READING BETWEEN THE “FRAMES”: ENGLISH LANGUAGE LEARNERS’ AND NON-ENGLISH LANGUAGE LEARNERS’ RESPONSES TO GRAPHIC NOVELS

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A thesis submitted in conformity with the requirements
For the degree of Master of Arts
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Abstract

Literacy in the 21st century is constantly evolving. To teach literacy effectively, educators need to embrace and understand linguistic, cultural and textual practices that are relevant for students. Reading and responding to graphic novels in face-to-face and online settings are such 21st century literate practices.

This thesis focuses on how grade 6 students who are both English Language Learners and non-English Language Learners respond and connect to social justice issues in graphic novels through literature circles, online blogging and personal journals. Responses to social justice issues were fairly similar between English Language Learners and non-English Language Learners, especially based on a cultural experience standpoint. It is important for educators to encourage students to connect with prior experiences and knowledge with social justice issues and stereotypes that exist in their own world. This prepares students to become more socially conscious and critical thinkers about the world around them.
Acknowledgements

Completing this thesis was an exciting journey which has given me the freedom to write about what is important to me in education. It has been a learning experience and a great privilege to work alongside my grade 6 students. I have been blessed to be surrounded by people who have allowed this thesis to happen.

I would like to take the time to thank my thesis supervisor, Dr. Shelley Stagg Peterson, who was instrumental in supporting, guiding, and giving me great feedback in every step of my research process. Your dedication, expertise in the literacy field and encouragement was greatly appreciated. Thank you to Dr. Mary Kooy who was has taken the time to be my secondary reader.

I would like to extend my appreciation to my colleague Justina, the grade 6 students and the Toronto Catholic District School Board who have been a great help. Without them, this thesis would not have been possible. I appreciate the time and effort the students put into responding to the literature circle booklets and online blogs.

Finally, I would like to thank my immediate family and extended family for being supportive of my decision to write a thesis and to pursue a graduate degree. I am grateful for Samir, who has been endured many hours of “thesis-talk” and helping me strive to be the best I can be.
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CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

1.1 Background

Literacy connects individuals and communities, and is an essential tool for personal growth and active participation in a cohesive, democratic society (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2008). In recent years, there has been a province-wide process of consultation and professional learning to improve students’ competency in reading and writing. For example, recent expert panel reports by the Ministry of Education for improving literacy among students in Ontario include the *Early Reading Strategy* (2003), *Literacy for Learning for Grades 4 to 6* (2004) and *Supporting English Language Learners* (2008). These reports were developed by experts to promote a broad approach to championing literacy learning across the curriculum either for a particular school or for an entire school board. Hence, there has been an increasing interest and emphasis on how educators can engage and enhance students’ literacy skills through the use of multiliteracies and multimodal texts.

1.2 Research Objective and Scope

My research attempts to address these themes by looking at ways to select appropriate learning and instructional material that will allow my students to become engaged, reflective and critical thinkers. My research is based on the belief that we need to offer a range of information and material in a variety of formats that will allow students to succeed in school and in life, to become confident, be able to communicate ideas and thoughts effectively and be great decision-makers.

In addition to the essential skills that students learn in school, such as reading and writing, my goal is to ensure that these students become literate citizens who will make informed
decisions throughout their life. Therefore, I would like to undertake a qualitative research study, based on the reader-response theory, to address how grade 6 students, particularly those who are ELLs and non-ELLS, respond to social justice issues and connect to personal experiences found in multimodal texts such as graphic novels.

Specifically, my research seeks to investigate the following questions:

- What social justice issues do students identify when reading graphic novels?
- What are the differences and similarities between ELLs and non-ELLS students’ responses when reading graphic novels?

1.3 The Importance of Multiliteracies

Literacy in the twenty-first century is constantly evolving, as is technology and the way in which we interact on a changing cultural and social landscape. Literacy is defined as the ability to use language and images in rich and varied forms to read, write, listen, speak, view, represent, and think critically about ideas (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2004). It allows us to share information, communicate with others and make meaning to the outside world. However, the world is constantly changing and so must the means of communication.

Multiliteracies is the term coined by the New London Group of educators that look at the state of literacy pedagogy. Their main purpose is to consider cultural, linguistic diversity and the increasingly globalized societies that influence the way communication takes place in the world (New London Group, 1996). Multiliteracies extends the “traditional” definition of literacies by including the need to encourage equitable social participation by all. Multiliteracies is not limited to print texts, but encompasses many other representational forms of communication. These forms are becoming increasingly significant in today’s global communications realm. They
include visual images and their relationship to the written word (signs/symbols), media supports, texting, “wiki-ing” and blogging. It therefore becomes essential for teachers to support students in learning the different modes of communications.

There is also a need for multiple avenues for literacies, including spoken, gestured, written, graphic, official or unofficial forms of literacy (Rowsell et al, 2008, p. 112). Broadening views of literacy helps to include students who are on the ‘margins’, in particular adolescent boys and English Language Learners (ELLs). Literacies need to provide a liberating experience. They should be dynamically representational and should reach out to all.

In addition, multiliteracies relate to the realities of the increased local diversity and global connectedness. Students must constantly negotiate meaning every day in the global interconnected society. Different modes of meaning-making consist of visual (images, page layouts, screen formats) and audio (music and sound effects) forms. Therefore, meaning is made in ways that are increasingly multimodal (Cope & Kalantzis, 2000).

It is important to expose students to a wide range of communication modes that will help them become critical, reflective and innovative learners. For example, McCloud (1993) believes that cartooning, a form of iconic abstraction, reduces the resemblance of objects, ideas, and people in order to amplify meaning. The greater the degree of iconic abstraction, the more interpretative work and knowledge of cultural conventions are required on the part of the viewer (El Refaie, 2009). These skills are beneficial in helping students make meaning out of different types of texts in different contexts.

Educators need to enrich students’ literacy learning experiences with the various text forms that exist in order to condition them into becoming deeper thinkers and effective communicators. The term ‘text’ in this paper will be used to describe information and ideas that are captured in print and electronic forms, using words, graphics, and other visual elements.
Specifically, for the purpose of this study, the term, ‘text’ is used more broadly, encompassing visual and graphical images in multimodal (multiple) texts such as graphic novels, cartoons, sequential art and comic books.

1.4 Reach Every Student- The influx of English Language Learners

In Ontario school boards, there is an ever-growing diverse student population comprised of various ethnicities, cultures and linguistic backgrounds. According to Ontario immigration (www.ontarioimmigration.ca) in 2009, English was spoken by 8.2 million people and French was spoken by 490,000 people. The next five languages most commonly spoken in Ontario homes were: Chinese (475,000), Italian (280,000), Spanish (160,000), German (158,000), and Portuguese (155,000)\(^1\). Moreover, in 2005 and 2008, the number of foreign temporary and permanent students immigrating to Toronto, according to Citizenship and Immigration Canada 2008, were 35,027 and 35,797, respectively\(^2\).

In 2008 alone, Citizenship and Immigration Canada listed the top three countries that immigrated into Canada to be: China (29,336), India (24,549) and the Philippines (23,724)\(^3\). Therefore, based on these rising numbers, many students entering Ontario schools are English Language Learners (ELLs). These students are predominately taught in a language (English) which is not their mother tongue. Therefore, a transformation needs to take place in schools in which literacy teaching goes beyond the implementation of traditional forms of English reading material. When students see themselves reflected and affirmed in classroom texts and in

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instruction, they come to appreciate that reading and writing are genuinely for them and about them (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2004).

There are a range of differences among students who come to school with a home language other than English. In this paper I will define English Language Learners (or ELLs) as those who speak another language other than English in their home environment. These students, who are born or raised in countries where English is not the dominant language, bring a new set of experiences to the classroom. These include varying home values, behavioural patterns, and diverse ethnic and socioeconomic backgrounds. Their prior education and knowledge base is also different. Some are more confident, while others are shy and prefer to keep to themselves. However, despite the differences, educators need to foster a nurturing classroom environment that caters to their needs and allows students to communicate their feelings.

English Language Learners also include those who are Canadian-born and who are raised in families and communities where languages other than English are spoken at home. Regardless of the type of ELL, educators need to realize that all students bring a variety of life situations, experiences, education and understandings to the classroom and ultimately to their learning experience. Cummins (2001) proposed that ELLs have a lot to contribute to society and that the Canadian society has a lot to gain from their reservoir of skills and ability to develop both cognitive flexibility and divergent thinking. Educators therefore need to tap into each student’s prior knowledge and embrace their levels of understandings. This is critical in supporting students’ identities and their development into responsible, well-rounded Canadian citizens in a global economy.
1.5 Reading for ELLs

Reading is the most important skill to master especially for ELL students. It is the foundational basis towards progress and a greater development in other communication areas such as speaking, writing, texting and comprehension of a language. Reading is an active process which involves the reader to build meaning (Anderson, 1999). This meaning is constructed by combining the words on the page with the reader’s prior knowledge, experience, and background. This constructivist view (a view on how one comes to understand or know) suggests that learners construct knowledge based on their social environment (Savery, 1996).

Beck & Kosnik (2006) support this constructivist view by noting that learning involves building upon students’ prior ideas and experience. If students have not had the experience relevant to a given idea, they may not be able to make meaning of what they read (Beck & Kosnik, 2006, p. 19). Thus, learning material that is relevant and engages interaction and dialogue among peers is important for students. Moreover, it helps students in considering different opinions, values, and perspectives. I believe that the multimodal nature of graphic novels makes it easier for students to visualize and to relate what they are reading to a specific situation. This leads towards analysis and deeper thinking. Thus, constructivist theory (Vygotsky, 1962) underpins my research.

Generally, educators have a challenge in teaching ELL students regarding how to utilize the skills and knowledge that they bring from their first language into the new language (Anderson, 1999). Reading involves teaching vocabulary skills, improving reading comprehension, and increasing reading fluency, in addition to successfully integrating the reading strategies such as making connections, inferring, questioning and using prior knowledge. Students must be able to access prior knowledge and understandings and apply them to reading
in a different language. Therefore it is important to use reading material that allows for access and application of prior knowledge.

Moreover, there are many linguistic differences between languages that may influence second language comprehension. For example, those whose first language is a Romance language (i.e. French, Spanish, Italian, and Portuguese) tend to focus greater amounts of attention on the ends of the words. Those whose first language is Chinese, Japanese or Korean tend to make use of visual clues because reading in their language is highly dependent upon pictures and orthography (Farrell, 2009). This leads to different rates of acquisitions of a second language based on what students are normally accustomed to in their home language.

Educators need to respond and be aware that ELL students have to face the challenges of learning in a language that is not their own, and at the same time develop a full range of literacy abilities. Moreover, educators also need to be cognizant of the fact that an apparent “lack” of motivation may be because of students’ low level of comprehension and the fast pace of learning a new language.

1.6 Graphic Novels and Comic Books

It is important to understand and distinguish between the definition of comic books and graphic novels. Comic books are referred to as “a medium that combines written text and visual art to an extent unparallel in any other art form” (Abbott, 1986, p. 155). Eisner uses the term “Sequential Art”, where the art of the image is transformed into something else. McCloud (1993) describes comics as not crude, semi-literate, or “kiddie fare” type of text (p. 3), but instead comics are “juxtaposed pictorial images in a delicate sequence, intended to convey information and/or produce an aesthetic response in the viewer” (p. 9).
Moreover, graphic novels have evolved from comic books that first came out in the 1930s in newspaper strips that contained superheroes and villains. While all graphic novels are comic books, not all comic books are graphic novels. Both make use of sequential art, which is a combination of text, panels, and images to tell a story (Brenner, 2006). But the difference lies in the length. Comic books are shorter than graphic novels with soft covers and usually 32 pages long. Graphic novels come in different sizes and number of pages and are constituted as a book that comes with an ISBN (International Standard Book Number) (Wolk, 2007). Therefore, graphic novels give a sense of permanency and elevated status over comic books because they can be reprinted and shelved. The graphic novel is considered “an emerging new literature of our times” (Campbell, 2007, p. 13).

Due to the popularity of graphic novels such as Bone (Smith, 2007), graphic novels are becoming more prevalent in classrooms and school libraries. Graphic novels present a unique multiliteracies experience that combines print, visual information, meaningful and emotional content. When a message is conveyed in several modes, it amplifies the meaning and gives way to increased understanding of the image and/or text, giving it a multimodal feature (McCloud, 1993). Therefore, reading graphic novels presents an exciting way for students to experience multiliteracies in ways that allow students to connect and experience the reading/text.

1.6.1 Using Graphic Novels in Classrooms

Research has shown that motivation and engagement levels are based on personal factors such as curiosity, involvement, social interchange and emotional satisfaction (Gambrell et al., 1996). Students who perceive reading as valuable and believe that they are competent will generally outperform students who feel reading is not valuable and believe that they will fail at the task, as motivation to read is also associated with positive self-concept and the value readers hold of the particular reading (Gambrell et al., 1996).
However, there may be cases where proficient readers are not highly motivated to read and less proficient readers are highly motivated to read. Therefore, it is essential for me as a teacher and researcher to find appropriate reading materials that are engaging and that students can connect with, regardless of their reading level. This was the reason for choosing graphic novels. They are highly engaging to adolescents and have been made popular by media and society. These graphic novels eventually are made into movies, have colourful, realistic pictures and generally use simplistic, everyday language.

*Going Graphic*, (Swartz, 2007) was a project designed to boost literacy among Early Language Learners (ELLs) from junior kindergarten to grade six. Swartz wanted to help teacher candidates consider ways to use comics and graphic novels in their practicum classrooms. In particular, the purpose was to look at how multimodal texts enhanced meaning for students. It was especially advantageous to use comics and graphic novels because of their use of expressions, symbols and actions of the characters in the story. Vocabulary development was not only through the written word, but also through illustrations and the layout of the comic and graphic novel.

Graphic texts were integrated not only in language arts classrooms, but also in social studies and even in a kindergarten setting. This further indicates the universal nature of graphic novels. For example, a teacher candidate asked the class to retell a story of ancient Egypt in graphic format for social studies. In the kindergarten class, students were asked to arrange pictures in order to tell a story (Swartz, 2007). The combination of pictures and words makes it easier for ELLs to practice language skills, learn new vocabulary and understand how stories are developed. He found that they had a growing interest and motivation for learning with graphic novels.
Although Swartz’s particular research was on the potential use of graphic novels as an engagement strategy for students, I want to look at the ways in which graphic novels elicit personal and reflective responses from the students. These personal responses could be categorized into major and common themes of social justice issues that the students have faced or will face in their life.

Many graphic novels have deep themes that help students examine social justice and change themes. There are also many graphic novels that focus on difference and issues of race, gender, class and ethnicity (Carter, 2007). Students should be able to relate and connect to what they are reading, which paves way to their improvement in reading and writing. In 2001, Bitz, a senior research associate at the Center for Educational Pathways in New York City founded The Comic Book Project which changed the attitudes and abilities of many urban students by helping them develop storytelling skills via the comic book format. In this project, comic production aided in student writing and ultimately increased reading motivation, interest and comprehension.

1.7 My Personal Experience

I was born in Toronto, Canada, and raised by two immigrant parents. My mother emigrated from Taiwan and spoke Mandarin to her four children at a very early age. She had learned English in her home country, but it was still her fourth language. Therefore, she felt more comfortable speaking Mandarin to her children. My father emigrated from Pakistan, and spoke broken English when he arrived in Canada at age 25. He basically learned English from watching television shows and reading the comics in The Sunday Sun newspaper. The language of communication between my mother and father was English since my father did not know how to
speak Mandarin and my mother did not understand or speak Urdu. Thus, in the family household there was a mix of Mandarin and English spoken by my parents.

It was very difficult to acquire the English language since my parents were not native English speakers and there were constant slogans in half Mandarin and half English spoken around in the house. However, since I had acquired Mandarin first, it was language of comfort as I entered Kindergarten. After my first few days in Kindergarten, my teacher had told my mother that I was speaking Mandarin at school and that I had to quickly start speaking English since it was the dominant language in Canadian education. This was the point where I left my Mandarin behind and began to acquire the language that would change my world forever.

As a child, I learned English relatively fast. I remember reading many picture books and comics early on in my life. I appreciated the illustrator’s attention to detail that tied the text and illustrations in perfect cohesion. Having visuals beside the text really helped me understand the reading, and I often found myself just looking at the pictures, rather than reading the words since the pictures gave much more information. The visual images revealed the situations and emotions in a universal way. It provided so much detail with few words. I loved these picture books and comics!

1.8 My Classroom Experience

In my first few years as teacher travelling to different schools and areas in and around Toronto, I saw a huge interest and motivation in reading graphic novels by the students. Particularly, I saw boys and English Language Learners who gravitated towards these literary texts. I asked them why they liked these particular novels so much. They thought that graphic novels were fun to read because of the simple language and detailed pictures that accompanied
each frame on the page. Some would even spend several minutes on each page, just captivated by the action, expression and intricate detail that graphic artists depicted in their settings and character development.

I recall observing a grade six boy in one of my classes, who seemed to be unmotivated in class, but was simply intrigued by what graphic novels had to offer. I would always notice him at the back of class, ignoring what was going on in class, with a graphic novel in his hands. To me, I thought it was ridiculous that he was not taking school seriously, and I thought that he should be doing his schoolwork. For some reason, I just could not take that graphic novel away from him. I did not have it in me to take away a piece of reading material that he enjoyed. So I broke the teacher rule: I let him continue not doing his work. After all, he was reading quietly, and seemed to love reading those graphic novels. This was probably the only reason why he came to school; to get immersed in the magical world of a graphic novel.

I approached him one day and asked him if he was reading the words or just looking at the pictures. He responded “Both,” and said that he would read the captions and also stare at the pictures and envision himself in the scene. His response reminded me of what literacies have evolved to; geared to engage and communicate to the student that helps them to build meaning with the text and/or image. These graphic novels can be a piece of text that could help shape a student’s view of the world, without being so “wordy”. The pictures and events taking place are very exciting, stimulating and easily relatable. The reader could perhaps be in control of how the text should be read in terms of pace, direction of eye movement and whether or not she/he chooses to read the words or the pictures first. I wondered if graphic novels could be a source of good reading material.
I was pleased to learn that many researchers (Conners; 1998; Liu, 2004; Purnell and Solman, 1991; Swartz, 2007) were seeing the potential benefits of graphic novels and comic books as a prospective educational tool. As a result, I was interested in learning more about how students could critically respond to these graphic novels in terms of social justice issues. In particular, I wanted to know if reading graphic novels elicited responses related to what they knew about the world around them and their personal experiences.

After teaching at various schools in Toronto, and being immersed in a very multicultural society, it was important for me to be able to find literature that was relatable for students of diverse backgrounds. Therefore, the increasing interest for graphic novels sparked my motivation in researching how English Language Learners (ELL) and non-ELL students are able to relate and connect to the characters and situations in the graphic novels.
CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW/THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

2.1 Traditional Meaning of Literacy

Traditionally, literacy refers to the mastery of skills, processes and understandings in making meaning from and through written text. However, this definition has been challenged by anthropological and linguistic research on literacy in everyday life (Street, 2003). Literacy is a social practice that uses cultural resources. Because of literacy’s connection to social and cultural understanding, understandings of literacies have expanded to include a range of forms from visual, digital, critical and multimodal (Luke & Woods, 2009).

However, the construction of what counts as literacy is largely based on who gets access to its practices and resources that hold power (Lankshear & Knobel, 2006). To teach literacy effectively, educators need to enhance students’ literate practices by embracing and understanding existing repertoires of linguistic, cultural and textual practices that are relevant for the students. Therefore, there needs to be alternative modes of looking at texts.

2.2 Understanding Critical Literacy

Literacy is a complex, interactive web that allows the reader to make meaning from texts of many types. One approach to understanding this interaction is through the “Four Resources Model” (1990) developed by Peter Freebody and Allan Luke. The four resources model can be referred to as the “four families of practice” in order to become a literate learner. These four roles allow students to:

1) Construct and communicate meaning from texts
2) To recognize the features and structures of text in order to break the “code” of text
3) To understand the purpose and structure of the text
4) To analyze and critique texts.

Freebody and Luke believe that any program of instruction in literacy should allow students to apply all four roles simultaneously when reading, writing, listening and speaking (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2004).

Freire speaks about literacies whereby, the student is not only “reading [and writing] the word, but “reading [and rewriting] the world” (Freire & Macedo, 1987, p. 35). Texts provide a means for reconstructing, shaping and reshaping the world according to the lived social experiences of each individual reader. Literacy needs to enable students to debate, argue, and take action over social, cultural and economic issues that matter to them (Luke & Woods, 2009). It is important for students to gain access to multimodal literacy material that promotes these literacies.

Reading of a text is not only decoding the written word, but being able to relate and connect with the text and its context (Freire & Macedo, 1987). Freire believes that reading does not consist of merely decoding the written word or language; but also depends on the readers’ prior knowledge and experience. Thus, there is a relationship between language and the students’ social reality/consciousness (Freire & Macedo, 1987). When students are conscious of their social reality, they can question it and assume a more critical stance towards the text.

Reading is more than just reading the literal meaning of the text. Instead, it involves looking at deeper issues where students begin to questions about what is missing, how the text was constructed, and how it influences the reader. Developing a critical standpoint allow students to think more deeply about the texts they read and create. Being critically literate entails looking at the issues of fairness, equity, and social justice issues. Therefore, texts need to help students address bias and realize that texts are not neutral; messages in texts can represent
particular views and perspectives, while leaving other views out. In this way students can reflect on their positions, beliefs, understandings and experience to “read” between the lines. In Freirian terms, learners need to use language to name and ‘problemize’ the world— that is to question constructions of social relations, class, race and gender through their reading, writing and dialogue (Luke & Woods, 2009).

2.3 “New” Literacies

Living in a world full of visuals that range from television, advertisements, multimedia, video games and computers, it is very evident that ‘visual competences’ are required as basic competences. Many scholars believe that the ability to make sense of visual texts is becoming ever more important (El Refaie, 2009). Schirato and Webb (2004) argue that visual literacy should be seen as a ‘kind of reading’ that requires readers to select, edit, and decode the visual material, therefore requiring a skilled understanding of the meaning behind the pictures (El Refaie, 2009).

This meaning is brought upon by “socially evolved and patterned activities” as individuals have been exposed to other ways of socially recognized ways of communicating and negotiating meaningful content (Lankshear & Knobel, 2007). For example, blogging, texting, photoshopping, videogaming, fan fiction books such as wordless picture books, graphic novels and comics contain interpretation of symbols and images. These all help in creating and enhancing the literacy repertoire for the reader. Lankshear and Knobel (2007) also argue that the more a literacy practice is seen to reflect the characteristics of the individual’s social activities, the more it is entitled to be regarded as a new literacy.
Leu et al. (2004) define new literacies as the ability to use internet technologies to identify questions, locate information, evaluate the information, synthesize information to answer questions and communicate the answers to others. They also state that the relationship between literacy and technology is transactional, whereby they transform one another, making way for new understandings. Open networks such as the internet allow for opportunity for critical literacy. Educators must assist students in becoming more critical consumers of the information they encounter because websites promote strong political, economic, religious or ideological stances that profoundly influence the nature of the information they present to others. (Leu et al., 2004). Online texts are more “participatory”, “collaborative” and “distributed”, requiring a new kind of mindset toward literacy (Lankshear & Knobel, 2007). It is increasingly important to include digital technologies such as Web 2.0 internet applications and approaches that allow users to participate in harnessing collective intelligence (Lankshear & Knobel, 2007).

New literacies incorporate different kinds of sensibilities than the traditional literacies we are familiar with. This “new” literacy studies involve the relationship between human practice and the production, distribution, exchange, refinement, and negotiation occurring during the reading process (Lankshear & Knobel, 2007). For example, Web 2.0 applications include blogging, wikis, google, Wikipedia and Flickr, and facebook. Teachers that encourage these Web 2.0 applications provide avenues for students to participate in their own way of acquiring knowledge from a text. These literacies therefore have become and evolved to incorporate the readers’ social practices and their perspectives and experiences. These literacies enable people to take part in literacy practices that involve different ways of “seeing” or “reading” texts. Therefore, there is a socio-cultural element attached to literacy that brings about meaning in different ways for a particular individual’s personal experience.
2.4 Reader-Response Theories: The Transactional Analysis

The “New Criticism” theorists asserted that the text was more objective and scientific, concluding that the reader found knowledge in the “text” rather than through their responses and experiences. The Reader-Response Theorists (such as Rosenblatt, Purves and Beach) reacted against this New Criticism in the 1940s and 1950s. They advocated for recognition of “subjectivity” (the interests, intentions, commitments, and purposes that readers bring) and readers’ emotional reactions as constituting meaning when reading a text. They argued that the role of the reader’s response is crucial in the development of expression, creativity and formation of meaning while reading (Beach, 1993). The text could not be understood or analyzed as a separate entity, therefore, there needed to be a transaction (or exchange of thoughts/ideas) between the reader and the text.

Louise Rosenblatt, the pioneer reader-response theorist, proposed that meaning was derived from a combination of a particular reader, at a particular time/context, with a particular text. By “text” she means not simply the inked marks on the page but as the printed signs in their capacity to serve as symbols (Rosenblatt, 1978). Her Transactional Theory invites the reader “to reflect on what he/she brings to any reading and to acknowledge and examine the images, feelings, attitudes that these responses evoke” (Rosenblatt, 1978, p. 10). Therefore there needs to be a two-way relationship that develops between the reader and the text in order to interpret it. This two-way relationship can be seen as the reader responding to the textual stimuli offered by the text. At the same time, “the reader must draw on selective experiences and sensibilities to provide a response” (Rosenblatt, 1978, p. 33).

The Transactional Theory reveals the individual consciousness as a continuing self-creating process, shaped by the interrelationships of their environment and social matrix (Rosenblatt, 1978). It states that the reader’s individuality must be respected and considered; that
the readers initially understand a work only on the basis of prior experience. These social experiences (i.e., the feelings, memories and other associations) are the foundation upon which understanding of a text is built.

Rosenblatt’s theories involve a range of different response strategies. A response was considered an “event” due to the associations of the words and images that elicit a response from the reader. Rosenblatt believed that a reader interpreted a book in terms of his/her past experiences. This occurrence between the reader and the text is what brings about a rewarding literary experience (Rosenblatt, 1978). There is a transaction between the reader and the text in which the reader “is intent on the pattern of sensations, emotions and concepts it [the text] evokes. Because the text is organized and self-contained, it concentrates on the reader's attention and regulates what will enter into his consciousness” (Rosenblatt, 1978, p. 172).

It is the transaction between the author, reader and text that make the reading process meaningful. There is no sharp separation between perceiver and perception, since the observer is part of the observation (Rosenblatt, 1993). These “events are particular to the reader based on her/his personality traits, memories of past events, present needs and preoccupations, a particular mood of the moment and a particular physical condition” (Beach, 1993, p. 50). Both the reader and writer are drawing on personal linguistic/experiential reservoirs in a transaction with a text. This developed framework guides their selective attention and helps synthesize, organize and process meaning (Rosenblatt, 1993).

Moreover, Rosenblatt believes that readers take up an aesthetic (or “lived through”) and an efferent (taken away) stance when reading (Rosenblatt, 1993). This aesthetic experience meant that the reader was at the centre of reading experiences and that his/her human experiences helped in the process of giving meaning to the text. It also represented the private feelings, attitudes and ideas that the readers’ personal linguistic/experiential reservoir brings
while reading a text. In contrast, the efferent stance involves what the reader will carry away and learn from the text.

These aesthetic and efferent values are not dichotomous with one another, as both are always present in the reader’s transactions with the world and the text. The student needs to encounter literature for which he possesses the intellectual, emotional and experiential equipment. He/she must draw on his past experience with life and language as his/her raw materials to shape the new experience symbolized on the page (Rosenblatt, 1978).

Grossman, found that teachers who centered on the value of the literary experience based on the reader’s response were more likely to generate more discussions or writing activities than those teachers who focused on a “text-based” orientation (Beach, 1993). She found that the individual reader’s responses varied significantly due to the different reactions, emotions, understanding and experience that the readers brought to the classroom. Due to the wide range of responses, reader-response theorists were interested in delving deeper into different types of texts (such as graphic novels) that could build more ground to acknowledge the importance of responding through oral interpretation, role-playing, artwork, and rewriting/recreating texts.

Greatly influenced by Rosenblatt’s transactional theory, theorists such as Alan Purves and Richard Beach (1972) have described a number of special response processes. Such responses need to be:

a) Engaging- where the reader becomes emotionally involved and able to empathize or identify with the text.

b) Constructive- the reader enters and creates alternative worlds, where he/she conceptualizes characters, events and settings

c) Visualizing- the reader creates visual images from the text

d) Connectable- the reader relates their autobiographical experience to the text
e) Evaluative/Reflective- the reader judges the quality of one’s experience with the text

In addition, theorist, David Bleich (1975), describes the “subjective paradigm” in which readers define knowledge how they continually respond to and collectively negotiate meaning with others. True understanding takes place when readers enter in a dialogue with their peers. Their peers may or may not lead them towards a change in opinion, but nevertheless this dialogue intensifies the readers’ cognitive and emotional experience (Beach, 1993). Dialogue with others expands the reader’s perceptions of himself/herself as well as others. This leads to a process of reflection and critical thinking, a new deeper understanding and a complete aesthetic experience.

2.5 Connecting the Transactional Theory to Graphic Novels

This two-way relationship holds true for reading comic books and/or graphic novels. McCloud (1993) refers to the reader who has to participate or work to construct meaning and be able to use their imaginations. Furthermore, he mentions that “when entering the world of comics, the reader is able to relate to universally identifiable objects and settings, its simplicity, features and personality traits of many of the characters in a comic book and/or graphic novel” (McCloud, 1993, p. 36).

Graphic novels consist of visual images that readers have to interpret and analyze based on their own emotions, experiences and beliefs. Interpreting graphic novels is a complex process that requires students to draw on many literacies simultaneously such as the visual and the critical. The impact of the graphic novel for the student is highly dependent upon the familiarity of past and current events and experience about thinking about real-world circumstances. Graphic novels have this advantage of being highly relatable due to their simplistic nature and
highly visual format that other traditional texts may not provide. Many graphic novels have a social issue attached which makes it possible for the reader to develop insights and re-experience human realities, feelings and events.

In a study of cartoon representations, Connors (1998) found that cartoons can often be understood across cultures, ages and levels of intelligence. She also believes that due to the common use of metaphors and symbols which ‘simplify’ ideas, graphic novels enable readers to interpret images quickly and easily (El Refaie, 2009). In addition, graphic novels have always been regarded as the partnership between both the artist and the reader to create meaning. This partnership can be understood using Rosenblatt’s theory as a transaction between the text and reader, which is essential in the reading process.

With comics, basic emotions are indeed universally recognized. For example, facial expressions, the way in which the image is portrayed, the size and tone of the frame are all indicators for helping to link the reader’s degree of familiarity with the emotions that graphic novels can potentially create. McCloud (1993) believes that “our identities and awarenesses are invested in the comics that we read. We are able to extend our identities into inanimate objects in these texts we read and see.” (p. 38). Therefore, the readers’ participation evokes emotions and allows them to re-live the experience through their senses. Once readers are fully immersed in the text and/or image, they can participate in analyzing the deeper layers embedded in the storyline.

2.6 Previous Research on using Comics and Graphic Novels in Classrooms

There have been many studies on the importance of using text accompanied with pictures to engage students to read. This is particularly due to comics being communicative, popular, accessible and readable. Purnell and Solman (1991) found that when students received text and
pictures separately, they did not do as well in comprehension as those who received both text and visuals simultaneously. Liu (2004) found that “when the text and illustrations were well integrated (the visuals matched the wording), L2 (second language) students were able to comprehend the text through matching and mapping among factors such as word recognition, syntax and background knowledge.” (p. 236).

However, Liu found that the high-level students did not benefit from the comic strip presented with the high-level text than compared to their counterparts (Liu, 2004). This was probably due to the fact that comic strips were very simple and the illustrations did not suit the text. These comic strips probably did not engage any critical insight or allow the student to think about deeper themes embedded in the picture. Therefore, examining the effects of graphic novels, which may include a more complex storyline and characters, would possibly elicit more of a response and improve reading comprehension for high-level students.
CHAPTER THREE: RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

3.1 Qualitative Research

The primary goal of my research project was to understand and interpret how the students make sense of the texts, how they socially and critically respond to the graphic novels, and how the responses from ELL and non-ELL students compare. To achieve this, I chose to apply qualitative research methodologies. The qualitative methodologist seeks to understand the perceptions, feelings and knowledge of people through intensive communication (Patton, 1980). I had students participate in online discussions and study groups which require the need for direct quotations, anecdotal, correspondence and documentation in the exact words of my participants, giving them a sense of ownership and voice. Qualitative research methods are the most appropriate in attempting to understand and reflect upon the participants’ feelings, emotions, perceptions, experiences and situations (Patton, 1980).

Since my study involves understanding the themes, meanings and perspectives from the responses of my ELL and non-ELL students, it is essential to have open dialogue and communication with my participants. Therefore it was deemed beneficial and appropriate to collect data that allow a natural response flow between participants and the researcher. As an example, the data collection process allowed students to discuss a question or theme online or in a journal in an anonymous setting. This natural flow of ideas gives me a sense of students’ point of view and their reactions to peers’ responses without pressure from the teacher or their peers.

Merriam and Associates (2002) believe that the key to understanding qualitative research lies with the idea that meaning is socially constructed by individuals in interaction with their world: “The world is not stable, agreed upon, single or measureable whereby one can analyze through positivist or quantitative research. In fact, there are multiple constructions and
interpretations of reality that are constantly changing over time.” (p. 3). Thus, qualitative research allows researchers to look at each individual’s experience at various points in time and in various contexts. Furthermore, such research attempts to understand the particular phenomenon through the participants’ perspectives.

Qualitative research methods allow me to understand the meaning students have constructed about their world and experiences. Patton (1980) describes qualitative research as an effort to understand situations in their unique context. Rather than an attempt in predicting what will happen in the future, the goal is to understand what the world looks like through the participants’ eyes (Merriam & Associates, 2002). As the researcher, I observed my participants in their classroom environment which allowed me to understand how they drew on their prior experiences to read the graphic novels.

In qualitative research, the researcher is the primary instrument for data collection and data analysis. Because the goal is to understand human behavior, the researcher checks with the participants for accuracy of interpretation and to understand unique responses. This clarification process can be made through scheduling interviews, online discussions and focus groups (specialized groups). Since I was also the students’ classroom teacher, I had insight in noticing their reactions, needs, struggle and development in their responses. In addition, I had firsthand knowledge of the progress of the study.

However, undergoing a qualitative research study has some shortcomings. Because there is the involvement of the human instrument, there may be biases or “subjectivities” that influence how I gather and analyze the data (Merriam & Associates, 2002). I was aware of these possibilities and made a deliberate effort to taking steps in the data collection and analysis processes to minimize any possible bias due to subjective notions. For example, as the classroom teacher and researcher, I knew the participants both on a personal and academic level. Therefore,
to minimize potential biases, it was important for me not to have any knowledge of which students were taking part in the study. I asked my colleague to collect permission/consent forms. Further preserving anonymity with respect to responses, the students used pseudonyms in place of their given names in their online work. It also reduced the vulnerability of the students and encouraged students to answer more honestly and in an open manner. Furthermore, I have discussed the study findings throughout the process with my supervisor to help me recognize potential biases.

Qualitative research is holistic and inductive. The holistic aspect involves gathering data on any number of aspects in order to put together a complete picture of the situation (Patton, 1980). Patton states, "[A] holistic approach assumes that the whole is greater than the sum of its parts" (p. 40). In other words, almost every action or communication must be taken as a part of the whole phenomenon of a certain community or culture. In my research, these aspects of communication would include the major themes based on the responses given by ELLs and non-ELLs when reading a graphic novel. These themes or topics could include, but not limited to stereotypes, discrimination, injustice, power struggle/gain, ignorance, inequality, friendship and peace. In addition, my research is inductive in that the major themes were allowed to emerge without my imposing particular categories on my data.

3.2 Research Methods

In conducting the qualitative research as outlined in the above section, I followed these major steps:

1. Selection of study participants

2. Selection of texts/graphic novels
3. Preparation of study participants prior to the actual study

4. Data collection

5. Data Analysis

Each step will be described in the following sections.

3.3 Selection of Participants

The participants were ten students in my grade 6 class in a Toronto Catholic Elementary school. I was primarily interested in comparing how English Language Learners (ELLs) responded to graphic novels versus non-English Language Learners (non-ELLs). This was because of the fact that many ELLs may have had different perspectives due to socioeconomic background, experiences and being fairly new to Canada. Working with and including non-ELLs was also important for me as they, too, may have experiences, socioeconomic background and knowledge of living in Canada that differ from those of ELLs. Furthermore, studying these students’ responses was of great importance to me as I am interested in how responses may be influenced by personal experiences.

In this particular school, there is a high population of Asians and Eastern Europeans; therefore, the study included ELLs and non-ELLs of diverse backgrounds rather than based on a particular cultural background. Many of the students were new immigrants who had just arrived in Canada less than five years ago and were still acquiring the English language. It is interesting to note that even the non-ELLs came from diverse backgrounds where they spoke another language at home, but deemed English to be their dominant language. Dominant language here was defined as the language they spoke the majority of the time at home.
Due to the fact that I was both researcher and the classroom teacher, I avoided bias by having a colleague collect permission forms (see Appendix 1 & 2) for those who were interested to take part in the study. I was not aware of the students selected to participate in the study. All my students engaged in the graphic novel activities during language arts period as part of their language arts classes. However, their written responses were not graded. All students in the class were given a chance to create a pseudonym which they used as they responded on the blog site. After the completion of the graphic novels, I also asked my colleague to organize the ELL and non-ELL focus group, which helped me in analyzing and comparing responses between these groups after the study was completed.

After all the students had read and responded to the four graphic novels, I was made aware of the students who had given consent to participate in my study. In total, ten students had volunteered and returned consent forms to my colleague. These students all had completed the blog responses and literature circle booklets, therefore all of them were considered for this study. There were five ELLs and five non-ELLs. The five ELL students were born in Russia, Romania, Trinidad, and Canada. During the interview session, I had asked the students what language they spoke at home in order to learn more about their cultural background and what languages they spoke (see Appendix 4). The two students who were born in Canada fell under the ELL focus group because they spoke another language (Filipino and Cantonese) at home. The five non-ELL students were born in Canada or in another country, but had arrived in Canada at an early age. However, they were more comfortable speaking English. The non-ELL students were also from diverse backgrounds and cultures and were exposed to languages such as Chinese and Polish.

At this point, it is important to clarify the definition and composition of a “study group” and “focus group”. 
**Study Group:** Study groups were groups of five to six students reading and responding to graphic novels at the same time. All students (in this case 22) took part in study groups regardless of whether their parents had signed the permission/consent form. The graphic novels were distributed among four groups of five to six students which I had previously organized for literature circles.

**Focus Group:** The formation and the use of online focus groups was important to my qualitative research. Focus groups are carefully planned discussion groups that allowed me to understand students’ perceptions in a nurturing, non-threatening environment. For my research, they were comprised of one ELL focus group and a non-ELL focus group. These usually involve four to six participants per group that will yield a more diversified array of responses and afford a more extended basis for research (Merton et al, 1990). For my study, each focus group had five participants that had given consent to participate in the study. These participants all used pseudonyms to maintain anonymity.

**3.4 Selection of Texts**

I selected the graphic novels using these basic criteria:

- Are the themes and issues complex enough to hold the attention of grade 6 students?
- Is the text visually interesting?
- Do students have the requisite background to interpret and understand the themes in the story?
- Does the text raise themes and issues that students can relate to?

**3.4.1 American Born Chinese: by Gene Luen Yang**
It contains three unrelated stories which come together in a twist at the end of the book. The first story is about a monkey king who is unsatisfied and wants to hold sovereignty. He trains himself to be powerful and strong until the day he meets his creator. The day comes and his creator punishes him for being disobedient. His punishment is to be trapped under a bed of rocks for 400 years. This is a lesson to him to accept who he is, and not to tamper with the gods.

The second story is about a character named Jin Wang, who moves from San Francisco Chinatown to a white suburb. He is ridiculed by his classmates and teacher and finds it very difficult to fit in. This is until he meets a Taiwanese friend, Wei-Chun Sun whom he finds a lot in common in terms of cultural background and they end up being best friends. There are many themes of struggles as a teenager, love, relationships, bullying and discrimination that students could relate to as they read this book, whether they are Asian or not.

The third story is about Danny, a popular, blond high school basketball player. In the beginning of the story he wants to profess his love to his friend. But he learns that his Chinese cousin, Chin-Kee, is coming to visit him at his high school. His cousin is the typical Chinese stereotype; a character with yellow skin, small eyes and even a Chinese accent. Chin-Kee performs many embarrassing stunts that make Danny cringe. Danny hates the fact that Chin-Kee visits him every year and tarnishes his image in school. This part of the story is filled with Chinese stereotypes and themes of isolation and loneliness.

All three stories come together in a twist where all the characters are actually related. Jin Wang desperately wants to fit into the white American lifestyle and is ‘transformed’ into something else. He becomes Danny, the blond athlete. His friend, Wei-Chun Sun, is the monkey king’s son who wanted to serve the creator but has to prove himself fit as a human first. He ends up hating humans because of how Jin badly treats him. Thus, the monkey king (disguised as
Chin-Kee) visits Jin instead of his son, to be his conscience, and encourage him to remember his Chinese roots.

It was quite hard for me to narrow down the “best” graphic novels for this study. I wanted to find texts that the students could potentially relate to the situations/events in these graphic novels. *American Born Chinese* reveals many stereotypes that Asians may encounter, especially living in North America. There were many deep themes that only immigrant Chinese people may be able to connect to. The illustrations were very clear and would help the participants develop an understanding of themes, characters and experiences. Even if the reader is not of Asian descent, he/she can relate to instances where they have encountered mistreatment, presumptions, and the stereotypes that exist in schools and in society.

3.4.2 *The Arrival* by Shaun Tan

It is a completely wordless picture book that depicts the protagonist’s immigration from a threatened country somewhere in Eurasia. He leaves home in search for a better opportunity ahead for him and his family. However, life is not as easy as he would like it to be. He struggles to find a job, a place to stay and begins to wonder what it will take for him to survive. He meets several other immigrants who have done well in their new home, and learns from them, absorbing and learning about their adjustments to their new environment.

In this graphic novel, the pictures are illustrated in a stunning fashion. These pictures are so surreal that they entice the reader to be in the “moment” of the immigrant’s journey. The simplicity of the graphic novel makes it relatable, as readers are naturally drawn to recognizable, everyday symbols and pictures that assist them through experiencing the subtle details in the story. This brings about an emotional element that is important for visual literacy. For my study,
this was a great graphic novel to help boost problem-solving and interpretation skills because of
the mood, tone and the surrealistic images that the author has portrayed in this work of sequential
art.

It is quite remarkable how the pictures tell so much about a situation, emotion and
experience. While I was reading the book, I was mesmerized by the author’s ability to produce
realistic pictures that anyone visiting a foreign place could relate to. This is a piece of work that
ELLS could especially relate to, being new to a country and experiencing life in a new place. It
was interesting to analyze how non-ELLS respond towards this graphic novel as they may/may
not have had first-hand experience with this situation. Examining the different responses by the
participants of various cultural backgrounds was interesting to compare.

3.4.3 Re-Gifters by Mike Carey, Sonny Liew, and Marc Hempel

The main character is Jen Dickson (a.k.a. Dik Seong Jen or Dixie) who is a Korean-
American living in Koreatown’s Los Angeles district. She has a bad temper and finds her outlet
in a martial arts form called Hapkido. In her class, there is a boy named Adam, a blond haired
athlete, with who she falls madly in love. All she can think about is him, which is affecting the
way she performs at school and even how she treats her best friend.

It is Adam’s birthday and Dixie impresses him by buying him the most exotic and unique
gift. She buys him a Hawang warrior statue, which costs all of her allowance and the money that
she needs to enter into the upcoming Hapkido tournament. She is disappointed when she finds
out at the party that he is not into her, but another pretty white girl named Megan. Adam re-gifts
the statue for Megan which helps him win her love for him. Dixie cannot believe this and decides
to enter the Hapkido tournament to get back at him.
At the tournament, after fights with many tough Asian street guys, she meets her match in the final - Adam. However, Megan finds out about the re-gift and is unhappy about Adam. She leaves and Adam starts to contemplate about Dixie. He then decides to tell Dixie how he has a “crush” on her and that he does not want to hurt her. Therefore, she should retire from the tournament and let him win. Dixie thinks about it for a minute. But then finds all her strength in persuading herself that he is not worth it. She does win the tournament and ultimately her self-confidence.

*Re-Gifters* contains stereotypes and gender discrimination that students may have encountered. There were events in the novel that the students could relate to based on their prior knowledge, background and socio-cultural experience. The illustrations are in a simple, black and white format which allows the reader to concentrate on the true essence of the storyline. Since the main character encounters many mishaps with society, friends, family and love, I think that any student can relate to this graphic novel.

**3.4.4 Amelia Rules! by Jimmy Gownley**

It takes place in an elementary school where Amelia and her friends encounter the typical adventures, emotions, and frustrations that any elementary student would experience. Amelia is a blonde girl who desperately wants to be popular; however, she finds it quite difficult especially being around Rhonda (the girl with the weird hair) and Joan (who wears the weirdest-looking clothes). Of course, there is the popular girl, Brittney, who constantly makes fun of them. This makes Amelia angry and causes her to start insulting everyone. This is a big mistake because the whole school ends up against the trio and chases them throughout town.
Amelia gets into trouble for her bad words and is led to believe that she is a bad person. She starts thinking about this and becomes saddened that no matter how hard she tries, she will never fit in and be popular. Aunt Tanner tells her a story about being self-confident and doing what feels good and that is all that matters. Amelia takes this good piece of advice - until the cheerleading tryouts. Again, she tries to impress her friends and the teacher. To her surprise, she actually makes the team; however, her best friend Rhonda does not.

Amelia has a hard decision to make. She is ecstatic about being closer to becoming popular, but on the other hand, her best friend is now a geek forever. Does she give up her spot realizing Rhonda wants it more? Amelia does some thinking and knows that she has a big decision to make. She decides to do something good and gives up her cheerleading spot. She decides to keep this secret to herself and takes this as an altruistic opportunity. Rhonda finds out that she makes it onto the cheerleading squad and is excited. However, she remains friends with Amelia and Joan because she knows who her true friends are.

This novel was chosen because it features a blonde girl going through the trials and tribulations of being in elementary school. I know that the students in my study would definitely connect to Amelia and the concept of being popular and liked in school. I purposely chose a graphic novel that had a non-Asian character so that I could examine the responses between ELLs and non-ELLs, whether Asian or not. I wanted to observe how these students would react and/or associate with the characters in the book, whether connected through themes, emotions or experiences or due to the cultural background of the main character.
3.5 Preparation of Study Participants Prior to Study

Prior to starting the study, I realized I needed to prepare the class to answer some of the deeper level questions that would be proposed in the study. I had them read a graphic novel called *The Titanic* that I found in my school library. Students read their own copies so that they would be able to visualize and read the text instead of listening to me read without reference to a picture or word. This graphic novel contained many social justice issues that mimicked present-day society. The students and I reflected and discussed what some social injustices were: race/culture and inequality (economic status/background, gender, age or physical appearance). We agreed with the fact that the passengers on the ship were classified according to their economic background. First-class passengers had bigger, nicer cabins while the third-class passengers were discriminated against, as they had inhumane conditions of staying in smaller-sized cabins with no separate washroom. We also discussed the fact that there were not enough lifejackets and lifeboats for everyone on the ship, which led to many of the third-class citizens with no chance of survival when the ship sank.

In addition to the social justice issues, I prompted students with questions on point of view. I wanted the students to realize that the perspective of the storyteller/narrator can drastically change the effect of the book and its affect on readers. *The Titanic* was not based on any of the passengers’ perspectives but rather an outsider’s perspective: a detective named Izzy. Some of the detrimental and unfortunate events that were taking place, especially from the standpoint of the third-class passengers were missing, and it seemed like they had no voice and were insignificant in the story. My hope was for the students to take into consideration various points of views when reading a story.
In addition, the students seemed to have a difficult time with the definition of stereotypes. Therefore, I did a mini-lesson on media stereotypes since I wanted to them grasp the notion of stereotypes and be able to recognize these as they read the graphic novels. The definition I gave them was this: Stereotype: An oversimplification about a person or group of people -- usually relating to their class, ethnicity or race, gender, or social status.

I also mentioned that there were ‘positive’ and ‘negative’ stereotypes. Examples were given on the board and students were to brainstorm any other ‘positive’ or ‘negative’ stereotypes that they had encountered before (i.e., Asians are good at math, black people are good at sports, doctors are usually men and girls are weaker than boys). It was important for me to relay the message that stereotypes are fabrications made by the media and society that potentially can become reality in people’s minds. Recognizing this and understanding how they affect society was essential, as these stereotypes can perpetuate social prejudice and inequality.

3.6 Data Collection

Qualitative research includes holistic, inductive and naturalistic characteristics or aspects. Almost every action or communication must be taken as a part of the whole phenomenon of a certain community or culture. A naturalistic inquiry was implemented, as I did not attempt to manipulate the research setting. The data that I collected was similar to the data that would be collected as the classroom teacher in my language arts classes. A classroom is a naturally occurring event, program, relationship or interaction that is also changing through time. Guba (1978, in Patton, 1980, p. 42) describes this naturalistic inquiry as a “discovery-oriented” approach which minimizes researcher manipulation. Patton (1980) explains, "Naturalistic inquiry
is thus contrasted to experimental research where the investigator attempts to completely control the condition of the study" (p. 42). This allows the researcher to understand the naturally-occurring events of the setting.

The inductive approach to my research was the preparation of raw data, being knowledgeable of the various graphic novels, and identifying and defining categories or themes that emerged from the students’ responses. Within each category or theme, I searched for common subthemes, new insights, opposing views and relationships among the responses between the ELL and non-ELL groups.

Through the utilization of inductive, naturalistic and holistic approaches, I attempted to get a better sense of how graphic novels motivated responses for middle grade students. The only controlled part of the study involved the organization of ELL and non-ELL focus groups and individual blogs and journal responses based on researcher-generated questions. Another controlled part of the study was the pre-selection of graphic novels that I had chosen for the participants and students to read.

Generally, there are three types data collection methods for a qualitative research study: interviews, observations and documents. Researchers are encouraged to use more than one of the above methods mentioned in data collection because multiple methods help enhance the validity of the findings (Merriam & Associates, 2002). The nature of the data collected depends upon the ways in which the interviews, observations and documents were conducted. Becoming an active participant while observing, may have influenced the responses and actions of the participants under study. Therefore, I attempted to gather multiple types of data because of my awareness of the characteristics of each type of data.
For my study, I utilized the following three methods of data collection:

**Individual/Group**

1. Journal Response
2. Blogs

**One-on-One**

3. One-on-One Interview

Further details as to the process and scope for each of these data collection methodologies is described below:

**3.6.1 Individual/Group Responses**

I introduced my study and had it set up in my classroom as literature circles, made popular by Harvey Daniels, a former classroom teacher and professor. Literature circles are discussion groups that meet together regularly to discuss a particular book (Daniels, 1994). Each literature group was essentially a study group comprised of five to six students as discussed earlier. I have always used literature circles as a way of eliciting different types of responses based on the reading comprehension strategies.

Arranging the students in literature circles was also beneficial when rotating the graphic novels, as each study group could be reading a different graphic novel. This also maintained the flow and organization in the classroom teaching environment. Introducing literature circles in the latter part of the school year was also advantageous. I had already been implementing literature circles since January, when we read the novel *Holes* (Sachar, 1998). Many of the students were
already familiar with each role and what was expected of them as they responded to each role (see description below). I also found that, through the previous literature circles, students had already formed bonds and understood how to work in group settings.

Five copies of each of the four different graphic novels (twenty graphic novels altogether) were distributed among the students in each study group. These graphic novels were rotated in sequence. Students were aware of this sequence, as the order was given to them when they began their study group rotations. After five days, each graphic novel set was rotated to the next study group. At the end of the four week period, each student had read all four graphic novels.

3.6.2 Journals

Each student received a journal (see Appendix 7) that indicated certain roles. These roles consisted of connecting to the text (connector), questioning the text (discussion facilitator), understanding the main idea (various online questions) and visualizing an event/situation in the story (illustrator). All students responded to the four roles each of the four days for 30 to 40 minutes during language arts period. These literature circle journals were collected after four days.

At the end of the research project, all students had read all four graphic novels regardless of whether their parents had signed the permission form or not, thus, preserving the anonymity of the actual participants. The texts remained in the classroom at all times and could only be read during independent reading time and/or language arts time. In this way, I was able to track and avoid potential misplacing of the graphic novels. The reading and response component of the study was completed in four weeks. When the study was complete, I examined the responses of
the participants who had signed the permission/consent forms and organized students into focus groups for analysis of results. The students’ journal responses were not graded.

### 3.6.3 Blogs

In addition to these literature circle journals, students had their own personal response blogging account. This gave them access to the online questions that I proposed in the study (see Appendix 3). Further discussion and group interaction with their study groups took place in the blogs. I had each student sign up on wikispaces.com with their personalized username (or pseudonym) and password to preserve the anonymity of each response. These blogs were both of a personal nature and could be shared and viewed by others in the group. Group members could respond and voice their opinion and perspectives on peers’ blog entries, if they wished.

The blog was organized into five questions that I had posted beforehand for each graphic novel. These online discussions helped me discover the various themes, thoughts and points of view that the students had about each graphic novel. The questions were framed so that I could sense their level of understanding and insight on how graphic novels may connect to their experience or their encounters with social justice issues such as stereotyping, gender inequality, discrimination, and familiar themes that hold meaning to them. Every fifth day of reading the graphic novel, when they had completed the graphic novel, they blogged for one hour during computer time/language arts time. Having a structured timeframe for the blog encouraged students to finish reading and responding to the particular graphic novel on time.

### 3.6.4 One-on-One Interview
After the completion of the blogs and literature circle journals, I interviewed the five ELL and five non-ELL participants. The purpose of this interview was to discover some background about their home life, languages spoken, and origin. In addition, I was given feedback about the graphic novels chosen and whether they perception about reading graphic novels had changed. The interview responses informed my organization of the focus groups into ELL and non-ELL participants.

3.7 Data Analysis

My data analysis was inductive, as I attempted to make sense of the situation without imposing preexisting theoretical expectations on the setting. I looked at general patterns in the various sources of data. In this case, the data sources were from the online blogs and literature circle journals. The important part here is allowing the significant themes to emerge from analysis of the cases under study without presupposing what those important dimensions are (Patton, 1980).

I began analyzing the data following the first response, the first observation and the first documentation accessed in the study. I analyzed students’ reactions, discussions, and responses to the online blogs and literature circle journals. This provided a greater sense of the whole experience of the project. This was important because it allowed for adjustments along the way, in order to redirect data collection and to investigate emerging concepts and themes against the succeeding data (Merriam & Associates, 2002). In my inductive approach, I compared data, while looking for common patterns (i.e. common themes stated by the participants). These
patterns were refined and adjusted as the analysis proceeded (i.e. asking different questions, using focus groups and/or study groups and simplifying the language in the questions).

I was fortunate that I was able to have my own grade 6 students participate in the study. This enabled me to engage in the process of the study and act not only as a researcher but as a teacher as well. This gave the students a sense of security knowing that I was their classroom teacher and not an outsider, as many other researchers may have to deal with. It was also easier to know that language arts period was usually at the same time each day and that I had control over when and where I could observe them in their natural setting (either in the computer lab or classroom). Even though there were perks of being a classroom teacher and being in the school environment, there were constant interruptions (track & field, trips, assemblies) that were scheduled during the time of my study. However, I was able to add in a few extra periods of computer time and language time in order for the students to catch up on their reading, responding and blogging online.

Focus groups and online blogs allowed me to investigate how the participants reacted to deeper themes embedded in graphic novels. In this way, triangulation allowed for cross-checking the consistency of information by comparing observational data with interview data, what students said in private versus with the whole group. I was able to check the consistency over time, and compare the perspectives of students of different genders.

Categorizing participants in ELL or non-ELL focus groups also helped me compare and contrast their responses to different social justice issues and the particular connections that they had given. Moreover, even within groups, I analyzed overlapping patterns between genders and background. Student responses were analyzed to discover differences between the responses when reading graphic novels. These focus groups helped me determine the application of graphic
novels and their potential flexible nature to reach out to ELL and non-ELLs. These focus groups were intended to give the participants a more active role in leading the questions and discussions.

When the study was done, I organized the students’ responses on wikispaces.com by cutting and pasting them onto a word document. This made it easier to compare and contrast common themes or categories, such as stereotyping, that the students had responded to. In addition, I also wanted to use this information to identify important patterns and themes that were constantly repeated within the data (Merriam & Associates, 2002). I highlighted (in different colours) the key phrases and common themes and then organized it into a two-column table. Since I had two focus groups, each column had an ELL or non-ELL heading. In this way, it was easier for me to organize and analyze the students’ responses within the ELL group and non-ELL group. These were then compared in terms of similarities and differences between the two groups. I was especially interested to see their responses on social justice issues, such as equality, culture, identity, and power in society. Moreover, I noticed that there were student responses which did not relate to the question, perhaps these students did not understand what the question was asking, even after prompting. For the purpose of the study, I had to exclude those responses.

Essentially, the way I had laid out the questions online paved way for how I could categorize common themes, stereotypes and how they connected to the characters. For example, the first question directly asked students to describe any stereotypes, thus, it was easy to organize by only analyzing that one question. When analyzing their connections and experiences, the question: How did the situations/events in this graphic novel relate to you? and the question (which was revised): Which character were you able to relate to? helped me organize and categorize the data.
Analyzing the literature circle journals was done in the same manner. I only focussed on the ten participants’ responses and organized them according to common themes and connections. It was interesting to note that I had to cut some of the data from Illustrator and Word Master roles. This was because most of the drawings were of the front covers of the graphic novel and the words that students chose were all words they already knew or words that I could not connect to my initial research questions (see end of Chapter One).

Lastly, I used the interview data gathered after the graphic novel activities ended. I had asked students background questions for the sole purpose of placing them in ELL or non-ELL groups. Although my colleague had recommended the grouping as well, it was important for me to ask the students their opinions and comfort level with English. It did turn out that the placement of the individual students correlated to my colleague’s.
CHAPTER FOUR: RESULTS

The goal of the following section is to reveal the students’ perceptions and interpretations of various themes and connections found in the four graphic novels they were given to read. In Chapter Five, these perceptions and interpretations will be linked to the literature and theoretical framework as discussed in Chapter Two.

4.1 Participants- Brief Overview

4.1.1 English Language Learners

The participants in the ELL focus group consisted of five students –both male and female- under the pseudonyms: Animation1999, Grus, Cwalker1999, Soap1999, and Butterfly1999. I will provide brief details about each participant based on gender, race, mother tongue, reading preferences, habits and abilities and their interests.

Animation1999, a female, was born in Romania. During the interview she said, “I came to Toronto three years ago. I learned English during this time. I speak mostly Romanian at home, which I find is much easier to express myself.” After asking about her favourite graphic novels and whether she liked reading them, she responded, “My favourite novels were *American Born Chinese* and *The Arrival* because of the detailed pictures. I enjoy reading graphic novels.” She loves studying and doing well in school.

Grus, a male, was born in Russia and arrived in Canada three years ago. During the interview, he said, “I speak only Russian at home. Russian is obviously the easier language for
me to speak since I speak it all the time.” He then mentioned that his favourite graphic novel was *The Arrival*. His interest in reading did not change as a result of the graphic novel activities.

It seems that he is still finding it hard to adjust to the Canadian culture. He has a serious attitude and is unwilling to try new things. He enjoys reading scientific novels and magazines that are fact-based. Since he is very detailed-oriented and analytical, he enjoys math and science, subjects that are numbers-based with very little wording. He is interested in becoming an aerospace engineer when he grows up.

Cwalker1999 is female and born in Canada. When asked during an interview about her language spoken at home, she replied, “I often speak Filipino to my parents since they do not speak English well. But in my opinion, I speak English better.” She enjoys reading chapter books that involve fantasy and fairytales. She still has strong ties with the Philippines and has many friends who are of Filipino descent.

Soap1999 is male and born in Canada. He stated, “I usually speak English at home, but I do know how to speak Cantonese. Basically, I’m comfortable in both languages.” His reading preferences include graphic novels and comic books, such as *Manga* and *Pokemon*. In addition to graphic novels, he enjoys playing video games.

Finally, Butterfly1999 is female and born in Trinidad. She said, “I just arrived from Trinidad two years ago. I speak a form of English slang at home.” At this point, I asked if it was still hard for her to speak North American English. She replied, “Yes, I still find it hard to pronounce certain words correctly.” She is a good reader and writer and enjoys spending time with both her male and female friends.

### 4.1.2 Non-English Language Learners
The participants in the non-ELL group consisted of five students - both male and female: JollyRancher1999, SBK1999, Icefish001, Numberfour and Internetgirl1999. They were all born in Canada, but they were exposed to another language at home. While conducting the interviews, some of the students told me that they spoke mostly English at home and were stronger and more comfortable conversing in that language. Since English was their dominant language, I included these students in the non-ELL group. Here is a brief outline of their gender, race, mother-tongue, reading preferences, habits, abilities and interests.

JollyRancher1999 is female and of Chinese descent. She speaks primarily English at home. She has a great talent for writing and does well academically in all subjects. Being a fluent reader, she often enjoys all novels with a great storyline and that touches her emotionally. She enjoys socializing and being with friends, both male and female.

SBK1999 is male and of Canadian descent. He is black and speaks English at home. His reading preferences include graphic novels, comic books and magazines. He has an interest in reading chapter books, as well. He is a good reader and writer and enjoys connecting his experiences to any book he reads. A social butterfly, he is well-liked by his peers and enjoys being with friends.

Icefish001 is female whose origin is Chinese. She speaks English at home, but also understands and speaks a bit of Cantonese. Her favourite graphic novel was Re-Gifters because it was the most exciting and full of suspense. Being accepted into the Gifted program and French Immersion program, she is a highly self-motivated individual and does extremely well in all aspects of school. She enjoys reading and writing all types of genres and texts and recently submitted an English story to Young Authors of Canada.
Numberfour is male and of Polish descent. He said, “I speak mostly Polish to my parents at home. But I am more comfortable speaking English.” An avid reader and writer, he enjoys reading action and novels that involve pirates and vampires. Writing stories and reading are some of his favourite past-times. A competitor swimmer, he enjoys doing his best and just having fun.

Finally, Internetgirl1999 is female and is second-generation Canadian. Her grandmother was from Australia and her parents are originally from the United Kingdom. She speaks English at home and enjoys reading all types of texts from chapter books to graphic novels. She enjoys reading and writes beautiful, detailed stories. After winning a medal as a competitive rhythmic gymnast, she understands the dedication and hardwork that is needed to be successful.

4.2 Connections to Characters

In this section, I will be reporting on what the students felt they had in common with the characters. This will be broken down into sub-themes which were made apparent as the students connected with the characters in each graphic novel.

4.2.1 Responses to American Born Chinese

The concept of friendship and acceptance were themes that stood out as both focus groups made connections to the characters in American Born Chinese. Another interesting theme was how males and females connected to the storyline in a different way. Most of the boys connected to the Monkey King’s powers, while the girls commented on Jin Wang’s struggle in school.
Friendship and Acceptance

Most of the students in the ELL focus group connected to Jin Wang, one of the main characters in the graphic novel. Butterfly1999 mentioned that she connected with Jin Wang in that they were both new to a school and had to adjust to the new culture. It was a daunting experience because she wanted to make new friends. This was difficult since she thought that the students in the class would not accept her for the way she was. Soap1999, a new student, could also relate to Jin Wang because he found it hard to make friends for the first few days of school. In his words, “When I went to a new school, I had no friends for one to two days, just like Jin Wang.” (Literature Circle Journal, May 2011). It was obvious that making friends and fitting in were important for these students.

One student, Grus, did not mention Jin Wang as the character that he could most relate to. This was partly because he had a hard time maintaining and making friends due to his accent and expressed his frustration with not understanding the Canadian culture. He was born and raised in Russia, where he came from an extremely disciplined culture. He was overprotective and often had one friend of the opposite gender. It was hard for him to connect with other boys, without ending in an argument or physical force.

For the participants in the non-ELL group, most of the students connected to all the characters in the graphic novel. Although the graphic novel was comprised of three different, yet connecting stories, they were all able to easily connect with all characters: Jin Wang, Chin-Kee, Wei Chen Sun, Danny and the Monkey King. Each character was unique in behaviour and appearance. These characters were also going through the trials and tribulations of being a middle-school student, which made it easy for the students to relate to the characters’
experiences. Many of the students spoke about their desire to fit in and be accepted by their peers.

One participant, who was non-Asian, was still able to connect with Jin Wang when she recalled a time when students in her class called her a geek: “When I was in grade 5, people called me a geek. This relates to Jin when he was being called a geek.” (Literature Circle Journal, May 2011). Another non-Asian participant spoke about a teacher who mispronounced his name similar to when Jin Wang’s name was mispronounced. Therefore it seemed that both ELL and non-ELL groups were sensitive about how they were addressed and/or labelled.

**Gender-Related Interests**

From a gender perspective, most of the boys in the non-ELL group seemed to connect to the imaginative side of *American Born Chinese*. The boys related to the Monkey King because of the fact that he had special powers and enjoyed fighting. They were interested about his shape-shifting abilities and how he was a god who commanded power and respect from his peers. Grus could only relate to the Monkey King and was mesmerized by his magical powers and strength. He seemed to like the fact that the Monkey King was an animal with human qualities.

In contrast, the non-ELL girls did not mention any connection with the Monkey King’s power and supernatural strengths. One student did connect to the time when the Monkey King was careless and selfish towards his creator, Tze-Yo-Tzuh. JollyRancher1999 related to the time when she felt that her mother was not being fair to her, but after contemplating for a long time, she realized what she did was wrong and apologized. She felt that the Monkey King’s character taught her about important life lessons. However, most of the other girls related to Jin Wang and his struggles of being accepted by his peers due to his culture and appearance.
4.2.2 Responses to *The Arrival*

The ELL group and non-ELL group connected to family-longing, exploring the unknown and were also able to relate *The Arrival* to recent world events.

*Family-longing and Exploring the Unknown*

Most of the students in the ELL focus group seemed to have a strong connection with the man (the main character) and the family (in particular the daughter). Some students mentioned on their blog about their parent(s) or other family members who had to leave them due to a business trip or vacation. This caused them grief and sadness to witness a loved one leaving the family behind. They felt that there was a void in the family nucleus. Butterfly1999 spoke about her father leaving on business trips around the world, and she would often feel sad to see him go. But when he did come back, she was delighted to see him safe and sound.

Moreover, other ELL students pointed out that the man had to explore a new and unknown place. One student, Animation1999, mentioned that she enjoyed exploring new places and that she felt that she discovered something new every day. She was also a relatively new immigrant who came from Romania. She related this to the time when the man arrived in a new place and had to quickly adjust to his new surroundings. Grus related himself to the man’s physical appearance and found that they had similarities because they were both immigrants who arrived in a new place with a family. Soap1999, an avid video gamer, related to the setting of the graphic novel in that it was set in a dreary and gloomy place. He connected it to a movie, “World of the War” and video game, “Call of Duty” where people are constantly running away from war and turmoil.
The non-ELL group had similar connections to the man. JollyRancher1999 mentioned that she connected to the man when she went to camp for the first time and noticed that it was very strange. She was used to a bed and a comfy couch; but instead, she had to sleep in a tent and use portable toilets. Another student mentioned how she went to Iceland and could not communicate with the citizens there, similar to how the man had a difficult time communicating. Meanwhile, Internetgirl1999, an only child, related the man to her mother when she had to leave on a business trip and left her and her grandmother at home. Icefish001 mentioned that she connected to the daughter when she recalled watching her grandparents leave for China without the rest of her family.

**Relations to World Events**

Both ELL and non-ELL groups made a connection with the letter folding into paper cranes. These would magically fly and be sent home to his family. Recently, the students in my class had to fold paper cranes for the Japan Relief Fund for the devastating tsunami that happened in March 2011. The students had acknowledged this good deed and it had meant a lot to them to try to help the people in Japan. Both ELLs and non-ELLs experienced the same emotions and connections when made aware of the destruction and chaos endured by people around the world. This was a universal emotion that everyone felt.

**4.2.3 Responses to *Amelia Rules***

For the ELL and non-ELL group, most of the students mentioned their connections to the themes of popularity, friendship, mistreatment and bullying that occurred in their school.
**Friendship, School and Bullying**

The ELLs spoke about their experiences with friends and bullying. Animation1999 mentioned that she was bullied by some girls and she had to defend herself by snapping back. She connected this incident to the time when Amelia used inappropriate language that ultimately ended her up in the principal’s office. Butterfly1999 recalled the friendship that Amelia had with her best friend, Rhonda, and how she would also stick up for her friend if she ever needed her help: “I will always stand up for my friends no matter what, even when it means getting in trouble. I will give up anything for my friends.” (Literature Circle Journal, May 2011). Cwalker1999 connected to Amelia in that they both wanted to be liked by their peers.

However, Grus, who was very independent, did not relate to Amelia. Rather, he connected to the teacher because the teacher did not choose sides or make fun of others. He blogged: “I think I most likely identify with Amelia's teacher. Amelia's teacher doesn't make fun of anybody and is neutral in everything.” (Wikispaces 2011). He also felt that he connected to the adults in the school instead of his peers. He cared about getting good marks in school and gaining respect from his peers.

The non-ELL groups had similar connections to the trials and tribulations that happened to Amelia and her friends. Many students recalled a mean group of kids making fun of their friend and the difficulties of choosing between friends. JollyRancher1999 spoke about how she used to be best friends with a girl, but their friendship started to grow apart when they hung out with different people. She felt that she had ‘lost’ her best friend to another classmate. This was similar to when Rhonda finally became a cheerleader and had imagined that she might hang out with the more ‘popular and prettier’ friends. The students also spoke about working with partners...
on projects for school and the embarrassment of presenting in front of their classmates. Many of
the students disliked presenting in front of their peers because of the fear of making a mistake.

Overall, both focus groups connected with Amelia because she treasured her friendships
and had to deal with the social and academic pressures of being a middle-school student. They
both mentioned a key moment in the graphic novel where Amelia finally made it to the
cheerleading squad but Rhonda did not. Amelia had a tough decision to make and gave up the
coveted spot to her friend. Both the ELL and non-ELL students remembered a time when they
had made it on the track & field team but due to circumstances out of their control (i.e. injuries)
they had to give up their spot. There were times when they also witnessed their friends getting
cut from the team, which they did not feel good about.

4.2.4 Responses to Re-Gifters

The students in the ELL group connected to Dixie’s character, while those in the non-ELL group
connected to the friendship between Dixie and her friend, Avril. The themes that stood out as
they related to these characters were: competition, acceptance, friendship, love and re-gifting.

**Competition, Acceptance and Friendship**

The students in the ELL group connected to Dixie because of her feisty, competitive
nature and her yearning to fit in. Animation1999 mentioned how she was nervous about her math
test, similar to how Dixie was nervous about her upcoming Hapkido tournament. She also
remembered a time when, like Dixie, she was not invited to a birthday party, which made her
feel excluded. Grus mentioned that he could connect with the annoyance and anger that Dixie
had towards Adam that it made him think of a classmate against whom he had had a previous
vendetta. Meanwhile, reading *Re-Gifters* helped Butterfly1999 reminisce about her win at a
swim competition and how she felt proud of herself. This resembled Dixie’s triumphant win at
the tournament against Adam.

The non-ELL group had connections with the experiences of Dixie and Avril friendship
and Dixie’s love for Adam. JollyRancher1999 felt that Avril reminded her of her own friend:
“…I think Avril is very similar to [name] because Avril is there for Dixie even when she is at her
lowest…. [name] is here for me no matter what.” (Literature Circle Journal, May 2011).
SBK1999 was able to recall when Avril had given her ticket to Dixie so she could enter the
Hapkido tournament to face Adam. SBK1999 remembered when he had given an extra TTC
ticket to his friend. JollyRancher1999 also spoke about her crush on a boy and how it distracted
her to the point where it affected her marks at school.

Both ELL and non-ELL students could relate to the strain and anxiety associated with
fighting or competing against an opponent. Hard work and dedication was also involved in
becoming good at one’s sport. For example, Numberfour wrote: “I am able to connect to Dixie
because similar to her, I go to swim competitions instead of martial art competitions…like Dixie,
I usually go to the finals and usually get a ribbon, but I didn't get any medals yet.” (Wikispaces,
May 2011). Many mentioned that they either watched a friend at a tournament or were enrolled
in Karate or Tae Kwon Do lessons. Internetgirl1999 spoke about the time she helped her friend
prepare for an upcoming tournament because she knew the pressures and stress caused by being
in a competition.

Additionally, both groups mentioned that they had experiences with re-gifting, being
selfless and attending competitions. Cwalker1999 had a gift returned to her after two months by
the same friend she had given the gift to. Icefish001 also experienced the notion of ‘re-gifting’ at
her birthday party. However, none of them mentioned how it made them feel and why anyone would think of re-gifting a present that someone else had given them.

4.3 Connections to Familiar Themes

In this section, I will be reporting on the students’ connections to familiar themes (or the main message of the text) as they read each graphic novel. This will be sub-divided within each novel.

4.3.1 Responses to American Born Chinese

My own opinions and motivation for choosing this graphic novel for the study were validated as I observed the themes of appreciation, discrimination (cultural or physical appearance), isolation and acceptance in the students’ responses. The ELL group focused their reflections on the themes of isolation and acceptance. The students were able to incorporate and connect to these themes in their written entries and blogs throughout the study.

*Discrimination and Appreciation*

The two themes that really stood out were discrimination and appreciation for both focus groups. I defined discrimination to include remarks or stereotypes about cultural background and physical appearance. Both the ELL and non-ELL group were comprised of students from diverse backgrounds, which probably led them to become more aware of themes of discrimination and appreciation. These students mentioned the negative stereotype of Asians having slanted eyes, eating exotic food, having intelligence, knowledge of martial arts and being from China.

Internetgirl1999 blogged: “… be happy with who you are and do not try to be something you're not. Just be yourself… people like you the way you are. Your race or skin colour doesn't
make you ‘un cool.’ It just makes you you.” (Wikispaces 2011). Grus mentioned that people should be proud of who they are. He recalled when Danny chose to disguise himself as a blonde, Caucasian boy rather than revealing his true identity of being Chinese. Others wrote how they would not change themselves for anyone. For example, Icefish001 wrote, “I learned…how great it was to be yourself. This is even said by the monkey king at the end of the story. He said he could have freed himself a long time ago if he knew how good it was to be a monkey. You can fit in your own special way. After the monkey king told this to Jin, he transformed back to himself…” (Wikispaces 2011).

**Acceptance and Isolation**

The two themes that were more relevant for the ELL group were acceptance and isolation. For the theme of acceptance, most of the ELL group connected to being new to Canada once before and remembered having to make new friends and familiarizing themselves with their new surroundings. They just wanted to fit in with the rest of society. Butterfly1999 wrote: “I was a new student in Grade 5. I came from a different place in the world and almost everything was different. For example there are only two seasons where I am from and here (in Canada) there are four. It was hard to get used to everything but once I made friends it got easier.” (Wikispaces 2011). The non-ELLs connected with making new friends at their new school, but not necessarily having to adjust and learn a new language.

The ELLs possibly felt the effects of isolation because it took longer for them to settle down in their new home country. Soap1999 acknowledged how he felt alone at his new school and did not make friends for the first few days. Butterfly1999 spoke about how she had an accent, and many students would tease her about this. However, JollyRancher1999, an Asian non-ELL, was the only non-ELL who commented on how she felt isolated from her classmates.
(who were not Asian) and mentioned that other students would tease her about her facial features: “I can connect [to Jin Wang] because we both know we don’t eat dogs and we know our eyes are more slanted than others, but we didn’t choose to have eyes like that.” (Wikispaces 2011). It was obvious she felt categorized purely on her looks rather than who she was on the inside. She felt that she was still different from the Canadian students even though she was born and raised in Canada.

4.3.2 Responses to The Arrival
The common themes that were revealed after reading the students’ responses for The Arrival were: family, male dominance, foreignness and change. Male dominance was particularly strong for the non-ELLs, whereas, foreignness resonated for the ELL group.

**Family and Change**

Family was a theme that was equally mentioned by the ELL and non-ELL group. The students wrote that they would be heartbroken to see someone in their family leave for an extended period of time. However, they knew this was in the best interest of the family; they had to accept this change. Many related their feelings of love and concern to a time when they had to witness their close family members head off to another country.

Change was another big theme for both the ELLs and non-ELLs. They recognized the importance of travel and exploring new places. Animation1999 blogged: “…go and discover other parts of the world not just the one you are familiar with…” (Wikispaces 2011). Therefore, they believed that change and the unexpected were something that everyone should experience and that it was good. Icefish001 commented about how living in different places could help one learn and experience diversity. It helped open one’s mind to other cultures and ways of life.
Male Dominance

The non-ELLs were very opinionated about male dominance. They thought it was absurd that it was a man that was chosen by the author to travel and explore while leaving the woman and daughter behind. JollyRancher1999 started to relate this to a time when her and her mother were not allowed to go boxing at the gym, while her father and brother went. Icefish001 noticed that the author chose a man as the sole breadwinner and had to take risks to ensure that he and his family would have a good life: “I noticed was that it was the man or the father of the family that always had to go to a new place and look for a job to get more money.” (Wikispaces 2011). These non-ELL students believed that a woman could have taken his place.

Foreignness

The theme of foreignness was mentioned by the students in the ELL group. They expressed their understanding of having to arrive in a new country and adjusting to their new world. They commented on how immigrants/foreigners found it hard, especially when local people were wondering who and where they came from. Animation1999 mentioned that as she read the graphic novel, she learned that the residents in the new place looked at the man in a peculiar way as if he was from another planet. Grus stated that it did not bother him that immigrants were viewed as different and that being different should not matter.

4.3.3 Responses to Amelia Rules

Major themes that were conveyed were: unequal power, dignity of the human person, acceptance, and popularity. However, the non-ELLs started to reflect on the definition of popularity, while the ELLs connected to the effects of bullying or unequal power.
Acceptance and Dignity of the Human person

Acceptance and dignity of the human person were mentioned by both groups. For the theme of acceptance, one ELL student realized that Amelia seemed to be excluded by others just because of her physical appearance. She declared that new students should be given a chance. The non-ELL student mentioned that her best friend decided to hang out with the popular group, comprised of mean girls, but later realized that they were not her true friends. For the theme of dignity of the human person, the students explained that God made everyone special and unique in their own way. Therefore, nobody has the right to judge others’ appearances and behaviours, no matter how peculiar.

Popularity

The non-ELLs focused on the theme of popularity more than the ELL group did. Many of the non-ELLs thought that there was an oversimplification of being popular in the story and that popularity was viewed in a unrealistic way. They did not agree that to be popular one had to look and act a certain way. Others stated that being popular was not important. Numberfour, a non-ELL, mentioned: “I think being popular is important when you're a professional athlete. But then I tell myself that it doesn't matter if you're popular or not.” (Wikispaces 2011). Many others mentioned that being popular was not necessarily a good thing, especially when they had to conform to something they were not. The non-ELLs expressed their feelings about popularity when they had experienced a similar situation of wanting to be accepted and/or their desire to be in the popular crowd.

Unequal Power
It was interesting to learn that the ELLs connected with the theme of unequal power or bullying. Both students revealed their experiences with bullying or having a power disadvantage. They pointed out that when they were younger, they were bullied by other students. In their defense, they snapped back which got them into more trouble. Butterfly1999 blogged: “…in third grade I got bullied. So I defended myself and got into huge trouble, like how Amelia got in trouble for defending her friend.” (Wikispaces 2011). Animation1999 also pointed out the same thing: “I once got into big trouble in grade 5 because somebody from my class was bullying me and making fun of me, so I started defending myself and then I got into much bigger trouble with my teacher.” (Wikispaces 2011). Therefore, the ELLs had experienced a power disadvantage probably because they were new and were relatively easy to pick on.

**4.3.4 Responses to Re-Gifters**

The themes that were described for both ELL and non-ELL groups were: discrimination, perseverance, and trust. The non-ELLs related to the theme of relationships while reading this graphic novel.

**Discrimination, Perseverance and Trust**

Both the ELLs and non-ELLs directed their attention on the theme of discrimination. Internetgirl1999 expressed how the graphic novel seemed to portray Asians being good at martial arts and that the Koreans in the story were only allowed to walk on one side of the street. Cwalker1999 stated that although she was Asian, she did not know anything about martial arts. Icefish001 wrote that it was unfair and ridiculous to think that similar cultures would need to live in the same area or neighbourhood. Likewise, Butterfly1999 wondered why the story had to depict bullies as dark-skinned.
For the theme of perseverance, both groups noted the importance of not giving up and attaining a goal. They were able to relate to Dixie’s drive and competitiveness to prove that she was the best in her sport. The notion of believing in oneself was important to the students. One student stated that he thought it was not the right decision for Dixie to give up the sport she loved in order to impress a boy who may not like her in the end. Instead, she should stay focused and believe that she can succeed in anything she puts her mind to.

Moreover, dishonesty was another major theme that came up for both groups. They revealed their experiences with spending their money irresponsibly rather than listening and obeying their parents. Butterfly1999 blogged: “….my parents gave me money to pay for a school trip but I spent the money on Starbucks with my friends. My parents were really angry. This relates to Dixie. The reason is that Dixie spent all her money on a gift for a friend instead of giving the money to her Hapkido teacher.” (Wikispaces 2011). She had learned a valuable lesson. The majority of the students appeared to feel guilty about disobeying their parents.

**Relationships**

Finally, the concept of relationships/friendships resonated most with the non-ELLs. They understood and connected with the relationship between Avril and Dixie, and the care and concern that Avril had for Dixie. JollyRancher1999 felt she had underestimated her best friend, but now realized that they both cared for each other: “I have an amazing best friend that knows I’m aggressive, and knows my flaws, but still puts up with me.” She continued with: “I have a friend, whose feelings I would hurt, but at the time I wouldn’t care….overtime I realized I was hurting her and she is an amazing friend. This is similar to Avril and Dixie. Dixie realized how important Avril was to her.” (Wikispaces 2011).
4.4 Recognizing Stereotypes

The students were aware of the definition for stereotypes beforehand and I had asked them to look for any recognizable stereotypes in the four graphic novels. I was interested to learn that the four graphic novels which contained many stereotypes and social justice issues, were recognized by the students. As a class, we defined stereotypes to encompass a physical appearance, a certain behaviour based on either gender, social and/or economic status.

4.4.1 Responses to *American Born Chinese*

Students’ responses consisted of many incidences of typical stereotypes and social justice issues. In particular, the stereotype and social justice issue that were mentioned was the Asian experience.

*The Asian Experience*

Both the ELLs and non-ELLs seemed to mention the physical and cultural stereotype of Asians. For example, the ELLs noticed the physical appearance of Asian people having slanted eyes, pale, and yellow skin. Grus mentioned that the graphic novel seemed to depict that most Asians have difficult sounding names and that they tend to be very independent. Another student mentioned that she thought it was absurd to think that all Chinese people ate dogs, which she thought was untrue and that it was unfair to make that assumption: “…my friends never eat dogs. I think this is unfair to make-up lies about someone else's culture.” (Wikispaces 2011).

The non-ELLs observed that in the graphic novel, all Asians knew martial arts and that Chinese people ate odd types of food. Numberfour noticed that the students in the novel treated others by the way they looked: “The stereotypes in this graphic novel are that you are treated by
the way you look. You never know how someone will act. Just like the Monkey King. Everybody thought he was just a little monkey and turned out he was a master at kung-fu.” (Wikispaces 2011). Also, Asians tended to be categorized as ‘immigrants’ since it appears that many Asians seem to be immigrating to Canada. The non-ELL students learned the term “Fresh off the Boat” (or FOB for short) to denote Asians (or any other foreign citizen) entering the country for the first time. Labeling of new immigrants was extremely unusual and new to them.

4.4.2 Responses to Amelia Rules

Both groups detected the stereotype of physical appearance. There are certain images set by society on the characteristics of a ‘nerd’ and a person who was ‘popular’. This graphic novel detailed the life of a Caucasian girl who got into trouble at school and found it difficult to fit into the rest of society. Unlike the characters in American Born Chinese, Amelia’s seclusion and rejection from her classmates (or society) was based on how she looked like and how she acted rather than her race/culture. The concept of popularity and what constitutes as popular also came up quite often.

Physical Appearance and Etiquette

Most of the students in both focus groups recognized how Amelia was often excluded from other groups. The reason was because she resembled a typical nerd and acted in an unconventional way. For the ELLs, Animation1999 showed empathy with Amelia’s situation when Amelia’s classmates were talking behind her back and excluding her in the conversation. Two girls recognized that the popular students had a certain image: mean, mature and blonde. For Butterfly1999 her excerpt read: “I only found one stereotype, which is when you are popular you have to be mean, which is not true. I have lots of friends that are popular and they aren't
The boys did not view popularity as important and did not think anything of it. For example, one male student blogged: “The situations in Amelia Rules relates to me because sometimes I fight with my friend about something. We know it's wrong and we get over it by talking it out. This is similar to when Amelia and Rhonda were fighting about being popular. But my friend and I don't fight about being popular.” (Wikispaces 2011).

The non-ELLs also reflected on the text’s depiction of popular people being blonde, mean, and mature. JollyRancher1999 testified her angst with what popularity was defined as and what it should mean instead:

….all popular people are blonde, mean, wear fancy clothes, and all the boys like them. In some cases this may be true, but not in all cases. Popular people can be nice, not blonde, and do not wear expensive fancy clothes. This stereotype portrays that you have to be exactly this to be popular. This would be false; you can become popular by being nice. (Wikispaces 2011).

Another student mentioned that the graphic novel communicated the message that it was not cool to be unpopular. Thus there is a hidden message that influences society to think that having many friends and being popular is important. He disagreed with the whole concept of popularity and that people should not strive towards popularity. Popularity was just a fabricated term that essentially meant nothing at all.

4.4.3 Responses to The Arrival

The Arrival depicts a young man travelling to a foreign land to attain a better life for his wife and daughter. In his travels, it is quite obvious that he finds it difficult to get around and witnesses strange events that he has never seen before. Both ELL and non-ELL groups were able to distinguish the fact that the male character was always the one taking risks and seeking
protection for his family. After reading their excerpts, it was clear that they thought this graphic novel was filled with gender and cultural discrimination.

**Gender and Cultural Discrimination**

The ELL and non-ELL group mentioned that it was unfair that the wife and daughter had to stay at home while the husband/father left for an indefinite period of time. They seemed to express that it was just as difficult from the point of view of the mother and the daughter. Seeing a loved one leave without any idea of their return was not easy to endure. Butterfly1999 blogged: “….only the man goes and not his wife or his daughter. This gives a message that men are stronger the women, which is a stereotype that is not true. Women can do anything men can do.” (Wikispaces 2011). Some students started to reflect among themselves and started to think that the author did not choose the wife to go because she was uneducated, weak, and helpless, that she was not ready for a big adventure by herself.

The two ELL students mentioned the effects of cultural discrimination. Animation1999 commented on the fact that she was able to recognize the hardship that the man had as he was travelling. He had to keep drawing pictures to communicate and often, residents (who were immigrants themselves, but who had been living there longer), looked at him peculiarly. Grus noticed that as the man was making his way into his new home, many of the already-settled immigrants were acting strangely towards him. Grus’ reasoning for this odd behavior was that the man and the strangers did not know each others’ pasts. He was curious about why they chose to move. This tension was broken when the strangers told the man stories about their war torn country and turmoil endured back home. A connection then sparked between the man and the stranger, as both their pasts were very common.


4.4.4 Responses to Re-Gifters

Both ELL and non-ELL groups noticed that this graphic novel contained many cultural, racial and gender stereotypes.

**Cultural, Racial and Gender Stereotypes**

The message that all Asians performed martial arts, gender and racial discrimination did not fare well with the ELL students. Cwalker1999 communicated about the false notion that all Asians knew martial arts. She stated that although she was Asian, she did not have knowledge about martial arts. Since there were gangs in the graphic novel, Butterfly1999 noticed that the novel portrayed the ‘bad, tough’ guys as dark-skinned. Coming from a Trinidadian descent, she did not think this was true at all.

Furthermore, Animation1999 noticed that Dixie was underestimated for her skill in Hapkido and that others thought she would not make it to the finals. This gave the false notion that girls were weaker. However, Dixie, overcame this gender stereotype of not being able to participate in combat sports. She also overcame her obsession with her boy crush and as a result this increased her confidence in her ability to perform well in the Hapkido tournament.

For the non-ELL group, the students declared that there were many indications of cultural and gender stereotypes. JollyRancher1999 noticed that there seemed to be pressure from Korean parents that were against her own ideals: “Koreans have to participate in martial arts because of their culture. I know many Koreans who are exactly like me (they don’t do martial arts)...in this text it says 'Hapkido (type of martial arts) holds a very high priority.’ This portrays that martial arts is always important to Koreans.” (Wikispaces 2011). Moreover, another student spoke about the graphic novel depicting Koreans living in a certain area. She certainly thought this was not
true, especially living in a multicultural neighbourhood. An individual is entitled to live wherever they wanted, despite their culture or race.
CHAPTER FIVE: CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

The conclusions are based on the results of the study as described in Chapter Four, along with the previous research work and theoretical framework on the subject as set out in Chapter Two.

Chapter Five is organized into the following sections:

- Social Justice Issues Identified by ELL and non-ELL Students
- Conclusions
- Limitations and Implications for Future Research
- Implications for Teachers

5.1 Social Justice Issues Identified by ELL and non-ELL Students

5.1.1 Culture, Identity and Stereotypes

There were similar connections that the ELLs and non-ELLs had with the characters in each graphic novel, and both were generally able to relate to being a foreign person in a westernized culture. Despite differences in physical appearances and cultural backgrounds, the students showed a universal desire to be accepted by their peers. This was especially true at school, where the students mostly experienced the effects of being isolated due to their culture or identity. These reactions illustrate the relationship between human practice (i.e. their experience) and the negotiation that occurs during the reading process to incorporate the readers’ social practices and their perspectives and experiences (Lankshear & Knobel, 2007).

*The Arrival, Amelia Rules* and *American Born Chinese* generated themes of isolation and acceptance for the ELL students. The ELL students felt that their strong accents served as a barrier that caused them to feel isolated in front of their more proficient English-speaking peers, especially during oral discussions. They often felt shy to speak in front of their peers for fear of
being ridiculed. Like the characters in the graphic novels, they were confronted with a communication barrier. The ELLs highlighted how hard it was to make new friends since they had been living in Canada for a short time period. They noticed that the man in The Arrival used pictures and shared common stories of hopes, dreams, struggles and turmoil which drew the strangers/immigrants together. Based on Rosenblatt (1983), this graphic novel was meaningful to them because it seemed to hold some link with the students’ past and present preoccupations, anxieties, and ambitions.

Although most ELLs were very opinionated about isolation and acceptance, the non-ELLs also connected with these themes. They remembered the difficulties of travelling or moving to a new school, and had also gone through the experience of making friends and trying to fit into a group within their new environment (school or community). This was also true for non-ELLs whose parents or grandparents were immigrants. Thus, the particular community background of the student was a factor. It affected the nature of the understanding and the prejudices that students brought to the book (Rosenblatt, 1983).

It seemed that most of the ELLs and non-ELLs experienced similar emotions when a loved one was leaving family behind in search of a better life, or even going on a vacation. This correlates to Rosenblatt’s (1983) belief that readers’ responses are based on their memories, feelings, preoccupations, and current situation during the time of reading the text. Attachment, sadness and loneliness were all common emotions that were felt by the ELL and non-ELL students.

The ELL students had some interesting responses in terms of how they connected to graphic novels. For example, one student was able to connect the war stories that were told to the man by the other immigrant in The Arrival to a video game that he had played. As Lankshear
and Knobel (2007) explain, this student’s social practice of playing video games allowed him/her to connect, interpret, and “read” the text more easily.

Both the ELL and non-ELL students noticed that there was a negative stereotype against Asians, in *American Born Chinese*, where the characters were ashamed of their true identity. The students already had a notion of society’s false depiction of the ‘perfect’ person. This coincides with Freire’s (1987) belief that texts need to help students critically reflect on their positions, beliefs and understandings. Both ELL and non-ELL students recognized this immediately and avoided thinking about cultures in a narrow-minded manner. Rather, they started to think on a deeper level by justifying that God created everyone as a unique and special human being.

*Re-Gifters* and *American Born Chinese* gave the ELLs and non-ELLs an opportunity to voice their opinion about negative stereotypes, especially surrounding the Asian culture. It also allowed them a chance to comment on their true concerns of living in a multicultural society and being appreciative of the diverse cultures that exist in society. They felt that it was not socially acceptable to judge others by their appearance and that it ultimately did not shape an individual. Rosenblatt (1983) believes that any piece of literature that encourages the reader to become critical, reflective and honest is one that creates a liberating experience as they read the book. When readers approach literature personally, it directly enriches their awareness and understandings. Moreover, literacy needs to enable students to debate, argue, and take action over social, cultural and economic issues that matter to them (Luke & Woods, 2009).

5.1.2 Popularity, Friendships and Bullying

The non-ELLs were highly opinionated about what popularity should really mean. They were able to comment about how popularity was just a fabricated term. It did not make sense to
them how popularity should encompass a certain behavior, physical appearance, attitude and culture. Often, students are bombarded with books, media and television shows that misinterpret the definition of popularity. This literature [graphic novel] helps transmit a different sense of images of behavior, social relationships and personal standards (Rosenblatt, 1983). The concept of popularity was not what the students had imagined and they believed that being a good person is what matters. In addition, the ELLs thought that popularity did not mean that a person needed to change in order to impress others. This coincides with McCloud’s (1993) belief that the students’ identities and awarenesses were invested in the comics that they read. This meant that the ELLs were comfortable and satisfied about own identity, actions and appearance.

Both ELL and non-ELL groups seemed to connect with Amelia’s and Dixie’s character in Amelia Rules and Re-Gifters, since they both experienced similar social and academic pressures as middle-school student. Most students remembered being bullied at school, being in competitions, getting into trouble with teachers and also having a hard time dealing with friends or realizing the attributes of a good friend. These events coincide with Rosenblatt’s (1978) transactional theory that meaning is derived from a combination of a particular reader, at a particular time/context, with a particular text. Regardless of gender or cultural upbringing, relevance was found in Amelia’s and Dixie’s characters by both groups of students. The students showed empathy and understanding towards the effects of bullying and the special friendships that they hold dearly. These issues were a reality to them and they felt free to let their comments take the form dictated by what they had lived through in reading the book (Rosenblatt, 1978). Their aesthetic experience (Rosenblatt, 1978) placed them as readers at the centre of their reading experiences. Their human experience gave meaning to the text.

5.1.3 Gender-Related Themes
Both ELLs and non-ELLs connected to gender discrimination in all four graphic novels. Gender discrimination was especially apparent in *The Arrival* since the students felt that the woman and daughter could accompany the man as well. Therefore, their personal family situation led them to comment on this stereotype. Also, since the students had experienced change in their lives in terms of a family member leaving, they thought that change was good in order to handle different situations. It enabled them to reflect on the reasons why certain things happen the way they do. As Rosenblatt (1983) suggests, texts often help to reveal the reader’s thoughts and realizations as they make connections between the text and their own lived-through experience.

The boys connected more to the character of the Monkey King and how he transformed himself into Jin Wang’s friend. He was powerful and the leader in his society. The boys in both focus groups enjoyed the fighting and imaginative side to *American Born Chinese*. In contrast, the girls in the study argued that there should be equal gender participation in martial arts when referring to *Re-Gifters*. This coincides with the idea that the reader is not only paying attention to the written word, but the images, feelings, attitudes, associations and ideas that the words and their referents evoked in him/her (Rosenblatt, 1978). In this case, the boys were better able to relate to action sequences in the text because they had encountered situations that involved physical combat. Most of the boys participated in some form of martial arts.

Peterson (2000, 2002) found that boys tended to write in ways that clearly identified them as masculine to others in the classroom. This shows that gender role is a significant feature of an individual’s identity. In addition, Peterson (2000) found that violence and crime were typically found in boys’ writing. Boys often positioned male characters as powerful, independent problem
solvers that overcome obstacles. This coincides to the boys’ responses to the Monkey King and their constant connections with his power, strength and knowledge in martial arts.

Both ELLs and non-ELLs commented on their experiences with re-gifting. Interestingly enough, those students who did respond to this concept were females. One female ELL student had mentioned her experience with witnessing re-gifting by her friend. Her responses gave me the impression that she understood the term “re-gift” and did not feel that it was commonly accepted or encouraged. Both girls did not state how it made them feel, but based on the responses, they sounded surprised that their friend would re-distribute a gift. They just thought this was wrong, but did not know why it was wrong. Moreover, these two students were females of Asian descent and thought that the concept of re-gifting was absurd because it is traditionally a westernized concept. Cummins (2000) states that educators should acknowledge that students’ cultural upbringing are valid forms of self-expression. Students’ identities should be validated through group discussions which help them think critically about the ideals and notions that challenge their customs and norms.

It is interesting to note that male dominance was a theme that the non-ELLs highlighted. This was probably due to the fact that they were born in Canada and they believed that everyone was entitled to their own rights. Today’s education system advocates for equal rights for both genders, therefore, the non-ELL students were highly opinionated about this theme. Many of the non-ELL girls seemed to comment on how The Arrival depicted males to take more risks and be more adventurous. They strongly believed that females could also search for a new place and be the ‘breadwinner’ for the family. It is important to note that the reader brings to the work personality traits, memories of past events, present needs and preoccupations, a particular mood of the moment, and a particular physical condition (Beach, 1993). This finding also relates to
Rosenblatt’s (1983) belief that readers often pay attention first to the feelings and ideas accompanying the work. If the experience challenges readers’ assumptions and interpretations, they may be stimulated to clarify their own values, and their prior sense of the world and its possibilities. Therefore, these girls’ feelings about gender equality were challenged which led them to feel that they had to voice their opinion on what they believed in. These girls were familiar with gender equality that exists in Canada, where mothers work or raise their family on their own.

5.2 Conclusions

Overall, the study provided information about how graphic novels elicit responses from the students based on cultural, social and background experience, not only from a language standpoint. The students found that there was some level of difficulty to understanding one particular graphic novel because of the need to interpret the pictures. Also, the literature circle roles, especially the connector role, allowed me to understand how they connected and related to the social justice issues embedded in the graphic novels.

The study’s findings support the transactional theory: that reading involves an active transaction between the reader and the text (Rosenblatt, 1983). This active transaction that takes place is ultimately influenced by the readers’ past experiences, their culture and social upbringing. The readers’ current states of mind are highly present as they interpret and make judgments about the text. Although there were slight differences in the way the ELL and non-ELLs interpreted each graphic novel, they all generally related it to a key moment in their lives.
Being a new English speaker did not have as much of an influence as did their past experiences, lifestyles, self-perceptions, social groupings and childhood and cultural upbringing.

The students were critically reflective in their responses because the particular theme/experience that they related to was real and meaningful to them. There was the realization that they were human beings with human qualities and universal experiences. Therefore, there is a relationship between language and the students’ social reality/consciousness (Freire & Macedo, 1987). When students are conscious of their social reality, they are able to take a more critical standpoint, understand the purpose of the text, construct meaning from texts, and “read” between the lines (Luke & Freebody, 1990).

The research supports the fact the theory (Rosenblat, 1983) that different experiences allow for unique interpretations and connections to the text. Language was a factor in their responses, but culture, customs and background were also important. My initial hope for categorizing the students into ELLs and non-ELLs was to differentiate between those who were new to the country and those who were born in Canada, thus having common backgrounds and traditions. However, many of the non-ELLs were also from different cultural backgrounds and had a ‘dual-identity’: one with Canada and one with their own culture. Ultimately, this led to similar responses to cultural-based questions.

I noticed that the students in both ELL and non-ELL focus groups had the toughest time ‘reading’ and interpreting The Arrival. A graphic novel without words was something that was difficult to comprehend. I had to prompt and review the images and pictures with them to ensure that they had a better understanding of the text. All they could perceive was a man visiting a strange land where he encountered giants, different kinds of people and creatures. Members in their literature circle group helped explain the storyline to those that found it hard to
comprehend. It was therefore not necessarily true that wordless texts were ‘easier’. Many found it hard to understand the images and therefore it had an impact on how they connected to this particular graphic novel.

In regards to the literature circle journals, I found that the most important role for data analysis was the connector role. The students’ connections allowed me to become sensible to their experience, thoughts and emotions about each graphic novel. Many of the students were able to make great connections with themselves or with world events, and I noticed their openness, aspirations, and desires. On the other hand, the discussion facilitator, word master and illustrator roles did not give me enough feedback, although they did assist the students in understanding the graphic novel in different ways. Therefore, I could not include any of these roles in my data analysis section.

5.3 Limitations and Implications for Future Research

There were several limitations that I encountered while conducting the study. Since this study was done during class time, the size of the sample and age of the participants were restricted. The study involved only grade 6 students, rather than all middle-school students from grades 6 to 8. For future research, it would be desirable to have a larger sample for both ELL and non-ELL students that includes students from grades 6 to 8. Also, because of the limitations of working with one class, my ELL sample was restricted to those who did hand in the form. Some of these students were born in Canada but spoke a different language at home. These students had already been exposed to the English language and therefore their perceptions would differ from students who have just recently arrived and had to acquire English at a later age.
In addition, throughout the duration of the action research, some students were not as independent as I had initially thought. I had to prompt with questions that would help students with some understanding of particular graphic novels that were difficult for them to decipher. This would obviously lead them to understand the text in a different light. Many of the ELL students had trouble with understanding the questions that were posted online and had to ask me or other fellow peers. Even within their literature circle groups, members would help those students who did not seem to understand the text, which would also subtly influence their responses.

The type of personalities, reading interest, and motivation of the participants were also a limitation for my study. Most of the students who had volunteered were keen readers and already enjoyed reading prior to the study. I asked them during an interview if their perspective on reading graphic novels had changed, and many of them mentioned that their motivation and interest level in reading had not changed or had been elevated slightly. After the interview, it was clear that these participants enjoyed graphic novels before and were mostly comprised of students who performed well in school and cared about their education. Therefore, it would be difficult to generalize my results to the broader student population.

Online blogging was also a limitation to my study. Since the blogs were online, all the participants could see everyone’s responses. I found that many of the subsequent responses were similar to the previous one, indicating that they had read them and were somewhat influenced by the blog. Furthermore, some of the students struggled with blogging online and were given more time to blog at a different time other than language arts period. This would probably affect their responses since they would rush and not have enough time to think through their responses.
Future research using blogs should involve a personal site or journal first to get students’ initial personal interpretations.

This study demonstrated a subtle trend between the responses from the ELL and non-ELLs based on social justice issues. Many of them found similar connections to the characters, experiences, and stereotypes to the four graphic novels: *American Born Chinese*, *The Arrival*, *Amelia Rules*, and *Re-Gifters*. Further research might include interviewing the students after the completion of each novel so that they would not forget the details of the text.

In addition, it would be interesting for researchers to analyze the results from those born in Canada with those who were educated and lived in a different country (i.e., China or India). Many of the ELL participants were students who had been living in Canada for at least three years. There would have been a different interpretation or perspective if the students had recently arrived to Canada. However, the researcher needs to keep in mind the language barrier and the difficulties the student would have in reading the text when designing future research.

It seemed that many of the students were accustomed to the Canadian way of life which led to subtle trends in their responses. Therefore, areas for future research might include observing the different social justice issues and connections to power and self-identity between students from Eastern cultures (i.e., Asia) versus those from western cultures (i.e., North America), especially since these two groups of students have been living in a completely different culture than their counterparts. In addition, it would be interesting to focus primarily on the female and male perspective and how they relate to different social justice issues by organizing two focus groups comprised of male-only and female-only participants.
5.4 Implications for Teachers

From a teaching perspective, the students had to be taught the different stereotypes and social justice issues that existed in the world around them. We had finished reading the novel, *The Breadwinner* in which a girl living in war-torn Afghanistan had to dress up as a boy in order to be the sole provider for her family of six. We had also reviewed social justice issues in another graphic novel called *The Titanic* in which there were many instances of economic, gender, and social injustices. Therefore, the students needed prior knowledge of these stereotypes and social justice issues in order to identify them in the four graphic novels in the study. It is important for the teacher to ensure that there is an understanding of this through lessons and discussions in order for the student to feel prepared when they read themes that require them to think deeper and critically.

For this particular study, I chose not to include the summarizer role due to the fact that it would be difficult to summarize certain parts in the text since the reading was broken into different components that differed for each reader. If the summarizer role were to be included, I would suggest having the student respond after reading the whole graphic novel since the students typically read at different speeds. Rather than having every student finish reading up to the same page, I decided to have students read at their own pace within a given time period. Those that needed extra time had it during in-class homework time.

Based on the research study and the effects of the students’ responses to social justice issues towards the graphic novels, I believe that graphic novels would be beneficial for any classroom setting. In the twenty-first century, we are advocating the need for higher achievement levels towards reading and writing for students, especially with the existence of standardized testing organized through Education Quality and Accountability Office (EQAO). According to
Literacy for Learning (2004), they believe that literacy is defined as the ability to use language and images in rich and varied forms to read, write, listen, speak, view, represent, and think critically about ideas.

Throughout this study, the students were able to use the language and images in the graphic novels that allowed them to think critically about ideas in the text. Online blogging, wiki-ing, group discussions and literature booklets were some varied forms that allowed for their individual responses and opinions about each graphic novel. Thus, a suggested method of teaching using graphic novels would be to choose graphic novels with deeper themes that reach out to the demographic of the student population. This would allow them to easily connect to the experiences and characters in the novel, generating meaningful connections to the text.

Incorporating graphic novels in the classroom sparks excitement and adds a creative element in language arts class. For example, students could create their own graphic novel based on certain social justice themes: discrimination, gender equality, racism, economic status and more. In addition, having group discussions and collaboration through literature circles allows students to assist lower-levelled readers in understanding the graphic novels. In this way, every student is able to participate in each role in the literature circle booklet and feel that they have positively contributed to the group, hence, improving their listening, speaking, and presentation skills.

There were many graphic novels that I would have liked to include in my study, but because of limitations due to my study, I had to choose my top four graphic novels. Other graphic novels that I would suggest are the Diary of a Wimpy Kid series (2007) (by Jeff Kinney), Naruto (1999) (by Masashi Kishimoto), Scott Pilgrim series (2004) (by Bryan Lee O'Malley), The Eternal Smile (2009), Prime Baby (2010) (both by Gene Luen Yang) and Persepolis (2003).
These graphic novels relate to student-life, the teenager experience, heroes, fantasy, reality, political repression, and the individual spirit/ego. Some of these graphic novels would be tailored for intermediate and high school age students because of the content. For example, some of the stories involve war, inhumane treatment, and violence.

Although graphic novels have its benefits, there are some precautions that teachers should take. After searching for appropriate graphic novels for my study, I had found that many contained inappropriate language and themes that were too mature for the students. In addition, due to the nature of the graphic novel being fiction-based, many of the themes, settings, and character descriptions may be overly exaggerated for the students. Thus, teachers must be careful in selecting student-friendly graphic novels with themes that are at their level of understanding.

I would highly recommend teachers to implement Web 2.0 applications such as blogging, wiki-ing and online discussion in their classrooms. Since I had incorporated blogging on wikis, the students were very engaged and motivated to read others’ responses and were influenced/voiced their opinion on a certain issue they felt strongly about. After the completion of my research study, I continued to implement my understanding of the socio-cultural element of literacy. Lankshear and Knobel (2007) state that students can negotiate, organize, generate and process meaning through music videos, podcasting and photo-shopping. Hence, I had all my students (regardless whether they had participated in my study) produce trailers using MovieMaker that includes slideshows and videos of their favourite graphic novel that they had read during the study. They had included videos of them re-enacting scenes from the graphic novel in their own unique way. Others chose to find images that correlated to the major themes of the graphic novel.
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Appendix 1

Consent Letter

Research Title: Reading between the “frames”: English Language Learners’ responses using graphic novels

Researcher: Jessica Chang, M.A Candidate

Research Supervisor: Dr. Shelley Stagg Peterson

Dear Parent/Guardian,

I am a Masters of Arts student in Education at OISE/University of Toronto. In this letter I would like to provide some information to you about a research study focusing on how English Language Learners (ELLs), students whose first language is not English, respond to the use of graphic texts.

Participation in this study is entirely voluntary and will not have an impact on your child’s grade. I will select ten students, five English Language Learners and five non-English Language Learners from all the students who bring signed forms indicating that their parents consent to their participation.

As part of my research, I will be conducting several discussions and online discussions that inquire about social justice issues and how they critically respond and make connections to the graphic novels presented to them. These responses will be based on their opinions and responses on of the particular graphic novels they will be asked to read. It is important to note that all data and documentation that I gather will be kept confidential and responses in this study will not affect your grade in any way. I will use false names for all participants and all data will be kept in a locked cabinet and my computer which is password protected. None of the students’ names will be attached to any published material.

The study will be taking place during class time and will run from March 2011 to June 2011.

These are some potential questions that I will potentially ask all students as part of a journal response and/or online discussion:

- What kinds of stereotypes or assumptions about culture/identity is this graphic novel communicating?
- What is the message of this image/text?
- How did the situations/events in this graphic novel relate to you? (categorizing ELLs experiences versus non ELLs experiences)
- Which part of the graphic novel did you like best/least? Explain why.
Focus group and/or interview questions are as follows:

- What did you learn/see from peers that you had not seen or understood on your own?
- Do you enjoy reading more after taking part in this study using graphic novels? Why? Why not?
- Which graphic novel/character could you most relate/connect to? How? Please explain.

Once the study is completed, the results will be made available to the parents/guardians of the participants. If you are willing to have your child take part, please read and sign the attached permission form.

Any questions or concerns may be addressed to me at Jessc.chang@utoronto.ca or my Thesis Supervisor, Dr. Shelley Stagg Peterson at shelleystagg.peteron@utoronto.ca.

Thank you for considering this invitation to have your child participate in my research.

Jessica Chang, M.A Candidate
OISE/University of Toronto
Appendix 2

Sample Consent to Participate Form

Research Title: Reading between the “frames”: English Language Learners’ responses to graphic novels

Researcher: Ms. Jessica Chang, M.A Candidate

Research Supervisor: Dr. Shelley Stagg Peterson

I agree to allow my son/daughter __________________________ to participate in the study conducted by Ms. Jessica Chang. I have read the Information Letter and understand the purpose of the study.

Student ___________________________ Signature ___________________________

Parent/Guardian_______________________ Signature________________________________

Date_______________________
Appendix 3

Sample Reading Response Questions

• What kinds of stereotypes or assumptions about culture/identity is this graphic novel communicating?

• What is the message of this image/text?

• How did the situations/events in this graphic novel relate to you? (categorizing ELLs experiences versus non ELLs experiences)

• Which part of the graphic novel did you like best/least? Explain why.
Appendix 4

Focus-Group Interview Questions:

• What did you learn/see from peers that you had not seen or understood on your own?

• Do you enjoy reading more after taking part in this study using graphic novels? Why? Why not?

• Which graphic novel/character could you most relate/connect to? How? Please explain.
Appendix 5

Questionnaire for students at the end of the study:

1. Where were you born?

2. How long have you been living in Canada?

3. What language do you speak at home? If there are two languages spoken, how much do you speak of each language percentage-wise?

4. At what age did you first learn/acquire English?
Appendix 6

Recruitment Script

I will be conducting a study on how ELLs and non-ELLs respond to graphic novels. My hope is to have at least ten participants (five ELLs and five non-ELLs). Your grade will not be affected at all throughout the course of the study and is purely as a volunteer basis. If you choose to participate in the study, you can withdraw at any time of the study. Also, to protect your name and privacy, there will be pseudonyms (that you can choose) in placement of your real names. I will be sending a consent form and information letter to you and your parents. Please hand it in to me by February, 15th, 2011.

Thank you.
Appendix 7

Literature Circle Journal Roles:

**Discussion Facilitator:** This role entails the student to develop open-ended questions that will promote discussion in their group. Usually the best discussion questions come from their own reactions, thoughts and feelings as they read. They recorded five questions after reading an assigned section.

**Connector:** This role entails the student to explore the connections between what the student has read and their personal experiences; connections to other books and authors and/or connections to global events or issues. They had to explain how these connections impacted their understanding of the book.

**Word Master:** This role entails finding interesting words in the text that they had read. These may be words that they do not understand or powerful words that the author has chosen to convey a vivid description, emotion or idea.

**Illustrator:** This role entails choosing a part of the text that the student has read to share visually with the group. They can use a picture, sketch, cartoon or graphic organizer to share the information. They had to consider a part that created strong visual images in their mind.