

Developing a comic library to support children reading for pleasure



Figure 1: Three children discussing their comic choices

By Helen Jones, UCL Institute of Education

This article examines the impact on children's reading of a research project in which a comic lending library was set up in a school for the use of Y3 pupils. The project was completed as part of an MA in Children's Literature at Goldsmiths University and in collaboration with Kingswood Primary School, Lambeth, and the Y3 teachers Di Kavanagh, Lenesha Williams, Christan Francis and Sinead Power.

The role of comics in engaging readers

Over the last couple of years, comics and graphic novels have started to become much more recognised within primary education as being an important part of children's reading repertoire. However, it has been a chequered path to get to this stage. In the past, comics have often suffered from a lack of legitimacy.

Throughout the 20th century, comics struggled against censorship, being suspected of corrupting the morality of young people. Even when viewed in a positive light, comics were often seen as "useful primers, stepping stones to literacy, but not worth reading in their own right" (Gravett, 2005, p.11). This is currently reinforced by

government policy in publications such as the English National Curriculum (2013) and the DfE paper Reading: The Next Steps (2015). Across the two documents, in relation to literature, only poetry, plays and novels are mentioned. There is no mention of the value of picture books, comics or other multimodal texts.

However, the status of comics aimed at children and young adults is rising. This is partially due to the popularity of the graphic novel, in which the comics format is bound into a longer book form. In education, many teachers are re-evaluating the use of comics in the classroom and recognising that they are a key component of children's reading outside of school (Cremin et al., 2014). Recent research into children's reading habits showed that around a quarter of girls in the 5-10 age group prefer comics and magazines to books, and for boys that figure is much higher, at almost 45% (Egmont Publishing, 2017).

The comic library project was brought about when I noticed my eight year old daughter, although generally an engaged and capable reader, no longer wanted to read at home her home-school readers (books generally from reading schemes and often adaptations of 'classics'). At home her chosen reading included wide range of material, both written and multi-modal and, increasingly, comics and graphic novels. In collaboration with my daughter's school, the project was set up to investigate how creating a comics lending library would impact on children's reading habits, both inside and outside of school. Would children choose to engage, and read the texts for pleasure? Would the children, their teachers, and parents see the value of reading comics and the potential of a comic lending library?

The project

The research took place in a large, four form entry primary school in the London Borough of Lambeth. The four classes which participated in borrowing comics from the library were from the Year 3 cohort of just under 120 seven-to-eight year old children. Over an eight week period, each class had five half hour weekly library sessions, with children also being able to borrow comics during class time. The library was given a dedicated weekly timeslot in its own room.

The comic stock was collected in a variety of ways. Primarily, requests for donations were sent out to parents and the local community. In addition, comics were obtained from Free Comic Book Day, an intentional event held each May.

Publishers and local bookshops also donated. By the start of the project over 300 publications had been collected. Later in the project, the school's parents and friends group provided £500 to support the library. In deciding how to spend this money, possible purchases were shared with the children, and they voted on which to buy, increasing the library stock to around 400 texts. The stock tried to incorporate as wide a range of age appropriate comics medium as possible, including weekly publications, graphic novels and manga, with authors representing a range of cultures (see figure 2).

Evidence about the impact of the library was collected in a range of ways. Questionnaires were used to collect information from children, teachers and parents. Children and teaching staff were observed and photographed during library sessions. Audio recordings of children reading and talking about the texts were made. In addition, children also made their own comics.



Figure 2: A range of different comics were chosen for the library.

Creating a community of comics readers



Figure 3: Reading comics together was a highlight of the comic library.

I loved how excited my class were to visit the lending library. I also liked how well the children engaged with one another when discussing and sharing comics.’ – Class teacher

The library was met with almost universal enthusiasm. 78% of the Y3 cohort reported that they ‘loved’ coming to use the library, with 97% of the children reporting ‘really liking’ or above. Borrowing records showed that children chose widely across the different types of comics available, and that there were no specific gender lines for choices.

The children looked forward to visiting the library and valued being able to choose and borrow comics, and enjoyed interacting with others about their choices:

‘At home my dad reads Marvel comics which I don’t enjoy, so here I can express myself and have fun.’ - Y3 child

‘I love swapping comics with my friends and exchanging jokes from the Beano.’ – Y3 child

The class teachers recognised the potential in children’s agency in choosing and swapping comics, and noted how much it engaged reluctant readers:

‘Some of the reluctant readers were the keenest on swapping. Swapping and recommending...has been a highlight.’ – Class teacher

During the library sessions children often chose to read the comics alongside each other or in small groups. These were often fluid groupings, which changed in size and type of discussion across each classes time slot in the library. Groups were often based on existing friendships, and borrowing or sharing of texts in a series (e.g. Pokémon) was common, children working as a reading network to actively share interests (see figures one and two). This was particularly noticeable when observing children reading comics from a series, during which they chose to read alongside one another, occasionally stopping to share notes and facts, jokes or to swap comics. As one teacher commented:

‘Everyone was engaged and sharing opinions – evaluating - even my reluctant readers.’

Comic readers become comic makers



Figure 4: The children enjoyed copying characters and also inventing their own comic strips.

One unexpected development from the project was the number of children who began to start making comics in their free time and at home. For example, 71% of parents who responded to the questionnaire reported that their child had made a comic at home as a result of the project:

'She has made a comic strip and I was impressed with the standard. She seemed to understand the concept and styles of the writing well.' – Y3 parent

'He is working on a few different ideas – one that he asked us to help with and one on his own. He started by copying the comics that he likes, but is now developing his own style and characters.' – Y3 parent

Children brought in comics they had made at home, and also created comics in class and at lunchtime in the playground (see figures 3 and 4). This demonstrated that children, although not having been directly taught the conventions of the comics, were able to begin to apply key features to their own work, and that their enjoyment of reading the comics led them to write comics for pleasure in their free time.



Figure 5: Children made their own comic strips at home and brought them into school.

and 'fun'. While comics sit quite firmly outside the 'great canon of English literature', their potential was widely acknowledged by the parents and teachers involved in the project, and the library's positive effect on Y3 readers was observed by the wider school community. As a result of the project each Y3 classroom in the school now has its own comic library, and an after school comics club has been established. Comics and graphic novels are an excellent way of developing the range on offer in school libraries, and they deserve to have pride of place in every classroom!

Useful information to help you set up a comic library

- Comics are an art form, not a genre, and therefore content can cover all sorts of storytelling and non-fiction. Engage children with choosing the types of comics they would like and try to provide as big a range as possible. For the comic library I made a mock catalogue of different comics, and the children voted on which ones they would like to purchase.
- As comics do tend to be printed on thin paper they can get damaged easily, although you can protect them with plastic covers. Be prepared that you may need to replace comics on a regular basis.
- Asking parents and the local community to contribute no longer wanted collections of comics is a valuable way to restock. 'Free Comic Book Day' is another fantastic way of getting comics for free! See <https://www.freecomickbookday.com/> for more details.
- For more ideas about comics pedagogy, events and resources, please visit my padlet: https://padlet.com/h_c_jones/comics_in_education

- For reviews and ideas of how to use comics and graphic novels in the classroom, visit this excellent blog by Richard Ruddick: <https://comicsinclass.school.blog/>

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