6-1-1945

A survey of the literature on the use of comics as a means of promoting interest in reading

Florence Morrison Hogan

Atlanta University

Follow this and additional works at: http://digitalcommons.auctr.edu/dissertations

Part of the Education Commons

Recommended Citation

This Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by DigitalCommons@Robert W. Woodruff Library, Atlanta University Center. It has been accepted for inclusion in ETD Collection for AUC Robert W. Woodruff Library by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@Robert W. Woodruff Library, Atlanta University Center. For more information, please contact cwiseman@auctr.edu.
A SURVEY OF THE LITERATURE ON THE USE OF COMICS AS A
MEANS OF PROMOTING INTEREST IN READING

A THESIS
SUBMITTED TO THE FACULTY OF ATLANTA UNIVERSITY
IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR
THE DEGREE OF MASTER OF ARTS

BY
FLORENCE MORRISON HOGAN

DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION

ATLANTA, GEORGIA
JUNE 1945
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Chapter</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I. INTRODUCTION</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Statement of the Problem</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Historical Background</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Purpose of this Study</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Organization of Chapters</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Method of Procedure and Source of Data</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>II LITERATURE DEALING WITH COMICS</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Paul Witty</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Robert L. Thorndike</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ruth, Streng</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Charles D. Lutz</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>W. W. D. Sones</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Josette Frank</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lena Denecke</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>G. E. Hill</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Summary</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>III ANALYSIS OF FINDINGS</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Issues</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Trends</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Criticisms</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Observation and Interpretation of Investigator</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Summary</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IV SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>V BIBLIOGRAPHY</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

It is manifestly evident that comics have become an almost universal form of children's reading in America. From a recent survey\(^1\) it was found that about eighteen million comic books are sold each month. This does not include the daily and Sunday funnies.

Varied are the experiences of the classroom teacher in dealing with pupils and their reading of comics, which are apparently not restricted to sex, intelligence quotient, cultural, social or educational background. That is, comics are read and enjoyed by most pupils when available, regardless of background and previous experiences.

Statement of Problem. — A Survey of the Literature on the Use of Comics as a Means of Promoting Interest in Reading.

Historical Background. — The term comics includes all material in the newspapers or magazines under the caption of comics, funny papers or comic books.

The history of comics has not been treated extensively; however, according to Frances Henne,\(^2\) the first comics were in the form of cartoons and appeared in the newspapers in 1890. Among the first ones were "The Yellow Kid," "The Katzenjammer Kids," and "Happy Hooligan."

\(^1\) Josette Frank, "The Role of Comic Strips and Comic Books in Child Life," Adapting Reading Program to Wartime Needs, V (December, 1943), p. 158.

Finally, in 1900 came the daily strips, and in 1933 the now popular comic books. The following themes were presented in the early comic strips:

(1) Overemphasis of a character trait.
(2) Smart child.
(3) Animals with human abilities.
(4) Application of modern themes to another period.

No complete evolution of the comic strip has yet been written, but one may infer from all pictorial works that pictures are able to tell something in a quick and easy manner.³

The Purpose of the Study. — Comics are apparently valuable in that they seem to satisfy something lacking in the total reading pattern of the child. Thus, parents and teachers should acquaint themselves with the comics so that they may be able to understand the child’s viewpoint and to discuss with him intelligently any aspect of the comics that may arise. Again, comics are popular and their popularity is increasing as one of children’s best liked leisure pursuits.

David T. Armstrong⁴ made a study of some comic books because he was challenged by a pupil to read one. Before reading it, he was against comic books because his views were that they portrayed wild fantasy, used objectionable slang, contributed nothing permanent and used up

---

³ Ibid., pp. 155-156.

He would not allow his pupils to read the comics and criticized them whenever he could until the above mentioned challenge was made. He got the book and read it. First, he discovered that the publishers of this particular comic book had an editorial advisory board composed of a consultant on children's reading, an outstanding educator, and other outstanding individuals. Secondly, he enjoyed the story and conceded these points:

1. The vocabulary is on a high level.
2. This type of reading encourages reading and increases reading speed.
3. The values being stressed in the comic book were wholesome.
4. The comic books are reading and intriguing a large audience.
5. The appearance of True Comics in Parent Magazine is a tacit acknowledgment of the popularity and appeal of comics as an educational device.
6. Comics cannot be ignored any more than movies or the radio as a modern educational device.
7. The comic books contain historical and classic material as well as everyday human relationships.

In view of the above findings, the purpose of this study is to discover the status of comics as a means of motivating reading.

The Organization of Chapters. - Chapter one deals with the historical background of comics, the purpose of this study, and method of procedure. The second chapter will present views of outstanding authorities on comics
as a means of promoting interest in reading. The third chapter will discuss issues, needs, trends, and criticisms as expressed by these authors. The summary and conclusion will follow and suggestions as to the worthwhile use of comics.

Method of Procedure. - The analytical survey technique will be used. The material gathered is to be analyzed and classified under suitable headings.
CHAPTER II

LITERATURE DEALING WITH COMICS

Comics and comic magazines loom large on almost every child's horizon, therefore, we cannot treat the subject of comics lightly.

Any entertainment of such scope naturally receives the attention of parents, teachers and others concerned with child guidance.

Until recently, little authoritative evolution of comics has been available. For that reason, the writer in this chapter will bring together the opinions of outstanding educators, psychologists, authorities in child education, and others who base their statements on observation and experience.

The excerpts which follow were gathered from magazine articles, pamphlets, a reading conference report, a brochure, and unpublished circulars.

An outstanding authority on child education, Paul Witty, devised a questionnaire on comics and administered it first to 2500 selected pupils in grades IV, V, and VI, in eight schools in Evanston, and Chicago, Illinois, and Milwaukee, Wisconsin. The pupils were asked to check the comic books or magazines which they read and to indicate whether or not they read them regularly, often, or occasionally. Comic strips were to be checked in the same manner. The pupils were requested also to name

their favorite comic magazine and comic strip, and to add any titles not listed. The same questionnaire was afterward given to another group of pupils picked at random. The results revealed that sex, age, grade or locality did not affect the reading of comics and that comics are one of the pupils' favorite leisure activities. In fact, it appears to be the most popular of all reading pursuits.

In view of the apparent interest and appeal of comic material for the child, the facts presented in this report suggest that there exists in this supplementary resource real value for the educator who is interested in working with the child as he is, and in leading him on to greater attainment from one growth stage to another. Techniques such as the interest-inventory, the anecdotal record, or the child's own diary offer the teacher avenues of approach.

Robert L. Thorndike made a study of words in D. C. Superman, publication of comics. This company publishes the following comic books:

(1) Superman
(2) Batman
(3) Action Comics
(4) Detective Comics

He found that each of the above named books contained about 10,000 words and about 1,000 different words other than those found in the commonest 1,000 of the Thorndike list. The four books contained 3,000 different words from those found in Thorndike's first 1,000 word list. Thorndike further discovered that for the most part the reading is standard English.

---

This study is valuable in choice and selection of comic books to recommend in view of vocabulary building as well as child interest.

In her argument for the comics, Ruth Strang\(^7\) stated that comics may be listed under modern folklore and that they may be compared to the myths of the Greeks and Norse. She also pointed out that comics give to children a sense of adventure that they will eventually overcome, aid their imagination while they are children, help those of limited reading ability build a vocabulary, and serve as supplementary reading.

In the report of the proceedings of the conference on reading, held at the University of Chicago, December, 1943, Charles D. Lutz\(^8\) made the following significant implications in his summary. The comics are:

1. Based on popular appeal which cannot be easily overlooked or underestimated.

2. Do not antagonize any group or individual.


4. Contain adventure stories.

5. Become less and less comic.

6. Illustrate form of communication in use of pictures and printed word.

7. Have a wide audience and their potential strength should not be under-rated.

---


\(^8\) Charles D. Lutz, "Practical Implications of the Sixth Annual Conference on Reading," *Adapting Reading Programs to Wartime Needs*, V (December, 1943), p. 277.
(8) Reflect to some extent the socio-economic condition of the period in which they are printed.

The comics were discussed at length at the conference, which indicates their popularity and appeal. Their use was championed also as a means of promoting interest in reading.

Comic magazines have been studied extensively by Dr. W. W. D. Sones, Professor of Education and Director of Curriculum Study, University of Pittsburgh. He says, "Interest in comic books may be exploited to improve reading skills and tastes, and broaden informational background." 9

Sones conducted with his students a study of comic books in the curriculum laboratory of the University of Pittsburgh.

The group examined a wide variety of comic publications, read some of them jointly with the children, and encouraged general discussion among the pupils. Dr. Sones' own observations include: "Obviously, the influence on reading ability is one important contact between comic books and the work of the school. Does the excess of picturization retard or develop reading skills? Will the illustrated story tend to make 'lazy' readers? Analysis showed that a child in reading a comic book is practicing the very same activities that are used in good reading instruction. He learns new word symbols through pictures of things or actions, or in the content of the story. Interest in the story arouses need for identifying new

words in order to continue the thread of thought.

"The pupil gets practice in recognizing new words through their appearance in many different settings. ..... They may be used to enlarge reading and speech vocabulary. Allusion to History, Science, Geography, and Current Events may be expanded into real enlightenment through discussion. ..... Probably what is most important of all is the opportunity of sharing this interest with the child through reading together."10

Dr. Sones, in another article, stated that teachers are seeking ways and means by which they may capitalize on the interest in comics for school purposes. Comic books, like selected radio programs, popular movies, and selected games and sports, are a part of the child's life. The comics may be used as a remedial instrument. This was illustrated in a case study cited by Dr. Sones.

Case Study

George

Age 13     Fifth grade

He had taken seven years to make the same progress other children had made in five years. One day, the teacher saw a comic book in his geography book during the class period. She did not take the book, which is a conventional impulse. Rather, she checked his reading of the comic book. She found that he had comprehended enough of the story not only to reproduce it but had been doing some thinking and evaluating as he read. It was further discovered that the readers for his grade did not appeal to him because of the baby talk. The teacher gave sympathetic assistance in the reading of additional comic books. This provided opportunity to show how new words could

10
W. W. D. Sones, "What About the Comics?" Brochure, Juvenile Group Foundation, Children and Comic Magazines. N. D.
be identified. George was able very soon to see similarity in events of comics in geography, history and science material. His general reading ability and interest improved.\textsuperscript{11}

Josette Frank,\textsuperscript{12} well known staff advisor to the Children's Book and Radio Committee, Child Study Association of America, writes that it is the path of wisdom for educators to recognize that comics are materials that children are widely reading. In terms of interest, comics would seem to have potentialities for use in the teaching of reading in the schools and also serve to build vocabulary. Reading must stimulate and challenge critical thinking, difference of value, validity, sincerity, story content and appeal. Comics offer, therefore, an excellent bridge to reading, especially for those children who find it difficult to attack a whole page of printed matter. The short lines, the small units of print, the large type used by the better comic books, and the fact that the pictures help to carry the sense of the story all contribute to making reading a pleasant experience rather than a difficult task. She finally states, "I am profoundly convinced of this; that children read the comics because they find in them a very real and deep and vital satisfaction of some innermost need of their own."\textsuperscript{13}


\textsuperscript{13} Ibid.
A fifth grade class in school 52, Buffalo, New York, taught by Lena Denecke, decided to classify the comic books. Their classification follows in part:

I. Informational—relatively wholesome.
II. Harmless—amusing stories.
III. Unwholesome.

Under each classification were listed the comic books that were rated under that particular classification. With such interest started by the reading of comics the children culminated the reading with an assembly program, using comic personalities. It dramatically demonstrated that children are eager to follow new paths to new adventures. It must be a large part of our trust as teachers to help direct young footsteps on the paths.

A study was made by G. E. Hill, assisted by M. E. Triest, of 240 children in grades IV, V, and VI in Philadelphia, September, 1940. The questionnaire method was used. White and Negro children were used in the study. It was found that the white children read more comics than Negro children, due to economic conditions. It was proved, however, that all children had a common interest and liked the comics primarily for the adventure, excitement, and action portrayed, and because some of them were funny. Finally, that interest in comics was similar to their interest in radio and the movies.

---


From the foregoing survey, the writer concludes that comics represent a strong force in children's interests, and these interests can be capitalized upon and used to promote greater interest and better reading in the classroom. Beginning with the child's own interest and reading habits will inevitably involve a recognition of the comics and the child's needs which they meet.

In the last four or five years the comic book has made an appearance on the American scene and has taken its place along with the movies and radio in children's interest.

A more detailed conclusion will be given in a later chapter. However, the writer is aware from the survey that comics have contributed reading material of a positive nature and can be used to supplement the child's reading experience.
CHAPTER III

ANALYSIS OF FINDINGS

Many and varied have been the issues, trends and criticisms arising from the widespread popularity of comics. The purpose of this chapter is to cite these trends and issues as expressed by the authors and, likewise, certain critical views.

Issues. - There have been conflicting opinions concerning the comics. Some important issues have been raised. George R. Reynolds\(^{16}\) said that there is an insatiable desire of children for this form of amusement because children are ignorant of the availability of good books. It is interesting to note, however, that public libraries and school libraries are increasing. There is hardly a school room of any size that does not have a small reading corner, yet the children bring and read the comic books.

According to David T. Armstrong\(^{17}\), the comic books do not report historical facts accurately. This issue can be solved by the classroom teacher. First, the companies could be asked to report the facts accurately. Then, the classroom teacher, using the comics as a teaching device, may point out the mistakes and have the children read from another source the correct fact. Not only would this stimulate their interest but also serve as a means of introducing them to other sources of more accurate data; at the same time the comic books would be serving as a means to an end.

---


\(^{17}\) David T. Armstrong, "How Good are the Comic Books?" *The Elementary English Review*, XXI (December, 1944), p. 300.
It was reported further that comics are similar to the dime novel of two generations ago, and that the best way to deal with them is to redirect them into purposeful channels. This raises the issue as to whether the comic books are just a fad and will soon pass off the scene. From the information gathered, it seems that the comic books are here to stay. The issues involved in reading the comics are becoming less and less. They are not as exciting as the continued daily radio stories, nor as absurd as the continued series movies. The various companies are using improvement methods to keep the comic books on the market. They are also seeking to make the books of educational value. The comics are not always funny but are within range of the child's own social-economic environment, and help to extend his experiences.

Most educators are critical of the comics without a thorough knowledge of them. Therefore, an investigation by the classroom teacher is vitally necessary before the issue of the worth of comics is discussed. Their use as well as their influence is an important matter.

It is agreed that educators want children to read. They are reading the comics. If the classroom teacher knows the contents of the comic books she is in a position to start her teaching process with the child's own interest and within his own environment.

Comic strips, so lightly regarded by some of the nation's thinkers, comprise the most significant body of literature in America today. Only one daily metropolitan newspaper in the United States, The New York Times.

---

18 Current Events, "How Much of a Menace are the Comics?" School and Society, LIV (November, 1941), p. 436.
manages to exist without comic strips. The comic strips sell the newspapers. The issue raised here by some psychologists and educators is that the average person's devotion to comics is an indication of cultural and intellectual infantilism. On the other hand, it has been pointed out that comic strips, in reality, constitute the proletarian novels of America.

Finally, much work is involved in publishing the comics. Since most of them have a continuous thread over a period of weeks, it is necessary for the creator of a particular comic to work at least four weeks in advance. The creating of the comics requires skill, thought, patience and originality, beside clear drawing and interesting dialogue.

**Trends.** — "Post-war plans in this branch of the graphic arts," said David T. Armstrong, "will involve exploration into the adult market by supplying material on a level sufficiently intriguing and exciting to captivate the attention." He stated further that we should let comics have the market they have built up and encourage the publishers to use acceptable language, to encourage the virtues of human behavior and condemn the vices subtly enough so as not to become preachy.

The publishers of the *Superman Comic Magazines* have an editorial advisory board composed of a professor of psychiatry, a consultant on children's reading, a professor in the field of education, a professor of English, and an executive member of the Boy Scout Foundation and Catholic Youth organization. *The Blue Belt Comics* publishes letters from its readers. The letters consist of comments and critical views. *The Bow Comics* has an

---

editorial board composed of a director of the Child Study Association of America, a director of a clinic for gifted children, a professor of education, and a famous flier and author. The All America Comic Magazines also has an editorial advisory board consisting of similar specialists. The purpose of these boards is to help the companies maintain a high standard of wholesome entertainment.

George J. Heckt, the editor of Parent Magazine, after discovering that comic books were apparently here to stay, began the publication of three comic books, True Comics, Real Heroes, and Calling All Girls. These books are well written and drawn, and are popular with the children.

It seems that children in the middle grades have desires and experiences that are adventurous and exciting. According to most authorities the comics meet these needs.

From the information gathered by E. R. Smith, the comic strips were used to interest students in the library. For example, one bulletin read thus: "Pop Eye" is an Amateur Compared to Captains Blood. There were so many calls for the book that the display sign had to be removed.

Criticisms. — H. E. Lee of the Schurs High School, Chicago, Illinois, thinks that the reading of comics encourages wishful thinking on the part

--

20 Current Events, op cit., p. 436.


of the pupil.

North, in his editorial dated May 8, 1940, in the Chicago Daily News, was very bitter towards comic books. He stated that they are "A poisonous mushroom growth of the last years ....... that they are worse than the dime novel, badly drawn, badly printed, and a strain on the eyes and the nervous system." 23

From information gathered from Ruth Strang, both sides of the question of comics were discussed. Against the reading of comics, she said that the reading of comics tends to crowd out reading of a more desirable type, and that the poor reader merely gets the story from the picture without making any effort to read the text. She also stated that the adventure incidents are too far removed from reality. 24

Observation and Interpretation of Investigator. - The writer has made the following observations. It was found from checking at least a dozen comic books as well as carefully observing the daily funnies, along with a classroom experiment, that although the list is varied and the children have access to all of them, they do have choices. They exchange their books with other children.

It was further observed that the comics are written in standard English. The comic magazines already mentioned carry a two-page story beside the comics. The spelling of the words is correct and the pictures are well drawn and colorful. Some of the comics are real stories of present-day heroes, others give true historical incidents, and still

---


24 Ruth Stang, op. cit., p. 337.
points of the comics. They are so well written as to hold the pupil's interest to the next issue. Not only do children discuss them daily but adults as well.

The bond then of human relationship and human interest as shown in the comics is tied up closely with the everyday experiences of the child. Therefore, because of this human tie, the educator can use the comics as a motivating force in the promotion of interest in reading.

There are certain elements that one must consider in reading. The question arises as to how do the comics measure up.

As to comprehension, it has been found that the comics are easy to read and that the pictures help to carry the meaning.

The vocabulary is standard, as reported in a study made by Thorndike; in fact, the running words cover roughly twice the wordage of a fourth grade reader. 25

The foregoing account of observations of the author as teacher and interpretations of findings include educational resources consisting of many thousands of words of reading experiences and pictures.

The fact cannot be ignored that the comics can be used to aid in making reading more pleasant, informative, and attractive, and at the same time contribute to the growth of the pupil in a positive manner.
CHAPTER IV

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

This is a study of the comics as a means of promoting interest in reading.

From the information gathered, it has been found that the comics are popular and their popularity is increasing.

The history of comics dates back to 1890 when the first comics appeared in the daily newspaper. In 1900 came the daily strip, and in 1933, the now popular books or magazines. These early comics emphasized animals with human abilities, smart children, over-emphasis of character traits and application of modern themes to another period. No complete evolution of the comic strip has yet been written.

Until recently, little authoritative evaluation of comics has been available, but the writer brought together the opinions of such educators and psychologists as Paul Witty, Robert L. Thorndike, Ruth Strang, Charles D. Lutz, W. W. D. Sones, Josette Frank, G. E. Hill, and David T. Armstrong.

Many issues were raised by the authors concerning the comics. One author said that the reading of comics is not purposeful. Another commented that children read them because they are ignorant of the availability of good books. And still another observed that the comics do not report facts accurately.

Present-day trends indicate that comics are apparently here to stay. They seem to satisfy something lacking in the child's experience, and are a part of the current environment. It is generally advocated by the leading educational authorities that the comics should be allowed to have
the market they have built up, and by guidance teach the child to
evaluate them, thus eliminating the ones not meeting the standard.

The comics may be judged and classified like other children's
literature. It was found that from the standpoint of comprehension,
vocabulary, interest, illustrative material, and English, the comics
make a positive contribution as an in- and out-of-school supplement to
the child's reading experience. On the other hand, at school the
interest in reading comics by the children may be capitalized to promote
many phases of desirable growth and development.

Conclusion. - The comic book is a widespread feature of the current
environment of children. As such it must be recognized by parents and
teachers as an influence on child growth and development.

From the foregoing information the following conclusions were
drawn:

(1) Comicas have a strong appeal which cannot be easily
    ignored or underestimated.
(2) The comics are less and less comical.
(3) They meet rigid moral standards.
(4) They do not antagonize any group.
(5) They are a part of the child's current environment.
(6) They contain more words than the average fourth and
    fifth readers.
(7) They can be used to lengthen reading and speech
    vocabulary.
(8) Because of the pictures and illustrations, comics aid
    in carrying the reading, making it pleasant, attractive
    reading for the children who would be unable to read
straight text of that difficulty.

(9) The comics may be used to help teach history, science, geography and current events.

(10) To some extent, they reflect the socio-economic conditions of the period in which they are published.

(11) They are interesting and humanly appealing to children.

(12) The comics have a wide audience and their potential strength should not be under-rated.

Implications. - Since children of all ages, both sexes, of high and low intelligence quotients, of all cultural, social and educational backgrounds, read the comics they present a challenge to parents, teachers and librarians. In the first place, then, one should investigate these clues to reading interests which the children are showing and then find ways of offering the child reading and other activities that will really meet these interests and broaden them.

Since reading helps to mold opinion it is necessary to give to children the kind of reading satisfaction they are demanding. The comics may not be the answer but they point the way.
ARTICLES

Armstrong, David T. "How Good are the Comics?" The Elementary English Review, XXI (December, 1944), p. 285.

Current Events, "How Much of a Menace are the Comics?" School and Society, LIV (November, 1941), p. 436.


Witty, Paul "Children's Interest in Reading the Comics," Childhood Education, XVII (October, 1941), p. 56.

23
BULLETINS

Frank, Josette "The Use of Comics and Comic Books in Child Life," 
Adapting Reading Program to War Time Needs, Monograph No. 5, 
(December, 1943), p. 158. Compiled and edited by William 

Henne, Frances "Whence the Comics! Its Development and Content," 
Adapting Reading Program to War Time Needs, Monograph No. 5, 
(December, 1943), p. 158. Compiled and edited by William 

Sones, W. W. D. "What About the Comics?" Children and Comic Magazines, 
N. D. Published by the Juvenile Group Foundation, 
125 East 46th Street, New York City.