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## Evaluating a Suite of Strategies for Reading Graphic Novels: A Confirmatory Case Study

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### Cover Page Footnote

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## **Evaluating a Suite of Strategies for Reading Graphic Novels: A Confirmatory Case Study**

### **Introduction**

Although graphic novels are extremely popular among young people, and even many adults, a reticence has been observed among many elementary teachers, both anecdotally and in research, to encourage and support them in the classroom (Cary, 2004; Hudgens, 2022; Jaffe & Hurwich, 2019; Lapp et al., 2012; Laycock, 2019). As elementary teacher educators, the first two authors became aware of the potential of graphic novels and the fact that teachers should be receiving instruction in their use, how to read them, and what graphic novel literature is readily available (Authors, 2018; Cary, 2004; Clark, 2013; Laycock, 2019), but many were not.

To address this need, we first designed a set of strategies, based on research (e.g., Brozo et al., 2014; Cook, 2017; Dallacqua et al., 2015; McCloud, 1993; Monnin, 2013) that we felt could be useful in supporting both teachers and students as they learned to read graphic novels. We then began to include such instruction in preparing our own preservice teachers.

Concurrently, we developed a professional development approach based on the system of related strategies to help inservice teachers build their understanding of how to read graphic novels, become aware of the affordances of them, and how they can benefit their students. We presented the strategies in brief to longer scenarios at four separate conferences, observing how the inservice teachers responded. Convinced by this exposure that the strategies could be effective with inservice teachers, we searched for an opportunity to work with them in a more extended way. Our search led us to a reading coach (third author) at a private school where the reading workshop format was used, and we were able to collaborate with him to develop a design-based study to assess the following research question: How successful is the suite of strategies in

supporting teacher confidence and ability to incorporate graphic novels in their reading workshop format and encourage and support students in reading graphic novels?

### **Literature review**

Definitions of graphic novels vary (Cates, 2020; Hatfield, 2010; McCloud, 1993), but there is no doubt that graphic novels can and should be considered as an extension of the comics phenomenon (cites). As Beaty and Hatfield (2020) state, “This young century has seen comics win major literary prizes, shape the image-making practices of filmmakers and game designers, and inspire a burst of scholarly publications, both journals and books. Comics scholarship is booming . . .” (p. 2). A number of scholars have offered their thinking and support for promoting the inclusion of both the reading and creating comics in classrooms, especially college and secondary classrooms, e.g., Bitz, 2010; Carter, 2015; Hatfield, 2010. Nell (2020), however, makes the point that “comics and childhood are, and long have been, inextricably linked” (p. 127). Thompson (2008) has offered practical suggestions for using comics and graphic novels in the elementary classroom.

Yet, while graphic novels have exploded in popularity among young people and adults over the last 25 years, their adoption by teachers in elementary classrooms has been spotty (Cary, 2004; Jaffre & Hurwich, 2019; Laycock, 2019). When found there, they typically serve a specialized purpose such as supporting struggling readers (e.g., Hughes et al., 2011; Matthews, 2011; Smetena, 2010) and English learners (e.g., Cary, 2004; Danzak, 2011; Krashen, 2004; Park 2016). Some are simply tolerated as an element of classroom choice (Hudgens, 2022). Among the reasons for this is the belief of many educators that graphic novels do not constitute “real” literature and may actually be detrimental to students in some way (Clark, 2013; Jaffre & Hurwich, 2019; Krashen, 2004; Lapp et al., 2012; Laycock, 2019; Monnin, 2010). Perhaps a

corollary of this fact is the failure of many college textbooks for elementary preservice teachers on teaching reading to address graphic novels in any way (Authors, 2018). This lack of inclusion in textbooks suggests strongly that preservice teachers are likely not receiving instruction about graphic novels or how to teach them (Clark, 2013; Laycock, 2019). We are seeing and hearing about many teachers adding graphic novels such as *Dog Man*, *Cat Kid*, or *Diary of a Wimpy Kid* to their classroom libraries as choice options. However, we are concerned that not all teachers understand the appropriate strategies to use with them and do not use graphic novels in lessons, either to teach about them or enjoy them as literary pieces. We would like to see more whole-group modeling of graphic novel strategies.

Research has suggested that modern graphic novels are not easy for many students to read with sufficient comprehension (Boerman-Cornell et al., 2017; Carter, 2015; Cook, 2017; Jimenez & Meyer, 2016; Meyer & Jimenez, 2017). Components of reading graphic novels that challenge many readers' comprehension include images that require visual literacy strategies, specific graphic novel or comics conventions, and the need to synthesize words and images to construct meaning (Brozo et al., 2014; Jaffre & Hurwich, 2019; Monnin, 2010; Serafini, 2014). In discussing his PIM Pedagogy, Carter (2015) describes more complex challenges. PIM pedagogy includes panel and page analysis (or P) which refers to the basic content of panels and pages and is related to the comics conventions; imagetext (or I), which refers to what Carter calls the "co-scaffolding" of print and image and seems similar to the idea of synthesizing words and images in the construction of meaning; and ideas of multimodality of image study (or M), which involves the five modes identified by the New London Group (1996), specifically, audio, spatial, gestural, visual, and linguistic, and which clearly expands the concept of visual literacy. These findings and theories suggest that teachers need instruction not only in how to read graphic

novels but also how to teach with them (Authors, 2019; Boerman-Cornell et al., 2017; Brozo, Moorman, & Meyer, 2014; Carter, 2015; Jaffre & Hurwich, 2019; Layock, 2019; Monnin, 2010). Such visual skills are critical for 21st Century literacy, learning, and life (Brozo et al., 2014; Dallacqua et al., 2015; Serafini, 2012, 2014), and much research suggests that learning to read graphic novels can support such development (e.g., Bitz, 2010; Boerman-Cornell et al., 2017; Brozo et al., 2014; Monnin, 2010; Thompson, 2008).

Thompson (2008) has suggested that reading workshops are ideal places for students to read graphic novels. Reading and writing workshop teaching is not new. Lucy Calkins is one of the original architects of this approach to literacy instruction, and she and her team of staff developers at the Teachers College Reading and Writing Project at Columbia University have been honing the craft for over thirty years. (Calkins, 1994; Calkins, 2001; Calkins, 2015; Teachers College Reading & Writing Project, 2014a). The method stems from research that shows that students become better and more engaged readers when their time for independent reading is expanded and students have access to a large classroom library (Allington, 2014; Guthrie & Wigfield, 2000) along with access to and choice of high-interest materials to read (Allington, 2005; Bass et al., 2008; Worthy & McKool, 1996).

The approach follows a predictable structure:

- Teacher-led strategy mini-lesson (approximately 10 minutes)
- Student independent reading time while the teacher confers individually and pulls small groups (approximately 30 minutes)
- Share time (approximately 5-10 minutes) (Calkins, 2015, p. 25)

Units of Study (UOS) are the Teachers College Reading and Writing Project's detailed construction of workshop teaching for both reading and writing (Calkins, 2015). For reading

workshop, UOS are composed of collections of books, both fiction and nonfiction reading units, for the primary, intermediate, and middle school grades. Each unit is meant to be taught and completed in a four- to five-week time-frame. The UOS provides detailed transcripts of how individual teaching sessions *could* go; however, these transcripts are not intended to be scripts to be followed or read verbatim. The UOS also provide an abundance of resources including suggestions for read-alouds and mentor texts for individual units. The units allow for flexibility in teachers' choices for read-alouds and mentor texts.

Aware of the challenges of reading graphic novels through the research noted in this literature review and personal experience, we recognized a need for a specific and systematic set of comprehension strategies for teaching graphic novels at the elementary level that addressed the major components that make graphic novels a difficult read for many. The need for such a system extended to both preservice and inservice elementary teachers. We discovered we were in good company in that other researchers had come to similar opinions (Carter, 2015; Jaffe & Hurwich, 2019; Monnin, 2010; Thompson, 2008) as to the need for a well-designed plan for teaching about graphic novels. Carter's thinking, however, focused on designing coursework for college and secondary students, and Monnin targeted secondary as well, but Jaffe and Hurwich as well as Thompson included elementary students as a focus of their strategies to encourage teachers to incorporate graphic novels in their teaching. Yet, other than published articles and books and some rather isolated efforts to reach elementary teachers (e.g., Bitz 2010; Thompson, 2008), we were aware of no research-based program of strategies being systematically taught or shared generally with inservice or preservice elementary teachers.

In response to this situation, we developed such a system of strategies, which we piloted on our own preservice teachers and with conference participants (Authors, 2019). The specific

comprehension strategies included Yenawine's (2013) Visual Thinking Strategies, the direct teaching of graphic novel conventions (vocabulary) using Landsdown Cards (Lansdown, 1991; Richek, 2005) for practice, and a Double-entry Journal Jigsaw strategy to teach synthesis of images and words. Adequately preparing readers for reading graphic novels requires using the strategies in concert. However, we had not determined how successful or useful the strategies could be in P-12 classroom settings with teachers charged with the teaching of reading/literacy.

As we looked for an opportunity to share the strategies with inservice teachers, we were keenly aware of the drawbacks of the "one-shot" professional development (PD) model. Research shows clearly that a single, short-term PD is generally ineffective (Chin & Benne, 1969; Desimone, 2011; Howey & Vaughan, 1983; Richardson & Placier, 2001; Saunders, 2014; Yoon et al., 2007), so we as researchers planned for extended support and coaching for any participant teachers who agreed to take part (Showers et al., 1987; Yoon et al., 2007). The goal was to build the teachers' confidence for reading and teaching with graphic novels on their own.

### **Methodology**

An opportunity to determine the effectiveness of the strategies arose with Morris Academy (pseudonym), a small private school in a suburb of a large metropolitan area in the southwestern United States. Morris used a school-wide (grades K-5) reading workshop structure based on Teachers College Units of Study (UOS; Calkins, 2015) and was in its third year of workshop-style teaching. Working with school administration and university guidelines, a protocol was developed and approved by all authorities involved (Yin, 2003). A recent research review (Wallner & Barajas, 2020) of comics and graphic novel studies in K-9 settings found that the large majority of such studies are experimental-type studies in which researchers provide an intervention with specific material and document the results. These reviewers suggested a need



for non-experimental studies. The study we conducted at Morris avoided introducing any specific material other than the strategies and focused on teacher responses, not students, as a case study, thus meeting the criteria for non-experimental studies. The case study focused on three teachers as a group as a portion of a design-based framework that included a single case study design (Yin, 2003). The overall study followed design-based research (DBR; Anderson & Shattuck, 2012; Brown, 1992; Philippakos et al., 2021) in that the initial plan for the study was created in a way to be flexible as interim results and events suggested the need to make adjustments in procedures. This approach seemed reasonable because we were not following an experimental intervention in a clinical situation that required fidelity but were instead setting up a window which was intended to observe how teachers responded to and acted upon new information provided by the university researchers and the coach. Additionally, this study was planned to inform future studies related to the suite of strategies, and it was hoped that it could inform the researchers of important adjustments that could or should be made. According to Hjalmarson et al. (2021), “A fundamental affordance of DBR [Design-based Research] is that it enables researchers to iteratively and flexibly refine an educational intervention to meet a contextually sensitive goal” (p. 24). Additionally, we utilized a confirmatory approach as described by Miles and Huberman (1994).

### *Participants and procedures*

Morris includes a small yet diverse group of teachers and students using Teachers College Units of Study (UOS) reading and writing workshop curriculum discussed earlier. In the 2018-2019 school year, they served students in grades K-5. In 2018, the administration allowed us to present a 2-½ hour interactive professional development to the entire school faculty to introduce the strategies prior to the opening of the spring semester. Figure 1 presents a timeline

of the entire intervention, beginning with our earliest thinking about graphic novels. Figure 2 presents the major components of the initial PD. We used read-alouds and a PowerPoint to introduce the concepts of reading graphic novels and the rationale for the strategies. A part of the PowerPoint presentation included an interactive activity that required participants to experience visual learning strategies (Yenawine, 2013), an analysis of images that lays the groundwork for Carter's (2015) imagetext and multimodal concepts. Following that, we led the teachers through an exercise of making Landsdown cards (Lansdown, 1991; Richek, 2005) to build familiarity with graphic novel conventions and vocabulary. Next, we led the group in a double entry journal jigsaw activity intended to provide direct experience with how words and images support each other in graphic novels. Half of the participants were given copies of four pages of a graphic novel with words removed, and the other half received copies of the same pages with the images removed. Each group was to write in their journals what they saw or read on the left and what they thought it meant on the right. After a few minutes, each participant was paired up with someone who had the pages with the words or images they did not have. The participants quickly realized that neither the words nor the images alone provide sufficient information to comprehend the pages. In other words, the two components must be synthesized in order to construct intended meaning. As Carter (2015) suggests, this activity is intended to provide "a light bulb moment and helps students see how print and image can co-scaffold" (p. 5). The workshop closed with a question/answer session, asking whether the participants thought that graphic novels could be incorporated into the reading workshop.

Three teachers who taught third, fourth, and fifth grades were nominated by the school administration to participate in the case study, serving as a convenience sample, to delve more deeply into graphic novels and explore possibilities of using them in their classrooms. The

school had only one section at each of these grade levels, with fifth being the highest grade taught at the school. School administration felt that grades below third would not likely benefit from participating in the case study. The third-grade teacher was Ellen (all names are pseudonyms); she was an African-American female in her second year of teaching. The fourth-grade teacher was Kelly, a Caucasian female with seven years of experience. The most experienced was Janice, the fifth-grade teacher with ten years of experience, also a Caucasian female. Their classes were small as were their rooms, but the rooms themselves were highly personalized. Kelly's room had no desks at all but instead had high round tables and boxes of books. Ellen's room had a single row of tables that made an L-shape around two sides; in the corner opposite the tables was a mattress where Ellen met her students to conduct mini lessons. Janice's room was the most traditional; the students did have desks, but this was also the smallest class.

Morris's reading coach (third author) was a graphic novel aficionado; the shelves in his office were lined with an array of graphic novels. He had agreed to lead these three teachers in a Professional Learning Community (PLC) month-long book study of Monnin's *Teaching Reading Comprehension with Graphic Texts* (2013), which is itself a graphic novel, to build their familiarity and confidence with the genre. All three researchers hoped that they would then be willing to try introducing their students to a graphic novel.

When communication by the coach to the university researchers suggested that the teachers were struggling, the university researchers visited with the teachers in February to provide additional instructional support regarding using traditional reading comprehension strategies in teaching with graphic novels. This was a change in the study protocol; such flexibility in single case studies is supported by Yin (2003) and in design-based research as well

(Anderson & Shattuck, 2012; Philippakos et al., 2021). The teachers were surprised to discover that print books and their counterpart graphic novels used the same words; the graphic novel just used fewer of them, compensating for the left-out verbal expressions with images and color. The teachers' surprise at how easy it would be to teach figurative language from a graphic novel was very interesting. They realized that concepts such as onomatopoeia and metaphors can be shown in a single panel in a graphic novel that would take a large number of words in a print text.

During the meeting, one researcher presented a story still-life designed (See Figure 3) to demonstrate that the teachers already knew the good reading strategies that they would need to teach graphic novels; they would just need to evaluate what works with each lesson and student and apply them to a different type of format that required synthesizing images with text. The researchers stressed that the teachers did not need to learn a new way to teach reading. Later the coach and teachers incorporated the story still-life in an initial session with third- through fifth-grade students.

As the teachers and coach neared completion of the book study, the coach shared his idea for introducing the students to graphic novels by having all three grades meet together in the library for the mini lessons. This was something of a disruption to the normal schedule, but the teachers agreed they could accommodate it. The coach suggested he conduct the first couple of mini-lessons, and the teachers could take them over as they felt comfortable doing so. The content of the mini lessons was based in large part on the content and activities shared in the initial PD.

Using the coach's plan, the mini lessons began at the end of February. The coach taught the first mini lesson in a short session at the beginning of the day to introduce graphic novels to the students. In a second session later that day, he carried out a visual literacy activity with the

students using the Visual Thinking Strategies (Yenawine, 2013) that the researchers had demonstrated in the PD. A week later, in an early morning whole-group minilesson, the coach introduced a wordless picture book to demonstrate how students can use images to make predictions and clarify understanding. During the remainder of the week, the teachers led discussions in their classrooms to build understanding of utilizing images to determine setting, plot, predicting, inferring, etc. During the PLC before Spring Break, the coach suggested that the teachers work together to plan and present the next group minilesson together. The Monday after Spring Break, the fourth-grade teacher felt confident enough to lead the late morning group minilesson on synthesizing images and words, using the materials and procedures that had been used in the initial PD. A week later, the final group minilesson was taught by the fifth-grade teacher, who began to teach the conventions of graphic novels. Portions of these sessions were videoed.

By the end of the library lessons, all three teachers had decided to use the graphic novel introduced in the minilessons (but not read) to focus on visual comprehension as read-alouds in their classrooms. The teachers also began referring to graphic novels in mini lessons although not specifically teaching on graphic novels in their classes, offering graphic novels as student options for reading, and conferring with students who chose to read graphic novels just as they would with a traditional print text.

In April of 2019, the university researchers visited the school to observe each teacher in her classroom. This was not a surprise visit. The researchers communicated to the teachers beforehand through the coach that they did not want for them to construct a special lesson on graphic novels for the researchers to see. Instead the teachers were encouraged to teach as they would normally teach, with the hope that they would be able to include something related to

graphic novels based on the PD and the PLC. The researchers observed simultaneously in each teacher's classroom. Ellen, the third-grade teacher, was teaching a lesson summarizing from a biography; though not directly related to graphic novels, at least one of the students that she conferred successfully with during the independent reading was reading a graphic novel. Kelly, the fourth-grade teacher, used a graphic novel, reading the first several pages of it and doing a think-aloud to teach students how to use details to understand mood and atmosphere in a text. Janice, the fifth-grade teacher, was co-creating anchor charts to help students reading books of fantasy with complex plots; two of the three books she chose as examples were graphic novels. It was interesting to note that all three teachers had developed anchor charts related to reading graphic novels that remained on continuous display in each classroom; in other words, the teachers had begun teaching about graphic novels using the same basic strategies they used with other types of text.

Later in May, the university researchers conducted a focus interview with the three teachers. The coach declined to be present until the very end so as not to influence teachers' responses. During the focus interview, the researchers and teachers sat around a table and informally discussed the teachers' experiences during the semester, using a semi-structured format. Pre-planned questions (Appendix) were used, but the researchers deliberately attempted to create a casual atmosphere to avoid making the teachers feel defensive in discussing their participation in the research. The discussion was recorded and transcribed for analysis to provide additional insight.

#### *Data results and analysis*

Data for the study came from four of the six sources of evidence recommended by Yin (2003)—documentation, interviews, direct observations, and participant observations. Data

related to the described events were collected from the email threads between the researchers and the coach as the semester progressed, the coach's contemporaneous journal which he shared with the university researchers, notes on in-person observations of teachers, and video recordings of the teaching of the three teachers which the coach made and shared with the university researchers. After collection, the researchers worked both separately and together to disaggregate the data. The university researchers combed through the data to find related comments in the post-study interview questions, the email threads, and coach's journal as well as videos and observation notes. Next, they met to develop common threads, trends, and themes throughout the narratives. These theme threads and trends were color-coded and sorted into categories in two tables: one for the email threads and coach's journal and a second for the post-intervention interview (Miles & Huberman, 1994; Yin, 2003).

The themes that developed from the email threads, coach's journal, videos, and observation notes, which represent the points of view of the university researchers and the coach, are listed below.

- Teacher Responses/Reactions
- Teachers' Teaching Actions

We identified the following themes from the Focus Interview Transcript, which represent the teachers' point of view.

- Teacher Knowledge of Graphic Novels
- Challenges/Issues with Workshop format
- Using Familiar Strategies
- Perceived Student Outcomes
- Benefits of Graphic Novels for Students

We will first discuss the results and analyses of the data that represent the researchers' point of view. We will then discuss the data from the teachers' point of view developed from the focus interview.

*Analysis of email threads, coach's journal, videos, and observation notes*

During the Spring 2019 semester, the coach and researchers maintained frequent contact via email to discuss planning and any issues that arose throughout the duration of the study. This email thread became part of the data collection and was used to answer the research question regarding the growth of teachers' understanding and confidence in incorporating graphic novels in their classrooms. The coach began keeping an electronic journal, documenting his activities and his perception of teachers' responses. This journal also became data and provided some answers to the research question as to teacher growth related to understanding graphic novels, as well as to how teachers perceived students' responses when they were being taught strategies for reading graphic novels.

Both the email threads and the journal describe the coach's work as he set up a Professional Learning Community (PLC) with the teachers to support them in considering how they could use graphic novels as alternatives to the books already planned in the Teachers College Workshop UOS. They began with a book study using Monnin's (2013) *Teaching Reading Comprehension with Graphic Texts*, meeting in four sessions throughout the months of January, February, and March, with the last two occurring after the library mini lessons had begun.

*Teacher Responses/Reactions*

The coach reported that at the first session the teachers "were a bit fearful," an observation that surprised him. He recorded in his journal that the fourth-grade teacher stated



that “she’s never really read or paid close attention to many [graphic novels]” and was “a bit nervous.” He suggested that they read the first three chapters of the Monnin (2013) book and explained that “it’s OK . . . that a reader will flip back to previous pages for clarification.” He commented in an email to the researchers that “My general impression is that they’ll need a bit of hand-holding and encouragement.” Not surprisingly, when they met next to discuss the reading, the coach journaled that as he was “asking simple questions about ‘who’s the main character, who’s talking now, what does that panel mean (foreshadowing) etc. . . . the teachers appeared dumbfounded. They realized that they read straight through without flipping back to check for understanding . . . assuming they knew what was going on . . . They agreed to reread for the next time as well as read the next two chapters.” After the next PLC session on the Monnin book, the coach commented to the researchers that “I think they have a better understanding of how tough [graphic novels] can be to read properly.”

All three researchers initially were optimistic that after the original PD and the book study, the teachers would be ready to start incorporating graphic novels within their unit lessons. Emails and dialogs among the researchers and coach suggested, however, that the teachers were struggling with the confidence to actually use graphic novels on their own. The decision was made for the researchers to visit the school for a grand conversation with the teachers.

After that visit, one researcher stated in an email, “Our sense is that the teachers are completely open to what we want to accomplish but are not comfortable enough yet to present it on their own in their classrooms.” All the researchers were basically in agreement with that sentiment, and the coach came up with a solution.

Shortly after the visit, the coach shared his plan in an email: “I’ve come up with what I think (hope) is a working plan for [graphic novel] reading workshop that involve[s] both

teachers and students. My goal is to get teachers comfortable with [graphic novel] ‘talk’ and ‘conventions’ as quickly as possible so that they can become independent [graphic novel] readers who can more seamlessly teach with this format.” His plan is summarized in the following points:

- Coach would develop a series of workshop-style mini lesson to better familiarize teachers and students with graphic novels.
- Coach would model first lessons, nudging teachers to begin implementing them on their own.
- As teachers take on more responsibility in their own classrooms, Coach would observe and debrief with them.

All agreed this was a good approach, the coach proceeded to carry it out as described in the Methods section.

As the teachers began to take over the mini lesson presentations in the library, the coach noted in his journal, “The teachers and students are becoming more comfortable with [graphic novels].” Ellen appeared comfortable in conferring with [Student] with the [graphic novel] as the text,” indicating both teachers and students were gaining a level of comfort with the format. These data speak to the portion of the research question regarding supporting teacher confidence.

#### *Teachers’ Teaching Actions*

Toward the end of March, the coach noted in his journal that “I’m getting to the point where the decisions will come from teachers in their own classrooms. The scaffolding is beginning to come down, gradual release, Vygotsky and all that. We’ll see how they take to it all.” The next day he shared that during a PLC meeting, he “advised all [the teachers] that it was

nearly time for them to start decision-making of using [graphic novels] in the classroom (workshop, read-alouds, conferences) and offered my assistance.”

As the library mini lessons came to a close, the coach worked with the teachers to incorporate graphic novels as appropriate into each teacher’s weekly written lesson plan prior to teaching, offering them use of his personal library. Some teachers were already thinking about how to incorporate graphic novels in their teaching before the library sessions were completed. For example, while the teachers were still deep in the book study, Ellen, the third-grade teacher, was reading an African folktale graphic novel to make a connection to the Monnin (2013) text. She mentioned to the coach that she thought it “would fit in well with the fairy tale unit that she was presently teaching.”

The coach worked, consulting along the way with the researchers, to help the teachers adjust their UOS lesson plans to include graphic novel components. The first week in April, the teachers all agreed to use a very short graphic novel “to tie everything together.” The coach reported that Kelly, the fourth-grade teacher, began a unit on fantasy and borrowed several graphic novels from the coach as options for student independent reading. The coach commented in his journal, “Normal read-aloud prompts (for any text) will be used for highlighting particular reading skills (monitoring for meaning, envisioning, accumulating the text, predicting, inferring, synthesizing, critiquing), and they will be ‘tweaked’ for [graphic novel] format.” By mid-April, the coach reported that “[t]wo of the three classes, 3<sup>rd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> grades, presently have students reading [graphic novels] during independent reading time.” The results outlined in this section clearly speak to the research question related to how well the teachers were able to incorporate graphic novels in their reading workshop.

As teachers began planning additional graphic novel mini lessons in their classrooms, the coach supported on the side, helping guide discussions and in conferencing when a teacher worked with individual students per UOS workshop format. The coach video-recorded each teacher conducting a mini-lesson related to graphic novels at least once and shared the videos with researchers. The researchers included the videos along with the in-person observations to provide data to answer the research question regarding the teachers' facility of introducing graphic novels in the reading workshop format.

During the university researcher visit in April, both researchers took copious notes and engaged in several discussions to analyze their notes for common themes. The theme that seemed most pronounced was confidence. We concluded that the teachers had reached a level of confidence in their knowledge of graphic novels to be able to use them in their teaching, to support their students as they engaged with them, and to offer students the choice of graphic novels without pressure to choose one. These observations add additional evidence to answer the research question regarding teacher confidence with the use of graphic novels as well as their ability to support students as they read graphic novels.

#### *Focus interview*

The transcription of the interview was analyzed for themes. We will discuss each theme with quotations from the teacher's comments as support.

#### *Teacher knowledge of graphic novels*

The researchers asked the teachers if their impressions regarding graphic novels had changed in any way throughout the semester. Though years of teaching experiences ranged from one to ten, their knowledge of graphic novels started out at a similar point. Ellen, the third-grade teacher, answered first saying, "I didn't have any knowledge of graphic novels before." The

other teachers also indicated they had never read a graphic novel before. Kelly, the fourth-grade teacher, said, “It has absolutely changed ‘cause I didn’t know . . . how much was involved in the graphic novels.” She went on to share her astonishment at finding that a graphic novel version of a classic traditional novel was “the same exact words, same exact story.” Ellen added, “But a different format.” Janice, the fifth-grade teacher agreed stating, “I would say definitely mine has changed . . . I had no idea that they were so specific and had so much meaning.” Then she added, “I found that it was a little bit easier than I thought.” Kelly finished up by saying, “Now that we know more about it, we can do more with it next year.” Ellen and Janice agreed. These responses clearly demonstrate that these teachers’ understanding of how graphic novels work and how they might plan with them in the future had risen appreciably.

#### *Challenges and issues with workshop format*

When we asked the teachers about their impressions of the success of the attempt to incorporate graphic novels into their reading workshop structures, they were open and candid. All of them reported struggling initially with confusion as to how it was going to work. Kelly pointed out that in their teacher editions everything is planned out for them in the UOS, including the books used in the mini lessons. Ellen and Janice agreed, including what page numbers in the books would be used, what handouts were needed. Kelly continued, “[the materials] are already made, so how do I make that connection if I was gonna use a graphic novel in that ‘teach’ [lesson] unless it’s already in there?” One of the researchers probed this concern by asking if they were talking about lesson planning. Janice responded, “Oh, absolutely!” Kelly shared that if the graphic novel were not already in the “teach piece, that’s something that would have to be in the [unit] kit, because we can’t reinvent the wheel; we teach, and we don’t have the plan time.” Then she added, “Well, we don’t have a lot of graphic novels

here.” Later she acknowledged that “if you had just a good grasp on how to teach units of study, then it would be easier to implement a graphic novel into it.” Janice added, “Or maybe if we found our graphic novel that is our read-aloud for our unit—if there was one.” A bit later Janice said, “We have an extreme weather unit in reading . . . so it would be really neat for them to be able to use a graphic novel as a source. But we just don’t have that.” This discussion showed clearly how the teachers viewed it as problematic to insert a graphic novel, or probably any different text, into their lessons unless they were already planned in the UOS. They felt the planning time that would be required was too much, especially since they did not seem to feel that there was a large supply of graphic novels to draw on. Since we had visited with the librarian and she had provided us with a long list of graphic novels in the library, this appears to be more a function of the teachers’ lack of knowledge of the graphic novels that were in fact available to them.

The teachers returned to their discussion of the trepidation they felt initially. Referring to the overall structure of the effort to encourage reading and teaching with graphic novels, Janice said, “I think just how it was planned at the beginning—it definitely helped that [the coach] loves graphic novels. His enthusiasm definitely kind of propelled us and kept us going throughout the whole thing . . . Had that not been there, I probably would have fizzled out.” She went on to describe how she liked the plan for beginning the introduction to graphic novels to the students with the coach leading the initial sessions in the library at the beginning of the week, and the teachers could then build on that in their own classrooms throughout the remainder of the week. She also mentioned the support provided by the librarian. Kelly shared that the structure of the effort “made it individual for us and individual for the kids.” These comments suggest that the overall design of the effort was effective but was highly dependent on the work of the coach.

When asked what didn't go well, Kelly complained that she felt "it was kinda thrown at us, in the middle of the year." She said, "We were kinda thinking, well, how are we supposed to do this and our lessons." Ellen indicated she was initially confused. Janice acknowledged that they had been given a "heads-up" and had committed to the study, but it "was stressful for me, that I didn't have the time to pre-plan, sit down, figure it out, scope and sequence of everything." These comments suggest a level of stress researchers had not fully anticipated. A beginning-of-the-year start for the effort would have been more acceptable and less stressful for teachers.

#### *Using familiar strategies*

One of the researchers' concerns that prompted the second visit was what was perceived as the teachers' perception that teaching with graphic novels meant learning a whole new way of teaching. Thus, we were pleased to hear comments during the interview such as the following that indicated the teachers had come to understand that the literary attributes and reading strategies they were accustomed to teaching were completely applicable to graphic novels. Janice reported that, in conferencing with her students, "my language didn't change at all . . . I didn't really have to learn any new strategies on how to talk to [the students] about what they were reading—which I found is great!" Kelly agreed; "I didn't have to change," she said. "No, not at all," Ellen chimed in. Then they offered specific examples of what remained the same: character traits, story problem, setting, finding text evidence, context clues, visualization.

#### *Teacher impressions of student responses*

One of the interview questions asked whether the teachers were able to perceive any differences in the attitudes of their students toward graphic novels. Ellen stated that she "noticed more of the kids actually slowed down when they were reading in the graphic novels." Janice added that "they're all flipping back now," indicating that she felt they were slowing their

reading by re-reading. The other teachers agreed. Ellen said, “They go back and ‘This relates to this,’ and ‘This is where I noticed this is a different color from this,’ and even using the words—some of them saying ‘panels’ and different [graphic novel-related] words. I was like, Wow! You guys really did take that in!” Kelly commented that she felt one reason for the success with the students was that “the kids’ interest in it makes them want to read more.” She said, “I have some kids that love to read the graphic novels, so if that relates to what we’re doing, that’s great.”

Kelly also mentioned that “the kids can teach someone else about [graphic novels] now.” Janice explained how “their enthusiasm over the past couple weeks, when they would go back and look back at it and be able to talk about what they were inferring and what they were connect[ing], kind of connecting two different parts together, just overhearing that and letting them lead it.” Ellen commented on how she felt her students experienced “aha!” moments, when they began to figure out how the authors used color and other graphic novel conventions. When one researcher asked for more clarification as to whether before the study a student might read through a graphic novel quickly without understanding it, Ellen agreed. The researcher asked whether even students who did not particularly like graphic novels would now feel more comfortable if they had to read one. Janice said that “some . . . probably could read them at least a little differently because [of] how we have the anchor charts in our room . . . and we use that language when we can, so they’re being at least exposed to it a little bit more.” These comments suggest that the teachers perceived that the work done with the students on graphic novels had had a positive impact on many if not most students.

*Teacher perceptions of benefits of graphic novels for students*

As a part of the conversation related to students, the teachers made other comments that related more to how they observed graphic novels benefitting their students. Kelly indicated that



such things as color in a graphic novel make it easier for some students to pick up on such literary components as mood, something they seem to struggle with during read-alouds. Janice felt that graphic novels made it easier for her students to infer. All the teachers laughed when Kelly said, “They could teach their parents about the panels and everything.” The teachers agreed that most of the students were valuing graphic novels in a new way, but as Kelly said, “Not all of them . . . most of them;” some students, she felt, saw little to no benefit to them. Kelly seemed to feel that the biggest impact was “the language that they use . . . they knew the language of graphic novels.” So clearly, all the teachers saw that being introduced to graphic novels in a methodical way had been a benefit to most of their students.

### **Discussion and implications**

The data provide much insight into how the teachers responded, learned, changed, and felt benefit from the study. In the focus interview, comments the teachers made as to how pleased they were to discover that they could teach graphic novels using the same comprehension strategies they used with traditional text demonstrated a new-found confidence in teaching with graphic novels. This change in perception is indicative of the overall success of the professional development that utilized the strategies we had designed in terms of teacher growth.

The part of our research question that investigated the situational aspect of the readers workshop was much more complicated. As researchers, we anticipated the challenge that teachers might find graphic novels harder to read than they thought they would be. Indeed, the coach’s conversation with the perplexed teachers in trying to discuss the first three chapters of the Monnin (2013) book was a clear indication that our prediction was accurate. Even as the three teachers began to understand how to read graphic novels, it took several weeks for them to

see their way clear to begin to integrate graphic novels into their classrooms. It, in fact, seemed to be harder than all researchers expected.

As Guskey (2003) has pointed out, the context of a professional development can have a strong influence on its results. What the researchers in this case did not truly realize until later was that a large part of the teachers' concerns centered around the UOS of the Teachers College Reading Workshop that they were required to use. Despite the fact that the UOS are intended to be a guide, not a script, it seemed clear in hindsight that the teachers felt that they must stick quite closely to them, or that to deviate from them would take time that they did not feel comfortable investing in something they were not yet familiar with. This helps explain why the coach felt the need to design the first mini lessons for them and conduct them jointly. The fact that the teachers had no UOS guide for what we were asking them to do was a source of major discomfort for them.

The fact that the university researchers were not familiar with the detailed guidance and structure for lessons provided to the teachers by the Teachers College UOS led to assumptions that the individual teachers had more autonomy than the teachers themselves believed they had in practicality. As we focused on the three teachers, we were somewhat puzzled that the coach felt it necessary to do as much "hand-holding" as he seemed to feel the need to do. Once the university researchers understood how dependent the teachers were on the UOS, they realized the teachers felt they had to learn a whole new way of teaching, which led to the second visit by the researchers. As teachers came to understand they were not being asked to make a drastic change in the *way* they taught, they were able to begin simply adapting their familiar reading strategies to accommodate graphic novels with the coach's hands-on support. Thus, the disconnect between what the teachers thought they were expected to do and what the researchers

were actually asking them to do was a challenge. Further insight was provided later by the coach; he suggested that the fact that the UOS constitute a complicated curriculum and these teachers had only been engaged with it for less than three years prior to the study, the teachers may not have developed a level of comfort or familiarity with it to “branch out.” Since the study, he reports he has begun to see such personalizing of lessons taking place (personal communication).

Based on comments in the focus interview, the researchers began to understand that the teachers were not quite as onboard with the study as was initially thought. Although the teachers acknowledged that they had agreed to commit to the study in the late fall before it began in the spring, the comments of the teachers suggested a level of resentment. The resentment had to do with beginning the process in the middle of the year, without what they felt they needed in terms of adequate planning time. A beginning-of-the-year start would clearly have supported a higher level of teacher buy-in.

In terms of benefits, evidence from the coach’s journal and the email threads strongly suggests that the teachers were engaged with learning about and reading graphic novels and slowly but steadily gaining confidence. By the end of the study, the teachers had gained an adequate level of confidence to teach with and about graphic novels and guide students as they read them, as evidenced in the observations. The teachers credited the patient leadership of the coach as well as the structure of the graphic novel comprehension strategies employed as part of the study as being critical to getting them through it successfully.

After the mini lessons in the library, the teachers began incorporating graphic novels in their individual class lessons, but the library sessions were key, the backbone, to students’ learning the structured process of reading graphic novels. They were also key for the teachers as they watched the teaching process modeled by the coach and this supported their moving into a

modeling position in their own classrooms. At the start of this process, it was very clear the teachers themselves had no to very little experience as graphic novel readers and no experience as teachers who utilize graphic novels within their own classrooms. These library modeling sessions were their lifelines.

Although both teachers and researchers struggled with adapting the UOS to incorporate graphic novels, with the help and encouragement of the coach, a way was found. (Interestingly, Teachers College offers a writing institute featuring a component on reading and writing graphic novels (Knight, 2019; Teachers College, 2014b)). By the end of the study, all teachers were teaching about and discussing graphic novels as appropriate and felt confident in conferencing with students who were reading graphic novels. Teachers had come to understand that they can use graphic novels to teach all aspects of literacy and literary elements. They seemed to grasp that teachers can and should include graphic novels as a reasonable option for all students who want to read them for independent reading. We should note that the researchers were hopeful this would allow for more flexibility in regard to the teachers' willingness to add more graphic novels to their units the following year. Sadly, comments of the teachers in the focus interview suggested that would not be the case unless the graphic novel was a part of their UOS. They did not seem invested enough to search them out on their own.

Regarding the research question which asked how successful the suite of strategies was in supporting teacher confidence and ability to incorporate graphic novels in their reading workshop format and encourage and support students in reading graphic novels, we believe we can say that we encountered expected and unexpected challenges which we were able to overcome to some degree. We feel that the study has provided important support for the effectiveness of the suite of strategies for introducing graphic novels that we hoped for. The

teachers did indeed learn a great deal about graphic novels and became competent readers of them and teachers about them and with them in their reading workshops. The caveat for that is, the teachers required a level of support to carry out the tasks related to introducing graphic novels to their students beyond what we anticipated.

The students themselves were not subjects of this study, but we felt it would be informative of the teachers' outlook to know how they perceived the impact on the students. Comments gleaned from the coach's journal and the focus interview showed that the teachers all felt that most students had benefited from the study of graphic novels. Researchers were pleased to hear the teachers talk about the students really using reading strategies to comprehend a graphic novel story. They noted that the teachers reported they could "see" their own students' thinking through the reading process, going back to re-read and put the pictures and storyline together to aid with interpretation and comprehension.

Teachers did not expect or require students to choose a graphic novel to read, but as they pointed out, many did and were reading them successfully, even teaching their parents about them. In sum, teachers perceived students overall had learned and were benefiting from graphic novels.

### **Limitations**

The setting of the study is, in part, a limitation in that it was a private school not subject to many of the constraints that public schools are. For purposes of the design of this study, the Teachers College UOS as the teachers implemented them comprise a limitation in that this style of reading workshop is somewhat more prescriptive compared to what we typically find in most classrooms (e.g., Miller, 2009). An EdWeek Research Center report (2020) found that only 16% of early childhood reading classrooms used Teachers College UOS. Some might also feel that

having the coach as a participant researcher embedded in the school on a day-to-day basis could compromise the reliability of our results. We feel, however, that this situation actually contributed to the richness of the study in ways that would not have been easy or practicable for the university researchers to do alone and that our data collection and methods of analysis mitigated the concern for reliability.

## **Conclusion**

As researchers, we designed and redesigned the study (Brown, 1992; Philippakos et al., 2021; Yin, 2003) to fit the learning environment and preset curriculum firmly in place within each classroom. This flexibility allowed us to watch the interaction between the teachers and the coach and between the students and the teachers as the learning took place and make adjustments as they seemed warranted. The data analysis provides vital insight into such important conversations. Having the ability to observe the workshop process in one-on-one settings, to hear the questions asked, to see the interactions taking place while being afforded the opportunity to suggest and revise as the process developed, to have emails and journals documenting each stage of the intervention—all of this allowed the professional development to be on-going, not a one-time shot, hit-or-miss opportunity. It became a developing study as the learning took place, and we were able to observe the successes and failures in real time.

As university researchers, we were pleased that the coach and the teachers were able to use most of the comprehension strategies introduced in the PD successfully, adapting them to their specific setting. We were able to determine that this effort to help teachers in a private school learn to appreciate and teach with graphic novels was successful on several levels, in that

teachers learned how to read graphic novels and how to teach with them and that students were perceived to have benefitted. It was also successful in providing answers to questions we did not know to ask. For example, it became clear that the leadership of the reading coach was critical in guiding teachers to a deeper understanding of how to read and appreciate graphic novels. To get the teachers comfortable within the study involved much work and was very time-consuming; without it, the study would simply not have been successful on any level. This supports our contention that ongoing, supported PD is a requirement for success with these strategies.

Despite the challenges that the Teachers College version of reading workshop presented for the teachers who lacked a sense of agency within it, we have concluded that reading workshops may be the most fertile format for both teachers and students to begin to feel comfortable with and acquire a taste for graphic novels. We believe in free choice of independent reading and lots of it; we subscribe to the principles of reading workshop. The format of the reading workshop with its mini lesson, status check, independent reading with conferencing, and sharing offers opportunity for graphic novels to be read, recommended, and shared among class members, meaning that appreciation for graphic novels as a reading option will grow.

This study has given us insight as to how we should redesign future studies as we move into the next iteration of supporting the teaching and reading of graphic novels using our suite of comprehension strategies. Although the private school was very open and willing to support our work, we believe the next study should be done in a public school to be more generalizable. We need to investigate beforehand to understand the level of autonomy teachers have in their own planning and structure the PD accordingly. Since many public schools do not typically have the luxury of a reading coach or one that is as familiar with graphic novels as the coach in this case was, we as university researchers will plan to do the coaching throughout the duration of the

study ourselves. Revisiting teachers after the study to determine any latent or lasting effects would make the study richer, and including school librarians would also add important insight.

So, although this particular episode has come to an end, our tale is not done. We are encouraged that this PD with extended intensive support made a difference in how some teachers and students have come to view graphic novels. As we work to improve our approach, we hope to reach many more future graphic novel readers, both teachers and students.

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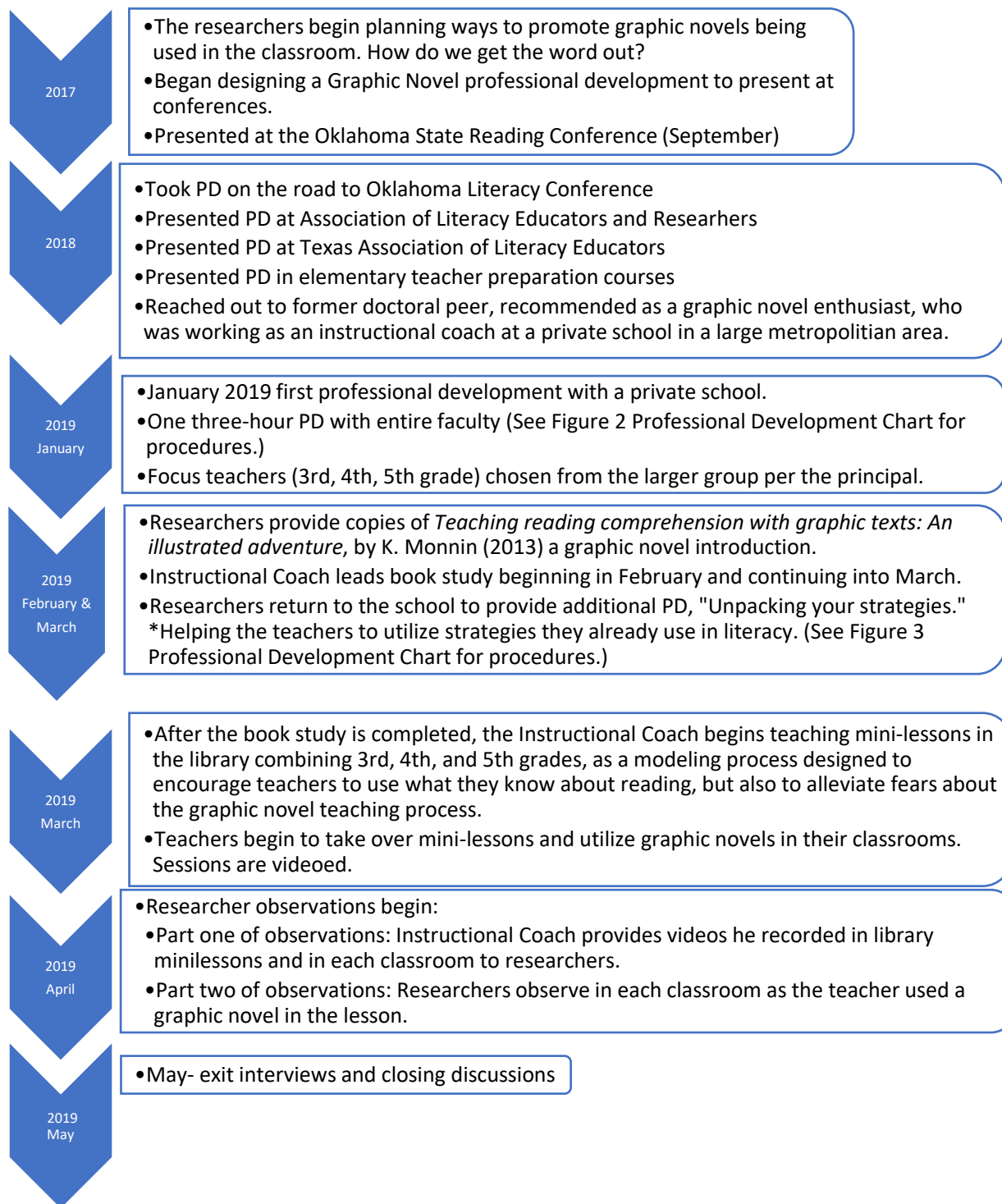
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## Appendix

### Structured Focus Group Interview Questions

1. Has your general impression of graphic novels changed? In what way?
2. What is your impression of the success or lack of it regarding teaching graphic novel strategies in the Reading Workshop?
3. If you see it as generally successful, what do you think is the reason?
4. If you see it as not successful, why?
5. As you taught the strategies over several months, did you see any evidence that the students' feelings about graphic novels changed? If so, how and why?

**Figure 1***Timeline of Professional Development Activities*



**Figure 2***Components of Full Faculty Professional Development*

Professional Development: Steps for Introducing Graphic Novels	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Reading the Image – visual reading (Visual Thinking Strategy)</li> <li>• Graphic Novel Conventions and Vocabulary - Landsdown Cards</li> <li>• Double-entry Jigsaw (Content Clues – reading for meaning/ Synthesizing images and text)</li> <li>• Question and Answer session to close</li> </ul>
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**Figure 3***Components of Second Professional Development with Three Focus Teachers*

Professional Development add-on: Unpacking your strategies - a dialog of strategies...	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Travel bathroom bag packed with essentials.</li> <li>• Researcher unpacks bag while giving reasons for using each item.</li> <li>• Questions the teachers, “What would you use these items for if they were yours?”</li> <li>• “Does it matter if we agree on the use?” “These are just the strategies I use. You choose your own strategies...those already in your bathroom kit. They are comfortable for you.</li> <li>• You know your students and their needs...the tools you choose are up to you...”</li> <li>• “I will not pack your kit; I don’t know what you’ll need.” “You alone know what to pack!”</li> <li>• “You don’t need to learn new strategies. You already have what you need.”</li> </ul>
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