie revealed that graphic novels serve a different function than just a literary text in her classroom, leading to various questions regarding how she uses the content of the text rather than the form as instructional material. A further discussion of this finding will be addressed in the section on the spectrum of use of graphic texts by teachers. In addition, I sent follow up questions by email to each of the teachers regarding their school and curricular contexts in order to

have a full understanding of how specific teachers' school structure as well as their curricular design influenced their ability to use graphic texts in the classroom. In order to acquire this information, I asked such questions as:

- What are the foci and themes of the English language arts class at various grades at your school?
- What are the curricular goals for your grade level? What other texts are used besides the graphic novels you mentioned? What other units are covered in the year?
- Are there other teachers for your grade level? Are there variations in the books used based on the teacher?
- What is the role of independent reading in your classroom and/or school? What role do graphic novels play in this program?
- How long have you been teaching and where? Is there any other important information about you as a teacher that I should know?
- What are the demographics of your school?

#### **7.4 Methods of Analysis**

In order to analyze my interview data, I transcribed each of the interviews. During the transcription process, I began to note down emerging themes that I heard arising from my participants. After all transcriptions were completed, I conducted a more thorough, open-ended coding process in which I read each interview and began to note different themes, some expected and others unexpected. As I worked through the data, I began to color code for overlapping themes between interviews. While my primary interest began with the question of how do teachers address the visual component of graphic novels, I found that a number of themes I had not anticipated emerged from our conversations. (citation to support the open-coding process). As I began to draw various themes together, as well as refocused my research on the question of multiliteracies and teaching paradigms, I found that my information covered much more than specific pedagogical strategies for working with visual texts, but also themes around teacher attitudes about the role of content and the visual component of these texts, as well as the accessibility

and transferability of using these texts with more traditional texts. These findings will be addressed in greater depth in the next chapter.

### **7.5 Research Challenges and Positional Complexities**

As a researcher, I approached my interviews with my unique biases and positionalities that most likely influenced how participants saw and responded to me. I entered the research with the opinion that graphic novels were rich texts worthy of analysis and that their incorporation would provide positive educational opportunities in the ELA curriculum. I was interested in the question of the extent teachers were able to draw upon the visual resources of these texts. Such an orientation doubtlessly influenced my questions and reactions to teachers' responses, which may have in turn influenced how they responded. However, my goal was to try and understand whatever work the teachers did, which hopefully elicited honest and true to practice responses.

Regarding my positionality, as an undergraduate at an elite liberal arts college aspiring to be a teacher, I both occupied a privileged position as well as a less powerful one. Regarding age and teaching experience, all the teachers I interviewed were far more knowledgeable and experienced in the profession and therefore occupy superior positions vis-à-vis my novice teaching identity. However, as a researcher from an elite college, I occupy a privileged position vis-à-vis my research subjects. As discussed by Diane Wolf (1996) in her work "Situating Feminist Dilemmas in Fieldwork," the question of the power of the researcher to represent the researched poses a dilemma for all qualitative research. Even as a researcher may feel that the research subjects may occupy a more powerful positionality in relation to the researcher, ultimately the researcher holds a great deal of power over the researched both in the research process as well as in the writing up

of the research. Because the author holds the last word on how the research subject is represented in the final written product, I hold the knowledge of this privileged position in mind as I represent the teachers whom I interviewed. My aim in representing their work with graphic novels is not to criticize or denigrate their pedagogy, but to raise questions about what possibilities for multiple literacies their work demonstrates and what are the constraints on their pedagogy that may exist due to context.

Regarding the scope of my research, I am able to represent the teaching experiences of educators at the sites of convenience where I was able to obtain contacts and therefore this work cannot be seen as representative of the larger teaching profession. However, I would like to speculatively address the fact that none of the teachers I interviewed worked in large comprehensive high schools but instead were concentrated in private or specialty public schools. More research, such as a survey study sent out to a range of types of schools in a variety of geographical and school-type settings, would be necessary in order to determine whether this fact is indicative of a larger trend.

## **Chapter 8: How Teachers Use Graphic Texts**

In this chapter, I will first provide the school and curricular background that contextualizes each teacher's incorporation of graphic texts into their classroom. I then argue that these contextual factors, along with teachers' personal curricular goals, influence their approach to graphic texts. In light of my initial research question regarding how teachers address the visual portions of the texts, I categorize teachers' use of graphic novels as falling upon a spectrum based on their respective curricular goals. I will argue that the extent to which teachers engage with various modalities in these texts and the literacies they elicit depended both on the teachers' goals and their understanding of the affordances of these texts. Chapters nine and ten will address the broader implications of why teachers use graphic texts.

### **8.1 School and Curricular Contexts**

#### Everton School

Everton School is a private Pre-K-12 Quaker school in the greater Philadelphia area. Located on a sprawling campus, the school is home to approximately 100 day students in the middle school (6<sup>th</sup>-8<sup>th</sup> grade) and 400 students in the high school, where the majority board from 9<sup>th</sup>-12<sup>th</sup> grade. Tuition for boarding students is around \$50,000, while middle school and day students' tuition is around \$30,000. Nearly half of the high school's families receive some form of financial aid. One fourth of the student body are students of color, while ten percent are international students, representing eighteen different countries. The Quaker values of the school guide its mission to have students recognize their individual strengths while living in a diverse community, in order to prepare them to be leaders for a better world.



### *Middle School-Stephanie*

Everton's middle school is small, with one English teacher per grade, making Stephanie the only teacher for the 8th grade. The 8<sup>th</sup> grade English curriculum is part of a spiraled curriculum that builds off of the work students have done in their 6<sup>th</sup> and 7<sup>th</sup> grade English classes, a connection the three English teachers in the middle school intentionally build into the English program. Students do work around identity in 7<sup>th</sup> grade, thus the 8<sup>th</sup> grade English curriculum's focus on discovering one's identity and placing it in a broader context extends the work students have done in previous years while widening the context. Thus, 8<sup>th</sup> grade English includes units on poetry, *The House on Mango Street*, short stories, *The Boy Who Harnessed the Wind*, *Persepolis* and *Peace Like a River*. In some years, Stephanie will collaborate with the other subject teachers to create an interdisciplinary unit or project. For example, this year the 8th grade team did a unit around *The Boy Who Harnessed the Wind* where math, science, English, and history teachers simultaneously did units that supported the story. This project will ultimately result in a "big build" in which students will work together across the curriculum to build a scaled-up windmill. In the past, Stephanie has worked with the history teacher to align units so that students are learning about a particular area of the world or time period that corresponds to the English readings. For example, in history the students learn about religion in the Middle East and Iran while in English the students read *Persepolis*.

### *High School ESOL-Melanie and Edmund*

Everton's large international student population has resulted in the creation of an English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) program at the high school level, where international students are placed in a supplementary ESOL class in addition to

their regular core classes. International students who attend for all four years of high school are required to take this class in order to attain competitive English language proficiency for college entrance, while exchange students at the school for only a year are not required to be a part of the program. As students are in regular classes for all core subjects, including English, the ESOL classes focus on language-specific needs, acting as an add-on rather than an all-encompassing program. The ESOL teachers are not responsible for teaching literary analysis or essay writing, but instead focus on pronunciation, vocabulary, idioms, speaking skills, bringing an opinion, reflection, or connection to a discussion, annotating readings, and other specific concerns. Both Edmund and Melanie begin the year with general essays, then a play, and end with a graphic novel, drawing upon text forms that are less word-dense but still allow for discussion of complex and relevant subjects. A key theme woven through the curriculum seems to be the development of cultural literacy through discussing various U.S. specific themes (such as urban poverty and the US legal system, two foci of Melanie's units) or wider questions on a global scale (e.g. Edmund's use of *Persepolis* as a basis for a larger research project into the cultural and historical context of Iran).

#### Reach Charter School: Rose

Reach Charter is a public charter middle school located in Harlem, New York City and serves students grades 5-8. Most of the student population is on free or reduced lunch, with a large West African immigrant population (around 30% of students), as well as portions of African American and Latino students. The school's charter focuses on the creation of a rigorous, standards-based curriculum in order to ensure students' high school and college readiness. The school places an emphasis on structure and discipline

through the implementation of uniforms and character development as a precursor to academic success. Students are referred to as “scholars,” aligning with larger goals of reinforcing academic mentality through an extended school day and year and increased instructional time in literacy and mathematics. The school uses an Integrated Collaborative Teaching Model for all core classes, which means that there are two teachers in every classroom so that students with IEPs are integrated in the general education classroom. Curriculum development occurs around six-week long units, where teachers select two to three Common Core standards that will be the primary focus of the unit. For example, Rose and her co-teacher’s first unit of the year was the graphic novel unit, where they focused on the writing standard of “writing a narrative” and the reading standards of “using text evidence” and “author’s craft.” The unit that followed focused on fantasy and dystopian novels, where students would each use an independent reading book in the genre to engage with skills and activities of the unit.

#### Lang Prep High School- Andrew

Lang Prep is a recently opened public high school in Manhattan, New York City and a member of the N.Y. State Consortium for Performance Standards. With about 120 students in each class, the student population is around 40% Latino, 20% African American, 15% White, and 15% Asian and come from all parts of the city. The school’s mission highlights the importance of experience, questioning, reflection, and production, rather than just consumption of information, to the learning process. As part of the Consortium, students do not take the Regents exams for most subjects (students still must pass the English Language Arts Regents exams) but instead must complete a Performance Based Assessment Task in each of the core subjects. For English, this

assessment entails completing an extensive literary analysis paper that is reviewed by an external examiner.

The curriculum stresses variety, where students in all grades 9<sup>th</sup>-12<sup>th</sup> select from a menu of options for the core subject areas. Students are required to take an English/Literature class every semester and at least one year of a language. However, the two subject areas are placed together in the course catalogue as the teachers “see [them]selves as one department—[they] work in semiotic systems and focus on the task of meaning-making in multiple contexts” (Andrew, personal communication, March 10<sup>th</sup>, 2015). The curricular goals, decided on by the entire department, for language and literature are: “argument/claim, logic/reasoning, close reading, evidence quality, grammar, style, organization, connections with literary theory and criticism” (Andrew, personal communication, March 10<sup>th</sup>, 2015). 9<sup>th</sup> and 10<sup>th</sup> grade literature options include Memoirs, Verses, Playing with Gender, Fantastical Worlds, and True Stories. 11<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup> grade offer such selections as Pysch Lit, Literary Theory, the Modern Epic, Narrative Time, and AP English Literature.

Certain curricular features are congruent across classes, such as 100-minute periods for English, where in 9<sup>th</sup> and 10<sup>th</sup> grade the first 30 minutes are devoted to independent reading time. Book talks, where twice a week students have the opportunity to “pitch” the book that they are reading to their peers in order to persuade them to read the text as well, happen in all classes. Students may engage with graphic novels during this independent reading time, where students select from numerous options on the bookshelves. Additionally, Andrew’s course this year on *telenovelas* (a Spanish-language serial drama similar to English-language soap operas in content), a class focused on

Spanish-language development, anthropological lenses, film theory, and visual and literary analysis, provides another type of example of graphic texts' inclusion in the curriculum. While this thesis does not address the full range of visual texts, instead focusing primarily on graphic novels, I felt that Andrew's work with *telenovela* brought an interesting perspective to the teaching of graphic texts and presented significant overlap with teaching the visual in graphic text.

#### Cherry Blossom Friends School-Harvey

Cherry Blossom, another private K-12 Friends school in the greater Philadelphia area, explains its mission as developing students' intellectual, spiritual, and ethical selves in order to peacefully transform the world. With a student body of approximately 550 in the middle and high school, the school maintains a 14-student average class size and a 7:1 student/teacher ratio. Tuition costs around \$30,000 for Upper school students, however, the school's legacy and alumni allow for a generous financial aid pool. The English department has 12 members, with 3 to 4 teachers teaching a grade level. Members of a grade team meet on a weekly basis to discuss lesson planning and any grade specific questions. The curriculum for each grade is standardized across teachers with little to no variation, as the school believes in the worth of students studying a common body of literature.

9<sup>th</sup> grade, literature and composition I, focuses on the various literary genres and emphasizes the development of the five paragraph essay. Major works include *The Piano Lesson*, *The Catcher in the Rye*, *Persepolis*, and *Macbeth*. Harvey's work with graphic novels resulted in the inclusion of *Persepolis* in the standard 9<sup>th</sup> grade curriculum. 10<sup>th</sup> grade continues the emphasis on literature and writing from 9<sup>th</sup> grade with the

development of students' literary analysis and analytical writing skills through extended study of the tragic form and the dilemma of self in society, resulting in an exploration of the personal essay form. The major works for 10<sup>th</sup> grade are *Antigone*, *A Lesson Before Dying*, *Death of a Salesman*, *Things Fall Apart*, *Twelfth Night*, *The Things They Carried*, and *Ru*. Both 9<sup>th</sup> and 10<sup>th</sup> grade include the study of a select film to look at this form as text. 11<sup>th</sup> grade features American literature, while 12<sup>th</sup> grade examines literature of the Western world within its cultural and historical context, each for two semesters. 11<sup>th</sup> grade in the past has featured both the prose version of *City of Glass* and a graphic novel version, however, the text has recently fallen out of the curriculum. The exception from the standard curriculum is the spring seminar, the third trimester of the students' junior and senior years, which feature a range of courses designed by the English teachers around their particular interests and specialties. Selections include Law in Literature, Queer Voices in Literature, Modern Short Stories, Athletes in Literature, and Graphic Novels.

## 8.2 Spectrum of Use

When I began my interview study, I conducted my interviews with the intention of identifying how teachers construct a pedagogy of graphic novels. What I found from my informants' answers is that the incorporation of graphic novels into the ELA curriculum is far more complicated than simply constructing a specific kind of pedagogy to address a new medium. Instead, the teachers' responses reflected the competing demands on English language arts educators, some discipline wide while others are school context and student population specific. Thus, my research questions shifted to ask: How do teachers use graphic texts in their curriculum and why do they use them? Do

the teachers' use of graphic texts reflect a change in the ELA teaching paradigm, reflecting the kind of pedagogy the New London Group (1996) might argue for, or an adherence to the present paradigm?

This section will specifically address how teachers attended to the visual portions of the graphic texts. I found that teachers explicitly taught the visual and multimodal components of the graphic texts to varying extents, with some not discussing this facet at all while others provided students with explicit language and analytical frameworks for reading and thinking about the visual and multimodal dimension of these texts. The amount that teachers did so was dictated by larger goals for text within the curricular context, which, for the most part, reflected a literature and literary analysis focused ELA paradigm. However, within this paradigm, the teachers, to varying extents, drew upon the visual and multimodal possibilities that graphic texts afford. In the section below, I will describe and analyze how each teacher used graphic texts and visual/multimodal literacy to further their specific curricular goals, mediated by school and student population contexts. A further discussion of the why behind teachers' use of graphic text as well as the tensions raised by this framing will follow in the next two chapters.

#### *ESOL Classes: Making Use of Graphic Novels*

Melanie describes her engagement with the graphic novel in her class as: "I don't know that I feel that I even teach it, I feel more that I use it or make use of it" (Melanie, 11/13/14). This idea of *using* graphic novels as a tool rather than as the primary object of study characterizes my interviews with the ESOL teachers Melanie and Edmund. Graphic novels are a means to an end; for Melanie, the means to getting her students to engage in language production, both in speech and in writing around an interesting but manageable

text, while for Edmund, *Persepolis* serves as a fun three day filler on a culture other than students' home cultures. This distinction echoes the one put forth by Flood *et al.* (2000) in their discussion of the role of visual media in literacy education. In their chapter, Flood *et al.* (2000) discuss both how teachers can teach *with* visual media, incorporating such text into the classroom to enhance students' learning experiences (such as showing the film version of a book students read, or using a PowerPoint presentation to teach concepts) and *teach* visual media by developing students' abilities to interpret visual texts. The ESOL classes reflect the former use of graphic novels, where the various visual resources inherent to the composition of graphic novels are either engaged with in a very surface level way or not at all. For example, for each chapter Melanie has students keep a journal where they write a summary of the chapter, create a visual, and then write a response. However, as she herself admitted, the creation of a visual seems redundant, as *Fist, Stick, Knife, Gun* is already using a significant image from each chapter as the chapter title in the table of contents. Thus, Feinstein and Hagerty's (1993) second component of visual literacy, that of creating a visualization externally becomes moot. Ultimately, Melanie chooses not to focus on developing students' visual literacy by failing to engage them in reading a graphic text with the intent of attending to the analytical possibilities the visual affords.

Instead, the ESOL teachers draw upon the language and topical resources offered by these less text-dense books. Melanie, in particular, highlighted the fact that she approaches her text, *Fist Stick Knife Gun*, as a language teacher rather than a literature teacher, as students receive literature and writing instruction elsewhere. This school feature proves important for the kind of work on which the ESOL teachers are able to



focus. At the small boarding school at which these two teachers work, international students are provided with various levels of ESOL classes to specifically target language and cultural adjustment, while remaining in the regular English literature classes with their peers. Of particular interest is their focus on cultural literacy, expressed through a design of curriculum around understanding U.S. specific conflicts and systems as well as attention to American slang and other culturally specific bits of language. ESOL at Everton represents the kind of global connectedness and cultural and linguistic diversity present in U.S. schools that the New London Group (1996) identifies in their call to expand literacies to incorporate this larger world. As the New London Group (1996) claims, “the very nature of language learning has changed” (p.64) as evidenced by these international students who must learn to navigate U.S. culture, American English, and the U.S. educational system without necessarily having to conform to an assimilationist narrative of immigration. Both Boatright (2010) and Chun (2009) address the ways in which the content of graphic novels as well as the form can be helpful for working with English Language Learners (ELLs). Boatright’s (2010) work is focused on the ways in which the U.S. immigrant experience is portrayed and how a discussion of the multiplicity of this representation would be productive for students to critically think about the current discourses around immigration, while Chun (2009) sees *Maus* as a possible entry for students into a complex historical moment that has very present implications around racism and power relations. Chun (2009) discusses the ways in which the graphic novel allowed for the scaffolding of traditional literacy skills, but also discussions around reading visual texts and connections to history, demonstrating that these texts can be used with students on multiple levels, depending on a teacher’s goal.

Melanie's purposes, as a language rather than literature teacher, focus on providing students with the opportunity to engage in meaningful language development through the development of students' cultural literacies and school-based literacies, rather than their visual literacy and analysis skills.

While Melanie acknowledges that it would be interesting to draw upon the visual resources, she explains that because of her pedagogical focus she chooses to forefront the themes of the graphic novel rather than the form. This idea of purpose emerges when she said, "So in a way it's wasted but it serves different purposes, it's wasted in that there are whole other levels [such as visual analysis] but it totally serves my purposes on getting, that it's exciting to me that they can get access to [reading a rich-content graphic novel] in a language class where they might have been just doing grammar exercises. Because you want kids to think about things that are important, that you need to know in life" (Melanie, 11/13/14). For Melanie, the most important component of the text is the content, an idea that will be explored more in-depth in the next chapter.

Melanie's curricular concerns for her class lead her to focus on multiliteracies in other ways, such as through the use of a range of modal inputs for students. For a single unit, she will have students listen to a rap song or an NPR story about the subject, read and respond to a news story, read a graphic novel or play that addresses that particular issue in U.S. culture, and engage in debates and discussions in class on the topic. Her focus is on real-world relevancy and cultural literacy, specifically targeting this group of international students. Many of the exercises she has students do, such as annotating and then responding to a current event news story every week, arose out of perceived deficits in the international students' academic skills by other teachers in the school. The

aforementioned activity was developed after a teacher remarked that the international students did not know how to *respond to* rather than just summarize readings. Thus, Melanie's pedagogy includes explicit instruction in school literacies, which, using Gallego and Hollingsworth's (2000) definition, encompasses the "learning of interpretive and communicative processes needed to adapt socially to school and other dominant language contexts" (p.5).

Melanie's work as an ESOL teacher thus extends far beyond teaching her international students new vocabulary, proper pronunciation, and correct grammar structures. In accordance with her pedagogical goals of providing international students with information regarding U.S. culture and practice in U.S. specific school skills and styles, Melanie draws upon the range of textual resources available to her, including a graphic novel, but also popular music, movies, news articles, podcasts, plays, etc. Melanie's and Edmund's classes fall outside of the ELA teaching paradigm revolving around literature, instead representing the different paradigm of the language teacher in an English-speaking context. Examining how graphic novels are used in ESOL classes provides insight into the range of possible ways that graphic novels are seen in a variety of kinds of English classes. The following classes are (generally) more traditional English language arts classes and thus attend to the literature and analytical side of graphic novel pedagogy, which will be the primary focus of my analysis.

*Rose's Class: The Role of Common Core in Shaping Curricular Goals*

In Rose's co-taught 7<sup>th</sup> grade ELA classroom at a charter school in New York, graphic novels compose the opening six week unit meant to engage students in age-appropriate themes with on-grade level texts. Curricular development revolves around the

Common Core, which is “pretty dominate in everything because it’s all about getting the kids to pass the state tests, unfortunately” (Rose, 10/15/14). Rose, throughout her interview, referred to the ways in which this set of standards shapes her curriculum in order to help students pass aligned state assessments. Thus, all activities are created with specific skills outlined by the Common Core in mind, such as “use of text evidence” and “author’s craft” and “writing a narrative.” In particular, Rose and her co-teacher designed the entire graphic novel unit in order to help students develop their ability to use “text evidence,” where graphic novels become particularly useful in scaffolding this skill. Rose explains that, “with the Common Core, it’s really difficult to get all the students practicing the skills that they need to be learning with grade level texts, because a lot of them are ‘behind’ air quotes, where they need to be” (Rose, 10/15/14). Because of this need to “catch students up,” grade-level texts like *Smile* and *American Born Chinese*, which also allow for different levels of entry into the text for students, are an ideal way to begin the school year. Rose conceptualizes the images in the graphic novels as a scaffold for students who require extra support for their reading comprehension. In particular, the images attached to words help students to access the texts in ways that support their skills in using text evidence. A further exploration of the idea of the accessibility of graphic novels will occur in the next chapter.

Throughout the interview, Rose constantly connected the activities and thought process behind using graphic novels to meeting the Common Core standards for the unit. For example, when explaining the initial lessons, which used comic strips like *Calvin & Hobbes* and *Farside*, Rose emphasized how she and her co-teacher structured questions around analyzing the panels through the lens of “author’s craft.” She explained that,

The very first thing we looked at was panels, then details of the images, there's this one panel without any words; what's the author trying to show you with these images? Everything that he did was an intentional choice. Why did he make these choices? That we were hoping to get at because so much of the Common Core is focused on "author's craft" and trying to explain what the author is trying to do, so we were hoping that that would be a useful entry point to get the kids used to talking about what the author is doing. (Rose, 10/15/14)

Such a structuring of the lesson allows for the emphasis of specific, discreet skills for analyzing the literary intentions of an author. While other teachers emphasized particular curricular goals around students' development of an understanding of traditional literary devices and analysis skills, Rose's curriculum was limited to three specific goals because of the need for her lessons to assign explicitly with CCSS.

This focus on specific Common Core goals demonstrates the way in which graphic novels are used to accomplish the acquisition of particular skills outlined by the CCSS. The language describing the purposes of the use of these texts thus becomes very functional, where graphic texts provide a means to acquire a particular skill set. Of particular note is the construction of the final assessment. Students write a short story narrative that they then translate into a graphic narrative. The purpose of the assignment was not for students "to get too intense about the artwork" but instead to "be thoughtful about what they were putting into the images" (Rose, 10/15/14), placing emphasis on students' demonstration of an understanding of the concepts, not necessarily on their creative output. They are asked to attend to the elements of a graphic novel that they have discussed in class, such as panels, narrative boxes, dialogue, "exploding the moment," and picture/word coordination. Particular emphasis is placed on panel usage, dialogue, and narration boxes, with the idea of developing the students' understanding of using the

dialogue, narration, and visuals to build on one another to tell the story. However, the act of translation from written text to a combined visual and verbal text proved difficult for many students, some of whom resorted to transcribing their story into the narration boxes rather than specifically choosing the most effective way to communicate the idea.

The terms introduced by this exercise are the kinds of elements of comics highlighted by McCloud (1994) and Eisner (1985) in their discussion of a language of comics, to use McCloud's (1994) phrase. Using the New London Group's (1996) concept of meta-language, I raise the question of whether the introduction of vocabulary to describe comics and graphic text is enough to meet the criteria set out by their document. For a meta-language to be useful, it must, "Be capable of supporting sophisticated critical analysis of language and other semiotic systems... [its] primary purpose... should be to identify and explain differences between texts, and relate these to the contexts of culture and situation in which they seem to work" (p.77). At a 7<sup>th</sup> grade level, it may be that grasping the multimodal ways in which graphic texts work is above the students' capacity. However, I would argue that the rigidity of having to adhere to specific Common Core standards may have resulted in Rose not emphasizing the ways in which the words and pictures can interact to make complex meanings in her lessons. Because the project focuses more on meeting the requirements of the Common Core standard for writing a narrative, a standard that does not specifically make reference to those more unique affordances that such a multimodal text could offer, the project does not utilize the full potential of graphic novels. The compartmentalization of skills for manipulating text that the Common Core seems to encourage is reflected in this curriculum, rather than a more holistic approach towards literary analysis skills that build towards a larger

meaning-making project that is reflected in the other participants' responses. I see the constraints of the Common Core as a key driver of this skills-based model, which reflect the differing demands placed upon teachers in a public, and particularly a charter, school context in regards to testing and standards compared to the private schools in this study.

*Andrew and Stephanie's classes: Interdisciplinary Approaches*

I have grouped Andrew and Stephanie's classrooms together due to the similarities I see in their approach to teaching English language arts. However, their classroom contexts differ greatly, so I will provide a brief overview of how each teacher approaches graphic texts before examining their overlap. Andrew's work at Lang Prep, a public school in New York City, has been shaped by his own pedagogical stance as well as his school's affordances for English classes. Because of the union between language and literature in the school, Andrew currently teaches a course on *telenovelas* that draws from multiple disciplines (Spanish language, anthropology, literary and visual analysis, film theory, etc.) in order to explore the "interpretive process" in analyzing the form of the *telenovela*. *Telenovela* is a form of TV serial drama, similar to soap opera, popular in Latin America.

Andrew's approach to teaching *telenovela* mirrors broader questions about teaching graphic texts in the ELA curriculum, namely, how to analyze the visual and how to make choices about focus for pedagogy. For example, while watching a *telenovela* Andrew will pause on a particular frame and students will analyze the image using the language of art history and visual analysis like line, form, style, composition etc. They will also discuss how the frame fits into the larger context of what was happening in the

story before this moment (narrative analysis), or focus on the language aspect, or cultural significance of the work, building these different analytical tools into a larger interpretation process. Andrew uses explicit transfer of skills and naming what students notice as tools for building students' meta-languages. For example, Andrew tells students explicitly ““you know how we have these literary devices? Now we have visual devices”” (Andrew, 10/28/14). Then, as students use specific tools to analyze the visual text, he names what students are already saying, ““What Beth is bringing up is line, or what Tyrell is really interested is thinking about composition”” (Andrew, 10/28/14). These terms then get added to the visual analysis toolbox on the wall, which “has these key words that act as tools as we learn to look” (Andrew, 10/28/14). Through such teaching strategies, Andrew builds students' visual vocabulary as well as places analysis skills within a larger interpretive process. Andrew's approach specifically relates to the examination of the meaning-making process promoted by the New London Group (1996) and uses disciplinary discourses as the available designs from which students can construct meanings around a given text.

Andrew engages in a similar kind of strategy in how he helps students engage with graphic novels during independent reading time. Because 9<sup>th</sup> and 10<sup>th</sup> graders have 30 minutes of independent reading time, Andrew uses that time to conference with students, checking for comprehension, reaction, as well as analysis. With graphic novels, he engages students in a mini-visual analysis, without necessarily using the formal terms, but instead asking such questions as, “What in the text made you think that? What kind of structural elements are at work here?” (Andrew, 10/28/14) The goal with this reading



time is to get students working with literary devices, such as thinking about theme, diction, and character; so graphic novels are also discussed in these literary terms.

Stephanie's work at Everton's middle school, a small Quaker K-12 private institution, and personal background in art history and graphic art seem to influence her unique approach to 8<sup>th</sup> grade English. Stephanie's class includes a number of interdisciplinary projects and coordination with other subject teachers as well as the inclusion of different medium and input on a particular unit's topic. The course includes a poetry unit where students do a book binding activity as well as look at Modernist paintings in conjunction with reading Modernist poems. She uses a Doonesbury comic on social calculus to complement the work on social identity the students are doing while reading *The House on Mango Street*. The unit we discussed the most was her graphic novel unit, which draws upon a range of visual activities around the graphic novel *Persepolis* and portions of *Maus*. At the beginning she includes a lesson on terminology so students are familiar with words such as gutter, word balloons, gesture, etc. For one of the chapters, she whites out all the words and has students discuss what they perceive about the story based on the images. At the end of the unit

[students] write a summary of what they took away from the story, what they think is a powerful message or meaning and they write about it and then [she] ha[s] them flip the page over and illustrate that lesson graphically, and then they get to choose which one they felt better represented their idea, whether they used words or the images.  
(Stephanie, 12/4/14)

The unit culminates in students creating their own graphic narrative on a similar theme as and in the style of *Persepolis*. I see the proliferation of activities explicitly addressing the visual portions of the texts that actively engage students in analysis of the visual as evidence for the development of students' visual literacy. Such an approach to graphic

texts provides students with a language for the visual and then operationalizes it in the analytical practice.

Stephanie's personal background as well as her school context allows her to engage with graphic texts from an interdisciplinary angle. Her explanation for her approach is as follows:

I guess my art history background, I view it really, it's a very cross-disciplinary discipline. So that's informed, that's probably why I teach graphic novels because I have a certain comfort with art, visual things, and I'm drawn to them personally. But the idea then that, I'm using art in English class with history, just having different disciplines inform kind of a more well rounded picture of a text that you're reading. (Stephanie, 12/4/14)

I would argue that along with her own personal comfort with various mediums of and approaches to text, the small class sizes and private school atmosphere of collaboration across subject teachers helps facilitate a focus on a more collaborative and project-based approach to teaching texts. Additionally, while Stephanie's goals as an ELA teacher remain focused on the same kinds of literary analysis skills of theme, symbolism, character, etc. as the other ELA teachers, her interdisciplinary mindset helps her draw from a range of analytical toolkits in her curriculum design.

A number of overlapping features between these two teachers' pedagogy struck me as characteristic of an interdisciplinary approach to texts and an openness to exploring texts in varied ways in the classroom. Both are interested in interdisciplinary intersections, meaning that their classes draw upon a range of text types, modalities and skills. Both see transfer of those skills across texts as important and fundamental to teaching. Thus, Andrew's *telenovela* course uses texts from multiple disciplines (such as readings from anthropology, language from art history, Spanish language translation) in

order to analyze a specific kind of text, the *telenovela*. However, more than just developing students' understandings of the *telenovela* form, the purpose of such an approach is to emphasize the idea that “the interpretive process is this dialectical tacking between the particular, closely analyzing in order to make larger claims in a kind of abstract realm” (Andrew, 10/28/14), a process that he discusses explicitly with his students. His engagement with students in independent reading of graphic novels also reflects this approach to meaning-making. He uses graphic novels to develop the same recognition of literary devices and analysis as he does with the prose novels, while utilizing the graphic elements in this process.

Stephanie weaves literary analysis with history and art and visual analysis, drawing upon multiple kinds of texts to provide multiple points of entry into the analytical skills and concepts she wants her students to develop. This interdisciplinary approach brings graphic novels like *Persepolis* and *Maus* into the classroom, but also the use of political cartoons and modernist paintings, as well as visual approaches and techniques to prose texts (e.g. visual representations of key scenes). When teaching graphic texts, both Andrew and Stephanie provide students with visual vocabulary (Andrew's visual toolkit word wall, Stephanie's graphic novel vocabulary overview) and then encourage them to apply this vocabulary to their textual analysis. Stephanie provides students with chances to engage with texts visually, both through the final graphic narrative project, but also through activities such as talking about what meaning is derived just from the pictures and storyboarding. By applying these interdisciplinary approaches to their teaching, particularly through the use of graphic texts, these teachers provide students with multiple points of entry into particular content or texts as well as

demonstrate that analysis skills for one kind of text can be transferred to another text. Both these teachers engage students in a multimodal meaning-making process with a number of different text types. Thus, such an approach allows for a multifaceted use of the various affordances of both graphic texts as well as visual approaches to prose texts, features that also appear in the following teacher's graphic novel use.

### *Harvey's Class: A Class of Graphic Novels*

Out of all my interviewees, Harvey has spent the greatest amount of time and energy thinking about teaching graphic novels as a consequence of his extensive use of graphic novels in the classroom. At Cherry Blossom Friends where Harvey has taught in the upper school for seventeen years, Harvey developed his fourteen-week spring seminar on graphic novels. As a third trimester spring seminar, the course has the space to be more “avant-garde experimental” than the normal standardized English curriculum. Thus, the fact that Harvey has an entire course devoted to graphic novels means that he has had to develop a myriad of ways of approaching the graphic novels. This also him provided more extensive time to study the medium with an exclusive focus, allowing for each text to be addressed from multiple points (such as the plot, the characters, the themes, the style, the execution), as well as a range of creative visual assessments. In some ways he falls on the more traditional English teacher side of the spectrum (he lacks the explicit interdisciplinary focus of Stephanie and Andrew), but incorporating graphic novels has allowed him to branch out and see different *kinds* of analysis, which is reflected in his statement that, “I love looking at the art; I love examining the construction of panels. It’s a whole different way of analysis that I find very interesting” (Harvey, 11/6/14). In other

portions of the interview, he mentions that graphic novels both “call on different skills” and have “allowed for reading in, not in a different context, but in a wider context” (Harvey, 11/6/14). In contrast to Andrew’s view of a universal “interpretation process,” Harvey highlights how visual analysis can require different skills and that students sometimes need help learning how to engage with a graphic novel analytically.

Harvey begins the graphic novel course with a unit that addresses the ways in which reading a graphic novel is different from reading a prose novel. He uses Scot McCloud’s (1994) *Understanding Comics* as his primary text for that unit, where he addresses the vocabulary of graphic texts, but also “how text is a kind of image, how text and image work together, and that idea that when you’re reading the graphic novel you can’t just read the text nor can you just look at the pictures. You have to integrate them both” (Harvey, 11/6/14). Such an in-depth exploration of the form provides students with an analytical lens through which to examine the unique qualities of graphic texts, particularly the visual and multimodal portions. The graphic texts he uses cover a range of topics, with such a diverse list of titles as *God Loves Man Kills* (an X-Men superhero comic), *Pride of Baghdad*, *American Born Chinese*, *In the Middle*, *Classic Comics*, *Maus*, and various graphic novel forms of *Macbeth*. He uses these texts as works of literature, having students engage in discussions around literary devices, themes, character, while encouraging students to bring their visual analysis tools to these texts. Like the other teachers, Harvey sees graphic novels as a way to build a specific analytical skill set that can transfer across to analysis of prose, but also provide a new way of thinking that can be applied to prose analysis. I will address this idea of different kinds of transfer more in the next chapter.

A unique feature of Harvey's class is his focus on creativity and intertextuality. He explains that graphic novels can "create bridges across different kinds of content and even across already existing stories" (Harvey, 11/6/15), providing examples from texts that he uses in class. He seems to have selected texts that capitalize on a kind of intertextuality (the dialogical interrelationship between text), usually defined by direct allusion to previous texts in various mediums (Todorov, 1984). In particular, he mentioned a text called *Classic Comics*, which takes cartoon and comic strip characters like Garfield and Blondie in order to create a graphic version of classical texts such as the Garden of Eden story or *The Scarlet Letter*, which capitalizes on literary allusion to give new meanings to the portrayed stories. Such works employ remediation, the borrowing of direct content, such as the stories of classic literature and the characters of comic strips, in order to repurpose that content to create a new meaning (Bolter & Grusin, 1999). Another text he uses called *Pride of Baghdad*, utilizes intertextuality in the following ways:

[By] taking that real historical event and reinterpreting that event with these protagonists in a way that they've seen animals, you know, in a ton of cartoons being used, but used in a really serious way creates a bridge between a real historical event that becomes really accessible and then also expands their mind to the possibilities of how you tell stories. (Harvey, 11/6/14)

Harvey engages students in a discussion of how literary works draw upon both explicit and implicit connections to other texts and examines how that remediation of content fundamentally changes the meaning of that content. This theme of "bridging" connects the idea of intertextuality, or the interrelatedness of texts, with the sort of interdisciplinary work that Andrew and Stephanie focus on, while also privileging the creative nature of this process.

Harvey draws upon this creative energy in his assignments, asking students to do a range of writing assignments with specific foci. Although both Rose and Stephanie have students complete a graphic narrative assignment, they direct students not to focus on the artistic output but instead on demonstrating the kind of narrative skills using words and pictures that they have been learning about, to varying extents, in class. Harvey, in contrast, seems to place more emphasis on creative output, engaging students in a number of highly specific assignments that challenges them to think creatively like a graphic novel creator. For example, for the assignment following *Pride of Baghdad*, he has students create a comic where they anthropomorphize the characters in order to depict some element of their school experience. For their *Classic Comics* assignment, students choose a text read in the 11<sup>th</sup> grade American literature course and then use an existing cartoon, comic book, or graphic novel character to retell the story, engaging in remediation (Bolter & Grusin, 1999). Both of these assignments require students to think creatively both about the story they produce, but also about the texts that they have read both in the class and outside of it in order to demonstrate an understanding of the key elements needed to communicate effectively and compellingly. Harvey frames having more creative and open-ended assignments as arising naturally from the medium and that he felt that to ask students to write a traditional essay would be “not really respecting the genre itself” (Harvey, 11/6/14). For him, “a traditional essay forces the kids to think about the words, where [with graphic novels] we’re marrying word and image. So the assessment should really do that as well, in some creative way” (Harvey, 11/6/14). So while Harvey is able to address the more traditional English curriculum skills of literary

analysis through looking at plot, character, theme, motif etc., he is also able to bring in these more creative exercises due to the unique affordances of graphic novels.

## **Chapter 9: Why Teachers Use Graphic Texts**

My second framing question revolves around why graphic texts and graphic novels specifically are being incorporated into the curriculum? In light of the widening definition of ELA and the particular concern in the past two or three decades about changing technologies and their influence on literacies, I was not surprised to see my interviewees mirror back some of the language around media literacy and visual literacy. What did surprise me was the ways in which these broadened languages around text were not reflective of a complete shift in teaching paradigm in the practices around these texts that they described. Instead, these graphic texts were instead used as points of entry to help students access the essay-text literacy that a literature approach to ELA develops (Gee, 1990, p.62). Within this framework, students are able to transfer the skills and methods of analyzing text learned from reading prose text to their analysis of graphic text. And yet even within this framework, the teachers' practice reflects some kind of opening up of literacies through the use of these new and different kinds of texts. In particular, the idea that students can gain skills and competencies through the reading of graphic text that they can transfer to their work with prose text demonstrates that the development of various components of visual literacy and to some extent multimodal literacy may be occurring in some of these classrooms. Additionally, the teachers' attention to the content of the graphic novels they teach reflects both a use of these texts as literature with themes to be explored, but also an incorporation of a wider range of voices than canonical literature would represent. This results in themes that address the



present globalized world by exposing students to varied perspectives and relevant questions. While not all of the teachers' interviews touched on each of these themes, their responses in each dimension did not fall consistently along the spectrum of their engagement with the visual aspects of these texts, raising questions of the pervasiveness of the maintenance of hierarchies at all levels. In the sections below, I will explore the tensions within the themes of visual literacy, accessibility, content, and transfer before a discussion of the broader implications of teachers' use of graphic texts in chapter ten.

### **9.1 The Importance of the Visual**

As stressed by both the NCTE Executive Committee (2013) in their definition of 21<sup>st</sup> century literacies and the New London Group (1996), the digital age and new media technologies have fundamentally shifted the kinds of literacies that students already possess as well as need to develop. Teachers articulated this concept in their acknowledgement of the present forms of visual literacy students possess, alongside their assertions of the importance of schools developing those skills. Harvey summarized this point best when he said, "That they're such a, such a visual generation. Anyway, they've grown up looking at their phone screens and their computer screens. They are just so much more of a pictorial generation than I grew up with" (Harvey, 11/6/14). Harvey points to the present technologies of cell phones and computers as shapers of students' interactions with the visual. Andrew provides a slightly different perspective, viewing the question of the visual from the angle of what competencies his students already bring into the classroom. He explained, "I think my kids come in with a huge amount of knowledge around graphic text, particularly with digital graphic text. There's a lot of various literacies involved there" (Andrew, 10/28/14). Andrew acknowledges that students'

interactions with various graphic mediums have shaped their literacies, which then shapes how Andrew brings various texts into the classroom. In particular, the assumption of students' existing knowledge and interactions with the television medium may have shaped his decision to bring *telenovelas* in as a classroom text. Such a move allows Andrew to capitalize on literacies students already possess to scaffold their learning around these texts.

Both Harvey and Stephanie mention the utility of using graphic texts with visual learners, for whom providing texts that include some visual aspects works well with their style of learning. Stephanie sees graphic novels as providing a different kind of entry point for some of her students, reflected in her comment that, "I have a lot of visual learners who just, this is something they can access in a way that they have trouble with text" (Stephanie, 12/4/14). These comments can be seen as reflecting Flood et al.'s (2000) concept of internal access. Students who are more visually minded are able to access the information (i.e. store the textual information in their long-term memory) better when the text they encounter includes a visual component. The idea of a "visual learner" arises from the work of Howard Gardner (1983) through his theory of multiple intelligences. Students who learn best visually may demonstrate visual-spatial abilities. While visual intelligence sees these characteristics as inherent to a person, teachers may be using the idea of the visual learner to discuss visual literacy skills as well as innate modal affinities. In their increased use of graphic texts, these teachers may be unconsciously drawing the conclusion that this "visual generation" may be producing a greater number of "visual learners" who may not find the most success with traditional text types. They attempt to remedy this disconnect with the incorporation of graphic texts

into the classroom. While Harvey did not articulate this connection, a possible causal assumption may exist.

What the media literacy theorists, reflected in the words of Stephanie, have claimed is that with the proliferation of visual and digital media form, schools need to explicitly teach students how to analyze the meaning-making that occurs in these new forms and modalities. Stephanie explained that Everton Middle School explicitly incorporates these notions into their curriculum: “And we do a lot of that, talking with kids about media literacy, about advertisements. I show them some Doonesbury cartoons when we’re doing political stuff... There’s just a lot of critical thinking about what images mean and what sources you might have” (Stephanie, 12/4/14). While most of this work happens in the history class around discussions of the reliability of secondary sources, some overlap happens with discussions in the English classroom. The ELA theorists who discuss how graphic novels can be used to promote media and critical literacy do so in the context of the contents of the graphic novels (Boatright, 2010; Carter, 2007; Chun, 2009; Schwarz, 2007). I will analyze how teachers talk about the contents of the graphic novels they used and the connections to critical media literacies as well as cultural literacy in section three of this chapter. A key rationale for the importance of the visual was the idea of how the visual component of the text related to the accessibility of graphic text.

## **9.2 Accessibility**

Throughout five of the six interviews, the theme of the accessibility of graphic novels emerged as a key rationale behind teachers’ use of graphic novels. I argue that the ways in which teachers talk about the concept of access both signals the reinforcement of

hierarchical notions of text and literacy, where graphic text and visual literacy are seen as easier than or an intermediate step towards reading word-based prose texts developing word-based literacy, and reflects a larger idea of points of entry into meaning and content. This second point accounts for the varied literacies and competencies that students already possess or learn best from when engaging with text. It also sees graphic text as providing access to the kinds of complex ideas and themes that are the centerpiece of a conception of “literary” texts as those with meaningful and relevant discourse.

As listed by teachers, the main groups of students who benefited the most from graphic novels included reluctant readers—“a student who hasn’t had a lot of success with reading in the past, or doesn’t like reading, or doesn’t self-identify as a reader” (Andrew, 10/28/14)—, visual learners, visually artistic students, younger students and English Language Learners. The focus on “reluctant readers” or students who do not fare as well with text-dense books aligns well with the current literature from various library and English teaching journal articles touting graphic novels as attractive material for unwilling readers (Crawford, 2004; Snowball, 2005; Lam, 2011). The literature on this topic focuses on the engaging nature of these texts and students’ desire for a variety of kinds of texts, a focus that was reflected in the interviews. Teachers also commented on the decrease of text-on-page as a useful feature for this group. These teachers believe that the visuals multiple points of entry into a text. Monnin (2013) explains this idea of graphic novels creating greater access to reading comprehension by asserting that graphic texts provide various “windows” for readers into the text, “words window, images window, and words and images window” (p.37). Students, as readers, are able to access through whichever window works to build their understanding of the text.

In particular, the images can provide a point of access into a surface level comprehension of what is happening in the text. Harvey explains this multiple entry point concept:

The text and the picture, for some kids, feels like, uh, not just more to work with, uh, there's something very... concrete may not be the right word, but it's the one that's in my head, seeing the image, not having to create it yourself, for some kids that process of seeing the words, having to take them in and create the images in their head to hold that all together is really hard, so when there's an image that's provided that the words can be connected to, that can be useful. (Harvey, 11/6/14)

Harvey frames the accessibility of graphic novels through their provision of multiple sources of input for the interpretative act. The image connected to the words removes a level of abstractness from the act of understanding what exactly a text is saying. An earlier comment from Harvey supports this idea, when he says, "There has, I don't hear, often with a prose novel you hear kids say, 'I just don't understand it.' I hear that less with graphic novels because there's more ways to enter into the understanding through the text, through the visuals" (Harvey, 11/6/14). Rose's comment on accessibility concurs with Harvey's assessment: "there is the surface level where you can tell, every student in our class can look at the pictures and look at the words and tell what's happening, which might not be the case for some other texts that don't have images attached so it's kind of a scaffold for a lot of students who are, who need the extra support" (Rose, 10/15/14). Thus, the presence of the images provides Rose's students who may struggle with the reading comprehension involved in decoding prose-text with a scaffold for comprehending what is happening through the images. Both Harvey and Rose's comments imply, however, that the visual components of these texts are easier for

students to decode than the written components, a subject explored further by Scott McCloud (1994).

As McCloud (1994) theorizes, the concreteness of the visuals within graphic text is explained by the difference between pictures and writing. He claims that, “pictures are *received* information. We need no formal education to ‘get the message’” while “writing is *perceived* information. It takes time and specialized knowledge to decode the abstract symbols of language” (McCloud, 1993, p.49). Thus, pictures require less perception than words to be understood. However, “when pictures are more abstracted from ‘reality,’ they require greater levels of perception, more like words” (McCloud, 1993, p.49). Words work in the opposite way, the more direct the words are, the easier the perception, making them more like pictures. Because the perception process is faster for pictures, it stands to reason that students will comprehend the content of graphic novels with greater efficiency than the process of decoding prose text. However, Flood et al.’s (2000) description of external access argues that teachers may need to teach the decoding and comprehension of how non-print based texts work, something that rarely happens in classrooms. Only Harvey describes incorporating explicit instruction for students to understand, on a decoding and comprehension level, how to read graphic texts. Most of the other teachers assume that the accessibility of graphic text makes this reading process transparent. Harvey provides students with reading guides to help focus their reading process on what aspects of the text may be most important to attend to. Such instruction reveals the multiple layers of what “access” means in the interpretation of a given text. Reading different kinds of text requires going beyond simply knowing what is being represented to the question of why it is represented in that way and the symbolic or

greater meaning of that representation, the analytical portion of reading text. Such an understanding challenges traditional notions in schools that graphic texts, through the provision of extra context, lead to decreased involvement in the reading act. When the intricate interpretation process is revealed, graphic texts prove to have their own complexities.

Stephanie's discussion on accessibility addresses such a question of further levels of abstractness: "I think for this age group, I think students are moving beyond the concrete at different points, so having the visual is a really powerful way to have them understand symbolism, metaphor" (Stephanie, 12/4/14). For her, graphic novels can help make abstract literary concepts such as symbolism and metaphor concrete. The example she provides, a depiction of Uncle Sam as a representation of the U.S. in *Persepolis*, demonstrates how concrete images such as his beard and hat evoke a common recognition of the personage of Uncle Sam, a more tangible example for her 8<sup>th</sup> graders than perhaps a verbal explanation of symbolism. She identifies what McCloud (1994) would call "icon," which he uses to mean "any image used to represent a person, place, thing or **idea**" (p.27). Symbols, for McCloud (1994), are a category of icon, which are "the images we use to represent concepts, ideas and philosophies" (p.27). Applied to Stephanie's example, Uncle Sam becomes the symbol for the broad concept or philosophy of America. In this particular way, graphic texts not only provide access to the efficient perception of what is happening literally, but also provide greater access for students to an understanding of what is the greater meaning of what they see being represented. However, teachers may have to scaffold such a symbolic reading of the text,

demonstrating that the instruction and guidance around students' textual interpretations of graphic texts may involve similar pedagogical strategies as teaching prose text.

Teachers, in talking about the ways in which graphic novels reduced the complexity of the reading act, struggled to differentiate such an acknowledgement from an acknowledgement of the complexity of meaning and form that graphic novels also can contain. Most teachers who mentioned accessibility included a caveat in their statement such as “They’re like deceptively difficult” (Andrew, 10/28/14), or “They have their own subtleties” (Harvey, 11/6/14), or the “deceptively simple imagery [of graphic novels]” (Stephanie, 12/4/14), and “there are a lot of layers of kind of complexity” (Rose, 10/15/14) before continuing on with their explanation of the ways in which they are more easily accessed by students. Such seemingly ambivalent statements represent the difficulty of seeing and discussing simultaneously the concreteness of images and the abstractness of the concepts those images can communicate and the complex ways in which they can be interpreted. Ultimately, these teachers all want their students to be able to “see the power of cartoons and comics” (Stephanie, 12/4/14) while acknowledging the benefits to comprehension afforded by image. This tension arises from the conceptions of value around different kinds of texts existent in both in the English teaching practice as well as general society, which will be explored in the hierarchies of literacies section in the next chapter.

Teachers may be using the idea of “access” to explain their desire to provide students with multiple different points of entry and methods of getting to the core curricular goals (e.g. Rose uses the graphic novel unit to set up use of text evidence for the rest of the year, Stephanie sees visual texts providing a more concrete version of key



concepts like symbolism and “show, not tell”). One such goal is engagement with the content of the graphic novels. For English language learners, Melanie explained that text-dense books represent a process of “slogging through” for her students while a graphic novel “wouldn’t be slogging through, it would be getting good things to talk about in an efficient way,” due to the appearance of “more language substance but just less language” (Melanie, 11/13/14). Thus, students are able to access the content of the story, the main focus of her use of graphic texts, more immediately. Both Rose and Stephanie, who teach 7<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> grade respectively, saw graphic novels as particularly age-appropriate for middle school due to the medium providing high quality themes in an accessible way.

Teachers are providing as many kinds of access to the core practice of the English language arts (as teachers and their schools define that practice), the art of reading and interpreting text through a literary and narrative-focused lens. Allowing students to engage with literacies in which they may be more proficient or may allow for more efficient entry into the story, such as reading visual texts, can be seen as an effective way to access key concepts from an essay-text literacy tradition (Gee, 1990, p.62). Thus, teachers may see the utility of graphic texts as drawing upon students’ existent visual literacy from their personal literacy repertoires in order to further their school-based literacy around kind of reading one does in a literature class, a form of practice that one does within the ELA classroom. This kind of practice is tied up in how students are able to access the story, which requires the content to be worth accessing, from a teacher’s perspective.

### **9.3 The Role of Content/Subject**

For most of the teachers, a key feature of the graphic novels chosen was the access to a range of rich and complex stories with a variety of literary themes. Much like the ELA theorists mentioned in the “graphic novels in the classroom” chapter, my interview subjects had a broader definition of “literary” than just canonical prose text. Instead, the teachers seemed to adopt Versaci’s (2001) idea of literary as texts that make one, “consider people and cultures and ideas and conflicts and dreams and tragedies that we have not yet encountered in quite the same way before” (p.66-67). Such a redefinition seems to fit within the New London Group’s (1996) call for a pedagogy of multiliteracies that includes learning to interact with “linguistic differences and cultural difference” (p.64) in the context of an increasingly global and diverse world. Teachers have interpreted such a call in the field to mean the increased incorporation of texts representing a wider range of voices from around the world and more diverse perspectives on modern conflicts. My interviewees’ concerns included students not just learning about these ideas but also understanding that multiple viewpoints might exist as well as where these viewpoints are generated. Below I will review the various topics and purposes behind the inclusion of those topics articulated by the teachers.

Melanie uses *Fist, Stick, Knife, Gun* to both educate international students about the conditions of urban poverty in the U.S. as well as to engage them in critical conversations around the morality of the various situations described in the book. In particular, discussions take on broad questions about “why someone would resort to using violence?” or “why a good person might end up in a bad situation?” (Melanie, 11/13/14). The contents of the text becomes a sounding board for larger questions around social justice and morality, encouraging students to both develop and articulate their

opinions on a given topic but also to exercise empathy and perspective-taking, key goals listed by Beach et al. (2006). Similarly, Rose's use of *American Born Chinese* with her West African, African-American and Latino students allowed her to address their lack of interaction with Asian people and to talk about stereotypes and prejudice. She explains that she worried about how students would handle the text, as

stereotypes are a big big theme, and like not necessarily stereotypes they would be familiar with beforehand so we spent a lot of time beforehand front loading, being like, 'Hey let's see what we know about China? What are some pre-existing notions we have about China and Chinese people and how do we see that playing out in the text?' (Rose, 10/15/14)

She was ultimately very impressed by the maturity students displayed in their analysis of these difficult and complex topics. By using a text that raises these difficult questions, teachers have more opportunities to address the big questions, such as the role of race and stereotypes in America.

Both Stephanie and Harvey used texts that they saw as relevant to the current state of world affairs regarding the Middle East, specifically texts that would provide a different perspective than the one that students might receive elsewhere. Stephanie uses *Persepolis*, the story of a young girl who lives through the stark cultural changes that occurred during and after the Iranian Revolution, as a way of exposing students to an alternative narrative than those traditionally heard about the Middle East. She explicitly connects this goal to the post-9/11 era saying, "I lived through 9/11 so to me it was really important to give kids that kind of story that wasn't what they were getting from the media or really anywhere; I couldn't think of any other literature that was as effective for this age group" (Stephanie, 12/4/14). Her words reflect the idea of this text as accessible for students developmentally, but also the notion of access to varied voices and

perspectives. This idea of linking personal narratives to larger socio-historical power relations is critical to developing students' critical literacies (Chun, 2009). By providing students with access to the voices of people from different cultures, especially those who may bring a more critical perspective on the dominant culture in which the students reside, teachers can open up the classroom for the discussion of global power relations that usually produce particular kinds of stories. Ultimately, this allows for both the development of cultural literacy (New London Group, 1996) but also media and critical literacies (Chun, 2009; Schwarz, 2007). Harvey's use of *Pride of Baghdad* provides students with a different perspective on an actual historical event, the bombing of Baghdad and the escape of the lions from the Baghdad zoo, albeit through a fictional, anthropomorphized lens. Such work has the potential to subvert the dominant narratives around the meaning of the Iraq War that pervade the U.S. context as each lion begins to represent a different perspective on the Iraq War. As students are faced with multiple competing narratives, both within the text and within greater society, they can engage critically with the ways in which various actors construct their justification for war.

These goals fit with the broader goals of teaching literature in the ELA curriculum as articulated by various theorists, such as Beach et al. (2006) and Elbow (1990). The choice of "literary" books and ideas about quality, in this framework, revolve around the complexity of questions these texts raise and their relevance to important real world events. Thus, these texts create spaces for the development of critical literacies and cultural competence in an increasingly global world, through the medium of multimodal texts (New London Group, 1996). Additionally, Andrew discusses the ways in which graphic novels "interacts with what we would traditionally think of as a literary toolbox,

thinking about theme and symbolism and metaphors and stuff like that, but through the visual” (Andrew, 10/28/14). In this way, these texts act as accessible mediums through which teachers can have students both explore the literary aspects of text as well as connections to larger questions about humanity, culture, politics, etc. in an active engagement with the meaning-making process. Because teachers use graphic texts to engage in the same kinds of meaningful conversations around substantive topics as they would with more traditional prose texts, it follows that they would see the similarities in how they teach these different text types, as well as the possibility of transferring skills learned in one medium to another.

#### **9.4 Transfer of Skills**

Versaci (2001) identifies how comic books “in addition to making use of standard literary devices such as point of view, narrative, characterization, conflict, setting, tone, and theme, they also operate with a very complex poetics that blend the visual and the textual... By combining words and pictures, comic books force students to, rather directly, to reconcile these two means of expression” (p.64). Versaci (2001) comments on the dual affordances of graphic texts as literary texts as well as multimodal texts. This second facet requires students and teachers to address the unique ways in which the words and images of graphic texts come together. Within the teachers’ use of graphic texts, some teachers reconciled the two modalities present within their texts by providing students with languages of analysis for each modality (i.e. literary and visual analysis vocabulary and tools) and by demonstrating to students that both modalities were part of a larger system of meaning-making and analysis that could be transferred across

modality. Thus, teachers developed, to varying extents, a meta-language with their class (New London Group, 1996). While teachers are not using the language of multimodality necessarily with students, they are discussing the ways in which students are using the visuals and the words together to create meaning from the text. In this section, I will examine some of the ways in which the teachers talked about how they use the visual and the verbal components of text to reinforce overarching ideas around the meaning-making process, whether that was constrained to literary analysis or not.

The kind of visual literacy draw upon in the reading of graphic texts can be utilized in the analysis of all kinds of text. At Everton, Stephanie and her fellow English teachers in the middle school: “use graphic techniques in helping kids process story and create cartoons, for lack of better terminology, to help break down story lines, narratives, plot. I think we do use a lot of graphic imagery in middle school, partly because it’s age appropriate” (Stephanie, 12/4/14). As Feinstein and Hagerty (1993) outline, the ability to both visualize internally and to produce visual text are major components of visual literacy. Thus, having students both process prose text through visualization internally and then externally through a storyboard draws upon the same kinds of competencies as creating a graphic text as well as helps students develop visual literacies. Such techniques provide supports for the visual learners of this visual generation as well as create multiple points of access for understanding the story (Flood et al., 2000). The same kinds of questions around critical literacies and media literacies can arise from the use of these graphic techniques. Stephanie told a story of how a students’ representation of an African character as white in a cartoon drawn for a summer reading assignment “turned into a really interesting conversation about race too because when kids are depicting people

how they're drawing people, how they perceive people... So we had a conversation about what you bring to your reading and things like that" (Stephanie, 12/4/14). The main theme seems to be teachers' ability to capitalize on these teachable moments and to help make connections with students.

Harvey spoke explicitly about how he draws upon the skills students have developed while reading a graphic text in their work with prose texts. He explained:

I try to talk about the structure of a novel when I talk about a prose novel but because graphic novels are graphic, the structure is easier to see in some ways, and that actually really cool and that's really transferrable, so when I do a novel, when we read *Persepolis* in the 9<sup>th</sup> grade, when we go on to whatever comes after that, which might be *Macbeth* I think you can use the vocabulary and the skills of the graphic novel. 'If this scene were a page in a graphic novel, what would be the central image and why?' So you can, some of the skills you develop in reading the graphic novel you can then use to accentuate and sort of compartize [sic] or clarify some of the analysis of prose, or at least that's what I've found. (Harvey, 11/6/14)

Harvey uses competencies built during students' reading of a graphic text, such as visualizing the structure or identifying a central image, and explicitly asks students to transfer that knowledge into a different medium of text. Directionality goes both ways, where the knowledge and language students bring to texts from reading prose text can be applied to their reading of graphic texts. Harvey discussed the ways in which he draws comparisons for students:

You have to talk about the visuals as a language, since they are adept at reading prose and analyzing prose, you know, same way you're looking for patterns of words in prose, you're looking for patterns of images in text. So where are the transferable skills? In the same way that a character description becomes an anchor for a certain character in a prose novel, how is the way that character is drawn an anchor for us for that character? What is it about the way the author is choosing to stylize this character, and it can be anything from the clothing that they're wearing to the way the face is drawn, just some unique identifier. (Harvey, 11/6/14)

While Harvey's articulation of transferability was the most explicit, most other teachers demonstrated that they applied the skills they had developed with students on other texts or in other mediums to their reading of graphic texts, or used graphic texts as a way to develop skills that could then be applied to prose text. Rose's goal during her graphic novel unit was "to get them using text evidence because that's so foundational to everything else that we're going to be doing" (Rose, 10/15/14). The ability to use particular moments in visual texts to prove a larger point can be transferred to making an argument using text evidence in a prose novel.

Andrew made the argument that the process of teaching graphic texts is the same as the process of teaching any other English class, in that the focus is on utilizing the various designs available to students within the classroom to make meaning out of the text. He explained:

It's exactly the same as when we watch the *telenovelas* and we look at and do visual analysis. We look at line and form and color and composition and we wonder about narrative art and we think about the plot and all these different things and then we connect these to big themes, to humanity, what it means to function in a particular culture, and really seeing the particular as connected to the abstract global notions. And building evidence so that you don't make a claim that's total bs, you know actually grounded in this stuff, and then I think that it's exactly the same as when I teach close reading in an English class. (Andrew, 10/28/14)

Andrew's statement represents the kind of overarching understanding that a multiliterate pedagogy must engage students in examining the ways text and language are used to shape meaning in a variety of contexts (New London Group, 1996). While not all teachers articulated their use of graphic texts in this way, most saw the ways in which graphic novels and prose novels could be used to further the same kinds of curricular goals. These goals seemed to revolve around students engaging in making meaning



through an exploration of a variety of texts, while also building core skills that students need around textual analysis and argumentation.

## Chapter 10: Tensions and Concluding Thoughts

### 10.1 Hierarchy of Literacies

The tensions described in the previous chapter between valuing what affordances in access and transfer that graphic texts bring while also asserting the equivalent complexity and individual merit of these texts can be explained by the existing hierarchies in literature and literacy within the world of English literature and language arts. Teachers seem to experience a tension between wanting to validate the merit of using graphic novels in their classes while also acknowledging that there exists a hierarchy both in the general public's notion of literary text and historically informed ideas within the discipline of English. This hierarchy drives the teachers' use of the more "literary" texts in the medium as opposed to the more popular culture fare of *manga* and superhero comics. They also sense a tension between seeing graphic novels as more accessible than prose text for some students, with accessible implying easy or transparent, while trying to articulate the ways in which these texts contain a great deal of complexity. I argue that these tensions exist within the larger discourse of the English discipline, where expanding notions of what texts are worthy of academic study set traditional notions of literature at odds with a relatively recent shift to value multiple texts and multiple literacies within the academy.

For example, in her interview, Rose said, "I think it's cool for them to be able to see that images are a legitimate form of art or literature and seeing images used as text was cool for a lot of them, really seeing that validated, was nice" (Rose, 10/15/14) while also talking about the graphic novel unit as a scaffold before "the more complicated texts

in the next unit. Or not just more complicated texts but more text-heavy books” (Rose, 10/15/14). Comics have a history of being degraded as a lesser or easier form of reading and in educational circles are often talked of as a stepping-stone into more “complex” texts (Dorrell et al., 1995). While Rose saw this unit as helping her students see the value in telling stories visually, this unit ultimately must still act as a scaffold for later work students will be required to accomplish with prose text. Her use of the word “legitimate” reveals the ways in which graphic texts must still fight to have their worth recognized. Similarly, Stephanie uses *Persepolis* because the visual provides a more concrete access point for students’ reading comprehension than traditional prose text, but she also wants to use graphic texts to help students “see the power of cartoons and comics” (Stephanie, 12/4/14).

Andrew articulated what challenges bringing non-traditional texts into the ELA classroom might pose:

I think that another constraint is that sometimes in schools and the world, visual texts are viewed as lesser than written texts and I think talking about that power differential in class is really really important and that can give some interesting affordances but you are always fighting against the kind of hegemonic notions like, ‘Oh *telenovela* isn’t as good’ and in *telenovelas* we’re really fighting against that because it’s not just TV, it’s soap opera. (Andrew, 10/28/14)

Andrew tries to explicitly discuss with his students how ideas around text exist within power structures that place value judgments on different kinds of texts and how those ideas reflect larger questions about culture and power. These reactions can come from other teachers, parents, administration, or from students themselves. While no teachers cited any pushback from administration or parents, they did discuss the already existent conceptions of textual hierarchy that their students bring into the classroom that reflect

societal views. In his graphic novel class, Harvey explained that his students come into class with pre-existing notions of what kind of work and reading such a class will entail:

I think their first assumption is, “Oh this is gonna be easy” because we’re reading a graphic novel instead of a prose novel, and I think that they get disabused of that really early, that it’s a different kind of reading and a different kind of learning rather than we’re doing this because it’s easy. Yeah, so I think with any new genre, there’s a little bit, they come in with expectations that may or may not be true and then there’s like an adjustment period where it’s like, ‘Oh wow, we’re actually reading this like a book! There are characters, and there are themes and there are motifs.’ And then, my experience is that most of them really enjoy it! (Harvey, 11/6/14)

Harvey’s students bring notions of graphic text into classroom that sees visual text as easier, reflecting larger societal notions. Teachers address those hierarchies by asserting the academic merit of these texts and engaging students in rigorous analysis. Peter Elbow (1990) explains the tendency in the English discipline to lean towards privileging writing analyses rather than stories and reading over writing as an attempt to “fend off the danger of softness. Both privilege what seems hard or rigorous: analytical writing rather than imaginative writing and taking in what is authoritative and outside the self rather than seeing and expressing what one has to say” (p.206). Teachers’ assertion of graphic texts as academic and literary leads to a focus on analysis through a more traditional literature lens. Aesthetic appreciation, while mentioned as a reason for enjoying these texts, was not mentioned as a key part of teachers’ pedagogy around graphic texts in the interviews. The exception was Harvey, whose assignments reflected a space for imaginative play with the form, while also engaging in a demonstration of a mastery of the important components of the form.

The second portion of Harvey’s quote above highlights how central a literary reading of these texts is in ELA classrooms. Harvey’s imitation of a student’s comment

of, ““Oh wow, we’re actually reading this like a book!”” reflects how central literary analysis is to these teachers’ conceptions of ELA. Elbow (1990) explains this emphasis by presenting the role of literature as a central tension within the English discipline. He explains that the English profession is

both polarized and paralyzed around literature. We see the problems: it unreasonably privileges certain texts and certain kinds of language and certain kinds of reading; it heightens certain destructive political division in the profession; it destructively narrows the profession. But in those very problems we cannot help but also see virtues we are reluctant to give up: commitment to special kinds of language, texts, and special ways of reading; quality; stretching ourselves; saying that certain things are good and worthy of prolonged attention. (Elbow, 1990, p.101)

While acknowledging the way in which a sole focus on literature limits the profession, Elbow (1990) also explains that teachers are still highly committed to the value they see in this particular kind of text and all the literacies that come with it. The teachers in my study would seem to also hold to these ideas of the virtue of literature and the literary. However, their inclusion of non-traditional literature in the form of graphic texts represents one possible way in which these teachers are trying to address the tension around privileging only traditional literature texts.

These teachers see widening text forms as the best way to get students to engage with the core competencies and practices they want them to leave with, giving them various kinds of discourse, both relating to literature and literary analysis (e.g. plot, character, symbolism) but also a discourse of visual analysis (e.g. panel, gutter, word balloon, line, color). This can be seen as a meta-language, which various teachers draw upon to differing extents (New London Group, 1996). So teachers, like Rose, Stephanie, Andrew, and Harvey, help students develop a language of visual analysis, varying as to

whether they are pulling language and concepts from art history, film studies, or comics (McCloud, 1994) based on their personal expertise and the expertise of their students. However, all fuse the language of visual design with the language around reading traditional literature already existent in the classroom and students' school repertoires. On the one hand, placing those languages side by side and showing how they can both assist in deconstructing the meaning-making process can be seen as a powerful de-privileging of the assumed supremacy of word and print-based literacy through the incorporation of both multiple kinds of texts but also the recognition of multiple semiotic meaning-making systems within those texts. On the other hand, the primacy of literature, broadly defined as works of story-telling, remains privileged with the focus on the analysis of graphic novels as literary works. Such use of graphic novels both demonstrates that the English language arts may be expanding to draw upon the varying literacies that students may already bring to the classroom, such as visual literacy, through the use of varied text, but that the primary focus of ELA remains on literary analysis as a key tool for understanding meaning-making.

Ultimately, what kinds of graphic texts are selected for the school curriculum tends to reflect and reinforce the separation of "literary" texts from popular culture texts that map onto the separation of students' school and personal literacies. Popular culture texts would reflect students' personal literacies and are therefore confined to out-of-school reading spaces, where more "literary" graphic texts are used to reinforce the already dominant school literacies. For example, Stephanie always has "some students who are really into *manga* or *anime*, a certain genre or type of graphic novel. Most of [her] students are not aware of Art Spiegelman or *Persepolis*, some of the more literary or

critically received, it's a lot more of the popular culture stuff" (Stephanie, 12/4/14). Thus, the introduction of these more literary graphic novels serves not to bring the texts that students already engage with into class and provide a validating school space for reading these texts, but instead provides a new form for accomplishing school-related goals. However, these students are "usually the ones who are most interested or engaged anyway because they're usually the ones interested in art or graphics" (Stephanie, 12/4/14), raising the question of whether the inclusion of the form itself allows for these students to engage more with the traditional goals through a personally familiar medium.

This idea highlights the tension of bringing text forms that students may use in their personal literacies into the classroom and raises the question of whether such a move validates students' personal literacies or if instead it co-opts their texts for school literacies. Visual literacy may exist already in students' repertoires as a personal literacy, in the same way that print-based literacy may have different meanings for students in the home versus school context (Gallego & Hollingsworth, 2000). Thus, teachers should be cautious of assuming that just because students may enjoy reading comics and engaging with visual texts in their free time, that such texts will immediately transfer into increased school-based literacy abilities. As Harvey demonstrates, the difference between reading a text for pleasure and reading for school-mandated analysis are two different kinds of projects, both equally valuable:

Reading a graphic novel *is* reading, and it is, it can be a, you know, certainly a serious endeavor or an academic endeavor, but also if you're reading a graphic novel because you like them, that's reading! That's reading for pleasure. And that's great! You know, so sort of getting permission for the graphic novel to be a valid genre is really important for kids because it can help them enjoy reading more and can perhaps help them transition to reading more standard prose text, perhaps not. The goal, for me the goal was never to use graphic novels as an in-between place,

between not reading and reading standard prose novels, it's a different kind of reading. (Harvey, 11/6/14)

Harvey asserts that graphic texts are worthy of and ripe for academic analysis, but that these texts can be read for pleasure and that such reading is a worthy endeavor as well.

Harvey claims that validating students' reading practices by incorporating varying mediums and genres, whether they belong to school literacies or personal literacies, can support students to develop positive identities as readers.

I would argue that a variety of text forms and diverse content represent positive changes in the classroom, but that a teacher cannot rely on novelty and texts' inherent desirability to students based on their out-of-school reading to engage students. That does not mean that bringing these texts into classrooms is not beneficial or will destroy student pleasure in reading these texts in their out-of-school lives, but instead that the use of these texts may require teachers to be intentional in how they draw upon students' personal literacies with such texts and assist students in transferring knowledge from one kind of practice to another. For, while literacy practices are "often associated with specific areas of life," that in the real world of peoples' daily existence, "such practices are hybrid and overlapping, with blurred edges, and people apply practices learned in one situation to new situations. This means that boundaries themselves are significant, generative spaces where resources may be combined in new ways for new purposes" (Barton & Hamilton, 2005, p.18). Thus, the use of graphic novels in the classroom may provide space in the classroom for the boundaries between students' school-based literacies around text and their personal literacies with visual and graphic texts may come into contact, combining or clashing in generative ways to produce a new kind of meaning-making process in the classroom. Good teachers just need to be prepared to capitalize on these moments,



requiring, to some extent, perhaps a movement away from a solely literary analysis framing of what ELA can do. Next, I examine Harvey's discussion of how graphic texts have changed his teaching in order to present a case study for how graphic texts can expand a teacher's practice.

## **10.2 The English Teacher's Toolkit**

Schwarz (2007) discusses the challenge of a lack of a unified theory for graphic novels that captures the medium's unique relationship between words and pictures as well as the innovations, devices, genres, etc. unique to the medium. She admits that "one of the challenges for those who wish to use the graphic novel in the classroom will be the search for new theory, new terms, and new ideas that will help to analyze, evaluate, and create this medium" (Schwarz, 2007, p.7) but that in the meantime, teachers will need to draw upon many fields and theories in their use of graphic novels. Through my interviews, I found that teachers brought various frameworks to their teaching of graphic texts, whether theories from art history, film theory, literary analysis, or some of the terminology and theory laid out by Eisner (1985) and McCloud (1994). The use of graphic texts in the classroom has, for some teachers, resulted in the development of a new vocabulary and analysis toolkit, while for others it has meant the assumption of these texts into their already existing modes of analysis and interacting with texts. However, I see Harvey's work in creating an entire curriculum of graphic novels and his perspective on how graphic texts have changed his teaching as indicative of the vast possibilities for expanded notions of text and pedagogy that graphic texts afford.

Harvey articulated the idea that graphic novels have pushed him to expand his teaching techniques and be more deliberate in his teaching. This may be because he is the

only one to devote an entire curriculum to graphic novels, so he is the most pressed to design a variety of exercises and assessments to keep the class interesting. As Harvey explained:

I think you have to be more, I don't know if creative is the right word, I have to think more about my lessons when I teach a graphic novel, I can just walk in and talk about a novel without a lot of forethought, especially one I've read a million times. But thinking about a graphic novel and thinking about, where am I going to focus on story? Where am I going to focus on art? What is the unique thing we want to look at today? That has challenged me to be a little more deliberate in, and be a little more varied in my teaching technique, than to just walk and say, here we are again with another graphic novel... it challenges me to think more deliberately about my lessons and about how to find different ways, to make sure I'm hitting all these aspects that are really important to a graphic novel, in the way I'm trying to touch on setting and character and theme and tone in a prose novel. But that comes more naturally in teaching a prose novel. It's more deliberate here. (Harvey, 11/6/14)

What Harvey highlights is that the adoption of a new form of text into the curriculum requires a refocusing of how a teacher will privilege certain aspects of a text over others and to what end. While this process happens in the teaching of all texts, prose novels represent a settled part of Harvey's practice and therefore require little thought. What graphic novels provide for Harvey's practice is a rediscovery of the active construction of the meaning-making process. A teacher must make choices of what aspects of a text to forefront and which opportunities to pass. Graphic texts may even pose a greater level of complexity, in that the words, images, and multimodal combination of these two modes present a greater number of possible foci for a lesson.

Additionally, Harvey highlighted how the inclusion of graphic novels into the 9<sup>th</sup> grade curriculum has pushed other teachers to develop their practice around graphic text. He talked about how the other 9<sup>th</sup> grade teachers who now teach *Persepolis* are more tentative in their use of this graphic novel:

I think anytime teachers are asked to stretch in a new direction it's exciting and terrifying, I think our team meetings when talking about graphic novels, it's a little more on the edge than when we're all talking about *Catcher in the Rye* that we've taught for a million years and recite large passages of. It's sort of like, 'Here's what I was doing with this page... Was that sort of what you were thinking about?' You know, it's much more tentative and exploratory, which I think is great. And then you know, as we get, we've been doing this for a long time then we get better at it, and then you get people saying things like, 'Oh I noticed this new thing I didn't see before and isn't that cool.' (Harvey, 11/6/14)

The inclusion of new texts creates opportunities for teachers to reengage with text as learners, modeling the kind of exploration and discovery that they encourage their students to practice in their classes. Teachers have to learn a new medium and develop their own understanding to help scaffold their students' learning. This quote also highlights the importance of a teacher support network for expanded practice. When teachers have models of how to incorporate new texts, they can draw upon their colleagues as resources and as well as collaborators.

Harvey's discussion of how graphic novels have influenced his own practice adds a different perspective to the existing literature on the use of graphic novels in the classroom. Most of the literature reviewed earlier in this thesis focuses on the benefits of these texts' use for students, while neglecting how expanding notions of text in the classroom can provide important teacher professional development. While Carter (2013) discusses the use of graphic novels with pre-service teachers to tackle their notions of text as well as expand their understanding of the uses of graphic forms, no work discusses how to provide professional development around graphic texts for teachers already in the field. A further examination of what resources teachers selecting graphic texts for their classroom use, as well as the role of professional communities in providing support for creative and innovative practice, would be useful to identify how to better support

teachers in engaging with the multiple affordances offered by these texts. Harvey's parting words demonstrate the utility of such work:

So it's definitely increased my toolkit as an English teacher and it has helped me think about prose novels in some interesting ways as well. So I think I'm all the better for having done this. It's not just, woohoo! I get to teach graphic novels because it's fun! It's really been a learning experience for me. (Harvey, 11/6/14)

#### **10.4 The Purpose of ELA: A Paradigm Shift?**

As we have seen, the incorporation of graphic texts into the classroom does not inherently signal a paradigm shift within the profession of ELA educators. In fact, teachers who use these texts remain enmeshed within the existing hierarchies around literature, text, and literacy that claim graphic texts and visual literacies as less or intermediary to prose text and word-text literacies. Tensions between "literary" texts and a focus on literary analysis and other school-based literacies and popular culture texts and students' personal literacies remain. However, the work done by these teachers still signals that small shifts are occurring. The inclusion of graphic texts with the varied voices and narratives they bring demonstrate a re-definition of what counts as "literary." Merely placing graphic texts next to prose works and engaging in academic analysis indicates to students that these texts are worthy of study and may serve to validate a medium of text from students' out-of-school reading. Finally, graphic texts hold the potential to expand teacher practice, resulting in more creative teaching of both prose and graphic texts. As Andrew explained:

the affordances seeing these things visual and textual and linguistic, in other languages, trans-interpretative, you could phrase that, really build this particular way of thinking and approaching the world, which is to see things from the particular, to the abstract, and to make claims and connections between them; as Paulo Freire would say, 'To be able to read the word of the world.' (Andrew, 10/28/14)

The ability to provide students with opportunities to see the connections across meaning-making systems builds a particular kind of interpretive process for students that allows them to engage with the multiliteracies required in a changing world. Such a lens can be used to promote students' critical and media literacies, engaging in the kind of critical analysis of the word and the world that Freire promotes.

### **10.5 Further Directions**

I am left with some key questions that would prove fruitful directions for further study:

- How can teachers best maximize the potential of various text forms, particularly multimodality, in the case of graphic texts?
- What would be the affordances and constraints of incorporating more popular culture graphic texts into the secondary ELA curriculum? How can teachers address the hierarchy of text both within their own teaching and within students' perceptions?
- Are there particular contexts that are more conducive to the inclusion of graphic texts than others? What factors play a role?

In order to answer these questions, a wider study that would look at the prevalence of the use of graphic texts would be instructive in identifying if there has been a shift in the wider ELA community towards use of these texts, or if their expanded use is confined to particular contexts. I am particularly interested in the distribution between public and private schools, as I hypothesize that the Common Core and standardized testing may impose restrictions on the varied text types that teachers choose to bring into the

classroom. Increased pressure may dissuade the kind of innovation and experimentation that teachers in private schools are afforded.

Additionally, more data regarding the six teachers I observed would have provided a more holistic view of their practice. Due to constraints in timing, I was unable to observe in any of the classrooms of the teachers interviewed. Observations of how they implemented their lesson plans using graphic texts in the classroom, as well student interviews, would have provided a more holistic vision of how pedagogy is enacted in practice, as well as how students interpret the incorporation of and learning with these texts.

Finally, I end with the acknowledgement that as much as teachers may want to be able to address a multiplicity of text and the various literacies they may contain, certain restrictions still apply. With a finite amount of time in the school day and year, teachers must decide where to direct their efforts. Andrew captures the tension of deciding, as a teacher, where to place one's focus when he says, "We don't have actual time to learn every school of thought about every literary device or every visual device so how do we privilege the ones that are central and decide what we're going to do and then have kids work with that and how do we make it student-centered and more and more. But worth it in the end! But very complicated" (Andrew, 10/28/14).

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## Appendix

Interview Protocol: Semi-structured interview

### Origins of Use:

- Tell me about how you first started using graphic novels in your classroom/How do you use graphic novels in your classroom?
- What texts do you use?
- How did you hear about these texts?
- Why do you use/did you choose these specific texts?
- Did any of your colleagues use graphic novels, either in English department or in another department? If so, did you discuss teaching strategies with them and how students responded to the graphic works?

### Use in Class:

- How did you first develop your lesson plans around the texts you use?
- Were there any outside materials or lesson plans you used to inspire/aid in your lesson planning?
- What has worked (e.g. certain activities, kinds of explanations, kinds of assessments)? What hasn't? How have you adapted your lesson plans/curriculum?
- What kind of activities do you do with these texts? Assessments? Do these differ from activities and assessments you use for other texts?
- How do you teach students to see and analyze the visual component of the text?
- When you teach graphic novels, do you find yourself teaching them differently than how you would teach a novel or story? If yes, then how so?

### Student reactions:

- How have students reacted to these texts? Are these reactions different or similar to other, non-visual texts?
- What do you think your students' background knowledge is on graphic novels?
- What do they get out of reading these texts?

### Attitudes:

- What are the affordances and constraints of using graphic novels?
- Why do you use graphic novels?
- How does teaching graphic novels differ or remain similar to how you teach other/more traditional texts?
- Was there any resistance to using these texts either from administrators, other teachers, parents, or students?
- Is there anything else I should know about your use of graphic novels in the classroom?