

Drawn to the Form

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Diversity in Comics and Graphic Novels

Recently, filmmakers announced the film debut of comic book superheroes Black Panther and Captain Marvel. Marvel Studio's Black Panther is a super strong, agile hero with super senses, and is a black African of royal descent. Captain Marvel is a feisty, female fighter pilot with a wide range of powers. Warner Brothers/DC Studios announced that Wonder Woman, the well-known female superhero, will feature in her own movie as well.

What does this have to do with comics and graphic novels? The origin of these superheroes in comic books and their movement to prominence in film is a trend toward more diverse comic superheroes being presented as lead characters. The movie adaptations of the comics ultimately draw readers to graphic novels and comics in the library, where more and diverse titles need to be available to engage readers — and more importantly — to reflect not just the school population but the diversity of the world.

Realizing the Promise of Diversity: Ontario's Equity and Inclusive Education Strategy (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2009) identifies that “the dimensions of diversity include, but are not limited to ancestry, culture, ethnicity, gender, gender identity, language, physical and intellectual ability, race, religion, sex, sexual orientation, and socio-economic status” (p.4). Each of these attributes should find a place in literature as well as in graphic novels in our school libraries.

Equity and Inclusive Education in Ontario schools: Realizing the promise of diversity (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2014) recognizes that our students are of diverse and unique backgrounds, and in order to reach their potential must be

provided with resources that reflect their experiences and the diversity of their communities. Comics and graphic novels offer the opportunity to engage students in exploring the diversity of our world through an already appealing format. The question remains: What diversity can we find in graphic novels and comics?

In order to locate diverse titles in this format we need to identify diverse characters with unique attributes, diversity in content, as well as diversity in comics' creators. Although G. Willow Wilson states, “I think we are at a point in comic book history where there is unprecedented openness to diversity” (Sava, Asselin, Bollers, and Wilson, 2014, para. 23), diversity in graphic novels and comics remains somewhat limited. Marvel Comics is promoting:

- a female Muslim superhero, Ms. Marvel,
- a female Thor: Goddess of Thunder,
- an African-American Spiderman, and
- a diverse group of teen crime fighters in *Runaways*.

DC Comics has created a new, more relatable Wonder Woman and a Batwoman who is lesbian; however, DC Comics also made the controversial decision that the latter character was not allowed to marry (Watson, 2014, para.3).

Archie Comics provides us with recurring character Kevin Keller, an openly gay teen, and Harper Lodge, a biracial female who happens to use a wheelchair. The stories told in the *Jinx: Little Miss Steps* series includes a single dad, a lesbian mother and the lead female, who is dreaming of playing on a baseball team.