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Untitled

Procreate

I chose to create a lesbian love story in graphic novel form for my final project. I was inspired by the relationship between people with learning disabilities and graphic novels. I also explored the lack of queer representation in graphic novels. I combined the two topics to create a graphic novel that I would have appreciated growing up. My goal for the project was to create a book that would have greatly benefited kids like myself who were struggling to understand their sexuality and learning process. I was influenced by many graphic novels I read in my childhood but I was especially inspired by Raina Telegamier. Raina Telegamier is known for her many graphic novels such as *Smile*, *Drama* and *Sisters*. I went through many steps to design my characters such as sketching, converting to digital and adding colors. My medium helped me to portray the story in a playful manner while telling a mellow, heartfelt story. My one piece of advice for how to interact with my art would be to go into the book with an open mind and youthful curiosity.

The Readers of Graphic Novels



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I began with a simple question: who is the target demographic for graphic novels. This question branched into; do graphic novels connect to kids with learning disabilities? And if so what aspects help to do so? These questions helped to form a base for my research. As I expanded my notes, I developed an understanding of how brains like mine process graphic novels more efficiently than regular books. After developing knowledge of graphic novels and their effects on kids with learning disabilities I decided to move onto queer representation in graphic novels and the media. I noticed that most of the graphic novels that have queer representation were all published after 2015 which was the year I stopped buying graphic novels. (This was also the year gay marriage was legalized.) This brought me to the conclusion that kids my age majorly missed out on queer representation in their childhood. This led me to the decision that I will be making a graphic novel including all of the elements that I wish I had as a kid. After acquiring all of that new information I began my final paper. The process of the outline gave me a clearer idea of the topics I would be writing about. Throughout the process of writing, I discovered that I had a lot on my mind and I slowly unpacked the topics of choice. The sentences began forming too quickly for me to take them down (another side effect from my learning disability.) That is when I decided that my paper would be based around my emotional experience rather than only showing research, which I discovered there was not very much of on the internet.

Graphic novels have a specific way of connecting to minds with learning disabilities. The combination of the words and the visual graphics representing what would have been a written description gives brains like mine a break from frustration.

Graphic novels were my childhood; Not to be confused with comic books which I enjoyed, but did not connect to as much. The primary difference between graphic novels and comic books is that Graphic novels are longer, this is because they contain complete narratives whereas comic books are typically excerpts from serialized narratives. In graphic novels, The connection of artwork and writing combined perfectly accommodated my processing disorder.

As a visual learner, graphic novels always had a special place in my heart because of how satisfying reading and actually understanding a story was. Reading graphic novels was a personal hobby which is why visiting the library with my grade in elementary school was upsetting. I would head towards the graphic novels while my friends picked up their *Twilights*. I could read those books but the pressure of understanding schoolwork reading was enough of a challenge already. I couldn't pile small fonted, boy-crazy books onto my very full plate. I remember feeling many sets of eyes on me while I walked towards the graphic novel section. I had to enter the children's books area to access them. This would only confirm my classmates' suspicions that I didn't belong in their grade. I was behind and they knew it. I remember forcing a grin and checking out my book in hopes of not running into any of my judgemental peers. I would fill my shelves with graphic novels and coloring books. One day, I had heard that my favorite graphic novel author was signing books at my local comic book store. This was a huge deal for me, she represented everything I wanted to be in life. Raina Telegamier was confident, talented, and well known for her graphic novels *Smile, drama*. She would write about her experiences as a kid with anxiety and it was comforting knowing that I could still turn out well after such an anxiety-filled childhood. Meeting Raina Telegamaier was somehow also anxiety-filled. It made no sense to me. This was all I had ever wanted yet a part of me was holding me back, tugging on my waist, telling me to stay. Telling me this would end in an unspeakable disaster.

While growing up in the mid-early 2000s I developed an understanding of the lack of mental illness, learning disability, or queer representation in mainstream teen and children's books. I would search for any character I could relate to but understanding the sentences on top of reading was a challenge for me. I found that graphic novels were very easy to understand and helpful to kids like myself who struggled with learning disabilities. Having the graphics in these novels made the story more understandable and easier to process the information I was reading.

Most people don't realize or even consider the work and specifics that are put into designing a graphic novel and how it will affect their audience. But, the creators of graphic novels manage to find the balance between literature and graphics. These specifics are a key component of what makes the books so enjoyable to specific audiences, for example, people who struggle to comprehend information at an average level. In the past graphic novels have often used comic style animation as the illustrations but if you branch out into the deep end of artistic graphic novels, beautifully detailed works can be found. For example, many are drawn in a sketch style and some can be digital including gif images. The world of graphic novels is only expanding with today's technology. People all around the world are finding new ways to share their stories through graphics.

Graphic novels are becoming more diverse and have much more representation than before. This is good for many reasons. Students that read these books can feel represented or kids will find a deeper connection to the characters especially the ones that have learning disabilities. Representation plays into a bigger role of the media in kids' lives. There was and still is a crushing presence of the media and its societal ways. We have all grown up around this influencing billion-dollar industry that can either hurt or help the people under its influence. An example of when the media can be used for good is when there is representation for people that feel marginalized.

Whether this is because of their gender, race, sexuality, mental health, or disability, when this topic is brought up or even shown in the media, this can make a large impact on the audience. This representation affirms readers' identities. The readers of graphic novels are in dire need of representation. Representation is often attempted in movies and books with the so-called representative characters ending up being tokened. Tokenism is a dangerous mistake that occurs far too often in the media when characters representing become one-dimensional and are used for their defining trait. An example of tokenism in the media is the character Damien in the movie Mean Girls. While many people found Damien to be funny and charming, the character itself was very one dimensional and did not have many characteristics other than the fact that he is "too gay to function". Characters like Damien are used all the time when writers feel that they need more representation in their work only to make that character a complete stereotype with no substantial impact on the story.

Comic books and graphic novels rarely had queer characters and when they did, their coming out was treated as a publicity stunt that was never mentioned again in those books. In an article, Brian Anderson stated that the first gay character in comic books was Northstar. "He came out in 1992, well into my later teen years. Even after he came out he wasn't shown kissing another man on panel for another 20 years."(Anderson, 2016). The fact that there were never any hints of representation for twenty years after the character came out shows that this truly was only for media attention and they had no intention of providing representation for struggling queer kids. These are kids who have felt pushed away from "normal" books and have found solidation in the artistic complexities of graphic novels.

There are many graphic novels where the main character plays the superhero role. Not always as an actual superhero fighting crime and saving civilians but as the main character that readers can relate to and feel connected to. The hero is larger than life but just normal enough for readers to relate to their struggles too. I could have used a superhero character growing up as a closeted lesbian. I was so lost and already thrown off by my anxiety and learning disability. I needed someone to relate to and recognize traits of myself in their best qualities. I had almost no queer representation in my life. I grew up in a straight household with straight neighbors and a straight extended family. Slowly queer representation popped up here and there but this was when it was too late. I had already witnessed enough to internalize homophobia. I couldn't go back in time and fix myself or give me queer characters to see. I had to only hope and theorize that some of my favorite characters were secretly queer. The same went for my anxiety, I would slowly start to see “stressed” kids that I could relate to. They were never defined as kids with anxiety until I reached middle school when it was also too late. I had become depressed at that point and was past realizing I had anxiety. There were never any characters with depression either, although I couldn't imagine any of my friends, classmates, or family members ever recommending a book about a mentally ill gay teen.

After plenty of rabbit holes of research, I have found that many kids like me who also struggle with learning disabilities have also been using graphic novels as a learning tool. There was an experiment in 2011 when middle school students with learning disabilities were given graphic novels and according to Kimberly A. Rothenberger in *The Effects of Reading Graphic Novels on the Vocabulary Acquisition of Students with Learning Disabilities*, “The visual literacy of graphic novels may activate deeper processing and recall of vocabulary words, prompting deeper comprehension, and sparking students' motivation to read more”(14). This research proved

a positive result with students becoming more engaged in reading. Many teens with learning disabilities choose graphic novels as their reading of choice because of how smoothly our brains connect stories through the graphic novel's literature techniques. As Robin Var num and Christina T. Gibbons declare in *Language of Comics: Word and Image*, "There is a synergy between words and pictures in comics such that their combined effect is greater than or different from what might have been predicted" (xiv)". This quote resonated with me because it was the perfect way to describe how my brain combined processing the graphic artwork and writing in the novel.

After plenty of research on the importance of graphic novels and representation, I have come to the conclusion that reading graphic novels as a child has positively influenced many kids struggling with their identity and mental health. I was inspired to research this topic by my own experiences that I have dealt with. Reading graphic novels throughout my childhood inspired me to project and understand my independence. After seeing many examples of different graphic novels, I was intrigued by all of the different artistic styles. Building my own graphic novel style has been a dream come true for my younger self even though I only entertained the idea of an interest in art. If I had to have one takeaway from all of my research, it would be that the incorporation of representation in graphic novels strongly influences kids.

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