Graph Neural Networks for Ruby Code Complexity Prediction and Generation: A Systematic Architecture Study

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Abstract

We present a systematic study of Graph Neural Network (GNN) architectures for two tasks on Ruby Abstract Syntax Trees (ASTs): cyclomatic complexity prediction and code generation via graph autoencoders. Using a dataset of 22,452 Ruby methods, we evaluate five GNN architectures (GCN, GraphSAGE, GAT, GIN, GraphConv) across 40 GPU experiments on RTX 4090 and RTX 2070 SUPER instances. For complexity prediction, a 5-layer GraphSAGE achieves MAE 4.018 ($R^2 = 0.709$), a 16% improvement over the 3-layer baseline. For code generation, we find a stark negative result: standard graph autoencoders produce 0% syntactically valid Ruby across all tested architectures, loss functions, and hidden dimensions. A deep-dive analysis reveals that teacher-forced GIN decoders achieve 81% node type accuracy and 99.5% type diversity, yet still produce 0% valid code because 47% of AST elements are literal values (identifiers, strings, numbers) with no learnable representation. This literal value bottleneck—not architectural capacity—is the fundamental barrier to GNN-based code generation. All experiments were orchestrated by an autonomous LLM-driven research pipeline. Total compute cost: under $5 USD.

1. Introduction

Graph Neural Networks have emerged as a natural representation for source code, where Abstract Syntax Trees provide a structured graph encoding of program syntax and semantics. Prior work has applied GNNs to tasks including vulnerability detection (Zhou et al., 2019), code clone detection (Zhang et al., 2019), and type inference. However, two questions remain underexplored:

1. Which GNN architecture best predicts code complexity from ASTs? Existing studies typically evaluate one or two architectures without controlled comparisons.

2. Can GNN autoencoders generate syntactically valid code? While graph variational autoencoders have shown promise in molecular generation, their application to code synthesis is largely uncharted.

We address both questions through a systematic study on Ruby, a dynamically-typed language whose relatively uniform syntax makes AST analysis tractable. While transformer-based autoregressive models (Chen et al., 2021; Rozière et al., 2023; Li et al., 2023) have demonstrated remarkable code generation capabilities through sequential token prediction, GNNs offer a fundamentally different approach: operating directly on the graph structure of parsed ASTs rather than treating code as text. This structural approach could theoretically provide stronger guarantees about syntactic validity and enable more sample-efficient learning of code semantics. Our study tests whether these theoretical advantages translate to practice.

Our contributions are:

- A controlled 5-way architecture comparison for complexity prediction, showing that network depth matters more than width or architecture choice (§4.1).

- A comprehensive negative result demonstrating that GNN autoencoders cannot generate valid Ruby code under standard training regimes (§4.2).

- A deep-dive analysis revealing the literal value bottleneck: teacher-forced GIN achieves 81%

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node type accuracy but 0% syntax validity because 47% of AST elements are unrecoverable literals (§4.3).

- Evidence that chain decoders suffer severe mode collapse (93% of predictions default to a single type), while teacher forcing restores type diversity without achieving code validity (§4.3).
- All experiments were orchestrated by an autonomous LLM-driven research pipeline, demonstrating reproducible AI-driven experimentation at under $5 total compute cost (§3.3).

2. Related Work

GNNs for Code Understanding. Allamanis et al. (2018) introduced GNNs for variable misuse detection. CodeBERT (Feng et al., 2020) and GraphCodeBERT (Guo et al., 2021) combine transformer architectures with code structure. Our work differs by focusing on classical GNN variants (GCN, SAGE, GAT, GIN, GraphConv) in a controlled comparison rather than proposing a new architecture.

Autoregressive Code Generation. Transformer-based models—Codex (Chen et al., 2021), StarCoder (Li et al., 2023), CodeLlama (Rozière et al., 2023)—treat code as a token sequence and generate it autoregressively. These models achieve remarkable results but lack structural guarantees: they can produce syntactically invalid code because they operate on surface text, not ASTs. GNN-based approaches, operating directly on parsed syntax trees, could theoretically enforce structural validity by construction. Our negative results demonstrate that this theoretical advantage does not materialize in practice.

Graph Autoencoders. Kipf & Welling (2016) proposed variational graph autoencoders for link prediction. Junction Tree VAE (Jin et al., 2018) generates molecular graphs with validity guarantees by decomposing graphs into tree structures. Our tree-aware decoder draws inspiration from this approach but operates on ASTs rather than molecular substructures.

Code Complexity Prediction. McCabe's cyclomatic complexity (McCabe, 1976) is a standard software metric. ML approaches using hand-crafted features (Gill & Kemerer, 1991) have been supplemented by deep learning methods, but few use graph representations of the AST directly.

Automated Research. Our experimental infrastructure belongs to the emerging class of LLM-driven scientific discovery tools alongside systems like The AI Scientist (Lu et al., 2024). We demonstrate that such systems can conduct meaningful ablation studies at minimal cost.

3. Experimental Setup

3.1. Dataset

We use 22,452 Ruby methods extracted from open-source repositories, each parsed into an AST with:

- 74-dimensional node features encoding node type (one-hot over 73 known AST types plus one unknown token). Lexical literals—identifiers, string contents, numeric values—are stripped of their content and mapped to this single unknown token to bound the feature space. As we show in §4.4, this design choice has profound consequences for generation.
- Edge attributes (3D): edge type encoding, relative depth, and child index.
- Positional encodings (2D): tree depth and sibling position.
- Labels: McCabe cyclomatic complexity (integer, range 1–200+).

The dataset is split 85/15 into training (19,084) and validation (3,368) sets. The full dataset is publicly available.[1]

3.2. Models

Complexity Prediction. RubyComplexityGNN applies L message-passing layers followed by global mean pooling and an MLP regressor. We evaluate five convolution operators: GCN (Kipf & Welling, 2017)—symmetric normalized adjacency; GraphSAGE (Hamilton et al., 2017)—mean aggregation with concatenation; GAT (Veličković et al., 2018)—multi-head attention (4 heads); GIN (Xu et al., 2019)—sum aggregation with learnable epsilon, designed for maximal expressiveness under the Weisfeiler–Leman (WL) test; and GraphConv (Morris et al., 2019)—general message-passing with separate self/neighbor transforms.

Code Generation. ASTAutoencoder encodes the AST into a fixed-size latent vector, then decodes to reconstruct node types and edge structure. We evaluate three loss functions: Simple—node type cross-entropy only; Improved—node type CE plus parent prediction

[1] https://huggingface.co/datasets/timlawrenz/gnn-ruby-code-study

Table 1. Summary of experiment tracks. All Vast.ai experiments use RTX 4090; local experiments use RTX 2070 SUPER.

Track	Task	Arms	Succ.	Varied
1	Complexity	8	7	Arch., depth, width
2	Gen. (chain)	7	5	Arch., loss, width
4	Gen. (tree)	6	5	Edge mode, arch.
5	GIN deep dive	5	5	Dim, depth, mode
BL	Baseline var.	18	18	Random seed

CE, weighted by type_weight and parent_weight, providing an explicit structural learning signal; and Comprehensive—similar to improved but with different parent logit normalization. The decoder supports three edge construction modes: Chain (nodes connected sequentially, no structural information), Teacher-forced (ground-truth AST edges provided during training), and Iterative (decoder predicts edges from node embeddings).

3.3. Infrastructure

All remote experiments run on single NVIDIA RTX 4090 GPUs (24 GB VRAM) provisioned via Vast.ai. Training uses Adam optimizer (lr = 0.001), batch size 32, and 50 epochs (complexity) or 30 epochs (generation). An autonomous pipeline handles instance provisioning, code deployment via Git, dependency installation, training execution, metric collection, and instance cleanup.

3.4. Experiment Design

Table 1 summarizes the experiment tracks. Additionally, 18 runs from the autonomous coordinator (3 iterations × ∼6 successful arms) provide baseline variance data under identical SAGE/64/3 configuration, yielding MAE $\mu = 4.745$, $\sigma = 0.073$.

4. Results

4.1. Track 1: Architecture Comparison

Table 2 shows complexity prediction results.

Depth dominates. The 5-layer SAGE achieves MAE 4.018, a 16.0% relative improvement over the 3-layer baseline (4.782). This result is 9.9 standard deviations below the baseline mean (Appendix A), confirming statistical significance.

Width does not help. Doubling the hidden dimension from 64 to 128 (SAGE-wide) produces no improvement (4.863 vs. 4.782), suggesting the representational bottleneck is in message-passing depth, not per-layer capacity.

Table 2. Complexity prediction results (RTX 4090, Vast.ai). Best in bold. †: completed locally on RTX 2070 SUPER after Vast.ai timeout.

Architecture	Dim	Layers	MAE ↓	MSE	R^2
SAGE	64	5	4.018	54.37	0.709
GIN	64	3	4.589	69.28	0.629
GAT (wide)†	128	3	4.662	72.36	0.612
SAGE	64	3	4.782	68.07	0.635
GraphConv	64	3	4.804	68.14	0.635
SAGE (wide)	128	3	4.863	68.15	0.635
GAT	64	3	4.952	73.19	0.608
GCN	64	3	5.321	81.61	0.563

Table 3. Code generation results (chain decoder, RTX 4090). All configurations achieve 0% syntactic validity.

Conv	Dim	Loss	Validity
GAT	256	improved	0%
GAT	512	improved	0%
SAGE	256	improved	0%
GIN	256	improved	0%
GCN	256	improved	0%

Architecture ranking (3 layers): GIN > SAGE ≈ GraphConv > GAT > GCN. GIN's theoretical advantage under the WL graph isomorphism test—which measures a GNN's ability to distinguish non-isomorphic graphs by iteratively hashing neighborhood multisets—translates to a practical 4% improvement over SAGE. GIN's injective sum aggregation preserves the full multiset of neighbor features, while SAGE's mean aggregation and GCN's normalized averaging lose information. GCN, lacking learnable aggregation weights, performs worst with 11% higher MAE.

GAT underperforms expectations. Despite attention being theoretically more expressive, GAT ranks below GIN and SAGE. We hypothesize that the relatively uniform AST structure (most nodes have 2–4 children) does not benefit from attention-based neighbor weighting.

4.2. Track 2: Generation Failure Analysis

Every configuration achieves 0% syntactic validity (Table 3). Validation loss converges to ∼7.7 across all variants, indicating the model learns non-trivial representations but cannot reconstruct valid ASTs. Both the improved loss (node type CE + parent prediction CE) and the simple loss (node type CE only) were tested; neither produced valid output. The comprehensive loss variant failed on two arms due to numerical

Table 4. Remote decoder topology results (RTX 4090, batch size 4096). Heuristic validity: >2 unique predicted node types per sample.

Edge Mode	Conv	Heur. Valid	Val Loss
chain	GAT	0%	7.715
teacher_forced	GAT	0%	7.706
iterative	GAT	0%	7.765
teacher_forced	SAGE	0%	7.799
teacher_forced	GIN	7%	8.384

Table 5. Local deep-dive results (RTX 2070 SUPER, batch size 32, 30 epochs). Despite 99.5% heuristic validity and 81% type accuracy, all configurations achieve 0% real syntax validity.

Config	Dim	L	Val Loss	Type Acc	Syntax
tf-gin-128	128	3	3.871	81.4%	0%
tf-gin-256	256	3	3.890	81.3%	0%
tf-gin-512	512	3	3.833	81.8%	0%
tf-gin-deep	256	5	3.759	81.1%	0%
chain (ctrl)	256	3	5.413	48.2%	0%

instability.

4.3. Track 4: Tree-Aware Decoder Topology

The initial remote results (Table 4) showed teacher-forced GIN as the sole configuration with non-zero heuristic validity. To investigate this signal, we conducted a deep-dive analysis on local GPU with smaller batch sizes enabling better convergence:

With proper convergence (Table 5), teacher-forced GIN achieves 99.5% heuristic validity and 81% node type accuracy—yet 0% real syntactic validity when reconstructed code is checked against a Ruby parser. This paradox reveals the core failure mode.

4.4. The Literal Value Bottleneck

Analysis of 500 validation samples shows the AST element distribution:

Category	Count	%
Typed nodes (def, send, args, …)	15,395	53.2
Literals (identifiers, strings, numbers)	13,534	46.8

All literal values—method names, variable names, string contents, numeric literals, and nil sentinels—are encoded as unknown (type index 73) in the 74-dimensional one-hot feature vector. The model has no mechanism to predict or recover these values.

Qualitative example. For the Ruby method def call(storage); new(storage).call; end, the AST contains 12 elements: 6 typed nodes (def, args, arg, send, send, lvar) and 6 literals ("call", "storage", nil, "new", "storage", "call"). The teacher-forced GIN decoder achieves 100% accuracy on all 12 elements—correctly predicting all structural types and unknown for all literals—yet the reconstructed AST cannot be unparsed to valid Ruby because the literal values are irrecoverable.

Mode collapse in chain decoders. Without ground-truth edges, the chain decoder exhibits severe mode collapse: 92.7% of all predicted tokens are unknown, with only def (3.6%) and send (3.0%) appearing as secondary predictions. Type accuracy drops from 81% (teacher-forced) to 48% (chain), and the average number of unique predicted types falls from 8.6 to 1.6.

Dimension invariance. Hidden dimensions of 128, 256, and 512 produce nearly identical results (type accuracy 81.3–81.8%), confirming that the bottleneck is not model capacity but the information-theoretic gap in the input representation.

5. Discussion

5.1. The Representation Gap

Our results reveal a representation gap between understanding and generation in GNN-based code models. For complexity prediction (a graph-level regression task), GNNs perform well—a 5-layer SAGE explains 71% of variance. But for generation (requiring node-level reconstruction of discrete types and literal values), the same representations fail catastrophically.

This gap has two components: (1) Structural: chain decoders destroy the tree topology needed for valid ASTs; teacher forcing eliminates this component, restoring 81% type accuracy. (2) Lexical: the 74D one-hot representation encodes node types but discards node values; nearly half of all AST elements are literals that become the undifferentiated unknown token. No amount of architectural improvement can recover information that was never encoded.

This mirrors findings in NLP, where masked language models excel at classification but require autoregressive decoding for generation. For GNNs on code, the problem is more fundamental: it is not merely a decoding strategy issue but an input representation deficiency. Autoregressive text models operate on the full token vocabulary; GNN autoencoders operate on a lossy projection that discards lexical content.

5.2. Why GIN for Generation?

GIN's success as the sole architecture achieving non-zero heuristic validity likely stems from its injective aggregation function. The sum aggregation with learnable epsilon preserves the full multiset of neighbor features, meaning it can distinguish structurally similar but semantically different AST subtrees. This is precisely the WL graph isomorphism advantage: GIN is provably as powerful as the 1-WL test in distinguishing non-isomorphic graphs, while GCN and GraphSAGE are strictly weaker (Xu et al., 2019).

5.3. Depth vs. Width

The stark depth-over-width result (5-layer SAGE improves 16%; 128-dim SAGE improves 0%) has practical implications. For code ASTs with depths of 10–30, a 3-layer GNN can only aggregate information from a 3-hop neighborhood. Deeper networks capture cross-branch dependencies (e.g., a variable defined in one branch and used in another) that directly relate to complexity.

5.4. Implications for GNN-Based Code Generation

Our findings suggest that viable GNN code generation would require: (1) literal value prediction heads: separate output heads for identifier names (via copy mechanism), string contents, and numeric values; (2) hybrid architectures: GNN encoders for structural understanding combined with autoregressive or grammar-constrained decoders; and (3) grammar-aware decoding: constrained decoders that enforce Ruby's BNF grammar during generation.

5.5. Limitations

Single language. Ruby results may not transfer to languages with different AST structures. Fixed hyperparameters. We did not tune learning rate, dropout, or batch size per architecture; the Vast.ai experiments used batch size 4096 while local deep-dive used batch size 32—this difference affected convergence and explains discrepancies between remote and local results. No cross-validation. Results are from a single 85/15 split, though the 18 baseline replicates ($\sigma = 0.073$) provide confidence in the complexity findings. Heuristic validity metric. The proxy metric (unique types >2) dramatically overestimates actual code validity (99.5% heuristic vs. 0% syntax); future work should always include real parser-based checking.

6. Conclusion

We conducted a systematic study of five GNN architectures for Ruby code complexity prediction and generation across 40 GPU experiments. Our findings:

1. For complexity prediction, go deeper: A 5-layer GraphSAGE (MAE 4.018, $R^2 = 0.709$) outperforms all 3-layer variants by 16%, while doubling width provides no benefit. This result is 9.9σ significant.
2. GNN autoencoders cannot generate valid code: Zero syntactic validity across 15+ configurations spanning five architectures, three loss functions, three decoder edge modes, and four hidden dimensions.
3. The literal value bottleneck is the root cause: Teacher-forced GIN achieves 81% node type accuracy but 0% syntax validity because 47% of AST elements are literal values with no learnable representation.
4. Chain decoders suffer mode collapse: Without structural supervision, 93% of predictions default to a single type.
5. Architecture expressiveness matters: GIN, the most expressive architecture under the WL framework, consistently outperforms alternatives.

Future work should focus on enriched input representations encoding literal values, hybrid GNN–autoregressive architectures, and copy mechanisms that can reproduce identifiers from the input graph. The strong complexity prediction performance ($R^2 = 0.71$) confirms that GNNs learn meaningful code representations—the challenge is building decoders that can reconstruct the full richness of code from these representations.

Reproducibility

All code is available at https://github.com/timlawrenz/jubilant-palm-tree (branch: experiment/ratiocinator-gnn-study). The dataset, model checkpoints, and all experiment results are published at https://huggingface.co/datasets/timlawrenz/gnn-ruby-code-study. Total compute cost: approximately $5 USD on Vast.ai RTX 4090 instances.

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A. Baseline Variance Analysis

The autonomous coordinator ran 3 iterations of 8 arms each under identical SAGE/64/3 configuration, providing 18 independent replicates:

Statistic	Value
Successful runs	18
MAE mean	4.745
MAE std	0.073
MAE range	4.622–4.962
R^2 mean	0.635

The 5-layer SAGE result (MAE 4.018) is 9.9 standard deviations below this baseline mean, confirming statistical significance.

B. Compute Cost Breakdown

Local GPU cost estimated at $0.10/hr electricity.

Experiment	Arms	Succ.	Hardware	Cost
Autonomous (3 iter)	24	18	RTX 4090	$1.50
Architecture comp.	8	7	RTX 4090	$1.20
Generation analysis	7	5	RTX 4090	$0.80
Decoder topology	6	5	RTX 4090	$0.70
GIN deep dive	5	5	2070S (local)	$0.10
GAT-wide compl.	1	1	2070S (local)	$0.02
Total	51	41		$4.32

C. Failed Arms

Arm	Failure	Cause
gat-wide (T1)	Timeout	Completed locally
simple-loss-gat (T2)	SSH timeout	Instance unreachable
comp.-loss-gat (T2)	Exit 1	Num. instability
tf-gat-comp. (T4)	Exit 1	Num. instability

All failures are infrastructure-related, timeout-related, or due to the comprehensive loss function's numerical instability.

D. Qualitative Reconstruction Examples

Perfect type reconstruction (teacher-forced GIN, 5-layer, 256-dim):

Original Ruby: def call(storage); new(storage).call; end

Node	Ground Truth	Predicted	Match
0	def	def	✓
1	"call" → unk	unk	✓
2	args	args	✓
3	arg	arg	✓
4	"storage" → unk	unk	✓
5	send	send	✓
6	send	send	✓
7	nil → unk	unk	✓
8	"new" → unk	unk	✓
9	lvar	lvar	✓
10	"storage" → unk	unk	✓
11	"call" → unk	unk	✓

12/12 correct (100%). The model perfectly reconstructs the AST type skeleton, but the 6 unknown nodes carry no recoverable content, making code generation impossible.

Most common type confusions (200 evaluation samples):

Ground Truth → Predicted	Explanation	n
str → lvar	Both leaf nodes	8
send → const	Both name-bearing	5
const → send	Symmetric confusion	5
args → unk	List → literal	3

All confusions are between semantically related node types—the model learns meaningful AST semantics but struggles with fine-grained distinctions.