The Use of Graphic Novels to Support Struggling Fifth Grade Student Story Writing

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Abstract
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The Use of Graphic Novels to Support Struggling Fifth Grade Student Story Writing

By

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Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree

M.S. Literacy Education

Supervised by

Dr. Joellen Maples

School of Arts and Sciences
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Abstract

This study focuses on the use of graphic novels to support struggling fifth grade students with story writing skills. Forms of data collected were student interviews, student work, and recorded observations. Three themes emerged from analyzing the data. First, graphic novels increase student motivation and confidence in writing. Second, students gained a knowledge of the relationship between image and text. Third, students improved writing skills in the areas of sequencing, plot, and character development. Teachers should include graphic novels in their literacy curriculum. Graphic novels could be used across all curriculum. Another implication that arose from this study was that creative writing should be included in the writing curriculum.
The Use of Graphic Novels to Support Struggling Fifth Grade Student Story Writing

The use of comic books and graphic novels have become increasingly popular in today’s classrooms in order to boost motivation and engagement in order to get even the most reluctant readers and writers to pick up a book or a pencil. There have been a few studies showing the impact that this type of literature has had on the motivation of struggling students (Lapp, Wolsey, Fisher & Frey, 2012; Carter, 2009; Gavigan & Albright, 2015). However, most of the studies listed above (Wolsey, Fisher & Frey; Carter, 2009) have only explored the reading side of literacy. The question remains as to how using comic books and graphic novels could impact students’ creativity and make the most reluctant writers start to write.

Before we study the effects of graphic novels on writing development, it is important to recognize what a graphic novel actually is. Baird and Jackson (2007) define a successful graphic novel as one that “starts with a stellar story told with words and pictures that augment the story, providing insight the text alone cannot do” (p. 5). Graphic novels combine both the print and image forms of media to make a story. Graphic novels in the context of literacy are not associated with words such as “adult” or “explicit.” Instead, it has to do with the visual nature or “graphics” of this form of literature. Hughes, King, Perkins, and Fuke (2011) explored the effects of using graphic novels with struggling students and motivation to read and write. They concluded that the use of graphic novels with these struggling students significantly increased student motivation to not only read the graphic novels, but then develop their own comic strip using stories from real life experiences. I have also learned that graphic novels and comic books can be for all ages. Normally, most people would think that comic books and for younger
students and graphic novels are for older students. While that is the case much of the time, older students can still get value out of reading comic books. Graphic novels use multiple modalities as the text and image are fused to tell the story (McPherson, 2006). Struggling readers can look at the image and understand the story much easier than if it was all text that they had to decode and try to figure out. The trouble with graphic novels is that they are a relatively new form of literature and some teachers and librarians do not even consider graphic novels to be literature. Many educators, including Griffith (2010) argue that there is a need for further research using graphic novels. That is what this study aims to do.

As stated before, graphic novels have been shown to increase reading achievement and motivation. However, this study took it a step further to find out what the impact of using graphic novels in the classroom has on writing skills, specifically story writing. Writing is an often undervalued aspect of literacy. However, writing is so important, not only in school, but in life after high school. There is a reason that there are writing standards included in curriculums in order to be college and career ready. Nowacek (2011) argues that writing is important in many ways, especially because writing is the primary basis upon which your work, your education, and your intellect will be judged throughout your life. Writing is portable and visible. It makes your thinking become visible. Fields, Hatala, and Nauert (2011) had a similar view on the importance of writing as they argued that writing skills are essential to being successful in college and further into your career. Whether a student likes to write or not, the student needs to know how important these writing skills will be as they go further in their learning.

The purpose of this study was to explore how graphic novels can support struggling fifth grade student story writing skills. The study aims to show how students can use graphic novels as mentor texts in order to learn and practice the literary elements and writing skills needed to be
successful with story writing. This study is important because it shows how a new and
ing upcomin genre can have a positive impact on students’ literacy achievement. I conducted pre
and post study interviews, took anecdotal notes and audio recordings during each session, and
collected student work samples in order to analyze the impact of the use of graphic novels to
improve these students’ writing. Three themes emerged from analyzing the data. The first was
that students showed an increased interest and engagement with the use of graphic novels to
improve their writing. These students also showed an increased level of confidence as we
ventured deeper into the study. The second theme was that students were accurately able to
connect the pictures that they drew with the text that they wrote, showing a good command of a
specific skill needed to be a good graphic novel story writer. The third theme was that these
students gained a better knowledge of story writing skills including sequence and organization,
plot, and character development. A few implications arose due to my findings in this study as it
p pertains to literacy instruction. The first implication calls for the use of graphic novels in the
classroom to improve reading and writing achievement and engagement. This study proved that
graphic novels can be used to improve writing skills. This study also showed that the students
had an increased level of engagement and interest in the topic because of the use of graphic
novels in instruction. Another implication calls for an increased use of creative writing in the
classroom in order to improve writing skills. The students used story writing in this study and
improved in many areas of writing that could be transferred to other genres of writing.

**Theoretical Framework**

Before looking at the theories that will be used to guide this study, it is important to know
what literacy is and how literacy is acquired. Larson and Marsh (2005) define literacy as the
ability to decode, encode, and make meanings using written text and symbols. That is a pretty
tightly constructed definition. Larson and Marsh’s definition means that a good student of literacy has strong ability to spell and figure out words along with read them. Also, a strong literacy student can make meaning and form connections with the text based on their past experiences. The Larson and Marsh (2005) definition is a very narrow definition compared to Gee’s definition. Gee defines literacy in a more universally relatable way. Gee (2003) defined literacy as “the control of secondary discourses or secondary uses of language” (p. 542). First, one must understand what a discourse is. Gee (1996) defined discourse as “connected stretches of language which hang together so as to make sense to some community of people” (p. 90). A discourse is a community in which you speak and act within certain values and viewpoints. Another characteristic of discourses is that they are resistant to internal criticism and self-scrutiny because opposing viewpoints from individuals would make those individuals considered to be outside of the discourse. The first Discourse that we learn is our primary discourse. Primary discourse is usually focused on our home and families. Secondary Discourses are learned through our social institutions such as school, church, and work. There are two types of Secondary Discourses. No matter what type of Discourse that we participate in, graphic images are all around us that need to be understood and analyzed in order to participate in that Discourse. The first type of Secondary Discourse is Dominant Discourse, which can allow for acquiring social goods and social status. The Dominant Discourse in society is the majority or most popular among the whole of the population. Non-Dominant Discourses do not help an individual with their social status, but it does give them a sense of inclusion in their own social network. Furthermore, literacy development occurs through the process of acquisition and learning. It requires exposure to the concept in many different settings. Acquisition and learning are not the same. Acquisition is how literacy can be mastered, not through learning. Gee (2003)
states that in our culture, we often confuse the importance of acquisition versus learning and we don’t get what we thought we would out of our literacy instruction.

Literacy acquisition can be defined as follows: “Children acquire literacy as they participate in a literate society” (Goodman, 2001, p. 316). Children develop their literacy through their experiences, and their attitudes towards literacy as they interact with many different groups or discourses. Goodman (2001) highlights that there are three roots of literacy each with smaller branches within them. The first root is the functions and forms that the literacy events serve. This highlights the fact that children develop both their reading and writing as they participate in these meaningful events and through these events students start to develop their control over the functions and forms of reading. Graphic novels are a medium in which these students can develop their reading and writing skills. The second root is the use of oral language about written language. This root involves children and other members of the society talking about the various literacy events in which they participate. This root relates to this action research study as the study has to do with storytelling, not only through writing, but also orally. Students can discuss their attitudes toward certain parts of literacy, such as learning to write stories through the use of graphic novels. The last root deals with the conscious awareness about literacy. This root includes the functions, forms, and context of literacy. Many students can develop conscious knowledge about written language before they even receive any formal instruction on the topic (Goodman, 2001). These roots of literacy are the basis for the acquisition of literacy in today’s educational society. After looking at what literacy is defined as and how it is acquired, now we can look at what theories of literacy will guide this study. There are a few theories of literacy that will be used to guide this study. The overarching theory guiding this study would be new literacies. New literacies generally are new forms of literacy...
made possible by digital technology developments, although new literacies do not necessarily have to involve use of digital technologies to be recognized as such, as in this case with the use of graphic novels. One of the new branches of new literacies is the visual literacy theory which deals with the ability to interpret, negotiate, and make meaning from information presented in the form of an image, usually to interpret printed text. Also, this study will incorporate the use of multiple literacies or media literacies. Once again, this relatively new type of literacy theory usually is shown through the use of technology. However, by definition, these types of literacy are more importantly about understanding the images of a form of literature and how they relate to the text.

Many students have difficulties with the traditional approach to literacy. Therefore, they thrive with the new ways that teachers can incorporate visual literacy into reading and writing instruction. Many students are visual learners. Generally, visual learners are classified as individuals who learn best with music, movies, television shows and other forms of media that they can see. Pertaining to this study, graphic novels and comic books would be put into this category of visual literacy.

In today’s society, children are exposed to many different forms of media that they need to try to read and understand in order to develop their literacy skills. There is various new media that these children interact with in their everyday lives. Graphic novels are one of the new medias that have become increasingly popular in schools. Though, as stated earlier in this paper, graphic novels still need to be further examined. Henzi (2016) states that alternative, subversive forms of storytelling—such as the comic book and the graphic novel are very important to today’s literacy practices. The new literacies theory will guide this study of how graphic novels can support fifth grade storytelling writing. But, what is the new literacies theory? Not so
ironically, the new literacies theory is a relatively new theory in the field of literacy studies. New literacies are new forms of literacy made possible by digital technology developments, although new literacies do not necessarily have to involve use of digital technologies to be recognized as part of this theory. Graphic novels can be digital, but in this study, there will only be print text being used.

Related to new literacies, graphic novels can help teach media literacy or multiple literacies. The National Council of Teachers of English (2008) state that the twenty-first century demands that a literate person possess a wide range of abilities and competencies, many literacies. Visual literacy, information literacy, network literacy and more are all multiple literacies. What the National Council of Teachers of English are saying is that literacy is not all about print text anymore. Today’s literate society demands that children decipher various forms of literacy in order to understand the world around them. Graphic novels fight perfectly under the umbrella of these new literacies or multiple literacies. Graphic novels not only access make a student use traditional literacy skills like literary terms and summarizing, but also new skills like comprehending how panels and contribute to a graphic novel. In addition, readers of graphic novels learn how to use the text and image together as multimodal forms of literacy.

Research Question

This study will focus on the new literacy elements of graphic novels as tools to motivate writers to improve their story writing skills. Given that new literacies are a growing medium in order to improve student literacy, this action research project asks, “How do graphic novels support struggling 5th graders' storytelling skills in writing?”
Literature Review

When creating a meaningful and accurate action research study, it is important to conduct a review of the literature already found on this topic in order to find the critical points of knowledge that have already been gathered and analyzed by information researchers regarding this topic. In this literature review, three themes will be stated and elaborated on. The first theme is that graphic novels increase student motivation to write. This theme will focus on the engagement of students when using graphic novels in their learning. The second theme is graphic novels as mentor texts. This theme will highlight what mentor texts are and why graphic novels should be used as mentor texts. A subtheme in this section will be the specific literary elements that graphic novels can support students with improving upon literacy elements such as sequencing, character development, creativity and ideas, and text and image relationships. The third theme is that graphic novels can be used to write across the curriculum. This third theme will focus on how and why graphic novels are used to improve writing skills across many content areas.

Graphic Novels Increase Student Motivation to Write

Motivation is a key component in improving reading and writing skills with learners. In 2000, the International Reading Association published a position statement that listed “the development and maintenance of a motivation to read” as one of the key prerequisites for deriving meaning from print (p. 195). When reading a text, a student’s main goal is to make meaning of the text. Likewise, with writing, the writer’s main goal is to convey meaning to the audience so that the audience understands what the author is trying to say. Motivation is key with reading and writing in order to push the student to explore their boundaries and make
meaning from text. When students are engaged in a text, whether they are reading or writing, they will most likely have more self-efficacy. Self-efficacy for writing has been shown consistently to correlate with academic performance, including writing achievement (MacArthur, Phillipakos, & Graham, 2016). Students are not afraid to take chances and make mistakes when they don’t feel threatened or anxious about the task that they are to complete. These students are comfortable with the tasks they are given because they can understand the text and format of the graphic novel. Additionally, Pajares and Valiente (2015) argue that students tend to select tasks and activities in which they feel confident and avoid the activities which do not. When students feel comfortable with the activity, they are more likely to give it a try. Furthermore, MacArthur, Phillipakos, and Graham (2016) say that individuals tend to choose activities in which they feel competent and avoid tasks that they think are beyond their ability. Low confidence leads to anxiety for student which may affect the student’s success on a certain task. Pajares and Valiente (2015) continue to argue that self-efficacy beliefs also help determine how much effort students will spend on an activity, how long they will persevere when they face obstacles, and how resilient the students will be in the face of adversity. That statement is where graphic novels come in. Graphic novels have been proven to motivate struggling students. When students are motivated, they can have self-efficacy. These students will work hard to overcome obstacles and hardships when reading and writing because they are engaged and interested in what they are doing. Researchers have established that students’ self-efficacy are highly predictive of academic outcomes across domains, specifically in writing (Pajares & Valiente, 2015).

There are many reluctant readers and writers in today’s classrooms. Specifically, struggling students have a hard time reading and writing in the traditional formats that still are in most school curriculums. MacArthur, Phillipakos, and Graham (2016) say that, “Writing is a
complex and demanding task that presents motivational challenges even for proficient writers” (p.393). If a student cannot find the motivation to complete the task, the task will most likely not get done or it will be completed very poorly. Most students won’t just do a task to the best of their ability if it is something that bores them or makes them feel lost or anxious. Graphic novels help to build the bridge between students and literacy. Friese (2013) states that graphic narratives (or graphic novels) have become exemplary mentor texts to teach numerous aspects of writing, fitting in alongside picture books as an important element in instruction. Graphic novels are like pictures books but another step up as graphic novels incorporate both images and text to convey meaning. Many teachers are starting to use graphic novels in the classroom because they have the potential to scaffold struggling students into fluent readers and even further enhance the literacy experiences of the more proficient readers in the classroom (Lapp, Wolsey, Fisher & Frey, 2012). Graphic novels are something new and intriguing to most students. Carter (2009) adds that graphic novels have piqued student interests in learning and increased their success in literacy. When a student is interested in a topic, they are more likely to want to learn and in turn do actually learn more.

Struggling readers can use the images to make meaning of what they are reading. Graphic novels incorporate visual literacy which can help struggling and reluctant readers grab a book and start reading. Visual literacy is becoming more and more important as visual communication has become even more powerful than words. Graphic novels support this shift from the traditional text to a more visually driven approach (Hughes, King, Perkins, & Fuke, 2011). This type of literature can connect with visual and spatial learners who learn best from materials with visual elements. In addition, Kluth (2008) adds that teacher should support their students by including graphic organizers, picture books, graphic notes, and mind mapping.
When a teacher can support their students with organizing their thoughts in order to get them down on paper, it makes the transition from reading to writing so much easier for the students. Reading and writing go hand in hand in the field of literacy. When young children are exposed to the situations, not of their own will, they should be provided with an opportunity to channel their thoughts and feelings in positive and creative ways through speaking or writing (Short & Kauffman, 2008). Writing is a great outlet for students to get their thoughts on paper. Many students enjoy drawing to channel their thoughts in creative ways so a graphic novel is perfect to get students to pick up a pencil and start creating.

When a student is motivated to read, it often carries over to writing. For many writers, drawing and the use of images can be a good beginning point of entry for composing stories (Friese, 2013; Horn & Giacobbe, 2007). These visual experiences can help the students practice writing about a picture or image. These experiences with images will help the students with their skills as they write narratives or really any type of storytelling. Ray (2010) stresses the importance of using visual mentor texts in writing instruction. Ray argues to teach students “into illustrations” (p.15) instead of teaching out of them. Illustrations are an important part of the writing process of graphic novels and teachers should teach students how illustrations can make a deeper meaning in a text. Ray continues to say that students should be taught how to decode images in published works to understand how authors can show change in time, point of view, and mood. Using graphic novels as mentor texts while exploring visual literacy is a very beneficial practice for students to participate in when trying to improve their writing skills. Additionally, Carter (2009) points out that educators need to start thinking beyond just reading graphic novels, but instead having students plan, write, and illustrate graphic novels as authentic writing activities. Students can create stories that are of interest to them, whether it is of a
personal experience or just something that peaks their interest. This interesting experience can entice and motivate students to write. Academic achievement can improve when students are engaged in activities that involve experiences that are relevant to their own lives (Lawrence, McNeal, & Yildiz, 2009).

The two most popular and effective ways to involve these relevant experiences are to have the students create stories that connect to life experiences and stories about social issues. Seelow (2010) argues that connections between the students’ lives and the text strengthen students reading and if the students feel that what they read relates to their lives, they will form stronger bonds with the literature and understand the story and its elements better. This in turn will motivate the students to be better writers. Gavigan and Albright (2015) worked with a group of incarcerated youths to create a graphic novel about HIV/AIDS to use as an education and prevention tool for teens. They picked this group and topic specifically because these students were more likely to get involved with intravenous drug use and catch dangerous diseases such as HIV/AIDS. The students in this study were very proud of their work. Many of these students had people that they knew who had been affected by the disease. This further helped those students connect to the text. Gavigan and Albright concluded that writing efficacy had significantly improved since the start of the study. These students took pride in their work. They were motivated and engaged in the topic because it not only related to their lives, but it dealt with a social issue that they were interested in being a part of. Hughes, King, Perkins, and Fuke (2011) had similar results to the Gavigan and Albright (2015) findings. Both studies showed how using personal experiences when writing graphic novels gives the students an extra boost of motivation and engagement. Hughes et al. (2011) carried out two case studies to show how writing graphic novels could be motivating for struggling students and reluctant readers and
writers. Both case study groups started off by reading a series of graphic novels and discussing the various literary elements that graphic novels incorporate. The first case study group included a number of preparatory high school students. After reading and discussing the novels as a group, these students created a series of their own sequential art panels. The second group involved a number of students who were in a multi-grade alternative learning program for academically expelled students. This group created sequential art panels, that told the story about a turning point in their lives or the event that landed them in the alternative learning program. In the end, even though the first case study students were interested in the topic of graphic novels, they struggled to put together their own creative stories. On the other hand, the alternative students in the second case study had no problem creating their graphic narratives. The students in the second study really relished the opportunity to use their life experiences to show why they were at a certain point in their life. Just like Gavigan and Albright (2015) exploring life experiences and social justice issues (or lesson learned stories) through the use of graphic novels was motivating for even the most struggling students.

Motivation and self-efficacy are two related factors that can help students overcome adversity and obstacles in their literacy development. Though it is not always easy to motivate and engage struggling readers and writers. Therefore, graphic novels are a great way for struggling readers to get interested in reading and writing. But, struggling readers aren’t the only ones that can benefit from the use of graphic novels in the classroom. Any student can use a graphic novel to tell a story about their own life experiences and the lessons that they learned. Another way to motivate students to write is through writing a social justice graphic novel in which issues of today’s society are examined and explained. Motivation is a key component to get the ball rolling on students’ writing experiences. But, motivation obtained from graphic
novels is not the main reason why this type of literature is so beneficial in improving student writing, though it is a very important part of the argument as to why graphic novels should be included in the classroom. For the main reason why graphic novels should be used, we look to theme two of this literature review.

**Graphic Novels Can Be Used as Mentor Texts**

Before exploring why graphic novels and comic are great mentor texts to use in the classroom, it is important to first look at what mentor texts are. Mentor texts can be defined as a published piece of writing used as an example for student writers (Culham, 2014; Mielke, 2016). Mentor texts can creatively model how to use illustrations to show a story, instead of telling a story. A mentor text might display excellence in certain writing techniques. Ultimately, a mentor text can be used to inspire children to write creatively by providing scaffolding on which students can build (Mielke, 2016). Mentor texts can help model to students how a good story is told. Fletcher (2011) explains that mentor texts are any texts that you can learn from. Fletcher goes on to argue that each and every writer, no matter how skilled you are or how early you may be in your writing skill development, encounters and reads something that can improve, inform, infuse their own writing. Mentor texts can engage students and let them see exactly what an exemplary work looks like. On a similar note to Fletcher (2011), Dorfman and Cappelli (2007) discuss mentor texts that allow students to concentrate on skills and strategies and help readers notice things in published works, empowering them to try something new in their own writing. There are many writing skills that could be taught through the use of a graphic novel as a mentor text. Graphic novels can be used to teach literary techniques, terms, and elements (Baird & Jackson, 2007; Esquivel, 2006). There are many learning opportunities for students who read
and write graphic novel texts. Graphic novels are not your average text dependent novel. Graphic novels are about looking at the pictures and the dialogue along with the words and captions in order to make meaning. When it comes to writing a graphic novel, there are a few fundamentals of writing that students learn how to use. Student can learn the importance of conflict, the use of dialogue to reveal character, and how crucial rewriting is to the writing process (Crilley, 2009). Graphic novels also use images to convey meaning and make the reader understand what is going on in the story. As stated before, reading and writing often go hand in hand. Therefore, more often than not, reading and writing use the same literary techniques and elements. There are particular story elements that translate into the creation and presentation of a graphic novel. The images or pictures of the text must establish or create the story, the author must make use of color for tone, use a style that creates the story’s setting and tone, and compose characters and plot with detail (O’Neil, 2011). In order to create and/or comprehend a graphic novel students need to know how to use different literacy strategies while reading or writing. Cook (2015) continues to say that students also need to critically think when reading a graphic novel. Students must make critical decisions as to how to interact with the panels and must make critical decisions of how to interact with the text as a whole while making meaning from the individual components of the story. This critical thinking helps students to learn how to work through a text and make meaning of it.

Another writing skill that can be taught through using graphic novels as mentor texts is creativity and ideas. Cook (2015) states that “In order to facilitate creativity, students can use graphic novels as mentor texts to guide experimentation with nontraditional methods of communication by using a combination of modes to further their purpose, address their audience, and maximize their effectiveness” (p. 30). When writing, especially when writing stories,
students need to use their creativity to come up with ideas for their plot and story in general. Graphic novels can help students to experiment with a different form of literature that they may have not had much experience with in the past. By using the graphic novel as a mentor text, these students can learn how an author can use tone, mood, and other writing skills in order to entice the audience and get their message across to the people that are reading the story. Friese (2013) states the use of images to convey meaning as a show, don’t tell type of activity. Tone, mood, and other storytelling skills can be shown in the pictures and illustrations in a creative manner in order to further advance the story. Students or authors need to be creative when making their illustrations and coming up with ideas how to show the reader through not only words, but images, how a story can be told.

Beyond creative and critical thinking, teachers often use graphic novels to provide visual context, to supplement more traditional reading, and to promote multimodal literacy, among many other reasons (Cook, 2015). A key to using graphic novels as mentor texts with elementary students, and students in general, is the use of multimodal literacy. Like Cook’s (2015) arguments for the use of critical thinking with graphic novels, Gainer (2013) argues that we must help students read like writers by exploring these new texts and analyzing them with the eyes of those who construct such texts. What he means by new texts is the graphic novels and their relatively recent rise to popularity in classrooms. When reading graphic novels, students are pushed to think outside of the box to analyze and decode what the text is trying to say. Readers must use clues that the writer gives them in order to make meaning. When students are writing graphic novels and comics of their own, these students must critically think how they will convey meaning so that their audience will understand and be able to interact with the text.
The knowledge that a student can gain from reading graphic novels can be transferred to writing when they create their own. The images in graphic novels are useful because they relay information from comics through the use of images and relating those images to the audience (Figeirido, 2011). When making graphic novels, the author has to choose specific images in order to connect with the audience and help them to understand what is going on. Plot and tone can both be shown through not only the text with dialogue and captions, but also through the images in the story. In times of struggle or conflict, the author needs to show, through the use of images, the struggle of the moment. Meaning could be conveyed to the audience with certain colors, like red for an angry moment, or even though the use of expressions on the characters’ faces. The times of the story that are sad or even cold could be blue or a purple color. Color plays a large role in establishing tone so that the audience can figure out what kind of feelings they are supposed to be having at any given time during the story. Figueiredo (2011) continued his point by saying that visuals are an important way to communication meaning in a text. Because visuals are so important to the communication of meaning in a text, students must draw on their knowledge of literacy elements and incorporate the visuals in a manner that is easy for the audience to understand and connect with. Our society is becoming increasingly more visually oriented and our literacy needs to follow suit. Schwarz (2016) states that today’s young people need the knowledge and skills to deal with persuasion in an age of images. What he means by that statement is that we are any ever changing society. Authors need to be able to tell a story through their pictures because sometimes words just don’t do the story justice. Readers can understand the story even deeper if the images supplement the words. There are images all around us in our everyday lives that we have to decode and analyze. Therefore, the graphic novel has an important role in helping students become literate with the connection between
images and text. The graphic novel is an engaging type of literature that asks readers and writers to analyze information in different ways. Writing can improve as the importance of the pictures or images in the story help the story along. Lawrence, McNeal, and Yildiz (2009) focused on the writing by having their students draft a manuscript of their graphic novel before putting images to the text. Lawrence et al. made their students in this study brainstorm the information they wished to present and then had the students find the images that would perfectly communicate that information. This class activity required students to use literary elements as a base in their writing and to incorporate these images with the elements in a successful and interesting way, thus connecting image and text while working on storytelling writing skills. Images and text go hand in hand and these students in this study made sure that their story made sense through both text and image. Hughes, King, Perkins, and Fuke (2011) made their students think in a similar manner in their study as they had their students write comics about their own lives and personal experiences as highlighted in the previous section. Use of spacing, expression of characters and their body language, and point of view were stressed to the students in order to improve their stories. Because these researchers made the students pay close attention to the literary elements that make graphic novels great storytelling medium, an emphasis was on the literary elements that make a great story and also on the ways that graphic novels can be written successfully, which made their stories that much stronger. In the end, Hughes et al. concluded that even the students who struggled with reading and writing not only found enjoyment with the activities, but also excelled when they turned their personal stories into comics. Literacy should be fun, but a lot of students do not find it very fun and, as a consequence, are reluctant to read and write in and out of school. Through the use of graphic novels and the opportunity to write about personal experiences and real world situations, these students in these experiments felt that these
activities had more worth than just reading a chapter book or writing an essay just to complete an assignment.

Crilley (2009) argues for the use of graphic novels for writing autobiographies. Crilley goes on to say when having the students write their own stories a teacher should give the students “assigned elements” that they have to hit on in their stories. Some examples are dialogue, sound effects, at least one wordless panel in which the story is conveyed only using the drawing, and using at least three different facial expressions in the story. Making the students pay close attention to the elements that are needed will make the students think about what good writing entails and the literary elements that are needed in order to tell a great story. These requirements also make sure that the students’ writing is a real comic book or graphic novel, not just a story with pictures. If it was just pictures with dialogue and captions underneath, it would be a picture book. If the class is studying graphic novels, then the students must be attentive to the attributes that make a graphic novel so unique. These “assigned elements” help to push the students to get stronger with using proper literacy elements and also to write real graphic novels.

Again connecting to Hughes, King, Perkins, and Fuke (2011), these researchers had the students in their study first read and discuss the literacy elements that make a graphic novel such a great genre. The students found many key visual and textual features of graphic novels, including types of panels, sequencing, word balloons, captions, setting, and point of view. This discussion helped the students to learn how to use these literary elements and set them up for success when they started to write their own graphic novels. In addition, the students learned to focus on the key moments of their stories, paying close attention to specific vocabulary, dialogue, and nonverbal communication such as body language of the characters in the story. These types of
discussions set the students up to become not only better readers, but also better writers because they focused on the specific literary elements that make great writers.

Graphic novels help improve student writing in the area of sequencing also. There are many different ways that panels can be presented and used. Graphic novels allow the writer to creatively use the boxes and panels to work through the story. Readers and writers of graphic novels need to be aware of how graphic novels use the panels to tell a story. It is not as easy as a regular book which has left to right reading all of the time. Panels can have multiple conversations going on at once or may just show an action. There are lots of options for authors or writers to pick when constructing a graphic novel. Overlapping or superimposed panels can show multiple events happening at the same time which could speed up the telling of events. Using the technique of different conversations or dialogues in a panel or set of panels could even show different point of view of the same event (Pantaleo, 2013). This technique could involve adding more to character development as the reader could see the same situation through different characters’ point of view. This use of point of view helps the reader to understand what a certain character may be thinking about a situation that may be happening in the story. Once again, the development of characters in graphic novels through the use of dialogue and images is so important in order to fully tell the story to the audience. McCloud (2006) furthers this point as he says that when creating these graphic novels or comics, writers can create intensity in the panels through changing the shape, size, and even position of panels. This technique of changing the panels again further helps the story telling move along in a sequential order, even though the speed of certain events in the story could vary. Using different panels with different size, shape, and color could help to set the tone of a page or part of the story too.
Graphic novels are considered sequential art as they show a progression of action through the use of images. The reader can see the action unfold, see what a character looks like, and experience the setting illustrated in the background while reading a graphic novel. Each image and panel in a graphic novel gives important information to the reader and most important pushes the plot forward in a sequential order (Dallacqua, 2012). One way that sequential order could be taught to students is through first starting with oral storytelling and hands-on activities. These activities could get the students thinking about what order events should be in when reading or writing a story. If the sequence of a story is wrong, the plot will not make very much sense. In order to get their students prepared to write, Chase, Son, and Steiner (2014) created a series of sequencing lessons using comic strips before their students created their own graphic novels. These teachers had the student focus on retelling stories by using the boxed panel format. These students would hear a story and then have to retell the story orally. The next step for the students in this study was hearing a story and then the students had to retell the story using a group of different images and putting them in the correct sequential order. Chase et al. noticed that students often self-corrected the order of the frames as they constructed a narrative. This observation was a huge step as it showed that the importance of sequencing in graphic novels and storytelling. It also showed that primary students are able to perform these tasks and learn about such an important literary writing skill early on in their writing development. This study echoed the sentiments of Pantaleo (2013) and McCloud (2006) on the importance of sequential storytelling or sequential narratives when it comes to writing in general and also specifically writing graphic novels. In addition, some argue that graphic novels are similar to film as the format of the panels are similar to strips of film. Whether it is a film or a graphic novel, the story doesn’t make much sense unless it goes in the correct sequential order. The only difference is, as
Dallacqua (2012) states, “Blocks of images drawn on a page act as frames of film, but the reader must be the projector” (p. 68). Looking at graphic novels as how they relate to film is an interesting way to view graphic novels. Film and graphic novels may not look very similar to each other. However, film and graphic novels may be more alike than they are different as it pertains to sequential storytelling. Film is just storytelling through video images. Graphic novels are storytelling through still images. The sequence of the storytelling holds an important role in both mediums, which is why the fact that graphic novels teach the literacy element of proper sequential writing is so important.

It is clear that mentor texts have an important place in the classroom. However, many teachers still do not use mentor texts with their students. The reason teachers may not use mentor texts could be for a variety of reasons. Many teachers may find it hard to use mentor texts because they simply cannot find the right one. Graphic novels could be the answer. Graphic novels are a great genre of literacy to use in schools because they can be used in any content area. Graphic novels can teach not only reading and writing, but also social studies and science. This statement will be further discussed in the third theme of this literature review as I talk about how graphic novels can be used across curriculum. Like mentor texts, graphic novels can model and teach specific writing skills and strategies.

**Graphic Novels Can Be Used Across the Curriculum to Improve Writing Skills**

Writing across the curriculum is integral in order to improve the writing skills of today’s students. Writing is a complex and recursive process that requires strategic decision making across multiple domains and content areas (Graham, 2006; Pritchard & Honeycutt, 2006; Newell, 2006; Bifuh-Ambe, 2013). The more chances a student gets to work on their writing,
the more opportunities they have to improve their writing. Writing does not have to just occur during English Language Arts time. More and more teachers are turning to graphic novels to support content learning and increase print experience for youth (Brozo, Moorman, & Meyer, 2013). In order to successfully support student writing, teachers must incorporate writing in other subject areas. Pritchard and Honeycutt (2006) cited evidence from both teacher surveys and examination of student essays during their research to conclude that teachers who provided students with significantly more opportunities for writing in the classroom outscored the students of teacher who were untrained in how to increase opportunities for writing in the classroom. In other words, the teachers who gave their students may opportunities to write not only in the ELA time of the day, but other time as well, had more success improving student writing than the teachers who did not incorporate extra writing time in their classrooms.

As you can see, the more chances students get to write, the more opportunities they have to improve their writing. That is where graphic novels come in to the picture. Graphic novels are a great medium to transcend across curriculum. As Gavigan (2012) says, “Graphic novels are terrific resources for helping the curriculum come alive for students” (p. 23). Graphic novels can be used in so many different content areas to improve writing. Graphic novels are an engaging way to get students interested in subjects that they didn’t even know they could be interested in. Boermann-Cornell (2013) says, “Graphic novels can be an effective way to engage students who don’t yet know they love the subject you are teaching” (p. 75). Graphic novels have a way of enticing students. The engaging format of graphic novels invites students to interact with the text and enjoy working with and learning from the text. Informational graphic novels, when used at school, motivate students to read in these content areas (Cromer & Clark, 2007). As discussed in the first theme of this literature review, motivation is a key factor in
determining success with literacy. Graphic novels can really be incorporated into any subject. However, the main subjects that graphic novels can be used to boost motivation and success in include social studies or history and science.

Numerous studies have focused on using graphic novels in the social studies classroom (Decker & Castro, 2012; Christensen, 2006; Boatright, 2010; Gavigan & Albright, 2015). Graphic novels are becoming increasingly more popular in the stories about war. Decker and Castro (2012) used a graphic novel titled The Unknown Soldier to teach students about war and violence. It is a story about the brutality and even the racism of war, specifically war in Uganda, because that was the unit the class was studying at the time. The story is about a soldier who has to fight through all of the hardships that a soldier has to face on the front lines. The students discussed the novel and the themes that they got out of looking at the text and the images. Decker and Castro observed that even the students who did not normally participate in class found ways to get involved in these discussions. The conclusion of this study was that graphic novels lend themselves to classroom discussions about larger historical values. After reading the graphic novel during history class, the students who normally struggled to read the class history textbooks felt that they got more out of the graphic novel than they would out of a textbook. Decker and Castro stated that using the graphic novel was a great way to connect with more of their students on a deeper level. The graphic images and the way that the story was told through these pictures made the students think deeply about the story and what messages the author was trying to convey. In addition, the use of the graphic novel made it easier for students to think critically about the content, as well as the context in which it was presented. Because the students were forced to think critically about the text, they were more engaged in the topic and thought about the text on a deeper level had they not used a graphic novel. Likewise,
Christensen (2006) states that because of the popularity with young adults, using a few well-chosen graphic novels in the classroom can initiate conversations about social justice, racism, war, and global conflict. Graphic novels are an intriguing new and upcoming form of literature for both educators and students. Many of the lessons in today’s high schools have started to become more student led discussion, with the teacher acting as a guide. Graphic novels fit perfectly into the setting of today’s high school classrooms. The use of graphic novels could start the class conversations that help to further student knowledge through discussion and debate. Graphic novels make students think critically about a text or a subject, which can lead to rich classroom discussion. Boatright (2010) had similar conclusions about the inclusion of graphic novels in the social studies classroom. Boatright used graphic novels to teach students about the United States issues of immigration, specifically with Asian immigrants. Echoing the conclusions of Decker and Castro (2012) and Christensen (2006), Boatright (2010) concluded that graphic novels are a great starting point for classroom dialogue. Furthermore, Boatright found that using the graphic novel to study the issue of immigration in the United States helped the students relate to the experiences of immigrants and were more willing to get engaged in the complex issues surrounding immigration. The foreign students in his classroom also had a great experience with the graphic novel as they could empathize with the characters in the book and the experiences these characters had trying to be United States citizens. The native students in the classroom realized how hard it is to become a United States citizen and had an eye-opening experience because of the use of the graphic novel and the discussions that ensued.

Yet another study that used graphic novels in history class was the Gavigan and Albright (2015) discussed earlier in the motivation theme section. For this study, Gavigan and Albright instructed a class of young men at a juvenile detention facility. These youths read a graphic
novel about HIV/AIDS and then had to create their own informational graphic novel on the topic. Similar to what Decker and Castro found, Gavigan and Albright found that using the graphic novel was a “gateway that provided the academic momentum for students to write in creative and authentic ways” (p. 43). These students used the graphic novel to learn about the geographic location where HIV/AIDS started and where it is most prevalent in today’s society. The graphic novel was also used to open up discussion about the prevalence of HIV/AIDS in America, specifically South Carolina. These students were amazed to find out how many people are affected by HIV/AIDS. They knew that when they make the informational graphic novel, they were doing a great thing for science and society by letting people know how bad that disease is. Many of the students that were in the study felt a connection whether someone they know had HIV/AIDS or because of the facts that they learned about how abundant the disease was around where they lived, specifically in their social circles because of drug use unprotected sex. The graphic novel does not have to be and should not be the only material that is used in the classroom. However, using graphic novels in the social studies or history classroom opens up many different gateways for discussion and further research on the topic. In turn, writing can be improved as the students are more motivated in the subject, have a deeper knowledge of the content, and actually have a motivation to write their own graphic novel about the topic. These students had fun with the topic and really felt they were doing something important when they made their own graphic novels.

Related to the conclusion made by Gavigan and Albright, Decker and Castro (2012) stated that using graphic novels in the classroom demonstrated to the students that history did not have to be boring. Some students think history is boring because they do not realize the connection it has to what is going on in the world today. Graphic novels can help students to
open up a book and learn about history in an engaging and interesting way. Graphic novels really seem to serve as the perfect medium to connect English Language Arts and Social Studies.

Science is another subject in which graphic novels can enhance student achievement, especially writing skills, across curriculum. Graphic novels can provide the visuals that are often needed in science instruction. Graphic novels are a great supplement, or even substitute, to the science textbook. Unlike textbooks, graphic novels are from youths’ popular culture and thus integral to their lives. In addition, graphic novels have content that is presented in a matter that can be used to encourage students to become critical consumers of science, which is a core goal of science literacy (Hapgood & Palinear, 2007). For a student to be literate in science, they must be able to read, write, and talk science. These characteristics can be nurtured by graphic novels and comics as the traditional science textbook is uninspiring and difficult to understand, especially for student readers. Brozo (2015) used a graphic novel during the study of genes and genetics. He found that using a graphic novel during science instruction translated into greater involvement in lessons, increased learning of essential information, and interpretive and critical thinking. Because of the positive experience that these students had using a graphic novel, many asked after the unit where they could find more graphic novels and also if they could make their own. This statement goes back to the first theme of this literature review, which was motivation to write. These students may have been in science class, but once again graphic novels proved to be a very useful in getting students engaged and wanting to create their own writing.

Cirigliano (2012) also found that students found using graphic novels to learn cell biology was not only entertaining, but the graphic novel made learning enjoyable. Despite the fact that a graphic novel was substituted for a textbook, the study participants still were successful in learning about cell biology. Specifically, many students felt strongly that the
graphic novel had the ability to aid them in recalling information and teaching them new concepts. This conclusion further proves the point that graphic novels can be used across the curriculum. Gavigan (2012) says that “Science based graphic novels offer students a colorful and engaging way to learn about topics from atoms to x-rays” (p. 23). There is another study that echoed the conclusions of the previously discussed studies of this theme. Spiegel, McQuillan, Halpin, Matuk, and Diamond (2013) studied how to engage their students to learn about viruses in a comic book or graphic novel type format. One group of students studied the topic through an essay format, while the other group studied viruses through the use of comics. These researchers concluded that science comic books may particularly engage and educate students who think of themselves as not big fans of science and therefore unlikely to be interested in science content. Spiegel et al. (2013) concluded that it was an important finding that many of the students wanted to read more comics, particularly teenagers with low science interest. It suggests that comics could be an influential step in developing interest in science in the youth most resistant to conventional educational materials. Also, these researchers found that both groups in the study had similar knowledge of viruses after reading either the comic or the essay. This study suggested that comics can be both engaging and effective with helping student gain science knowledge and may be a useful tool for attracting hard-to-reach teenagers to science. There are many examples of how graphic novels and comics can be used to engage students in the science classroom to further their learning.

One may think that graphic novels may only be used for the more simplistic science topics such as cell biology or anatomy, however that is not true. Babaian and Chalian (2014) found that comic books could be used as an instructional manual. In the study, Babaian and Chalian used a comic book to go through how to perform a successful thyroidectomy and what to
look out for as a doctor and patient. Babaian and Chalian argued that storyboards and layouts for comic books and graphic novels can show complex actions and movements. They also may assist in gaining deeper insight into sequential events that occur in surgeries. Graphic novels would be a great tool for the Operation Room Surgeons as it could be used as a preparation for a surgery and even a reflection on it after the surgery happens. While they are not meant to replace textbooks, graphic novels are a welcome alternative to the less visually pleasing format of science textbooks. Graphic novels and comic books can save a person’s life someday.

Relating the use of graphic novels for learning back to high school and below, graphic novels and comic books could help students study different body systems or diseases and how to treat them during science classes. It does not have to be as complex as head and neck surgery.

Another study that related to the findings of Babaian and Chalian (2014) was by Lo Fo Wong, Beijaerts, de Haes, and Sprangers (2014) found that comic books and graphic novels can assist in helping to understand how someone feels when they are sick with breast cancer. Lo Fo Wong et al. concluded that this graphic novel may be of value in medical education and health psychology settings to teach students and patients about the human side of being ill. This use of graphic novels could be used in a health or science class when discussing illnesses and diseases. Graphic novels can be used in so many different ways just in the subject of science.

Graphic novels could also be used to advance math instruction. Boermann-Cornell (2013) argues that graphic novels can model mathematical problem solving. This type of learning would benefit visual learners who need to see how to do something through the use of images and text, not just the textbook or on the chalkboard. Boermann-Cornell goes on to state that the greatest potential for teaching math through graphic novels involves their ability to illustrate mathematical concepts by combining images with equations and explanations of the
concepts under consideration in a format that is easy to understand and follow along. Brozo and Simpson (2007) further the argument for graphic novels in the math classroom but arguing that graphic novels are an engaging alternative to a textbook as they said, “If students find these texts unappealing or too difficult and find the teaching practices around these texts boring, they may avoid reading about science, social studies, and math” (p.4). In order to keep these students from avoiding the important subjects, graphic novels are a useful medium to keep the students engaged and interested in a subject they may not necessarily be a big fan of. Math can be a dry subject to students and often a confusing and boring subject. However, through the use of graphic novels, students have a new, intriguing way to learn about math concepts. Like science and social studies, graphic novels in math are not meant to replace the traditional textbooks. Instead, graphic novels are a welcome and engaging alternative way to learn the important concepts that are needed in order to be successful in this subject of mathematics.

There are just so many activities that can incorporate the use of graphic novels in many different subjects. Specifically, social studies, science, and math can use graphic novels during instruction. For social studies, graphic novels provide a way to look at the violence and brutality of war. Graphic novels can also help students to look at the geography of specific areas that students are studying. For science, graphic novels can help students to visualize certain items that may not be easy to understand out of a textbook. Cell biology and atoms are two topics of science that can be explored through the use of graphic novels. Graphic novels can be so detailed and informational that doctors can use them for surgeries. Graphic novels could also be used to describe illness and diseases to patients and doctors alike. Students can learn using graphic novels in math by connecting images with equations and explanations of concepts. Math, science, and social studies are three subject that graphic novels can be used with in today’s
classrooms. Graphic novels are welcome option instead of or to supplement the textbook in every subject in classrooms.

**Conclusion**

The study of graphic novels and their impact on student writing is still a relatively new concept to research. However, through my research I found three themes that will aid my further research as the action research study continues. The first theme was that graphic novels increase student motivation to write. Specifically, activities that incorporate writing about personal experiences or social justice issues are interesting to students. When students are motivated, they have more self-efficacy with their writing, which in turn allows the student to push to overcome challenges and obstacles that they may face. The second theme was that graphic novels can be used as mentor texts. This theme showed that writing and reading of graphic novels go hand in hand. Sequencing and the relationship between the writing and image are two important story writing techniques that graphic novels can help students improve on. Other literary elements and writing skills that graphic novels can help teach include creativity and ideas, audience, and character development. Lastly, the third theme was that graphic novels can be used to write across the curriculum. Science and social studies graphic novels are a welcome inclusion in the classroom for struggling and on grade level readers alike as they help the reader visualize the different topics and themes of the different subjects. These three themes and this literature review as a whole will help to guide my creation of a meaningful and accurate action research study.
Method

Context

The research that was conducted for this study took place in an urban elementary school in Upstate New York. This school is one of 27 traditional elementary schools in the district. The district population is 60.1% Black or African American, 25.6% Hispanic or Latino, 10.2% White, and 4.1 Asian/Native American/East Indian/Other. The school district has 84% of the students qualify for free or reduced lunch. Also, 16.5% of the district population has special needs. According to the New York State report card data for 2015-2016, the population of this school is 284 students. The population of this school is 55% black or African American, 33% Hispanic or Latino, and 12% White. Additionally, the makeup of this school is 55% male and 45% female. Every student in the school receives free or reduced lunch. This school has classes from kindergarten to sixth grade, with two classes in each grade. The students that participated in this study were all from the same fifth grade classroom. The demographic makeup of their classroom is 68.1% Black or African American, 18.3% Hispanic or Latino, and 13.6% White. There are 22 students in the classroom and 40.9% of the students in the classroom have special needs. The classroom consists of 12 females and 10 males.

Participants

The participants for this study included three fifth grade students who receive daily Resource Room support for English Language Arts. Each of the participants is reading below his respective grade levels and their teachers have reported a consistent struggle in the area of
writing. In addition, each of these students receives additional support in mathematics, science, and social studies. This support exists in one-to-one, small group, and whole group activities throughout their school day. All three of the students in this study are male. Each student has an Individualized Education Plan (IEP) and is in an integrated co-taught classroom with one special education teacher and one general education teacher.

Travis (a pseudonym) is a 10 year old student at Bay Elementary. Travis is a Caucasian student who is reading at a late third, early fourth grade level. He likes to read, but like Johnny, is a reluctant writer. Travis understands texts on a literal level, but has trouble with theme and other story elements like plot and sequence. Travis is a very hard working student who tries his very best, despite his struggles. He has written a short story about zombies on his own. Travis is a very poor speller and has difficulty identifying details to support a main idea.

Brady (a pseudonym) is a 10 year old, Caucasian student. Brady is another student who reads on a first grade level. Brady has a lot of trouble focusing in the classroom. He often stares into space and does not listen to what the teacher is telling him to write at all. He thrives in a small group setting as he gets more attention to work on his weaknesses. Brady loves to play games like Battleship and also enjoys the Five Nights at Freddy’s series. Brady struggles with conventions when writing. He also has trouble with conflict and resolution along with character development and sequencing in his stories.

Johnny (a pseudonym) is a 10 year old, African-American student. Johnny receives Resource Room services for both ELA and math. Johnny is reading at a late first, early second grade level. He is very aware of his struggles and gets very frustrated. In class, Johnny cannot focus and needs someone to tell him what to do all the time. He enjoys small group settings. Johnny thrives off activities where he can be rewarded with prizes or candy. Johnny is a huge
fan of Five Nights at Freddy’s. Johnny is a strong oral storyteller, but struggles to write his stories. Johnny also has difficulty with conventions and grammar with his writing.

**Researcher Stance**

Currently, I am a graduate student at St. John Fisher College completing my coursework for my Master’s degree in Literacy Education, Birth through Grade 6. I presently have a Bachelor’s degree in Childhood Education and Special Education, Grades 1-6. In terms of this action research study, I acted as an active participant observer, in which I actively taught story writing strategies while simultaneously observing the development and outcomes of this study (Mills, 2014). I am the Resource Room teacher for these students so I was able to conduct the study and observe the outcomes while working with the students in one to one and small group settings during the regular school day.

**Method**

Throughout the duration of this study, I collected forms of both qualitative and quantitative data to determine the impact of using graphic novels with struggling students to improve story writing skills. I observed the students’ understanding of how to implement the story writing skills that will be explicitly taught to them through the use of graphic novels. Field notes were collected during each meeting session. In an attempt to gain full student perspective on their understanding of story writing skills, the students were interviewed before and after the study to gain knowledge on their awareness and utilization of these writing skills.

This study occurred over a series of 10 sessions, with each session consisting of 40 minutes. There was mostly small group instruction and some one on one instruction. The first session consisted of a background on graphic novels and the students creating their own to use as the first form of pre-study data. The students were also interviewed during this first session to
find out what they knew about story writing skills and how to use them (Appendix A). The next four sessions involved explicit teaching of the story writing skills. These skills included conflict and resolution, character development, sequencing and organization, and the connection between image and text. During these sessions, we read a graphic novel together. The graphic novel was titled *Trolls* by Gary Jeffrey. *Trolls* is a story about a group of trolls that terrorize a small village, until a group of people take a stand against the trolls. This story is a fantasy and is full of lots of action, which really engaged these students. The sixth session was a session where the students attempted to use these newly taught skills by making their second graphic novel strip. Sessions 7-9 consisted of the last two skills that were taught, the writing process (specifically editing) and conventions. The last sessions consisted of the students making their final graphic novel story, using their newly taught skills. It also included the post-interview (Appendix A) of the students.

**Quality and Credibility of Research**

Throughout the completion of this action research project, it is imperative to ensure the quality and credibility of the study that is taking place. In order to promise quality and credibility of an action research study, Mills (2014), through citing the work of Guba (1981), highlights the importance of credibility, transformability, dependability, and confirmability. All four of the criteria for a trustworthy study were kept in mind during the course of this study.

The first criterion for trustworthiness in a study is credibility. Credibility refers to “The researcher’s ability to take into account the complexities that present themselves in a study and to deal with patterns that are not easily explained” (Mills, 2014, p. 115). Mills highlights a few methods that can be used to maintain credibility that relate to this study. First, I had prolonged
participation at the study site as I am the Resource Room teacher for these students and have
developed a relationship with them. I also did persistent observation as each session was closely
observed. Lastly, I collected documents, student artifacts, video recordings, and audio to get slice
of life items as Mills (2014) explains.

The second criterion for trustworthiness in research is transferability. Transferability
relates to the researcher’s beliefs that everything they study can be context bound. Also, it is
important to keep in mind that the goal of the study is to not provide truth statements that
generalize larger group of people (Mills, 2014). To make sure I have transferability, I collected
detailed descriptive data in which it will be permitted that comparison of this specific study in
this school can be transferred to other situations. I also developed detailed descriptions of the
context in order to make judgements about fittingness with other contexts when possible.

The third criterion for a research study that is trustworthy is dependability. Dependability
refers to the stability of the data. I used overlap methods, which are similar to triangulation, in
case one of my three methods was weak compared to the other two. I established an audit trail in
the form of a written description of each process through a critical colleague.

Confirmability is the last criterion for a trustworthy research study. This refers to the
objectivity of the data that has been collected. In order to do establish confirmability, I practiced
triangulation through my three forms of data to cross check that data. I also practiced reflexivity
through the use of a journal in which I wrote my reflections every day.

Credibility, transformability, dependability, and confirmability are the four criteria that
Mills (2014) argues create a trustworthy research study. Through the use of the four criteria, I
made sure that my action research study is of acceptable quality and credibility.
Informed Consent and Protecting the Rights of the Participants

Before beginning to collect data for this study, it was essential to inform the students and their families what the study entailed, as well as asking for permission to work with these students for this study. I asked each student if they would be willing to allow me to work with them. I also asked each student that gave assent to give their parents a parent permission form. The parent permission form highlighted the purpose of the study and asked for their signature for permission for their child to participate in the study. All of the students in this study are above third grade, so they had to sign an assent form. The assent form informed the student of the purpose of the study and asked for their signature in order to give permission to participate. The parental permission forms and child assent forms were collected after they had been signed. This measure of protection ensures confidentiality and anonymity.

Data Collection

I collected three forms of data that have been mentioned earlier in this methods section. Three forms of data confirmed triangulation of any results that I had. The first form of data collection that I used was field notes gained from observing each student during each session. During each session, I kept a small notebook by me at all times to record my observations when necessary.

The second form of data was the use of formal student interviews. The students were interviewed during the first session and then during the final session. The students answered questions about what they knew about storytelling and story writing. The students were also
given an opportunity to explain if they knew how to use the proper story writing skills. I audio recorded these interviews.

The third form of data was the use of student work. The students made three short graphic novels. The first was during session one, the second during session six, and the final one during session ten. Each of these graphic novels were graded based on a storytelling rubric. The rubric is included in the artifacts section. The aim of using the three graphic novels was to show change or lack of change in the story writing skills over time after learning these skills during the sessions.

Data Analysis

Several forms of data were collected for this action research project. These forms included my field notes, audio recordings of each session with students, student pre and post interviews, and student work samples. The data obtained from this study was coded several times in order to find patterns that appeared multiple times in different settings. Through the analysis of the data, I was able to draw conclusions on the effect of graphic novels in instruction of struggling readers and writers. I was also able to make conclusions on how to improve the use of graphic novels as a writing instruction tool. In addition, I gained a stronger sense of teacher understanding of literacy and writing instruction at the fifth grade level.

The first step I took to analyze and code the data was looking at the answers to the student interview questions. I looked at the pre-instruction interview answers and then to the post-instruction interview answers to see if there were any significant changes in the students’ answers. I also looked at the post-instruction interview answers to see any commonalities between the students’ answers. Specifically, I looked at how the students thought that their
writing skills improved or didn’t over the course of the study. Next, I looked at the student artifacts and their scores on the rubrics. Each of the three students had three rubrics because of the three comic strips that they made. One was used as a pre-assessment, the next was used as a mid-assessment, and then finally the third comic strip was the post-assessment. The students received scores up to 5 for each one of the five categories on the rubric, which were pictures and captions, characters, conventions, sequence and organization, and plot. I looked for commonalities in areas that the student scores improved and also areas that the student scores may have stayed the same. I also analyzed the overall percentage scores of each student on their rubric to find out if their writing skills improved as a whole over the course of this action research study. The commonalities that I noticed between the student interviews and the student work were written down in a graphic organizer so that I could find the themes of the data in order to form conclusion to answer the question that guided this action research study.

Lastly, I went back and looked at my anecdotal notes to see if the commonalities I found in my other forms of data matched what I had observed during each of the sessions. I also listened to the audio recordings of each session to help remember exactly how each session went. To code the data, I added the themes that I got out of this section to my graphic organizer and matched the commonalities in order to make the themes that I will be discussing in the next section.

Findings and Discussion

Findings and Discussion

The data from the action research was organized into three following main categories: field notes through audio recordings and observations during the lessons, student interview responses, and student work samples. In looking at the data through a close lens, several
reoccurring themes surfaced. The first theme was that the students were much more engaged and confident in their writing as they started to learn about how graphic novels can be used. Through the student interviews and the observations, I took during the learning segments, the students commented how much these graphic novels interested them more than “normal” books. The second theme discusses how the use of graphic novels impacted student understanding of connecting pictures and text. An important part of story writing, specifically graphic novels is being able to use pictures and text together in order to tell the story. These students showed growth with connecting pictures and text. The third theme highlights that the students gained a better knowledge of storytelling and story writing elements and skills as they worked through the course of this study. Through analyzing student work using a rubric, along with the students’ comments during the learning sessions, the students showed an increased knowledge of plot, sequence and organization, and character development.

**Student Engagement and Confidence in Writing**

In the context of this study, students showed interest and engagement with the use of graphic novels to improve their writing. These students also showed an increased level of confidence as we ventured deeper into the study. Observations and discussion with the students during the sessions, student interviews, and student work helped to form these conclusions.

During each of the 10 sessions that made up this action research study, I took notes on observations that I could make about the student response to the instruction. All three of the students made comments about the fact that this was a very fun unit to do. Brady said, “I wish I could stay up here all day and write these stories!” (Brady, personal communication, November
This interest in the project showed that the students were engaged. While they may have lacked confidence at the start of the study, these students did not lack a lot of confidence by the end of it. Connecting to the literature review, Gavigan and Albright (2015) stated that when students had fun with the topic and really felt they were doing something important, they made significant improvements in engagement and achievement. In the first session, the students were a little lost on what they were supposed to do when writing their own graphic novel strip. The reason that these students were lost is because graphic novels are a new genre of writing for them. Each of these students had read a graphic novel before but these students had never written one. However, by the mid-assessment graphic novel strip, these students started to ask less questions and worked much more independently. This improvement showed an increase in confidence as these students did not need as much help as before. When completing the post-assessment strip, two students asked me not to look at their work until they were done. These students were so excited about their work that they wanted to present their final work in a grand manner. Connecting to the literature review, when students are motivated and interested in what they are writing, they will continue to want to write (Hughes, King, Perkins, and Fuke, 2011).

These recorded notes helped me to look back and realize that over time, the students became more engaged in the subject and gained much more confidence as the action research study went on. The student answers from their pre and post interviews supported these findings. One of the questions for the student interview was “How confident are you about writing stories?” All three of the students showed a lack of confidence at the pre-study interview. However, all three of the students showed growth in their confidence by the end of the lesson. In the pre study interview, Brady said, “I like stories, but sometimes I don’t know what to write about. I like writing about zombies” (Brady, personal communication, September 29, 2016). By the end of the study,
Brady’s thoughts changed. He said, “Writing stories is fun. I know a lot about writing now. I can write stories about anything! I know that every picture needs writing” (Brady, personal communication, November 4, 2016). Brady went from an initial intrigue of writing stories but being lost as to what to write about and changed into a more confident, interested writer. Travis lacked a lot of confidence during the pre-study interview as it pertains to writing. Travis said, “I don’t like writing. I only like to draw” (Travis, personal communication, September 2016). He was pretty adamant that writing was not a strength for him or even something that interested him. However, at the post-study interview, Travis said, “I write good stories. I used lots of talking bubbles in my pictures so I did a good job” (Travis, personal communication, November 4, 2016). Travis showed a boost of confidence and even gave a reason why he thought he was a good writer. Lastly, Johnny also showed the biggest increase in confidence and interest from the pre-study interview to the post-study interview. At the pre-study interview, Johnny said, “I hate writing. Writing is boring” (Johnny, personal communication, September 2016). He was very straightforward that writing was not something that interested him at all. However, at the post-study interview, Johnny said, “Writing can be fun. I like to make pictures that go with my writing. I still don’t like to write very much, but making stories is fun. It is easy to find something to write about” (Johnny, personal communication, November 4, 2016). Even though he still said that he did not like writing very much, he did express an interest in the stories and even said that writing could be fun. This comment showed the increase in confidence and interest that his classmates in this study showed. This interview data can be connected to the literature review. MacArthur, Phillipakos, and Graham (2016) say that individuals tend to choose activities in which they feel competent and avoid tasks that they think are beyond their ability. Low confidence leads to anxiety for a student which may affect the student’s success on
a certain task. The individuals in this study choose to stick with what they were comfortable with and did not try to take any risks at the start. But, as the learning sessions went on, the students became more comfortable with the material.

The interviews gave a good glimpse into what the students thought about writing in terms of confidence. Through the recorded observations and the student work, I noticed a significant increase in confidence with these students. First, Travis started this study by stating that he did like to write but did not exactly know what to write about. However, as the case study went on, Travis started to figure out that he could write stories about anything he could think of during the brainstorming and organization lesson. Travis had what most people would call writers block. However, as I wrote in my observations, as he started to brainstorm ideas with the group, he started to get excited because he was starting to find more and more things that interested him that he wanted to write about. He was really excited to find out that he could write about his favorite game, Call of Duty. Travis’s newfound knowledge on the ability to write about what interested him was shown in his student work of the comic strips as he wrote all three of his comic strips with a Call of Duty theme. The strip below is from Travis’s first attempt at writing about something that interest him.
Travis wrote a story about something that interested him. Connecting to the literature review, Hughes, King, Perkins, and Fuke (2011) found that student writers have an increased level of engagement when they are writing about something of interest to them. However, since this comic strip was at the start of the study, he was not confident in how to write a story with the proper story writing elements. After a few learning segments on dialogue, picture and text, and organization, Travis expressed more confidence during the creation of his second graphic strip. Travis commented during one of the sessions that he wished he could teach the other kids in his class how to write a story like he was learning with me. Travis was confident that he had a wealth of knowledge with story writing that he wanted to share with others. His increased level of confidence showed in his second comic strip. Travis once again wrote about Call of Duty, but he took more chances with his writing techniques as he wrote about a specific part of the game that he said not many people know how to play.
Travis continued to show an increase in confidence and engagement as this study went on. He made a comment during the character development lesson that he wanted to add more people into his story. He wanted to challenge himself to add more characters to his story. Travis showed an increased level of confidence as he wanted to try new things and improve his writing even more. When making his final comic strip, Travis had a smile on his face the whole time. He was really interested and engaged in what he had to do. In the third comic strip, Travis added
more characters and furthered his storyline. He was not afraid to make mistakes with spelling. He added captions and even some dialogue as he was confident enough to try these elements in his writing. His third comic strip is shown below.

Figure 3. Travis’s final comic strip.

Travis’s increased confidence and interest really helped improve his story writing skills from start to finish in this study.
As stated above, Brady said that he did not like writing and only liked to draw during the pre-study interview. Throughout the course of the study, Brady learned how important captions and dialogue boxes are. During the lesson on picture to text connections, Brady started off very cautiously. I observed that he kept looking at other students’ work to see what they were doing. Brady kept looking around and not trying it on his own showed a lack of confidence. Like Travis, Brady showed this lack confidence in his student work at the start of the study. There were only a few single word dialogue bubbles in his first comic strip. He was too focused on making his pictures look nice that he often forgot to add captions or dialogue to help tell the story. Brady also was not confident in his writing ability. During one of the lessons, Brady commented that the reason that he spent so much time on his pictures was because he knew he was a good drawer. He said did not write a lot because he knew he was better at drawing than writing. However, as the study went on and Brady learned more about the writing skills necessary to be a good writer, he started to show more confidence. This increase of confidence was shown in his student work. Below is a panel from the first comic strip that Brady made. He focused fully on the picture and did not write any words.

Figure 4. Brady’s first comic strip.
As stated before, Brady was more confident with his drawing than his writing. However, Brady eventually started to gain confidence as he went through the different learning segments of this study. I observed that he was less worried about looking at other students’ work and started completing the activities on his own. When he had a question, he was not afraid to ask me what to do. Brady’s increase in confidence in writing showed in his final comic strip as he finally added dialogue and captions to his writing. Below is a panel from his final comic strip to show the improvements that he made, mostly due to his increased level of confidence.

*Figure 5. Brady’s second comic strip.*
Through the interview answer that Brady gave above, followed up with the observations and examples of student work, it is clear that Brady benefitted from an increased level of confidence. He was not afraid to take chances with dialogue or his pictures. His pictures also became much more detailed as he gained confidence. Connecting to the literature review, when a student has confidence, they will have self-efficacy, which in turn Pajares and Valiente (2015) argue that self-efficacy beliefs also help determine how much effort students will spend on an activity, how long they will persevere when they face obstacles, and how resilient the students will be in the face of adversity.

Johnny was a very reluctant writer at the start of this study. I made three recorded observations in the first two sessions that Johnny was lost on what he had to do to be a good writer. Johnny did not know where to even start. He did not ask many questions and just sat at the table looking around waiting for help. It was easily observed that he had no confidence in what he was doing. But, just like the other two students, after the use of the graphic novel that we read together and the literacy element skills practice, he gained much more confidence. Like Brady, Johnny found that there are many things that he could write about. Writing doesn’t always have to be so boring. Like the other two students, Johnny showed his newfound confidence in his work. Johnny’s first comic strip was very short and there were many mistakes. He only had 4 panels and the panels did not really work well with each other. He took a long time to write his first comic strip as he was also asking if he was doing it right. Johnny did not want to write independently. Through the use of the online comic generator, he gained interest. It was easier for him to make the pictures and type the text the way he wanted it to look. As time went on, Johnny gained confidence as he got more practice writing and working with his peers. Johnny kept saying how fun it was to make his own comic strips. His final comic strip was 9
panels long and had a storyline that made sense. Johnny’s first and last comic strip are shown on page 66-69.

All three of these students lacked a lot of confidence with writing when this action research study started as shown by the interview answers, recorded observations, and some student work. However, throughout the course of the study, these students started to have fun and be engaged in the activity as they gained confidence. This improvement in confidence was shown through student comments in the interviews, recorded observations, and the student work. The connections to the literature review involved the students gaining confidence and in turn improving chances at success. All three students gained an appreciation of their own writing skills and applied that confidence to their work. The next two conclusions that I will be discussing in this paper will show further data how the increase in confidence related to the improvement in writing skills with these students.

**Students Accurately Connected Picture and Text**

Through a review of the observation notes, student interview answers, and student work, I determined that these students showed an improvement in the ability to accurately connect picture and text. What I mean this is that a written story as it pertains to graphic novels need pictures and text. These two items work together to tell the story to the reader. The text, whether it is dialogue or captions can further the reader’s understanding of the pictures and the author’s message as a whole. This writing skill is an important one as it pertains to graphic novels and storytelling in general.

When conducting the pre-study interview, there were a few comments made about the awareness that pictures and text were related. Travis said, “The writing tells what the picture
means” (Travis, personal communication, September 2016). This statement showed that he realized that the pictures and writing went together. Connecting the interview answers to the student work at the beginning of this study, Travis did not apply his knowledge of captions to his own writing. In his first comic strip, he only used one caption. An example of Travis’s first comic strip is shown below.

![Figure 6. Panel from Travis’s first comic strip.](image)

As time went on, however, Travis started to figure it out. On his second comic strip, he included a caption on all four of his panels to describe his pictures. Even better, on the third comic strip, he not only included a caption on all four panels, but he also included dialogue in one of the panels. An example of this comic strip is shown on the next page.
Figure 7. Panel from Travis’s final comic strip.

This improvement in his work showed Travis’s growth in his awareness of how the pictures and text connected. On the post-study interview, Travis said once again that “The text tells what the pictures mean” (Travis, personal communication, November 4, 2016). However, Travis showed his growth as he continued his answer. He said, “I use speech bubbles to tell what my people are saying in my story” (Travis, personal communication, November 4, 2016). Travis showed a good knowledge of dialogue and captions as they pertain to the pictures. He showed an awareness of the text relating to the pictures. Connecting to the literature review, Figeirido (2011) said that the images in graphic novels are useful because they relay information from comics through the use of images and relating those images to the audience. Travis made the connection that information can be gained through not only the pictures, but the text as well.
Brady also showed an accurate understanding of the connections between picture and text when it comes to story writing. He said, “I can have the characters talk in my story” (Brady interview, 2016). This comment showed an awareness of dialogue and how it pertains to the story. I asked Brady a follow up question on how captions relate to the story. Brady said “I think that captions are the things that go with pictures to tell the story” (Brady interview, 2016). Brady, like Travis, had the awareness that both image and text can give information, as stated in the literature review by Figerido (2011). Brady showed that he had a good control of the use of speech bubbles for dialogue in his comic strips right from the start. He included dialogue in every box that was necessary. Brady even showed an understanding of the absence of text as he showed just the picture in a few of the panels. A student work sample from the first comic strip is shown in Figure 8 below.

Figure 8. Panel from Brady’s first comic strip.
Brady did not have any captions in his comic strips on neither the pre-assessment nor the mid-assessment. Brady showed growth on the post-assessment as he included a few captions in the boxes. He still only used two captions in his story out of 12 panels, so there was still room for improvement. An example of Brady’s improvement is shown below.

![Figure 9. Panel from Brady’s final comic strip.](image)

The instruction that went along with the study stressed that there should be captions with at least 75% of the pictures. Therefore, Brady did not meet the standards set forth for him, yet still showed improvement. During the post-study interview, Brady said that “I can have characters talk in my story to tell the story. I can also put sentences under or above the boxes to say what’s going on” (Brady, personal communication, November 4, 2016). Brady showed growth in the understanding and application of his knowledge of the picture to text connection. My observations and anecdotal notes support the conclusion that Brady improved in the area of text-image connections. At the start of the study, I commented that Brady was saying the right things about the captions, but he never used them. When I asked him why not, he basically said
that he forgot to add them. I also noticed that after we had this conversation, Brady started to add at least a few captions to support his story. This action showed that he was aware of an area he needed to improve and he then accurately improved that area. I interpreted this action as that Brady was still learning and trying to improve his practices as he learned more and more about how the text and pictures need to be connected. Connecting to the literature review, when students are motivated, they have an increase sense of self-efficacy and self-reflection (MacArthur, Phillipakos, & Graham, 2016). Brady was self-aware of what he needed to improve and he made an effort to make those necessary improvements.

Like two other two students, Johnny did not start off with a wealth of knowledge about text to picture connections, but did have a good base of what captions and dialogue were. Johnny said, “Dialogue is talking and captions are explaining the talking” (Johnny, personal communication, September 27, 2016). While he was right about dialogue, Johnny did not exactly explain how captions relate to the pictures. To connect back to the literature review, Crilley (2009) highlighted that dialogue can be used to reveal character. In his pre-assessment comic strip, Johnny used dialogue but it did not make much sense to the story nor to the pictures. The characters were not developed at all through the dialogue. An example of a panel is shown below.
Figure 10. Panel from Johnny’s first comic strip.

What the character was saying did not make sense with the background or the picture or story in general. The story was about a guy showing his friend around his house and it ended with the guy going to space. There was a party but it did not make sense to the story line. Johnny struggled off the bat with the correct use of dialogue. However, Johnny kept trying his best to understand how to use dialogue correctly. He then improved a bit with his dialogue making sense to the pictures on the mid-assessment, but still did not include any captions. Johnny scored a 3 on the characters and dialogue section on the rubric because he did include dialogue, but still only included a few dialogue bubbles that did not really help the story. He only received a 3 on the picture and text section of the rubric because only half of the boxes had a caption that went with the picture. Finally, like Travis, Johnny finally added some captions in his post-assessment comic strip. My observations connected to the student work and interview questions as early on in the study, I observed that Johnny relied only on dialogue to tell the story. This observation showed that he did not have a good awareness of the importance of captions. Connecting Johnny’s struggles to the literature review, Cook (2015) said that students need to think critically when reading and writing graphic novels. There needs to be an awareness of how
the panels can be interacted with in order to tell the story. There were gaps in his storytelling that a caption would have filled. Finally, after the session that he learned about using captions, Johnny immediately incorporated it into his writing and showed great improvement. An example of a panel from Johnny’s final comic strip is shown in Figure 11 on the next page.

![Image of Johnny's comic strip]

Figure 11. Johnny’s improved character development.

On the final comic strip, Johnny used captions for the majority of the panels, which earned him a 4 on the rubric. Johnny got a 5 on the rubric for character dialogue as the dialogue that Johnny chose for his characters made sense to the story. I picked this comic strip to show as a form of data because it shows Johnny’s ability to connect picture and text. Johnny’s character said that he needs to find his friends and he is in a walking motion, showing that he is on his way to find his friends. To connect to the literature review, Baird and Jackson (2007) define a successful graphic novel as one that “starts with a stellar story told with words and pictures that
augment the story, providing insight the text alone cannot do” (p. 5). As Johnny connected his word and images successfully, he would have been considered to have created a stellar story.

All three students exemplified through all three forms of my data that they had an accurate understanding of the connections between the text and the pictures. This improvement pertained to both the captions and the dialogue. All three of the students in the study had previous knowledge of the relationship between picture and text, but did not apply their knowledge to their own writing. However, after the learning segments, discussions, and writing practice during this study, each of the three students improved their picture to text writing skills to varying degrees.

**Students Gained a Better Knowledge of Story Writing Skills**

Other than dialogue and captions that were explained in the previous section, the students improved their overall story writing skills. Sequence and organization, plot, and character development were three writing skills that the students were taught and then improved on during the session. Sequence can be defined as the order of events in a story. Organization is how the beginning, middle, and end are put together in order to form the correct sequence. Organization and sequence are related and that is why the students learned about both of these elements during the same lesson. As it pertains to graphic novels, or any story, if the story is not organized in the correct sequential order, it will not make sense. Good story writers have great organization and can put the events in their story in the right order. Sequence and organization are related to plot. Plot is the main events of the story, including the problem and the solution. With graphic novels, the plot will not make sense if the events in the panels do not happen in sequential order. Lastly, character development is the author’s ability to portray who the character is to the reader. In graphic novels, character development can occur through the pictures and dialogue, and
sometimes through the captions. Sequence and organization, plot, and character development are all intertwined skills that make up what a good story writer does with their stories.

Each one of the students in this study struggled to explain how graphic novels work with some of the key elements of story writing at the start of the study. However, one student showed a strong awareness of how to use these story writing elements, Brady. On the next page is a table highlighting the scores that Brady received on his rubrics for his comic strips.

Table 1

*Brady’s Rubric Scores*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Assessment</th>
<th>Sequence and Organization</th>
<th>Plot</th>
<th>Character Development</th>
<th>Total Score</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Comic 1</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>72%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Comic 2</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>76%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Comic 3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>92%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note.* Total score was calculated based on five categories on a rubric. Each category was worth five points. The two categories not shown in this table are conventions and image-text connection.

Brady was very strong in many of the areas of story writing, despite not being able to explain exactly what the elements were or how to use them as I observed during the learning sessions. Brady scored a 4 on plot for the first two comic strips that he made. He had a problem and a solution, but the way the problem was solved was not clear to the reader. According to
the rubric, this qualified for a 4 out of 5 for plot. Finally, in his final comic strip, Brady made a problem and solution that made perfect sense with each other. Brady also performed well with characters, getting a 5 out of 5 on all three comic strips. Brady did a nice job showing different characters in his story that fit into his storyline and had dialogue that showed a little about them. Brady exemplified strong ability to sequence the events in his story and organize them in a concise manner. He started with a 4 on the rubric which said that there is a clear beginning, middle, and end but the sequence did not make perfect sense. It was almost as if a panel was missing in his story. By the end of the study, Brady did not show much improvement with sequence. His story made sense, but it seemed like it was missing a few parts that the reader needed to fully understand the storyline. Connecting this interpretation of the data to the literature review, Chase, Son, and Steiner (2014) stated that if the sequence of a story is wrong, the story will not make much sense. In this situation, Brady had a solid story, but because the sequence had a few holes in it, the plot was not as strong as it could have been.

Travis’s overall scores showed improvement too due to his increased skills in the areas of sequence, character development, and plot. The table below shows the scores that Travis received on each of the three comic strip rubrics. The total score is the combination of the five areas of sequence, character development, plot, conventions, and picture to text connection.
Table 2

_Travis’s Rubric Scores_

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Assessment</th>
<th>Sequence and Organization</th>
<th>Plot</th>
<th>Character Development</th>
<th>Total Score</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Comic 1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>24%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Comic 2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>60%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Comic 3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>84%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

_Note._ Total score was calculated based on 5 categories on a rubric. Each category was worth 5 points. The two categories not shown in this table are conventions and image-text connection.

Travis struggled with sequence and organization along with plot and character development at the start of the study. I observed that he wrote a story without really planning how it was going to go by the end of it. This lack of skill with sequence was evident in his first comic strip as he just drew pictures that didn’t make much sense with each other. He had no real characters in his story. The story did not make sense to the reader. Travis also did not have a problem or a solution in his story. These results from the observations and student work supported the notion that he did not have much knowledge on many story writing elements at the start of this study. Travis’s first comic strip is on the next page.
Figure 12. Travis’s entire first comic strip.

There is not much information to tell the plot. There seems to be no problem or solution and the lack of writing makes the story hard to follow. Travis has people in the story, but the reader gets no information about who these characters are. These reasons are why Travis scored so low on sequence, characters, and plot in his first comic strip. However, by the end of the
study, Travis did improve in all three areas. He was observed working very hard during each session to become a better story writer. Travis had a real interest in this study. He made comments during the sequence lesson that he couldn’t wait to show me what he had learned. An example below of Brady’s final comic strip shows his ability to tell his story in sequential order, including a plot and characters.

Figure 13. Travis’s entire final comic strip.
Travis showed growth from his first comic strip to the final one. He added captions which helped to tell his story. His story made sense in terms of sequence and plot as there was the problem of the characters getting spotted and then the solution of the characters running out of the base to a helicopter saving them. Travis’s panels were in an organized order and the reader could follow along with the story. He may have started off with low scores, but improved with his writing skills over time. Going back to Chase, Son, and Steiner (2014) from the literature review, sequence and plot go hand in hand. As he improved his sequence and organization score, the plot score in turn improved.

Johnny improved with a number of story writing elements as his fellow study participants did. The table below shows the scores for sequence, character development, and plot along with the total score that he received as the other two rubric categories of picture and text and conventions were calculated in.

Table 3

*Johnny’s Rubric Scores*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Assessment</th>
<th>Sequence and Organization</th>
<th>Plot</th>
<th>Character Development</th>
<th>Total Score</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Comic 1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>36%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Comic 2</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>76%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Comic 3</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>92%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Johnny went from a 36% on the pre-assessment, to a 76% on the mid-assessment, and then a 92% on the post-assessment. These scores showed a really strong improvement as he was the lowest level writer in the participant group coming into the study, but had the highest score on the post-assessment. He really improved with how his story was organized from the start of the study to the end. I observed that Johnny really tried to work on how to make a problem that was solved in his story. He asked a lot of questions during the instruction of the sequencing and plot skills because he really wanted to improve. Unlike the other two students, Johnny did not write his comic strip. Because he has Occupational Therapy issues, he used an online comic strip generator. Therefore, the part of the rubric about the legibility of his handwriting was moot.

Johnny showed an understanding of these new writing skills that he learned over the course of the study when he said during the interview, “I know that good stories have a problem that the characters have to figure out. I also learned that it is important to put things in the right order or they won’t make sense” (Johnny, personal communication, November 4, 2016). Johnny’s pre-assessment comic strip did not include a strong use of the writing elements on the rubric. His first comic strip is shown below.
Figure 14. Johnny’s entire first comic strip.
Johnny’s story for his first comic strip lacked organization and sequence. The reader could understand that there was a series of events, but the events did not match up with each other. There was no problem or solution which is why he received a 1 on the plot category for this comic strip. Johnny included characters in his comic strip, but they really didn’t add anything to the storyline. Over time as he learned the various elements of a good story, he showed improvement, concluding with a pretty strong final comic strip. His final comic strip is below.
How can I do that?

I need to find my friends.

We need to blow up all the planets except Earth.

Ha-ha-ha. I'm blowing up all the planets!
Figure 15. Johnny’s Final Comic Strip
Johnny showed an improvement in various writing skills according to the rubric. First, on the final comic strip, Johnny made a story that made sense sequentially. The reader could figure out that there was a guy trying to save the galaxy from being blown up. The solution is that he fights a bad guy and saves the galaxy. Therefore, there was a clear problem and solution. Because Johnny had some weird panels at the start of the story in addition to a speedy ending after a slow start, he did not receive a perfect score on plot. The problem and solution were there, but they could have been clearer. Johnny showed an ability to tell a story using characters who are protagonists and antagonists, which can be a key story writing skill. Connecting this analysis to the literature review, Dallacqua (2012) stated that each image and panel in a graphic novel gives important information to the reader and most important pushes the plot forward in a sequential order. Johnny’s ability to tell the story in a sequential order through the use of pictures and text showed that he had written a successful graphic novel strip. This claim was supported by Johnny’s high scores on his rubric.

These students showed an increased knowledge in connecting pictures with text through captions and dialogue, developing characters, the importance of sequence, and problem and solution throughout the course of this action research study. Each of the three students had moments in their work, their actions, or their comments during interviews that showed this new knowledge. Also, through the analysis of the three forms of data, I found that the students had an increased level of engagement and most importantly, confidence, when writing their stories.
Implications and Conclusions

The purpose of this study was to explore how graphic novels can support struggling fifth grade student story writing skills. The study aims to show how students can use graphic novels as mentor texts in order to learn and practice the literary elements and writing skills needed to be successful with story writing. This study is important because it shows how a new and upcoming genre can have a positive impact on students’ literacy achievement. I conducted pre and post study interviews, took anecdotal notes and audio recordings during each session, and collected student work samples in order to analyze the impact of the use of graphic novels to improve these students’ writing. Three themes emerged from analyzing the data. The first was that students showed an increased interest and engagement with the use of graphic novels to improve their writing. These students also showed an increased level of confidence as we ventured deeper into the study. The second theme was that students were accurately able to connect the pictures that they drew with the text that they wrote, showing a good command of a specific skill needed to be a good graphic novel story writer. The third theme was that these students gained a better knowledge of story writing skills including sequence and organization, plot, and character development. A few implications arose due to my findings in this study as it pertains to literacy instruction. The first implication calls for the use of graphic novels in the classroom to improve reading and writing achievement and engagement. This study proved that graphic novels can be used to improve writing skills. This study also showed that the students had an increased level of engagement and interest in the topic because of the use of graphic novels in instruction. In the literature review, there were many studies supporting the use of graphic novels in the classroom (Lapp, Wolsey, Fisher & Frey, 2012; Carter, 2009; Gavigan & Albright, 2015). Another implication calls for an increased use of creative writing in the
classroom in order to improve writing skills. The students used story writing in this study and improved in many areas of writing that could be transferred to other genres of writing.

There were a few limitations to this action research study. First, time was a limitation during the course of this study. Because I work with these students every day, I was able to get in all 10 sessions that were planned for this study. However, due to class scheduling and other events that arose including absences, these students were limited to only about 30 minutes a session or less. Another limitation was a lack of technology. Only one of the students used the computer to use the comic generator. However, each of the three students may have benefitted from the use of the comic generator as more time would have been focused on the writing and less on the drawing of the pictures.

Further questions arise after the conclusion of this study. The first is if the results of this study could be transferred to other grade levels. This study was strictly fifth grade and it would be of great benefit to learn more about the effect of graphic novels on the writing skills of other grade levels also. In addition, this study focused strictly on story writing skills. Could graphic novels improve other areas or types of writing? Can graphic novels help with any type of writing? These questions could be explored through further research on graphic novels and their effects on writing skills. Teachers should be lifelong literacy learners as they continually try to improve their teaching practices to cater to an ever-changing student population. As a result, literacy research is ongoing and constantly developing which allows for several opportunities for further research and questioning.

If I could do this study again, there are a few things that I would do differently. First, I would like to include more students. This study only had three male fifth grade students. I would love to see if the same conclusions occurred with both male and female students in grades
4-6. I would also give each student a choice to either use the comic generator or make their own drawings. The main goal of this study was to see how the graphic novels supports student writing. If the students had more time to write and spent less time drawing, different results could have occurred. Lastly, I think I would have used more graphic novels as mentor texts in the first few sessions. The students really did not have much knowledge on graphic novels as it is such a new genre of literacy. Using a few mentor texts could have helped to get the children to realize what quality graphic novel writing looks like.

In conclusion, graphic novels were found to be a motivating tool not only for struggling readers, but also struggling writers. The students in this study showed improved story writing skills over the course of the 10 sessions. These students proved that they understood the connection between text and image. These students also improved certain writing skills such as sequence, character development, and plot.
References


Lawrence, S., McNeal, K., & Yildiz, M. (2009). Summer program helps adolescent merge technology, popular culture, reading, and writing for academic purposes. *Journal of Adolescent and Adult Literature, 52*(6), 483-494.


Appendix A: Pre and Post Study Interview Protocol

1. What do you think about writing?

2. What are some skills good writers have?

3. Have you read a graphic novel before?

4. What is the point of sequencing in a story?

5. What do you know about developing characters?

6. What do you know about plot?

7. How can you show proper conventions of writing?

8. Do you like to write?

9. What do you write about?

10. How are pictures and text related?

11. What is dialogue?

12. What are captions?
# Appendix B: Student Work Rubric

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>5</th>
<th>4</th>
<th>3</th>
<th>2</th>
<th>1</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Pictures</strong></td>
<td>All boxes have a picture that goes with the text.</td>
<td>Most of the boxes have a picture that goes with the text.</td>
<td>Half of the boxes have a picture that goes with the text.</td>
<td>Less than half of the boxes have a picture that goes with the text.</td>
<td>One or no boxes have a picture that goes with the text.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Characters</strong></td>
<td>There are three characters that the reader learns about. There are at least two dialogue bubbles in the story.</td>
<td>There are two characters that the reader learns about. There are at least two dialogue bubbles in the story.</td>
<td>There are two characters that the reader learns about. There is one dialogue bubble in the story.</td>
<td>There is one character that the reader learns about. There is one dialogue bubble in the story.</td>
<td>There is one or no characters in the story. There are no dialogue bubbles in the story.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Conventions</strong></td>
<td>Each box has complete sentences with no errors. Handwriting is neat.</td>
<td>Most boxes have complete sentences with a few errors. Handwriting is mostly neat.</td>
<td>Some boxes have complete sentences with some errors. Handwriting is legible.</td>
<td>A few boxes have complete sentences. There are several errors. Handwriting is difficult to read.</td>
<td>No boxes have complete sentences. Handwriting is not legible.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Sequence and</strong></td>
<td>There is a clear beginning, middle, and end as told by the pictures and text.</td>
<td>There is a clear beginning, middle, and end in the story but the sequence of events does not make perfect sense.</td>
<td>There is one part (beginning, middle, or end) missing in the story.</td>
<td>There is not much order in how the events tell the story at all.</td>
<td>There is no clear beginning, middle, or end in the story.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Organization</strong></td>
<td>There is a clear problem and solution.</td>
<td>There is a problem but the way it is solved does not make sense to the reader.</td>
<td>There is a problem, but it is not solved.</td>
<td>There is no problem in the story that needs to be solved.</td>
<td>There is no problem or solution whatsoever.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Plot</strong></td>
<td>There is a clear problem and solution.</td>
<td>There is a problem but the way it is solved does not make sense to the reader.</td>
<td>There is a problem, but it is not solved.</td>
<td>There is no problem in the story that needs to be solved.</td>
<td>There is no problem or solution whatsoever.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>