The motivating power of comic books: Insights from Archie comic readers

This study, conducted in an elementary school, suggests that the sense of ownership that children have over comic books accounts for the vibrant debate, discussion, and critique of them. Such insights may help teachers reclaim literacy as a meaning-making practice.

If educators ever find out what constitutes the fantastic motivating power of comic books, I hope they bottle it and sprinkle it around classrooms.

(Hauggaard, 1973, p. 54)

Kay Haugaard's plea for research on comic books is no less relevant today than it was 30 years ago. Haugaard was a teacher and a mother of three boys, all of whom were reluctant readers. She found that it was only when her boys started to read comic books that they did not have to be "urged, coaxed, cajoled, and drilled" to read (Hauggaard, 1973, p. 54). The research described in this article can be seen as a response to Haugaard's call for greater understanding of the "fantastic motivating power" of comic books.

Like Haugaard, I am also a teacher and a mother, and I became interested in Archie comics when my children began to pick them up at our local grocery store. Their curiosity led me to investigate not only why children read Archie comics, but also whether insights from Archie readers might provide a window on larger questions of literacy and learning. Thus the objective of my research is not to promote or denounce Archie comics, but to better understand the ubiquitous Archie reader and to determine if insights from Archie readers may have significance for literacy educators. In embarking on this research I was aware, as Haugaard was, that the comic book—perhaps more than any other literary form—has been the source of much controversy. Since the 1950s, when texts such as Wertham's (1955) classic Seduction of the Innocent were published, debates have raged about the value of comic books within educational practice. These debates have frequently been related to prevailing conceptions of the text, the reader, and the process of reading. While Wertham dismissed comic books as trash, Meek (1992) argued more recently that they deserve better. There has been little research, however, to answer Haugaard's call.

For readers unfamiliar with Archie comics, an introduction will be useful (see also Robbins, 1999). Archie comics describe the lives of a group of teenagers living in a suburban area called Riverdale, in a temperate coastal region of the United States. The main characters in the stories are Archie, Betty, and Veronica, and the latter two constantly vie for Archie's attention. Other members of the group include Jughead, something of a maverick; Reggie, the local rich boy; Moose, Midge, and Ethel; and various parents and teachers. The majority of the characters in the stories are European American, though African American characters occasionally play minor roles. The girls generally wear fashionable clothing, and beach scenes are common. Any given comic book has about 20 short stories of varying length, addressing a variety of themes about friendship, schooling, dating, and family life. The stories are frequently humorous, and there is much play on words. According to the Chief Executive Office of Archie Comics Inc., Michael Silberkleit (personal communication, April 11, 2000), approximately one million Archie comics are sold on a monthly basis.
internationally, and the Archie website (www.archiecomics.com) has 13–14 million hits a month. Despite its popularity, however, little research has been done on a comic that has for decades attracted the attention of millions of primarily preteen children in North America and beyond—approximately 60% of whom are girls and 40% boys.

I began my research with two pilot projects in the greater Vancouver area. The first was with a group of 34 student teachers (January 1997) and another with a small group of Archie readers (October 1997). Both pilot studies included questionnaires and interviews. What I learned from the student teachers was that although they had enjoyed Archie comics as youngsters, they now considered them unsuitable reading material, particularly in the school context. The characters were dismissed as “superficial and shallow,” and the stories were perceived to give children “the wrong ideas.” When asked whether they would incorporate Archie comics into their curriculum, the majority of the student teachers answered negatively. “They are not very educational,” one student teacher said. “A lot of children might be distracted by the pictures,” said another. “I would prefer an actual book,” said a third. For those who were slightly more positive, the comic was seen to provide the opportunity to promote critical thinking, “particularly vis-à-vis analysis of [the comic’s] deficiencies and shortcomings,” while others said, “any reading is better than no reading.”

It was the pilot project with the Archie readers (three girls, two boys) that inspired me to persevere with the topic. The children arrived at the informal interview carrying armfuls of Archie comic books. They spoke animatedly about their enjoyment of them and illustrated their comments with numerous references to Archie stories. When I shared the reservations the student teachers had about Archie comics, the children were indignant. “They have no idea!” said one of the girls. The eldest child, a boy of 12, did express surprise that somebody at a university was interested in this topic. “Archie is more of a comic type thing, not a book type thing,” he said. When I asked him if he thought comics were not a legitimate text, he replied, “It depends if it’s supposed to be fun or not.” I was struck by such insights and wondered how many children thought that “legitimate” texts were not supposed to be “fun.” During the interviews, the children talked at length about the way they shared stories with friends, swapped comics on a regular basis, and debated the merits of different characters. I was intrigued by the children’s enthusiasm and insight, asking myself why I seldom saw such animation in the many classrooms I had visited.

My curiosity laid the groundwork for a larger scale study that took place from 1998 to 1999 in an elementary school in Vancouver, in which 34 Archie readers took part. As someone interested in critical literacy (see, for example, Alvermann, Hinchman, Moore, Phelps, & Waff, 1998; Barton & Hamilton, 1998; Fairclough, 1992; Gee, 1990; Hall, 1992, 1997; Kress, 1997, 2000; Lewis, 1998; Luke, 1995, 1997; McCarthy, 2001; Mitchell & Weiler, 1991; Muspratt, Luke, & Freebody, 1997; New London Group, 1996; Norton, 2001; Norton Peirce & Stein, 1995), I wished to better understand the nature of students’ engagement with Archie comics and the extent to which this engagement can be better understood with reference to larger sociocultural practices both inside and outside schools. In order to address my broad research question “Do insights from Archie readers have significance for literacy educators?” I developed three related research questions, all of which are informed by comments from teachers and students in the pilot study. Question 1, “Why do children read Archie comics?” gives me insight on the appeal of Archie comics and children’s conceptions of reading. Question 2, “How do readers of Archie comics relate to one another?” seeks to understand the relationship among Archie readers both inside and outside school. Question 3, “How is the reading of Archie comics contrasted with school-authorized literacy practices?” provides insight on such school rituals as homework and silent reading.

Methodology

Like Davies (1993), who was interested in the life worlds of children slightly younger than those in my study, I took the position that the best way of drawing on the insights of Archie readers was, very simply, to ask them. This is not to suggest, however, that asking questions is a simple task. The greatest challenge in the research was to construct questions and activities that would create
conditions for the generation of insight. Because questionnaires and interviews had proven successful in the pilot studies, I decided to carefully refine the questionnaire and interview protocols I had already used. An important modification to the questionnaire was to include a specific Archie story for analysis. I learned in the pilot studies that children like to have Archie comics on hand when responding to questions and that children enjoy illustrating their comments by referring to specific stories they have read.

The site I chose to do my research was an elementary school in the greater Vancouver, British Columbia, area of Canada. Because the elementary school included students from kindergarten through grade 7, I was confident I would find many readers of Archie comics at the school. As it is also a school with a multicultural and multilingual population, it provided the opportunity to investigate the appeal of Archie comics for a diverse range of students. I obtained permission from the principal, teachers, parents, and children to conduct the study, indicating that I wished to gain a better understanding of the immense appeal of Archie comics for preteen children. I explained that my research would involve both questionnaires and interviews, and that my research assistant, Karen Vanderheyden, would help with the interviews. Children in grades 5, 6, and 7 were invited to participate in the study, representing an age range of approximately 9 to 12. The participants comprised 19 girls and 15 boys, with 4 fifth graders, 23 sixth graders, and 7 seventh graders. Further, of the 34 Archie readers, 13 were English-language learners, 6 male and 7 female. The home languages of the latter group of students were Korean, Swedish, Mandarin, Bengali, Farsi, and Cantonese.

Perhaps one of the most important outcomes from this study, both personally and professionally, was the opportunity I had to enter the preadolescent world and confront my own fears and reservations about comic books in general and Archie comics more specifically. When children told me that their parents and teachers thought that Archie comics were a “waste of time,” I saw myself mirrored in such comments. When children said, in excited tones, how great it was that an adult was taking an interest in their world, I was embarrassed. I kept asking myself why it is that adults—and teachers in particular—are often dismissive of comic books. It may well be that our concern stems from fear of the unknown, fear of a loss of control over our students and our curricula. It was partly out of the desire to confront this fear that I embarked on the Archie comic research in the first place. I hope that the following findings, which I have found significant, represent at least a preliminary response to Haugaard’s plea, and may be of interest to other literacy educators. Pseudonyms are used throughout the text.

The appeal of Archie comics

Literacy educators can learn a great deal about reading by understanding the popularity of comics such as Archie. Of the 30 Archie readers who responded to the question “Why do you like reading Archie comics?” 25 cited humor as key to the Archie appeal. Common responses included the following: “I like reading them because they are funny,” “They are fun to read and also very funny,” “They are fun and I like stories I can’t put down.” For this particular age group, approximately 9 to 12, just discovering the richness of language and the myriad possibilities of irony, puns, and plays on words, there was much support for Clara’s observation, written in large capital letters, that “ARCHIE RULES!” Thus while the student teachers in the pilot study made the point that the characters in Archie stories were “superficial and shallow,” Archie readers in the study found the characters interesting, engaging, and humorous. When I told children in the pilot study that student teachers found the Archie characters offensive, the children felt personally aggrieved. Indeed, the children seemed protective of their favorite characters and were quick to defend their actions.

Such data prompt me to ask to what extent we as literacy educators take seriously the enjoyment value of reading for preteen children. Clearly, we recognize that children derive much pleasure from books such as the Harry Potter series or the Matilda books. However, we are frequently ambivalent about the pleasure that children derive from comic books. Have we become accustomed to equating such “fun” with “trivia”? More important, have we encouraged this view in the students we teach? Kim, for example, made a distinction between the process of reading for fun and the process of studying:
I just read them [Archie comics] for fun not to, like, study. But if I meant to, like, read it studying, then like, you know, I'd look at the dictionaries and stuff, but these, if I don't know the words from here, I just go by, 'cause I read them for fun.

Kim suggests that when a student is reading for fun, the student feels a certain amount of control in the reading process. The student can construct meaning, make hypotheses, and predict future developments. In contrast, when a student is “studying” a literary text, there is little room for invention and creativity; words that are unfamiliar need to be looked up in a dictionary; the meaning of a text is not coconstructed, but needs to be ferreted out by the diligent, studious reader.

I am not suggesting, however, that diligence is an undesirable characteristic or that dictionary work is problematic. My point is that Kim’s conception of what it means to be a “good reader” of prescribed books is a cause for concern. Not only are students like Kim unlikely to associate “fun” with the reading of prescribed books, but they limit their creative response to the text by constant reference to other school-authorized texts. As noted by Norton Peirce and Stein (1995), central questions for such students, given their institutional context, include the following: “How am I expected to read this text? What is the correct interpretation of this text?” The student is less concerned with questions such as “How do I make sense of this text? What background knowledge can I bring to this text?” With reference to the construction of meaning, students assume that the prescribed text has a preferred “fixed” meaning, known to the teacher, to be second-guessed by the student. Unequal relations of power between teachers and students thus construct the students’ readings of prescribed texts, and resistance on the part of students would, in all likelihood, have negative consequences.

Children who said that Archie comics are “fun to look at” highlight, in addition, the visual appeal of comic books. While one of the student teachers in the pilot study had expressed concern that students would become “distracted” by the pictures in Archie comics, my research suggests that the pictures were not only engaging, but also an aid to learning and meaning making. For example, one English-language learner, Guofang, made the following comment: “Well, they got picture, can help them, colorful pictures to help the readers to understand like how, what is happening, going on.” Namisha, similarly, explained that the pictures helped her in the construction of meaning: “The stuff that I did was that I first looked at the pictures and then I made up my own words.”

As Kress (2000) argued, especially in light of the increasingly visual nature of communication, scholars need to rethink the view that visual modalities are a distraction in the process of making meaning. Technologies of communication, he suggested, lend themselves to visualization because the transport of information is seen as more efficient in the visual rather than verbal mode. Drawing on such insights, it is possible to argue that comic books can be seen as innovative in seeking to convey meaning through multimodality. In such a theory, the notion of “text” is not confined to the written word, and readers are encouraged to construct meaning with reference to a wide range of representations.

The Archie comic community

As Dyson (1996) suggested, the social events through which artifacts are produced and used are central in the construction of meaning. A text does not exist independent of different readers and communities, at a given time and place. The comic book, given its marginalization within practices of schooling, can be associated with what Finders (1997) would call the “literate underlife” of schools and communities. In her seminal study on early adolescent girls, Just Girls, Finders (1997, pp. 25–26) made the case that “literate underlife is central to the development of the early adolescent female.... Underlife provides an opportunity for the girls to refute official expectations and negotiate social roles within other powerful circles.” In my research I found that Archie readers, and the girls in particular, constituted an informal and loosely connected reading community in which the vast majority were introduced to Archie comics by friends. The children in the study borrowed comics from one another, went to one another’s houses to swap comics, and talked about the stories on a regular basis. Suzanne, for example, describes how she and her friends would go...
to her grandmother's house, staying up late and reading Archie comics, "then we usually talk about them and say, 'it was really funny when this might of happened' and then, you know, and just talk...." As Ping said, "When I started reading it [Archie comics], when I was reading it I used to always talk about it with my friends who had them and we used to switch and read them."

As I reflect on the comments of these students, I wonder to what extent teachers are aware of this particular "literate underlife" of the children in their classes. How often have teachers tried to encourage students to engage with texts in the classroom, to debate the merits of various characters, and to share insights and critique—often with limited success? Have we put too much emphasis on the "right answers" and the "correct interpretations" of characters and events, thereby changing reading from an enjoyable activity to a challenging and often meaningless ritual? Again, reflecting on the students' comments, I wonder to what extent comic book culture is associated with an unofficial curriculum in which much learning, debate, and engagement take place. Such a curriculum, however, receives little validation in the public sphere of schooling, and even in the private sphere of the home.

Of particular interest to these reader relationships is the possibility that the "literate underlife" of the Archie reader cuts across ethnic and linguistic boundaries, an issue discussed in greater detail in Norton and Vanderheyden (in press). Consider the comments of Dylan, a native speaker of English:

Interviewer (I): Is popular culture like Archie comics a good way of bringing kids together?

Student (S): Well, yes, because I know that one reason most of the kids with English problems, and kids with good English don't relate is because the English kids seem to think that either they are stupid because they can't speak English, which is totally a misconception, or they're not like them, and they're kind of pushed away by that.

I: So that's what you think, that it's a good way 'cause they can talk to each other?

S: 'Cause it would give them something to realize that these kids like some things that they like, that they are kids who like things that other kids like, which is a way of bringing them together.

It is possible to argue that the reading of Archie comics is an activity shared by speakers of diverse backgrounds and can provide a common link among children. It is also important to note that common links are important, not only for the development of community relationships but also for the perceptions that target language speakers have of language learners. Comic book culture may serve as an important bridge to tolerance and community building.

**Authorized and unauthorized literacy practices in schools**

Both teachers and parents generally considered the reading of Archie comics to be a waste of time. While the children in the study were not given detailed reasons why adults held this view, they had picked up the message that Archie comics were, as one student said, "garbage." Two alternative, and far more productive, practices, as far as adults were concerned, were doing homework and reading chapter books. Consider the following exchange, in which Ping contrasts the reading of comics, a "waste of time," with the completion of "homework," a productive activity.

S: My mom just doesn't want me to read comics anymore.

So why do you think your mom doesn't like you to read comics?

S: She said it's like I'm wasting my time, like I could do something better, like instead of reading comics, like actually doing homework.

Now, um, do you think teachers think the same way about comic books?

S: Yeah, probably, but not always, but usually they do because they want you to focus on your homework.

While it is possible to debate the relative merits of doing homework as opposed to reading comic books, my central concern is as follows: In promoting rituals such as "homework," have parents and teachers shifted the focus of such practices from substance to form—from meaning making to ritual? Conversely, in discouraging child-authorized practices of comic book reading, have we been more concerned with form than substance? Although children derive great pleasure
from their Archie comics, and are clearly actively engaged in meaning making, this practice is considered a waste of time and is consequently not authorized by more powerful adults. Mary made the point that in order to read her Archie comics, there is in fact a hierarchy of rituals that need to be addressed. “I read a chapter book because that’s my excuse when I don’t want to do my homework, but when I’m finished with my homework I can read Archie.” Insights from children such as Ping and Mary should be taken seriously if literacy is to be a meaningful experience for children.

A similar argument could be made with reference to the ritual of reading chapter books during “silent reading” at school. In most elementary schools, “silent reading” is a time set aside during the school day when children are encouraged to read books of their own choosing. When I asked children if they thought Archie comics should be permitted during silent reading at school, the children responded with a host of insightful comments, most of them suggesting that teachers preferred “chapter books” to comic books. Ping, likewise, in answer to the question of whether students should be able to read Archie comics during silent reading, responded as follows, “Well, ah, I don’t really think so because I mean this is more of a free time thing instead of, like, silent reading is more, like, novels and books that are educational.” Mary stated that what she calls a “proper” book is “like, a book that doesn’t have, like, that many pictures, and more pages with text on it, like a chapter book.” Namisha, in a similar spirit, explained that in her school, comics were discouraged because they were not “challenging.”

Um, I mean you read and stuff, right? Well, there are some comics, some popular comics that were allowed to read, like, in my old school, but they’re not allowed to read Archie comics for some reason. There’s, like, no swearing or anything so we could probably, but teachers say that it’s, like, not challenging.

In interview after interview, I gained the perception that, for these children, texts that are “educational” are almost, by definition, texts that are abstract and unconnected to their everyday lives. School-authorized literacy practices have, for many of them, become rituals in which teachers define what is “good,” “proper,” and “challenging.” As Greenleaf, Schoenbach, Cziko, and Mueller (2001) suggested, however, such rituals can be a “colossal waste of energy” (p. 80). In their intriguing study, Greenleaf et al. described, for example, how some students “fake” reading during their silent reading periods, knowing exactly how long to wait before turning a page, so that the teacher is duped into thinking the student is reading. Ivey and Broaddus (2001, p. 368), in a similar spirit, found that middle school students ranked their classrooms as “one of the least likely places” to find the texts they want to read. Comic book reading, in contrast, can be seen as an extension of children’s own personal worlds. For the students in the study, the reading of Archie and other comic books provides a private curriculum for them—a curriculum that gives insights on social relationships, friendships, and communities. It is possible to argue that it is this sense of ownership that children have over Archie texts and the Archie world that makes them particularly sensitive to criticism by teachers and parents.

Significance for literacy education

I stated in the introduction to this article that, in embarking on this research, my aim was not to promote or denounce Archie comics, but to better understand the ubiquitous Archie reader, and to determine if insights from Archie readers may have significance for literacy education. In the interests of brevity, and at the risk of some oversimplification, I would like to conclude with three comments, informed by my study, that may be of interest to literacy educators.

First, my study suggests that the pleasure children derive from comics in general, and Archie comics in particular, is associated with a sense of ownership of text. It is this sense of ownership that gives children the confidence to engage with comic books energetically and critically. However, although the study provides much evidence to suggest that the Archie reading community was vibrant and social, the children’s reading preferences received little recognition or validation from teachers or parents. The reading of chapter books, for example, was considered a much more productive activity. I have suggested that a child’s engagement with what Mary called “proper” books is mediated by unequal relations of power between teachers—the guardians of standards and grades—and less
powerful students. In such a context, children have little ownership of text, and hence little pleasure in school-authorized literacy practices. As many of the students suggested, a school-authorized text is not perceived to be fun. Thus, for example, when children engage in critique of chapter books, their primary concern is to determine what kind of analysis teachers would consider appropriate, what criticism would guarantee high grades and public praise. In discussions about comics, however, the sense of ownership provides for a different set of possibilities. For Archie comic readers, their goal in debating the merits of characters, events, and stories is not to second-guess other interpretations and critiques, but to draw on their own knowledge and experience to reflect, engage, and defend. The study suggests that literacy educators need to better understand rather than dismiss those practices that students find engaging and meaningful, whether in or outside classrooms.

There are important caveats to be made. While I am suggesting that ownership and pleasure are important for active engagement in literacy practices, I am not suggesting that all pleasurable texts must be “funny” or entertaining. What I am suggesting is that if children are to engage meaningfully with text, they need to have a sense of ownership of the text, and it is from this sense of ownership that pleasure derives. Further, I am not suggesting that we as educators should embrace comic books uncritically. The challenge for educators is to consider how comics can be incorporated into a curriculum that remains centrally concerned with learning, meaning making, and human possibility (see, for example, Giroux & Simon, 1988). An additional challenge, conversely, is to structure activities and relationships in such a way that children can develop greater ownership of school-authorized literacy practices.

My second comment is a plea for further research. My study suggests we need a better understanding of why it is that educators are frequently dismissive of comics in general and Archie comics more specifically. Why did the student teachers, who themselves loved to read Archie comics as children, dismiss them as “garbage” once they reached adulthood? By what process did this transformation occur? How did they, like the children in the study, gradually learn that a “good” reader is one who reads difficult chapter books, consults the dictionary, and avoids comics—but seldom has “fun”? A number of tentative explanations can be offered. Reading assessments, for one, encourage the use of particular kinds of texts, and teaching performance is frequently assessed with reference to student performance on these tests. Educational publishers, for another, may reap greater rewards when chapter books are ordered by the dozen, particularly when accompanied by teacher guides and homework sets. It may also be the case, however, that as we grow from childhood to adulthood, we lose touch with the central interests of young children, and as we become distant from childhood pleasures, particularly of the popular culture kind, our ignorance turns to fear. In order to reestablish control, we retreat to the rituals and practices that are familiar in schooling, sometimes sacrificing a focus on learning and meaning making.

Third, Luke and Elkins (1998) have raised the question of what it will mean to be a reader and writer in the 21st century. They suggest that what is central is not a “tool kit” of methods, but an enhanced vision of the future of literacy. Indeed, as Kress (1997, 2000) and others have noted, we need to rethink the very notions of reading, literacy, and learning. The written word, while still important, is only one of the many semiotic modes that children encounter in the different domains of their lives. Hypertext, CD-ROM, and the Internet are becoming increasingly important in the lives of children. The challenge for literacy educators is to reconceptualize classrooms as semiotic spaces in which children have the opportunity to construct meaning with a wide variety of multimodal texts, including visual, written, spoken, auditory, and performative. Scaffolding such a curriculum is a theory of meaning making in which children are not only the users but also the makers of systems of communication.

In sum, I think Haugaard would be heartened by changes in conceptions of literacy over the past 30 years. My research suggests, however, that teachers remain ambivalent about the place of comic books within educational practice. I hope that these insights of Archie readers may contribute to an understanding of the fantastic motivating power of comic books. If we take such insights seriously, we may help to reclaim literacy as a meaning-making practice rather than a site of ritual.
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