MAKING A DIFFERENCE:
LANGUAGE AND CONNECTIONS IN THE GRAPHIC NOVEL *INVISIBLE*

By Amy Cummins and April Martinez
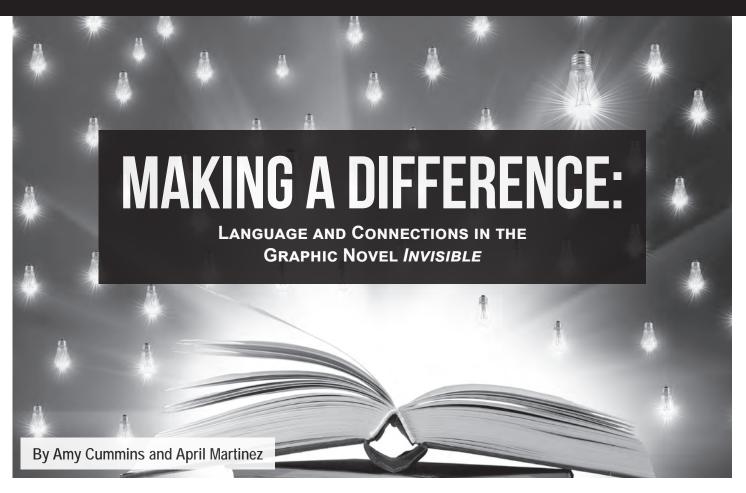
Amy Cummins works as a Professor of English in the College of Liberal Arts at the University of Texas Rio Grande Valley. She can be reached at amy.cummins@utrgv.edu.

April Martinez is a preservice teacher of English language arts and reading for grades 7-12 at the University of Texas Rio Grande Valley. She can be reached at april.martinez03@utrgv.edu.

Abstract: The graphic novel *Invisible* (2022) by Christina Diaz Gonzalez and Gabriela Epstein demonstrates that adolescents can create a positive difference in the world and build friendships with people different from themselves. The novel's themes, non-linear chronology, and innovative bilingual format make *Invisible* significant and linguistically inclusive. In this *Breakfast Club* (Hughes, 1985) remix, five eighth-grade students with Latina/o heritage grow to know one another and themselves through service hours. English Language Arts teachers can cover ELAR TEKS with *Invisible*. Suggested strategies include author study, process drama, cultural x-rays, writing prompts, videos about language, and family interviews. Gonzalez and Epstein's empowering and engaging narrative, told in English and Spanish, merits academic study and a place in required or independent reading.

Keywords: graphic novels, English Language Arts and Reading Texas Essential Knowledge and Skills (ELAR TEKS), bilingual books, literacy practices

In 1982, when my father (April's dad) was 12 years old, he joined the Boy Scouts of America™ based on how much he enjoyed camping and working with others. There were very few Boy Scouts in the Rio Grande Valley at that time, so he took pride in being one of the few. As he traveled to one of the first outings of the season, he noticed there were a lot of Scouts from in and out of the nation. My father, a proud Hispanic, would often speak Tex-Mex to his friends from the Rio Grande Valley. Upon hearing this, the Scoutmaster took my father to a group of three Scouts who were from Mexico. Then, the Scoutmaster made it clear that he wanted my father to translate from English to Spanish. My father's face drained of color. He knew his Spanish was rough compared to other Spanish speakers. The translations he offered the Scouts from Mexico were limited. The Scoutmaster asked him why he was translating only a little of what he was saying, and my father simply shrugged and said he was just summarizing. He earned his translator badge but vowed to speak Spanish only when around close friends. This anecdote demonstrates the history of language usage in Texas, and it points to how a book depicting multilingualism will resonate with adolescent readers today.

One such book is *Invisible* (2022) by Christina Diaz Gonzalez and Gabriela Epstein, a text that exemplifies quality, literary merit, and relevance. Analysis of this book's excellence and descriptions of teaching strategies to use with it reveal the unique strengths of this graphic novel. Supportive of *Invisible*, the Texas Library Association placed it on the 2023-24 Texas Bluebonnet List as well as the Texas Mavericks List of graphic novels recommended for grades 6-8. *Invisible* is on the 2023 list for the Notable Books for a Global Society from the International Literacy Association as well as on the Booklist Book Review Stars 2022 and the School Library Journal Best Books List of 2022 in the graphic novel category.

Invisible references *The Breakfast Club* (Hughes, 1985) when five different students who were not previously friends are brought together. While the film takes place in a high school library with students attending Saturday detention, this book focuses on five

eighth graders fulfilling service hours in the Conrad Middle School cafeteria. These characters have little in common, but Principal Powell requires everyone to do service hours so that the school can continue to have 100% service participation. Principal Powell places these five students together because he assumes they all speak Spanish. He expects George to translate, and George does so despite doubting his Spanish skills. Because the five main characters have different backgrounds and varying levels of proficiency in Spanish and English, the linguistic diversity that exists within the Spanish-speaking world is demonstrated. George (Jorge) Rivera is Puerto Rican American, Sara Domínguez is Mexican American, Dayara Gómez is Cuban American, Nico Piñeda is Venezuelan American, and Miguel Soto is Dominican American. The precise illustrations individuate all the characters and their personalities.
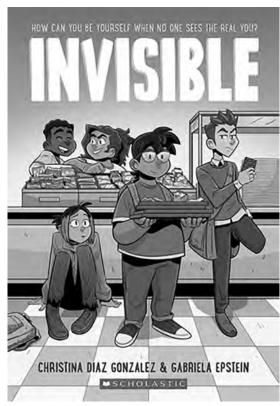
Learning Contexts

Pedagogical discourses about emergent bilingualism, translanguaging, and graphic novels apply to *Invisible*. Brewer and Núñez (2021), writing about text selection issues with secondary emergent bilingual learners, recommend "prioritizing students' literacy actions and identities" (p. 13) no matter which texts are used. Differentiation and individuation can take place through vocabulary work, evaluating evidence, tracking one's thinking, and text selection. Having some whole-class texts in addition to self-selected reading material provides for "conversation and community" (p. 16) in collaborative discussion, while a collective experience also can be achieved through daily read-alouds (Brewer & Núñez, 2021).

Translanguaging, communicating strategically across languages, appears in literature as in life. As Fu et al. (2019) state, translanguaging "acknowledges all the language resources of individuals and purposefully seeks to develop and expand all aspects of their linguistic repertoire" (p. 23). In order to help 21st-century learners, education "needs to embrace the ever-changing nature of literacy" (p. 23). While views vary on what it means to teach and learn 21st-century skills (Rich, 2010), students need the ability to think critically and to understand various cultures in the world that surrounds them. Reading literature provides a foundation for the 21st-century learner. Fiction depicting English language learners as main characters is important for representing the world accurately (Botelho & Marion, 2023). A novel showing people from different cultures and family situations entices a reader to look past stereotypes.

Although educators appreciate graphic novels, which are "narratives depicted with artwork in comic book format" (Leland et al., 2013, p. 68), acceptance of the illustrated format can still be met with resistance due to perceptions that the graphic format lacks status (Marlatt & Dallacqua, 2019). Basinger (2014) advocates for the high-school study of memoirs told in graphic narrative format. Schauer (2022) argues that contemporary graphic novels, through authentic depictions of multiple speech acts and conventional routines, belong in second language classrooms to expose readers to speech acts such as greetings, leave takings, and responses (p. 502). Graphic novels deserve usage in whole-class reads, literature circles, and independent reading selections available in classroom libraries and school libraries.

Graphic novels can support covering the English Language Arts and Reading Texas Essential Knowledge and Skills (ELAR TEKS; Texas Education Agency, 2017). In strand four of the ELAR TEKS, an expectation at all grade levels is for students to "analyze characteristics of multimodal and digital texts," such as in 110.22(b)(8)(F) for sixth grade. Graphic novels are multimodal; a multimodal text—defined as having more than one mode—could involve communicating not only through written language but also

with still images, moving images, or sound. In strand nine, which addresses author's purpose and craft, analyzing "the author's use of print and graphic features to achieve specific purposes" is an expectation across grades four to eight, shifting to "evaluate" for grades 9-12. For grade six, this standard is TEKS 110.22(b)(9)(C), and for grade seven, it is 110.23(b)(9)(C). Print features can refer to captions, subheadings, bold print, photographs, and illustrations, and a graphic is a picture, visual aid, or other image. Teachers should scrutinize each graphic novel to examine its suitability for their students.

Invisible book cover used by permission of Scholastic Inc.

The Innovative Structure of *Invisible*

In the ELAR TEKS strand seven, which addresses literary elements across genres, standards require analyzing plot elements in grades four and above. For example, identifying the rising action, climax, falling action, and resolution is required for grade 6 in 110.22(b)(7)(C). Significantly, "non-linear elements such as flashback" are introduced in grade 6 in the ELAR TEKS 110.22.(b)(7)(C) and stated in grades 8 and English I as well. The plot structure of *Invisible* works well to teach or review these terms.

Invisible begins *in medias res*, in the middle of things, then flashes back to how the characters got there. The frame narrative creates a non-linear plot structure, with the beginning and end set on April 26. The visual recurrence of the dates between April 9 and 26, shown on the front door of the school building, exemplifies the illustration technique of braiding. Braiding is defined as "the repetition of highly significant visual features across an entire comic" (Tarbox, 2020, p. 259). The braiding emphasizes the location at Conrad Middle School in an unstated region, while the dates indicate perspective shifts and movement through time.

The flashback plot structure that builds suspense increases adolescent reading motivation. Readers are compelled to continue in order to uncover why the characters are in trouble and have been called into Principal Powell's office for questioning. This scenario is a clever misdirection. The eighth graders have

actually been called in to describe how they assisted Celeste and Lisa Powers, an unhoused mother and daughter, whom some school board members have met at the diner where the students got Celeste a job. The TV reporter Tom Gimble reveals that the school board is giving the students an annual "Community Hero Award" (p. 190). Illustrations show the students receiving gold medallions and smiling as the reporter narrates for a video that "a real-life 'breakfast club' was formed when five very different kids were thrust together and ended up helping someone in our community" (p. 191). This resolution in the book's final pages validates and affirms the five diverse students.

Debating which moment is the climax shows how action and plot develop theme. The point of highest tension is when the students are trying to get word to Celeste about the diner waitress job offer that starts at the lunch hour that same day, and to which she can bring her daughter. Celeste had not asked for help, but she told the students, "We're pretty much invisible" (p. 83) and "No one really notices us. People only see what they want to see most of the time" (p. 84). Sara answers, "I know the feeling. A mí no me ven tampoco" (p. 84). Sara's words here are not translated, but a reader of Spanish will know Sara means, "They don't see me either." The moment of sharing the job offer shows the culmination of efforts in the rising action to help the family in need. The characters have disobeyed Mrs. Grouser, the grouchy cafeteria manager, who forbade them to give either school food or their own food to unhoused people. The quintet must use subterfuge to get the message through because of Mrs. Grouser's commands to stay inside, causing them to create a phone distraction and a soapy mess on the hallway floor to delay Mrs. Grouser.

Characterization, which drives plot, spans all grade levels of the TEKS with slightly different wording and entwines with other literary elements. For grade six, 110.22(b)(7)(B) requires analyzing "how the characters' internal and external responses develop the plot," while for grade seven, 110.23(b)(7)(B) states that students "analyze how characters' qualities influence events and resolution of the conflict." Creative characterization is a delight in this book. Readers also can debate whether there is one main character or whether all five group members are equivalently central characters who, together, make the climactic action occur.

Comics Analysis in Action

Reading comics is difficult for some people because of the expectation of close looking as well as close reading. *Invisible* provides a chance to guide visual analysis with comics terminology. Comics scholar Gwen Athene Tarbox (2020) defines panels as "the building blocks of comics," and the breakdown refers to "the choices a comic creator makes about how panels should be arranged" (p. 257). In *Invisible*, Epstein designs pages dynamically to avoid visual repetition; there is great variety in panel style. As readers move between panels, they are "filling in gaps and performing an act referred to as closure" (p. 258). Graphic novels reward re-reading to grasp the visual and verbal elements.

Speech bubbles tell the audience what characters are thinking or speaking. While speech bubbles "convey dialogue within a comic," thought bubbles "refer to a character's inner monologue" (Tarbox, 2020, p. 257). All characters in *Invisible* use speech bubbles to talk, whereas some translations are provided in dotted-line bubbles. There are very few captions or text boxes, except for dates. Reducing captions, or "text-based narration in a comic" (p. 258), keeps the focus on the immediate experiences of the five students. Onomatopoeia, a sound device, is heard through illustrations such as a ringing school bell, a photograph being taken, and a buzzing cell phone.

The speech bubbles move the story with fluidity. For example, Mrs. Grouser speaks to the group on their first day so they can start working together to clean the cafeteria, and while Mrs. Grouser is speaking, Dayara and Miguel secretly speak to one another (p. 32). Mrs. Grouser becomes noticeably angry when the students interrupt her, showing rigidity and irritation at people speaking a language of which she knows only a few words. When Nico is teasing Dayara for not knowing how to spell, not realizing she may be dyslexic, he challenges her to spell *albaricoque*, the Spanish word for apricot (p. 97). When Dayara complies and spells out the letters to the word, her speech bubble becomes elongated, visually underscoring Dayara's annoyance (p. 98).

The translations within the speech bubbles are part of the language of comics in *Invisible*. The dotted-line speech bubbles provide a translation for the solid-line speech bubbles and occasionally for thought bubbles. This format primarily has English in the dotted-line bubbles. Many characters in the book, as in real life, speak Spanish with one another, and this is represented in the speech bubbles. Readers who do not read Spanish access the English translation in the dotted-line bubbles. The format helps Spanish speakers relate to the novel and simultaneously helps non-Spanish speakers gain insights into the linguistic experiences of their peers as well as gain exposure to Spanish-language text and learn some Spanish vocabulary along the way.

Themes in *Invisible*

State standards expect students to "infer multiple themes within and across texts," such as in grade 6, with the ELAR TEKS 110.22(b)(7)(A). Other literary elements interweave to develop themes. *Invisible* offers valuable, theme-related life lessons with its overarching topic being courage and the ways in which the main characters stand up for what is right. They tell the truth to Principal Powell despite thinking that they are in trouble, with each of them willing to take the blame (p. 181), and they are brave in helping Lisa and her mother. Related messages include becoming united in friendship and valuing multilingualism. Although the characters initially have only the commonality of being Hispanic or Latino eighth graders, they grow to be bonded beyond this initial link.

Getting past stereotypical assumptions is an implicit message. The students get grouped together on the basis of their Spanish-language connection. Unfamiliarity causes the characters to make assumptions, but these are disproven once everyone grows to know one another. As Mrs. Perico, the Spanish teacher, expresses, "People need to see each other as individuals and not just a label. Because we Latinos can be very different from one another. So I'm glad that you see their individuality just like they now see some

of their commonality" (p. 192). The expression that there are two sides to every story is magnified times five in this unique version of storytelling. No one version is complete, because only together is the full story revealed. For instance, the classmates assume that Nico's being on his phone all the time means that he is not helping and is a "lost cause" (p. 133), yet Nico is the one who obtains the life-changing job offer for Celeste Powers.

The novel offers a chance to understand each character on a personal level since readers gain glimpses into the characters' family lives. The reading audience can experience diverse situations, including realistic troubles that the students are going through, which helps break prejudices and stereotypes. George (Jorge) has a single mother and a little sister and must keep the secret that they are now living outside the school district and possibly in a temporary situation at a motel (p. 24). Miguel Soto has a mother, father, and three little sisters. Dayara Gómez, like Miguel, has a working mother and father, and Dayara has a learning disability. Nico Piñeda resides temporarily with his great aunt in her senior living facility while his parents are stuck in Venezuela. Celeste Powers and her daughter Lisa are without a home and living in their van. Students will be exposed to multiple perspectives by reading *Invisible*.

Strategies for Teaching *Invisible*

Taking a whole-class approach to reading this book may bring attention to its suspenseful plot, graphic format, language usage, themes, and relevance. Useful strategies include author study, personal links and pair exchanges, graphic format analysis, process drama, cultural x-rays, writing prompts, videos and multimedia projects, and family interviews.

One activity for *Invisible* is an author study involving literary analysis, authorial background, and critical response (Leland et al., 2013). Christina Diaz Gonzalez (2023) is a Cuban American author living in Florida whose novels for tween readers include *The Red Umbrella* (2010), the *Moving Target* duology (2015-16), and *Concealed* (2021). Illustrator Gabriela Epstein resides in Austin, Texas, identifies as Latine, and has family in Chile (Kaplan, 2021). Epstein illustrated and wrote two *Baby-Sitters Club* graphic novels as well as *Danny Phantom: A Glitch in Time* (Epstein, n.d.). Gonzalez and Epstein maintain websites and give interviews providing information about themselves and their books.

Personal links with books increase literacy engagement. Botelho and Marion (2023) assert that readers of dual-language books deserve the opportunity "to make connections and disconnections with their lived experiences" (p. 376). Pairs of students benefit from turn-and-talk and pair-share scaffolded structures for exchanges before or during whole group discussions in which they choose what to share. Readers can identify how their lives are similar or dissimilar to characters. Using pairs invites students to express themselves.

Analyzing and applying the graphic novel format shows how images relate to words to advance a story. The varying panel size and design of *Invisible* makes it well suited for close analysis. For instance, visual details enhance debate about interpretative questions such as whether the principal's requirement for community service makes it coercive (p. 16) and why a few lines in Spanish are not directly translated (p. 193). Students can also use the format of the "What's in My Bag?" feature at the end of this novel to sketch themselves and list three things in their bookbag that represent their personal interests (pp. 196-197).

The process drama strategy for responding to literature has students embody roles from a book, ask questions of one another, and speak in character (Leland et al., 2013). This method builds empathy with characters and reviews the reading. Middle school readers could act out the roles of George, Sara, Dayara, Nico, and Miguel, as well as

their friend Lisa and her mother Celeste Powers, cafeteria authority Mrs. Grouser, Principal Powell, Spanish teacher Mrs. Perico, and TV reporter Tom Gimble. Readers also could "draw or write in role" (Leland et al., 2013, p. 194) by imagining themselves as a character, then sketching or writing to reflect on a prompt about their thoughts, actions, or reasons.

Cultural x-rays (Leland et al., 2013) enable students to compare their own culture with that of a character in a book. The activity involves drawing "an outline of a body shape with a heart inside" (p. 184) for both the student and for a main character in the book and listing values and beliefs inside the heart, with other characteristics drawn elsewhere on the cultural x-ray. With five main characters, *Invisible* offers choices for comparison.

Writing prompts, including bell-ringers or warm-up writings at the start of class, can raise interest in literature and enable text-to-life connections using prompts like these: In what languages do you communicate with different people in your life? Do you see your own home life situation reflected by any characters in this book? How do you feel about the activities you do for school or extra-curriculars? How can you get to know more people at school? How can you make the world a better place?

Projects involving videos with narration about students' own language assets can help them to feel seen and included, as the characters are by the end of *Invisible*. In a study with eighth grade students, Espinet and Chapman-Santiago (2022) describe how emergent bilinguals learning English "talked about how they felt when other people—teachers, other students, and adults in general—made false assumptions about who they were without getting to know them" (p. 94). The class completed multimedia projects in which they were "exploring the duality of how they were seen by others and who they felt they really were" (Espinet & Chapman-Santiago, 2022, p. 94). Schooling can honor the assets of multilingual learners.

Interviewing family members about their early language experiences can help students learn about family heritage and understand how elders' lives may differ from their own. Interviews could include bilingual writing or translation. Students could also create their own graphic narratives depicting moments from family or their own recent experiences. Teaching methods that go beyond a literary text to emphasize "students' literacy actions and identities" (Brewer & Núñez, 2021, p. 13) benefit all students, not only emergent bilingual learners. The novel *Invisible* provides opportunities for addressing both narrow and broad issues of language and identity.

Conclusion

Literature depicting diverse characters helps students to feel heard, seen, and understood. *Invisible*, a graphic novel written by Christina Diaz Gonzalez and illustrated by Gabriela Epstein, authentically represents issues faced in classroom, social, and home settings. This text engages and empowers multilingual readers; additionally, graphic novels, such as this one, further help bridge literacy gaps. While many narrative texts can be used to cover the ELAR TEKS standards, *Invisible* has strengths in its themes, format, and language usage. Moreover, this thought-provoking novel broaches social issues in an accepting and non-judgmental environment. Studying *Invisible* would help English Language Arts class experiences to be current with the issues facing Texas students.

References

Basinger, A. (2014). Graphic novels as social outreach: Students seeking empathy and compassion through content analysis study. *English in Texas*, *44*(2), 46-48.

Botelho, M. J., & Marion, R. (2023). Representing Spanishes: Language diversity in children's literature. *Journal of Latinos & Education, 22*(1), 371-386.

Brewer, A., & Núñez, M. (2021). Tensions in text selection: How English teachers balance text selection when working with emergent bilinguals. *English in Texas*, *51*(2), 12-16.

Epstein, G. (n.d.). *About*. Gabriela Epstein [Illustrator website]. Retrieved June 24, 2023, from https://www.gre-art.com/about

Espinet, I. & Chapman-Santiago, C. (2022). "When people don't know me, they think …": Fostering a multimodal translanguaging space that leverages students' voices. *Journal of Adolescent & Adult Literacy*, *66*(2), 91-99.

Fu, D., Hadjioannou, X., & Zhou, X. (2019). *Translanguaging for emergent bilinguals*. Teachers College Press.

Gonzalez, C. D. (2023). *About me*. Christina Diaz Gonzalez: Award-Winning Children's Book Author [Author website]. Retrieved June 24, 2023, from https://christinagonzalez.com/about/

Gonzalez, C. D., & Epstein, G. (2022). *Invisible*. Scholastic Graphix.

Hughes, J. (Director). (1985). *The breakfast club* [Motion picture]. Universal Pictures.

Kaplan, A. (2021, December 21). *Interview and cover reveal: Christina Diaz Gonzalez and Gabriela Epstein on* Invisible. Comics Beat. https://www.comicsbeat.com/interview-cover-reveal-christina-diaz-gonzales-gabriela-epstein-on-invisible/

Leland, C., Lewison, M., & Harste, J. (2013). *Teaching children's literature: It's critical*. Routledge.

Marlatt, R., & Dallacqua, A. (2019). Loud and clear: Using the graphic novel to challenge the status quo in content area literacy. *Journal of Language & Literacy Education*, *15*(1), 1-24.

Rich, E. (2010, January 29). How do you define 21st-century learning? *Education Week*. https://www.edweek.org/teaching-learning/how-do-you-define-21st-century-learning/2010/10

Schauer, G. A. (2022). Exploring the potential of graphic novels for L2 pragmatic teaching and learning—Focus on young learners. *The Language Learning Journal, 50*(4), 491-505. https://doi.org/10.1080/09571736.2022.2088445

Tarbox, G. A. (2020). Integrating comics into an undergraduate young adult literature course. In M. Cadden, K. Coats, & R. S. Trites (Eds.), *Teaching young adult literature* (pp. 251-260). Modern Language Association.

Texas Education Agency (TEA). (2017). *Texas essential knowledge and skills for English language arts and reading*. https://tea.texas.gov/about-tea/laws-and-rules/texas-administrative-code/19-tac-chapter-110