

Evaluation of the “Maryland Comics in the Classroom” Pilot Program

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Background and Overview

The Maryland State Department of Education (MSDE) contracted with researchers in the Psychology Department at the University of Maryland, Baltimore County (UMBC) to evaluate a pilot program called *Maryland Comics in the Classroom*. The program represents a collaborative effort between MSDE, Disney Educational Productions, and Diamond Comic Book Distributors. It is described by MSDE as “a new initiative designed to motivate reading and improve reading skills and comprehension for third grade students.”

The program was developed in response to evidence that comic books can serve a useful instructional function. In a letter introducing the program to the teachers who would be using it, the leaders of the collaborative team¹ wrote: “In recent years, the educational community has come to recognize that comic books, graphic novels, animated films, and other related materials are excellent instructional tools. Many researchers believe that often those who read comic books read more overall, read more traditional books, and have more positive attitudes toward reading. Reading comics can be fun, and at the same time, can motivate reluctant readers as well as engage and stimulate outstanding students.”

Maryland Comics in the Classroom uses comic books as part of a third grade language arts instructional program in an effort to enhance student engagement. The instructional units were conceptualized and designed by a group of Maryland teachers and staff from Disney Educational Productions. The comic stories themselves had been created by Disney 40 to 50 years ago. The program was designed to be consistent with the Maryland State Voluntary Curriculum guidelines. MSDE recruited 8 schools from around the state to participate in the pilot project. Selected schools had achieved some mark of excellence such as being cited as a “Blue Ribbon” school.

The primary goal of the formative evaluation was to learn how the program was perceived by teachers and students so that it could be improved upon in further development efforts. The evaluation was not summative; that is, it was not designed to determine whether the program was effective in improving student achievement or motivation. Such an evaluation would have been premature because the program had never been implemented previously.

The evaluation addressed students’ interest in the program, teachers’ and students’ perceptions of the difficulty level of the program, and perceived effects of the program on other reading activities. To accomplish the goals of the

¹ Nancy Grasmick, MSDE, Steve Miller, Disney Publishing Worldwide, Stephen Geppi, Diamond Comic Distributors, 2006).

evaluation, teachers and students completed questionnaires and participated in focus groups. The evaluation plan and measures were reviewed and approved by MSDE, Disney Educational Productions, and Diamond Comic Book Distributors. The 31 participating teachers were asked to complete a *Background Questionnaire*, 10 *Thoughts about Lessons* questionnaires (1 for each lesson), and a more integrative final *Teacher Questionnaire*. Approximately 50 students from each school completed the *Student Questionnaire* at the end of the school year. The evaluation team conducted two focus groups with teachers, two with students, and one with parents.

Major Findings

Analyses of the questionnaires and focus group discussions provided detailed information as to how the program was perceived by teachers and by students. Overall, the *Maryland Comics in the Classroom* program was viewed as innovative, enjoyable, and very interesting by the majority of teachers and students. Teachers and students alike expressed a desire to use the program again, but with modifications to maximize its appeal and effectiveness. Summarized below is a small portion of the quantitative data that supports these general observations:

Lesson effectiveness. Teachers were asked to rate the overall effectiveness of each of the 10 lessons on a scale of 1 to 5, with 1 being not very effective and 5 being very effective. On every lesson, the mean rating was above 3.0, ranging from 3.32 to 4.52, indicating that all lessons were viewed as effective. Two lessons, one dealing with plot elements and the other with comic language, had mean ratings above 4.0 (4.16 and 4.52, respectively). Teachers were also asked to estimate the percentages of students in their classes who mastered the specified objectives of each lesson. Estimates were high, ranging from 77% to 88%; however, it is not known the extent to which students had mastered the objectives prior to the *Maryland Comics in the Classroom* program.

Student interest in specific lessons and in the program as a whole. Teachers were asked to rate how interested the students were in each of the 10 lessons on a scale of 1-5, with 1 being not interested and 5 being very interested. All but one of the mean ratings was above 4.0, ranging from 3.40 to 4.61, indicating a very high degree of student interest. Students appeared to the teachers to be least interested in the summarizing lesson, and most interested in the comic language lesson (consistent with the effectiveness ratings reported above). Teachers and students alike commented that they especially enjoyed the comic language lesson, with its focus on onomatopoeia and interjections. In fact, students in one focus group recommended that there be more onomatopoeia in the comic stories. Students themselves were asked to rate how much they enjoyed the program. Seventy percent of the students said they enjoyed the program very much, whereas only 3% of the students said not much at all.

According to the data collected from the students, the program appealed to both boys and girls.

Interest in using the program again. Teachers were asked to indicate whether they would want to use the program again, responding on a 5-point scale ranging from 1, not at all, to 5, very much. Overall, 80% of the teachers gave ratings of 4 or 5, with 53% of them giving the strongest endorsement. The students were asked a similar question: “How much would you like it if your teacher next year used a new set of comic stories and lessons? Using a 3-point scale, ranging from not much at all to very much, 66% of the children responded very much, and 24% responded a little. Only 11% of the children indicated no desire to use the program again. Comments provided by the teachers and students qualified these strong endorsements, as discussed below.

Vocabulary difficulty. Teachers were asked to rate how difficult the vocabulary was in the comics in each of the 7 lessons that introduced new stories. On a scale of 1-5, with 1 being very difficult and 5 being very easy, all of the mean ratings were below 3.0, ranging from 1.58 to 2.96. Vocabulary difficulty was a recurrent theme in teachers’ comments about the lessons and the program overall. Although students should be introduced to new vocabulary during reading lessons, the teachers (and some students) seemed to think there were too many unfamiliar words and that these interfered with story comprehension.

Conclusions

The *Maryland Comics in the Classroom* program was viewed as innovative and very interesting by teachers and by students. We cannot definitively say that the *Maryland Comics in the Classroom* program *increased* students’ motivation because we did not conduct a true experiment or compare pre-program and post-program levels of motivation. We can conclude, however, that students found the program very motivating.

Most of the teachers’ formative comments focused on the difficulty level of the vocabulary and the means of teaching vocabulary. The comics were viewed as too difficult for all but the top readers. Personal glossaries, the primary tool for helping students learn vocabulary, were judged too time-consuming and not particularly effective. In addition, teachers thought many of their students did not monitor their understanding well enough to identify words they did not understand for their glossaries. Students were expected to be able to use the context of the stories to help them “define” unfamiliar words. However, the comics did not always provide sufficient context to figure out an unfamiliar word, and students sometimes lacked necessary background knowledge. Modifying the difficulty level of the vocabulary and how it is taught may be particularly important with respect to student learning outcomes. Such modifications may make the program more effective for less-skilled readers, those most likely at risk for academic difficulties.