

# Graphic Novels in the School Library: Questions of Cataloging, Classification, and Arrangement

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**Abstract:** In recent years, many school librarians have been scrambling to build and expand their graphic novel collections to meet the large and growing demand for these materials. For the purposes of this study, the term *graphic novels* refers to volumes in which the content is provided through sequential art, including fiction, nonfiction, and biographical material. As the library field has not yet arrived at a set of best practices or guidelines for institutions working to classify and catalog graphic novels, this study seeks to record the ways in which school librarians are handling these materials as well as issues and questions at the forefront of their minds. A survey of school librarians in the United States revealed that almost all of them collect fiction and nonfiction graphic novels, while 67% collect manga. Most respondents indicated that they are partly or solely responsible for the cataloging and classification decisions made in their media centers. For classification purposes, most have elected to create separate graphic novel collections to house their fictional graphic novels. Some include nonfiction graphic novels in this section, while others create a nonfiction graphic novel collection nearby or shelve nonfiction graphic novels with other items that deal with similar subject matter. Many school librarians express uncertainty about how best to catalog and classify longer series, adapted classics, superhero stories, and the increasing number and variety of inventive titles that defy categorization. They also struggle with inconsistent vendor records and past practices and suffer from a lack of full confidence in their knowledge of how to best classify and catalog graphic novels so that they are both searchable in the library catalog and easily accessible on the shelves.

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## 1.0 Introduction

Their recent surge in popularity undeniable, graphic novels for readers of all ages have been steadily making their way into public, school, and academic library collections. For their part, librarians have increasingly embraced these items, pleased with the way they attract new users and boost circu-

lation numbers. Though there are lingering social misperceptions of graphic novels' literary quality and potential educational merit (Clark 2013; Mathews 2011; Yusof, Lazim and Salehuddin 2017) many librarians and scholars have begun to advocate for the value of these materials, emphasizing both their broad and diverse appeal and their educational value (Gavigan 2011; Garrison and Gavigan 2019;

Cook 2017; Cromer and Clark 2007; Chun 2009). One barrier to creating robust graphic novel collections for school librarians has to do with anxieties or concerns with arranging, cataloging, and classifying these types of items. While many school librarians in the U.S. possess a graduate degree in library science, the educational programs preparing them often require only fundamental understanding of concepts related to the organization of information and an introduction to RDA cataloging standards and MARC format, without providing extensive exposure to or advanced practice in the creation of descriptive cataloging records. Further, while many other types of libraries, including public and academic institutions, often hire dedicated in-house cataloging experts, school libraries do not, relying instead on a combination of copy cataloging and vendor-purchased records that they modify as necessary (Adamich 2008). The average school library in the United States houses 11,780 books and employs 0.7 full time librarians and 0.5 library aides to develop and manage that collection in addition to the many other roles and duties staff must fill (U.S. Department of Education 2015-2016).

Add to this the complexities of the format and the fact that there is no single, widely accepted practice or set of guidelines to follow for handling graphic materials in a school library collection, and the result is that librarians are struggling to figure out solutions that work for their specific contexts and curious about what others are doing that might work better. Thus, this study seeks to create a record of the current practices school librarians in the United States are employing to catalog, classify, and arrange their graphic novel collections, as well as to capture librarians' questions and concerns about these practices and other elements of graphic novel collection and maintenance procedures.

## 2.0 Literature review

### 2.1 Challenges

One of the first decisions librarians collecting graphic novels have to make is how these items will be classified and arranged within the library. Most school libraries in the United States use the Dewey Decimal system for nonfiction items and traditional literary books such as folklore and poetry. General fiction items are generally shelved in a separate area by author's last name. In recent years, many libraries have opted to use alternative, reader-interest schemes, such as genreification, for the fiction section. In libraries organized this way, fiction is grouped into popular genres to facilitate browsing and book selection. When starting a graphic novel collection, some librarians opt to have these materials "integrated into the fiction section or the appropriate nonfiction section" (Weiner 2002, 57), treating them

just as they would traditional print items, with fiction graphic novels shelved by author's last name and non-fiction shelved with other nonfiction titles on the same subject. It has been argued that this method will persuade students "to browse through stories by the same author or on the same topic" as the graphic novel they are searching for, thus encouraging the search for "graphic novels to lead to 'real books'" (Dickson 2007, 7).

However, as the field has come to embrace the benefits and understand the complexities of graphic novel reading, we have also come to understand that readers of graphic novels often "have vastly differing search needs from the standard browsing patron" (Fee 2013, 37). Further, if graphic novels are not collocated or otherwise distinguished from other types of titles so that they are readily identifiable, patrons looking for graphic novels will often struggle to find them through use of the catalog alone (Goldsmith 2003; Pawuk and Sercay 2007). Given this, as well as the importance of the browsing experience (Raqi and Zainab 2008; Reuter 2008; Montgomery 2014) and social interaction (Guthrie et al. 1995; Smith and Wilhelm 2002; Baker and Wigfield 1999) to successful book selection and motivation for leisure reading, many librarians opt to develop a distinct graphic novel section "similar to many video or audiobook collections" (Weiner 2002, 57). Such a distinct section "creates a focal point for readers who might not be regular users of the library but are drawn in by graphic novel collections" (Rudiger and Schliesman 2007, 58). Other librarians choose to shelve both fiction and nonfiction graphic materials in Dewey 741.5, which is the designated area in the Dewey Decimal for comics and cartoons. However, this can make the section hard to find or create confusion by locating fictional graphic novels within an area that houses mostly nonfiction items. Finally, though graphic novels are a distinct format rather than a genre, a popular method with librarians who use genreification to organize their fiction collections is to treat graphic materials as one of the genres or classes into which they group items in this collection. Discovery and browsing of graphic novel materials can then be facilitated by location and signage, affirming Martinez-Avila's (2017) argument that classification can be less important than arrangement of the fiction collection.

In addition to classification and arrangement issues, librarians must also overcome cataloging challenges such as those described by O'English, Mathews and Lindsay (2006, 176-77), including "inconsistent manifestations among individual volumes that constitute a graphic novel series" and "hand[ing] those titles produced by more than one chief creator". When faced with titles that evolve in volume to volume of a series, for example, or a work in which there is both an author and artist with equal creative responsibility, school librarians may not be familiar enough with the cataloging standards (AACR2 or RDA), MARC rules, and au-

thority records to adapt each descriptive cataloging record as needed. In *Making and Managing Metadata in K-12 Graphic Novels and Metadata: The Connections and the Challenges*, Adamich (2009) points to another collection and cataloging challenge, observing that graphic novels can be oriented to either juvenile or adult audiences, which is one of the characteristics of the format that makes it appealing to so many people. This appeal can also create confusion, however, because in some instances “the dividing line between adult and juvenile material may be difficult for the librarian to discern, so decisions about collection placement can become issues for catalogers and other librarians, particularly where potentially controversial elements figure in the mix” (13).

## 2.2 Solutions

Some libraries have concluded that Dewey and MARC records are fundamentally unsuited to graphic material. Weiner (2002, 12), for example, describes the unique solution he devised at his public library system for cataloging graphic novels when “the Dewey system just seemed too hard to maintain”. He began by separating Marvel and DC items, and then organized books by character, moving prose novels about these characters, and some children’s books about these characters, into the graphics section. Because of this, Weiner (2002, 13) writes: “We have seen whole families come to the library together to help their kids learn to read, because mom or pop is a fanboy/girl and is still interested in these fictional worlds. Everything related to a character is put in one place... We found that the circulation did indeed go up on all levels.” The system’s catalogers and other branch librarians initially resisted the new system because of its difference from tradition and unfamiliar organizing principles, but ultimately came to understand and accept it. Reflecting on the experience, Weiner (2002, 13) concludes that “sometimes it is important to think outside the box to serve your users”.

Culbertson and Jackson, in *Comics and the Modern Library Catalog: New Rules for Breaking the Rules* (2016) discuss how they came to the decision to select a commercial product to organize their academic library’s comics collection. The authors emphasize the visual nature of graphic materials, including the importance of cover art, as well as characteristics of the format such as “instances of cross-issues, double-issues, back-to-back titles, overlapping story arcs, and other complex publishing anomalies that can be frustrating to analyze” (Culbertson and Jackson 2016, 163). For these reasons, they decided to select a commercial organizational system for their academic library’s significant comics collection, evaluating ComicBase, Comic Collector Pro, and Comic Collector Live.7, ultimately selecting Comic Collector Live.7. Selection criteria for the system included

the capacity to customize fields for notes, to import/export files, to track statistics and usage, and to provide a user interface featuring cover art and searchable by character as well as other, traditional access points.

Less radical solutions to these cataloging difficulties involve modifying or expanding existing MARC records with strategies such as applying consistent subject headings and genre terms from controlled vocabulary lists and including the authorized versions of additional creators of an item in the appropriate record fields. Goldsmith (2005, 57) explains that “graphic novels need the same attention as other materials when applicable descriptors are chosen from the subject headings”, adding that redundancies, such as “describing the format as graphic novel in both the call number and the MARC record’s subject fields” are important for discoverability. Slater and Kardos (2017, 118) add that care should be taken that “the subject and genre headings are correct and consistent, and that items in the collection can be found by searching graphic novels by title or subject/genre, or relevant keywords”. Goldsmith (2005, 59) also emphasizes the need to include “multiple artists and designers to fully describe creative responsibility for some works”, a point that Fee (2013) elaborates on, arguing for more comprehensive MARC records by comparing the level of detail needed for useful access to graphic novels to that needed for musical resources, in which knowledge of a composer, performer, conductor, etc. might be necessary to identify a desired item. West (2013), in “Tag, You’re It: Enhancing Access to Graphic Novels”, makes the point that in addition to genre headings, it is the capacity for user tagging that can best increase usability of cataloging records. While modifying or fleshing out descriptive cataloging records or adding user tagging would result in richer, more accurate records, many school librarians lack the expertise, experience, and/or time to implement these steps.

## 3.0 Research questions

Given the explosion in graphic novel popularity and the increasing recognition of the literary and educational value of these materials, many school libraries are in the process of expanding or starting graphic novel collections. This research seeks to describe how school librarians are handling the cataloging and classification of these materials as well as to document elements of these processes they find particularly challenging. Specifically, research questions include:

1. What kinds of graphics material are school librarians collecting? Who is cataloging these items?
2. Do the cataloging records facilitate students’ access to graphic novels? Why or why not?
3. How are graphic novels identified in the library? Are they collocated or stickered?

4. How are series and hybrid items shelved?
5. What other elements of cataloging and classification of graphic novels are challenging for school librarians?

#### 4.0 Methodology

A survey was distributed to school librarians through ALA Connect, “an online platform for discussion and collaboration between ALA members” (American Library Association 2022). At the time of writing, the platform hosts 45,047 members of the American Library Association and has developed specific online communities for library organizations such as the American Association for School Librarians, the Association for Children & Libraries, and the Young Adult Library Services Association, all of which were targeted in our recruiting efforts. Those ALA members associated with these three organizations amount to 10,507 users; however, many of those users may concurrently belong to more than one of the organizations (American Library Association 2021).

The survey consisted of 15 questions, including multiple choice and open-ended items (Appendix A). Using grounded theory and an inductive approach, the researchers analyzed the data to agree on themes before individually coding the open-ended responses, comparing results, and resolving discrepancies.

#### 5.0 Results

The survey was completed by 167 librarians, 80% of whom reported having a Masters degree in library science. Three surveys were eliminated from the sample because respond-

ents worked outside of the school library setting. The remaining 164 surveys represented all levels of school librarianship, including 29.4% high school librarians, 21.5% middle school librarians, 27.6% elementary school librarians, and 21.5% working at institutions that combine grade levels in different ways or at multiple institutions. Of the responding librarians, 100% reported collecting graphic novel fiction, 96.3% collect graphic nonfiction, and 67.1% collect manga. Responses to the open-ended question indicate that the size of participants’ graphic novel collections ranged in size from fewer than fifty to several hundred.

#### 5.1 Cataloging

As shown in Figure 1 below, 21.3% of respondents reported exclusive use of vendor-purchased cataloging records, and 7.3% use records created at their school district level. This means that the majority of responding librarians are responsible for at least some of their own cataloging, with 31% indicating sole responsibility for their library’s records and another 33% using a combination of vendor-purchased records and their own copy-cataloging and/or original cataloging records.

As Figure 2 shows, most respondents indicated that students do not use the catalog for finding graphic novels, and many explained that this is because students prefer to browse the options on the shelves. Some indicated that students sometimes use the catalog to place an item on hold, if they cannot find what they are looking for on the shelves.

Of those respondents indicating that their students do use the catalog to find and locate graphic novel materials, several explained the intentional strategies they have used to

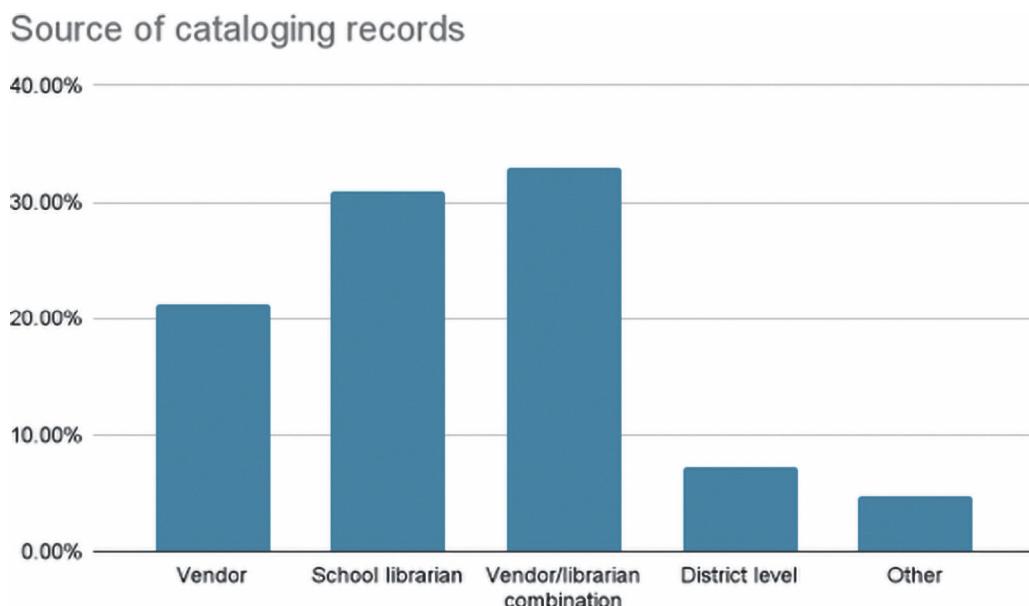


Figure 1. Source of cataloging records.

## Do students use the catalog to find graphic materials?

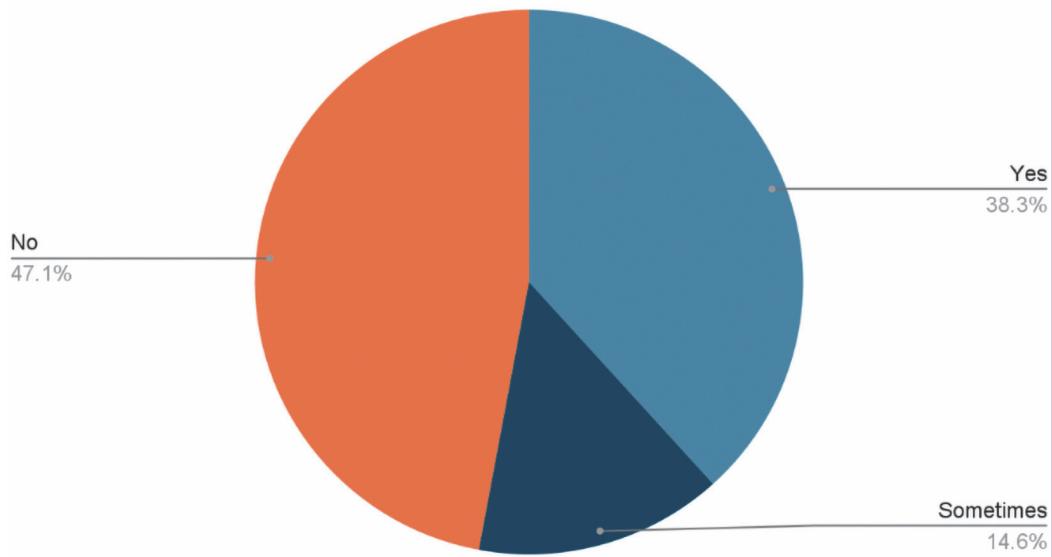


Figure 2. Use of the catalog to find graphic novels.

make this process easier for students. For example, one librarian states, “it depends upon the records to the titles being complete and up to date. If we don’t put series title in a record and a student searches for one it may look like we don’t have it. We have been trying hard to make sure there is access through the catalog.” Another reports that she has “changed the call number for all graphic materials to start with “GRAPHIC” so if they are non-fiction it will be “GRAPHIC 927.515” and students can search for just call numbers starting with GRAPHIC to find materials if they wish them to be in that format.” In a final example, several respondents noted they use cataloging and circulation management tools such as sublocations and fixed feature categories to denote graphic novels and make them easier to locate both in the catalog and in the physical library.

For items with an illustrator in addition to an author (Figure 3), 73.8% of respondents indicated that the items are searchable by illustrator, while 10.4% report they are not. 7.9% of respondents were not sure whether items are searchable by illustrator, and another 7.9% indicated that some records include illustrators as access points while others do not.

### 5.2 Arrangement and classification

Figure 4 reveals that a clear majority of respondents, 78%, organize their library’s graphic novels into a separate section. Of these, 3.66% noted that though they were collocated in a distinct area, graphic novels still bear 741.5 as part of the call number. In comparison, 14% of respondents both label and shelf graphic novels in Dewey 741.5, while

a small percentage, 6.1%, have their fictional graphic novels interfiled with regular fiction titles.

As Figure 5 makes clear, just under half of respondents, 49.39%, shelve graphic nonfiction with or near their graphic fiction, while 24.39% choose to shelve graphic nonfiction items according to subject, interfiling them with other, traditional print items covering the same topics. Still others, 12.2%, shelve them in Dewey 741.5 or in a separate, graphic nonfiction section (6.1%). Four respondents (2.44%) make decisions on these items on a case by case basis, while nine respondents (5.49%) did not provide an answer to this question.

As depicted in Figure 6, of the respondents who collect manga, 58.54% interfile them with fictional graphic novels, while 30.49% shelve them in a section near to but distinct from the fictional graphic novels, and 11% place them in 741.5.

Just under 56% of all respondents indicated that their graphic novels are marked with some sort of label or sticker signaling that the item is in graphic novel format. Narrowing the sample to those respondents whose graphic novel collections are not collocated, but instead are all or partly interfiled with other fiction and nonfiction materials, 45.83% reported placing identifying stickers on their graphic items.

### 5.3 Common questions: graphic series, hybrids, and superhero items

When asked how they catalog graphic novel series, just over 66% of librarians reported cataloging and shelving these by author, and 60.55% reported using the series title. Clearly,

### Are GNs accessible by illustrator in the OPAC?

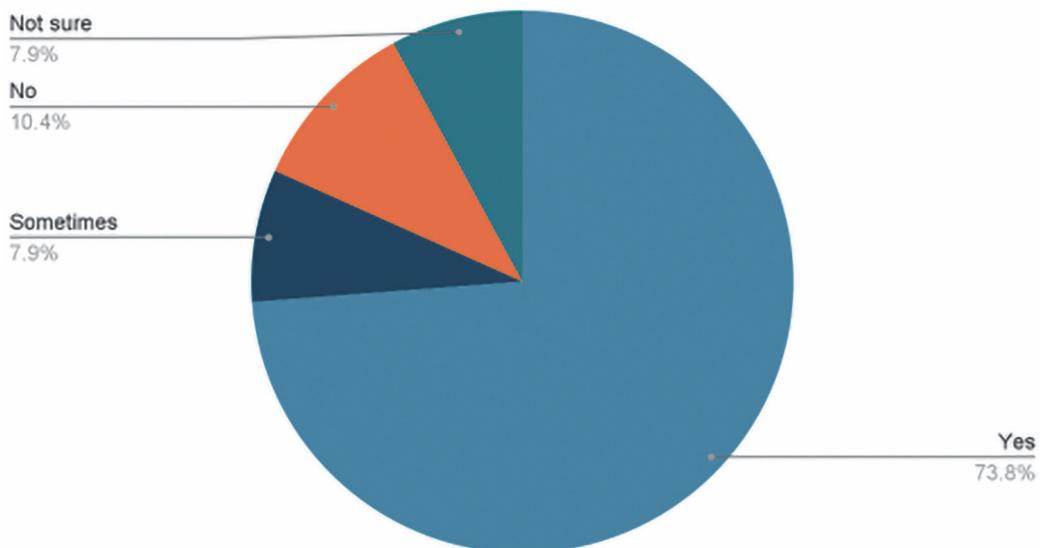


Figure 3. Illustrator as access point.

### Shelving of Fictional GNs

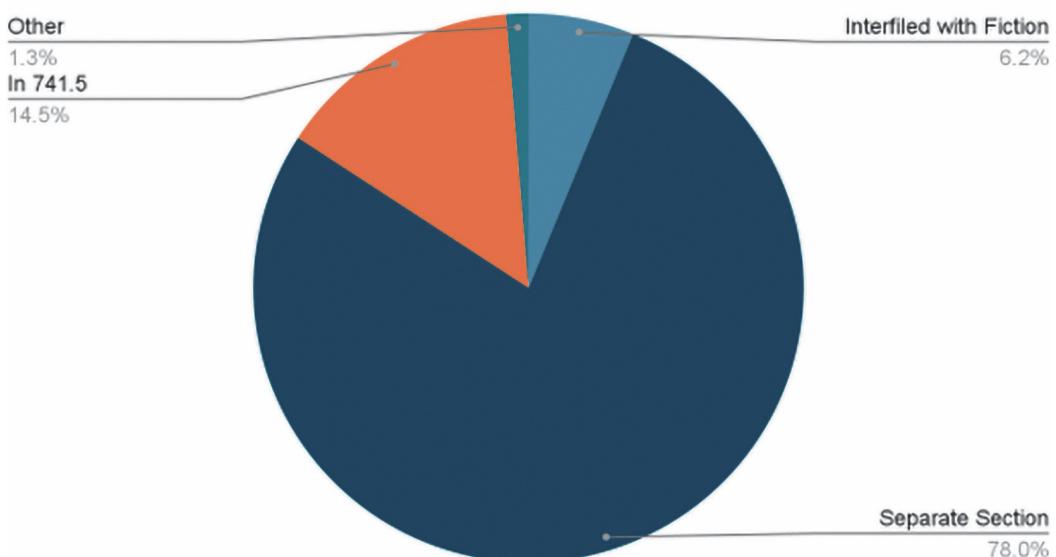


Figure 4. Shelving of fiction GNs.

some respondents chose both of these options. It is possible that these librarians use a process similar to the 15.6% who explained that they shelve series written by a single author by the author's last name, but handle series with multiple authors differently, using the series title in the call number so that series are always shelved together.

When asked where graphic novel hybrids (those titles that include both traditional text and visuals such as *Diary of a Wimpy Kid* or *Dork Diaries*) are placed in their collections,

121 (73.8%) indicated that these are shelved with traditional fiction, while 23 (14%) shelve them with graphic novels. Another 7 (4.3%) decide on a case by case basis whether hybrids will be shelved with regular fiction or with graphic novels. Finally, six librarians (3.66%) grouped hybrid volumes with other items such as "humor" or "illustrated books", and two people (1.2%) place them in a section of their own.

Thirty respondents (18.29%) indicated that they organize superhero items in a different way than they catalog typ-

### Shelving of Nonfiction GNs

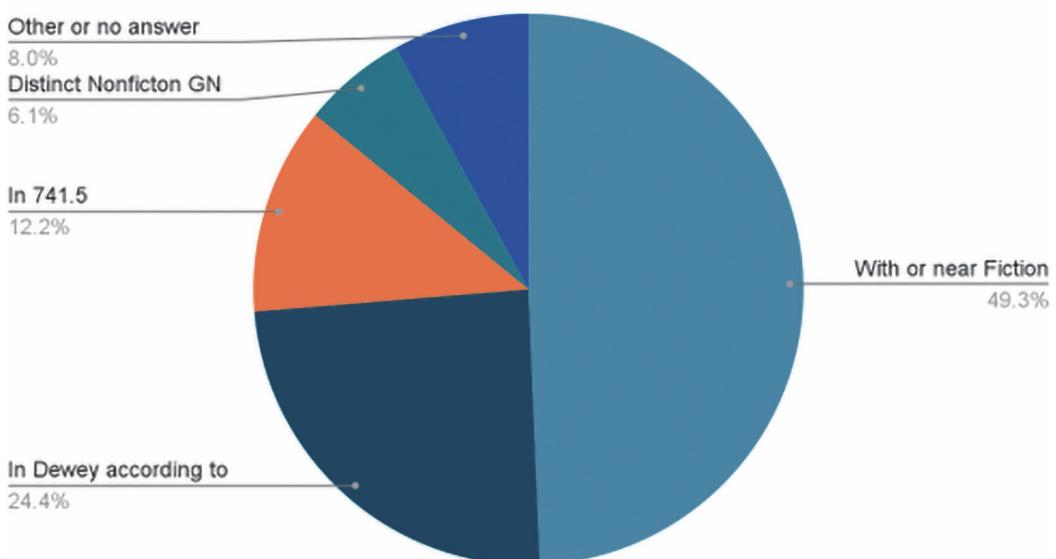


Figure 5. Shelving of nonfiction GNs.

### Shelving of Manga

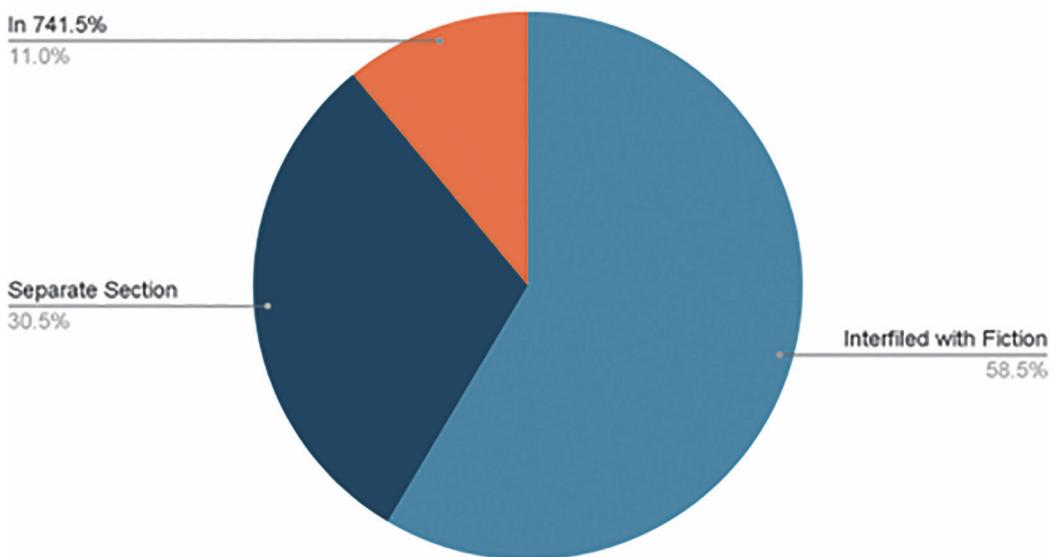


Figure 6. Shelving of manga.

ical graphic materials. The most popular approach to handling these materials is by placing them in a separate “superhero section” (5.49%) or arranging them by company (DC or Marvel) and/or character (11%).

#### 5.4 Location in the media center

In response to the question “If you have a separate graphic novel section, please describe where in your library that sec-

tion is located and why”, approximately 60% of survey respondents either do not have a separate section for graphic novels, did not indicate where this section was located, or described its location in ambiguous way that resists classification. Approximately 40% of respondents indicated that they did have a separate GN section and provided a description of its physical location. The most frequently cited location for the graphic novel section, by 19.51% of respondents, is near the entry/at the front of the media center, while

6.7% of survey respondents locate them near the circulation desk, 5.49% place them in a leisure reading area, 3.66% in the fiction area of the media center, and 2.44% between the fiction and nonfiction sections of the library. 11.59% of librarians indicated that their graphic novels are located in a section of their own, without describing where this section is positioned within the library.

Perhaps even more telling than the physical placement of the graphic novel section are the reasons respondents provided for locating the graphic novels where they do. As Figure 7 reveals, 37.8% of respondents indicated that they place graphic novels in the location where they will be most accessible to students. For 21.95% of librarians surveyed, graphic novels are located wherever space allows, while 6.1% include them as a “genre” option in genrefied collections. For a smaller portion of respondents, the primary reason they expressed for locating their graphic novel collections where they did was the desire to supervise student selection of these materials (4.27%), to provide readers advisory to students using this collection (3.05%), and, finally, to persuade students to explore and possibly check out items in other formats (1.22%).

## 5.5 Issues of concern identified by respondents

### 5.5.1 Shelving fiction graphic novels

The final question on the survey asked respondents what decisions give them pause when it comes to either cataloging or shelving graphic novels. Thirty respondents wrote about con-

cerns regarding the shelving of their fiction graphic novels, with 12 of them expressing uncertainty about the decision they made either to create a separate GN section or to interfile them with fiction and nonfiction. For example, one respondent with a separate graphic novel section wrote: “I feel that if they were in each genre and not pulled out in a section, a wider range of students might discover them and check them out, even if they think they don’t like graphic novels.” On the other hand, a respondent with an interfiled graphic novel collection explained: “I’m not completely satisfied with my decision to shelve graphic novel titles amongst the rest of the fiction/non-fiction. The philosophy is that they’ll just come to these titles while searching for other things (or, perhaps more likely, find related chapter books/novels while looking for graphic novels). A separate section would help students notice and find these titles better.”

Other shelving concerns include whether to separate graphic novels by DC or Marvel, whether to genrify the graphic novel section, and whether these items should be shelved by author, series, or subject. Finally, librarians commented that the heavy browsing makes maintaining any type of shelving system difficult: “The shelves end up a mess when students are browsing.”

### 5.5.2 Shelving nonfiction graphic novels

Twenty-five respondents expressed uncertainty about where to shelve nonfiction graphic novels, with the most frequently cited concern (19 respondents) involving whether nonfiction graphic novels should be included with the fiction graphic

## Reasons for location of graphic novels

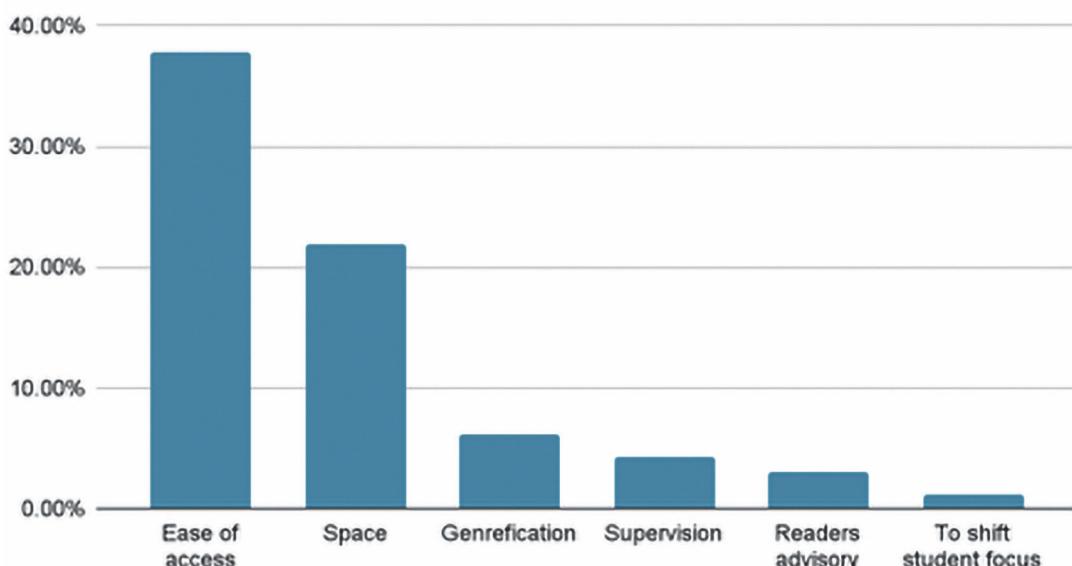


Figure 7. Reasons for location of graphic novels.

novels, either interfiled with fiction or separated out, or with their appropriate subjects in the nonfiction collection. Respondents wrote about the pros and cons of each choice in their responses, with one stating: "I like having the NF graphic novels by their topics, but they become kind of invisible mixed in with thousands of other books." Another explained: "I debate separating the fiction and non-fiction, but I also like that students might give non-fiction a chance when it is illustrated and presented in a unique format."

Four respondents wrote specifically about the placement of graphic biographies or memoirs, expressing difficulty deciding whether to shelve these items with graphic novels or with print biographies, "wonder[ing] whether students might prefer a graphic novel biography in the biography section" than with the other graphic novels.

### 5.5.3 Manga

Thirteen respondents wrote about their challenges with manga, mainly concerning shelving and content. Six expressed doubt about whether or not to pull manga out of graphic novels and make it a section of its own, expressing sentiments such as: "Biggest dilemma at the moment is whether to separate out manga." Three others reported shelving questions regarding manga such as whether manga should be shelved by series title or author or cataloged by author or illustrator. Another four respondents discussed difficulty determining age levels and content appropriateness of manga. For example, one librarian wrote: "The ratings in Manga are important... we don't go above T. We do own *Gender Queer*, which was recently challenged in our county ... and we were delighted to be able to put it back on the shelves after the committee review. We do want to make sure we are aware of titles that might raise parent concern so that we can defend their merits and value for our students if necessary."

### 5.5.4 Series, hybrids, adaptations, and early readers

Ten librarians mentioned that handling series was a challenge, with the majority of them (7) focusing on dealing with series by different authors. Two others mentioned difficulty discerning whether a title will be a stand alone or the first in a series and another avoids collecting series that are too large. On the other hand, one librarian mentioned having difficulty finding a good way to treat single (non-series) graphic novels, and another noted that "graphic novels that are not part of a series get less circulation without promotion".

For seven media specialists who responded to the survey, graphic novel adaptations of traditional novels present a challenge. Some respondents want to place graphic adaptations next to the originals, and accomplish this by placing

both in fiction: "I also shelve the new graphic novels of classics like *Anne of Green Gables* with the classic version of the book." Another respondent chose to keep the graphic version in the graphic novel section, but to increase findability by shelving it under the original author's name, rather than using the author of the graphic version. She explains: "An example is Marie Lu's *Legend*. Students know where to find it in Fiction, but not in Graphic Novels, so we have started putting those under the original author's name, but still in the Graphic Novel section."

Other questions focused on making decisions on whether to place illustrated books such as *Diary of a Wimpy Kid* and *Dork Diaries* with traditional fiction or with the graphic novels (8 respondents) and whether graphic novels designed for early readers "should go in the early reader section or the graphic novel section" (5 respondents).

### 5.5.5 Content concerns

Twelve respondents report concerns about graphic novel content. One writes: "I've been trying to get elementary level appropriate manga for a couple of years, and it's way, waaaaay harder than I ever thought it was going to be." Another librarian explained: "The only area I struggle with sometimes is whether or not I should/can purchase a selection for the collection. Books that I would easily purchase in print can sometimes just not be appropriate, due to illustrations, for my younger students. I tend to be conservative with age appropriateness, and pass on selections that might raise issues with our more conservative parents." This sentiment is echoed by another respondent: "I have actually thought about the need for warnings on some books where there are visual depictions of rape or other sexual situations. I never considered it on a non-graphic version of the same title however."

### 5.5.6 Negative perceptions

Three librarians' responses revealed their own perceptions that reading graphic novels is either insufficient or inferior to reading other types of literature. One respondent asked "Is it really quality literature?" Another librarian used this opportunity in the survey to note that she wants "students to also read regular fiction and nonfiction books!" and a third lamented that "students are not reading as widely and diversely as they once did".

Two others reported negative reactions from other adults. "To be honest", wrote one respondent, "some adults in the school community who do not know about graphic novels - think they are "graphic" as in graphic violence. One time I put up signs for the collection and our admissions office took them all down before an open house." Another created a section dedicated to graphic novels in her library

over the objections of “teachers who insisted that graphic novels are not ‘real’ books”.

In response to this open-ended question about concerns related to collecting graphic novels, two librarians expressed fears that students will not return these materials, with one noting that she is “on edge waiting for the return of the *Dog Man* titles” and other graphic novels, while another stated that “media retention has been a problem”.

### 5.5.7 Cataloging concerns

Six respondents refer in their comments to cataloging issues, with three mentioning their struggle with how to catalog series with multiple authors and two mentioning inconsistencies in Library of Congress records, vendor provided records, and their institution’s current practice making it difficult to catalog graphic items correctly. One librarian elaborated: “I am not confident about cataloging them (where the hell in MARC do I put the illustrator?); inconsistency in past labeling, inconsistency in shelving.” Another respondent explained: “A few things that come up for us cataloging are: What exactly is the title? For example, *Amulet: The Stonekeeper*. Is The Stonekeeper the title and Amulet the series name? Is it title, subtitle etc. This seems to be done differently in different places.” Insufficient time to catalog and process items is noted by one librarian, who explains: “I’d buy a lot more if I could get graphic novels, especially manga already processed.” Another respondent’s comment, though, reveals that this is not a complete solution: “Sometimes I have to rework the pre-processed cataloging in order to make them more available to students.”

## 5.6 Discussion

The survey results reveal that for most librarians, keeping fictional graphic novels in 741.5 has become untenable, and the best solution seems to be to create a distinct graphic novel section in their libraries, alongside either a traditionally organized or genrefied fiction section. Librarians are concerned about providing easy access to these rapidly circulating items, with many opting to place them near the doors of the library or in a central location. The question of whether to locate nonfiction with other, fictional, graphic materials or with items devoted to the same subject is a more complicated one, with librarians weighing in on both sides, discussing the pros and cons of each choice, and many second-guessing the decision they have made. Just under 70% of respondents reported collecting manga for their schools, and several indicated that they struggled with where to shelve manga titles, how to catalog them (by series title or author) and determining the age appropriateness of the content. Similarly, there is no clear consensus on how to deal with specific types of items such as illustrated books,

series titles, superhero titles, adapted classics, and graphic memoirs and biographies.

Further, as authors and publishers become more creative and inventive, there are more classification variables to consider and prioritize. For example, two respondents referred specifically to the Nathan Hale historical series, *Hazardous Tales*, as an example of graphic texts that are especially difficult to classify. One explained: “Some of the nonfiction hybrid types of books are tough. I have decided to shelve Nathan Hale in the fiction GN [graphic novel] section, even though they deal with NF [nonfiction] topics. I find they’re easier for students to locate or discover in the fiction area than spread out in NF.” Another responded: “The Nathan Hale graphic history titles have been the hardest to place. They are cataloged as nonfiction, but seem to bridge between fiction and nonfiction. I compromised and created a small nonfiction graphics at the end of the graphic novels. It makes me wonder if I should just pull all of the nonfiction titles and house them together. They would definitely get read more!” As this comment makes clear, each new decision can trigger a reexamination of the entire scheme, rendering the organizational process ongoing and recursive.

Of course, the decisions made will depend on context as well as the motivations of the librarian in charge. While most librarians tried to give the graphic novel collection “the best real estate in the library”, in order to provide ease of access for users or felt forced to locate the collection wherever space allowed, there were a couple of other motivations that were uncovered in the survey. A little over seven percent of respondents placed the graphic novels in their line of sight, either so that they could supervise students using the collection (4.27%) or to help students make selections in a readers’ advisory capacity (3.05%). Those respondents who cite the need for readers’ advisory are concerned about students selecting items that are age appropriate. One respondent explained the need for selection assistance in the graphic novel section by noting the common misperception that all items in graphic format are suited for children of all ages. She writes:

Having the GN section in an area frequented by young students can sometimes be an issue, if they choose a book that is more mature than is appropriate for them. I try to help guide their selections to the early reader GN titles, rather than more upper-elementary titles. Because everything is a “comic” they are perceived as being easy or the same, but we know that there are a variety of levels of complexity in this collection, [and] that requires readers’ advisory.

On the other hand, those who wish to supervise students either want to be sure that only students in particular grades are checking out the graphic novels in accordance with cir-

culation restrictions or want to “be close by to monitor behaviors, as that is where students clump up.” One respondent notes the “need to be able to intervene and help students if there are conflicts over who touched a specific graphic novel first” and, therefore, who gets to check it out. Another worries because these popular books “tend to ‘wander’ away unexpectedly”.

These comments and others that echo them suggest lingering associations between graphic novels and unruly or unlawful behavior and dangerous or inappropriate content. These themes surface elsewhere in the survey in complaints about students not reading other types of books and questions and stories about community members and teachers who do not view graphic novels as legitimate literature. The perception of an element of danger in graphic novels comes through most clearly in the words of the librarian who considered adding content warnings to her graphic novel collection for items depicting sexual situations. The fact that it did not occur to her to place warnings on non-graphic items with similar subject matter reveals a common belief that the same content is more powerful and potentially harmful or objectionable when presented in visual form than when described in words alone.

## 6.0 Conclusion

Graphic novels clearly present unique issues that can confound librarians, including inheriting, buying, or copy-cataloging inconsistent records; processing long series with varying titles, authors, and illustrators; regularly encountering items that resist easy categorization; and the maintenance of a section that is heavily browsed and often in disarray as a result. Despite these challenges, librarians are continuing to collect graphic novels because of their extreme popularity with the student patrons they serve. For most of the respondents to this survey, and many other practicing school librarians, this means a constant cycle of assessment of the collection and adaptations to improve its accessibility, adaptations involving everything from modifying MARC records, to separating out and relocating certain types of items, to constantly making decisions on hybrid items that challenge even our new and evolving classification schemes. A positive element of this is that librarians are perceiving the organization of their collections as the dynamic, evolving process that, ideally, it should always be. Unfortunately, all of this is extremely time-consuming work often undertaken by a single librarian in each school. If more channels of communication existed for librarians to exchange their ideas and experiences in collecting and organizing graphic collections, the field as a whole could work toward developing some flexible, adaptable guidelines or set of best practices that would benefit all librarians, but especially those new to acquisitions or to handling materials in graphic format. For now, librarians with large and thriving

graphic novel collections might consider creating presentations for district, state, and national organization meetings so that they can share their experience and knowledge with their colleagues. Larger school systems or states might consider hiring a cataloger to provide training to school librarians in charge of their own records. Programs that certify school librarians can also work to include more of a focus on the technical aspects of cataloging in multiple formats. Finally, further research in this area would present a clearer picture of evolving practice and further insight into librarians’ thinking process as they make determinations about graphic novels in their collections while sparking conversation about the most user-friendly ways to catalog and shelve these popular materials.

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## Appendix A: Survey Questions

What kinds of Graphic Novels do you collect? Select all that apply.

Fiction Graphic Novels

Nonfiction Graphic Novels

Mangaxz

Other

Who does your cataloging? Check all that apply.

We purchase cataloging records from a vendor

Cataloging is done at the district level

I do my own cataloging

How are your fiction graphic novels shelved?

In 741

In fiction, mixed in with traditional print materials

In a separate section of their own

Other

How are your non-fiction graphic novels shelved?

In 741

In the nonfiction section according to their subject matter, shelved with other titles on that topic

Other

Do you handle the organization of superhero graphic novels differently than other graphic novels in your collection? If yes, please explain.

If you collect Manga, where is it shelved?

Are your Graphic Novels indicated by a sticker or other marker aside from the call number?

Yes

No

Other

How do you handle graphic novel series?

Shelved according to series title

Shelved according to author

Other

If an item has a separate author and illustrator, is the illustrator searchable in the cataloging record?

Yes

No

Other

Where do you place graphic novel hybrids--those titles that include both both traditional text and visuals such as Diary of a Wimpy Kid or Dork Diaries?

If you have a separate graphic novel section, please describe where in your library that section is located and why.

Do students use the catalog to search for graphic novels? If so, are they able to locate what they want? Why or why not?

What decisions give you pause when it comes to either cataloging or shelving graphic novels?