Chapter 9
"To Act for a Better World":
Using Social Justice Graphic Novels to Empower Youth

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ABSTRACT

Graphic novels are becoming more widely accepted by librarians and teachers as a mainstream literary format for students. They are also effective tools for engaging youth with challenging social issues, as the quote in the title suggests. This chapter provides an overview of ways university instructors can teach pre-service educators to use social justice graphic novels in their high school classrooms and libraries. The content in this chapter is based on findings from research conducted by the authors about social justice issues in young adult graphic novels. The chapter includes an annotated list of selective graphic novel titles based on five social justice issues (racism, immigration and displacement, LGBTQIA+ and gender, mental health, and the environment and climate change). It also provides examples of standards-based best practices for using the graphic novels with pre-service teachers and librarians, award lists, and other educational resources.

INTRODUCTION

Reading and writing have always been tools that take us across borders, build bridges across cultures and communities, and enable us to see and hold up to critical scrutiny the competing and complex texts that vie to influence our beliefs, everyday lives, moral commitments, and social investments. (Luke, 2003, p. 20)

Learners and educators alike know the power of reading and literacy described by Allan Luke (2003). Outside of the literacy skills themselves, books tackling critical social justice issues offer readers op-

portunities to think beyond the mainstream, accepted norms presented to them daily and enable them to imagine something different. With the combination of sequential art and text, graphic novels take that a step forward.

The content developed for this chapter originated from a research study about social justice issues in graphic novels for young adults conducted by the authors, professors who teach pre-service school librarians in Australia and the United States. The following research questions guided the study:

- What types of social justice topics and issues are addressed in graphic novels for young adults?
- What are the overall characteristics of graphic novels for young adults addressing social justice topics and issues?
- What are best practices for using social justice graphic novels in culturally relevant ways with today's youth?

The researchers examined graphic novel collections in ten libraries across Australia and the United States, including the National Library of Australia in Canberra, AU and the Library of Congress in Washington, D.C.

While acknowledging the challenges in concretely defining the term social justice (Nijdam, 2020), the following definition guides this study: "The objective of creating a fair and equal society in which each individual matters, their rights are recognized and protected, and decisions are made in ways that are fair and honest" (Oxford Reference.) Social justice in school settings means that educators work to ensure that all of their students are recognized, valued, and supported in safe environments, such as classrooms and libraries. When defining diversity and considering the breadth of social justice issues affecting our world today, this project uses the We Need Diverse Books (WNDB) definition of diversity, as it is wide-reaching and specifically notes the marginalization of certain groups. On the WNDB website, they note: "We recognize all diverse experiences including but not limited to LGBTQIA, Native, people of color, gender diversity, people with disabilities, and ethnic, cultural, and religious minorities" and give special emphasis on disability including "physical, sensory, cognitive, intellectual, or developmental disabilities, chronic conditions and mental illnesses" including addiction issues (n.d.). This definition is all-encompassing and meant to embrace diversity.

The goals of the study follow:

- Examine social justice issues in graphic novels for young adults in the U.S. and Australia published since 2000;
- Provide a toolkit of social justice graphic novel resources that school, public, and academic librarians, classroom teachers, and parent/caregivers can use with young adults;
- Expose young adult readers to multiple representations of identities and experiences through the use of social justice graphic novels; and
- Develop compassionate participation in a multicultural society and provide authentic reflections so youth recognize themselves and others as valued members of society, through the use of social justice graphic novels.

The objectives for this chapter are to provide university faculty who teach pre-service teachers and librarians with resources and summaries of social justice graphic novel titles that they can use with their students, as well as best practices for using them in classrooms and libraries.

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