



Picturebooks and Young Children: Potential, Power, and Practices

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Abstract

Picturebooks play a vital role in the lives and learning of young children. These complex, multimodal texts offer unique opportunities for meaning-making as readers engage with the interplay between text and illustrations. Picturebooks offer children stepping stones into the literary arts, providing information and storylines that illuminate readers' perspectives about their own lives as well as offering opportunities to glimpse the lives of others. This article provides an overview of current perspectives of picturebooks, focusing on their *potential* (i.e., the unique qualities this literary format offers young readers), their *power* (i.e., the invitations these books provide for supporting readers' authentic literary transactions and affective responses), and associated *practices* (i.e., the ways in which these texts can be used as instructional tools to support learning both within and beyond the curriculum). Through picturebooks, caring adults can nurture children's reading and responses in supportive, developmentally appropriate, and impactful ways.

Keywords Picturebooks · Children's literature · Literacy · Multimodal texts · Early childhood education · Reading

Introduction

Picturebooks hold a special pride of place in the learning, literacy, and lives of young children. As resources, picturebooks are compact, meaning-laden, aesthetically appealing, literature-rich, reasonably available, and hold an appeal for a wide scope of developmental levels and interests. These texts offer children stepping stones into the worlds of art and literature and provide powerful avenues for learning (Kümmerling-Meibauer & Meibauer, 2015; Pantaleo, 2018). Beyond this, picturebooks can serve as material objects that invite engagement and delight; one that can be enjoyed individually or in the company of other children and caring adults. It is no wonder that this powerful literary format has been referred to as “the mighty picturebook” (Moreillon, 2017). Thus, in this special issue of *Early Childhood Education Journal*, we focus on the theme, *Picturebooks*

and Young Children. We see this issue as an avenue to both investigate and celebrate these texts and their undeniable importance in the lives of young children, through a broad range of articles and through attention to the potential, power, and practices that surround picturebooks.

The Potential of Picturebooks

True picturebooks are more complicated than illustrated books, in which the core written texts are merely enhanced with pictures. Rather, picturebooks involve a complex weave of multimodal texts that invite meaning-making and are typically presented in a form that may seem deceptively simple (Kelly & Kachorsky, 2022; Painter, 2017). Nearly a half century ago, Bader (1976) noted that “[a] picture book is text, illustrations, total design; an item of manufacture and a commercial product; a social, cultural, historical document, and FOREMOST—an experience for a child. As an art form, it hinges on the interdependence of pictures and words, on the simultaneous display of two facing pages, and on the drama of the turning page” (p. 1). Likewise, Young and Serafini (2013, p. 186) noted that, “The blending of visual images, design elements, and written language into multimodal ensembles presents readers with new challenges and requires an expansion of the resources and interpretive

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practices readers draw upon to make sense of these complex texts.”

In recent years, there has been a small, but intentional and significant shift, in descriptions of scholarly explorations surrounding this literary form. The use of the two-word *picture book* has gradually given way to the one-word compound *picturebook* in scholarly work in an effort to honor the central and integrated roles of both images and print (Wolfenbarger & Sipe, 2007). Sipe (2011) describes picturebooks as “a type of print-based, multimodal text using a variety of modes, in particular visual images, written language, and design elements, to offer potential meanings to the reader during transactions with these texts” (p. 4). Reading picturebooks involves navigating an “intricate dance” of words and images with a meaning that is more complex than a sum of its parts (Sipe, 2011, p. 232). While all forms of children’s literature have the potential to impact young readers, picturebooks offer a multimodal format that includes both print and visual texts and which offer readers opportunities to construct meaning based on each of these modalities, as well as from the dynamic interplay between these modes (Arizpe, 2021b; Kachorsky et al., 2017; Nodelman, 2017; Salisbury & Styles, 2020; Serafini, 2023; Serafini & Reid, 2022; Wolfenbarger & Sipe, 2007).

Picturebooks often serve as an introduction to the practice of reading and the dispositions and skills related to it, as well as springboards for rich talk, and effective pedagogical tools to support classroom interactions (Acer & Gözen, 2020; Jalongo, 2004; Kachorsky et al., 2017; Sipe, 2008; Wanless & Crawford, 2016). Picturebooks offer bridges for understanding; providing a powerful medium for helping children to explore a multitude of issues related to culture, diversity, and the lived experiences of neighbors in their local communities as well as those of people around the world (Crawford & Calabria, 2018; Deliman, 2021; Kuwabara et al., 2020; Lacina & Griffith, 2014; Short, 2009).

Recent picturebook research points to the variety of visually-rich books available for young children, ranging from well-known classics to daringly different texts. Many texts published since the mid-1900s continue to emerge as classics. Generations of children have found solace and engagement in the pioneering and enduring work of beloved book creators such as Margaret Wise Brown, Eric Carle, Maurice Sendak, Ezra Jack Keats, Kevin Henkes, and so many more. Meanwhile, the picturebooks of today continue to evolve with a remarkable use of varied artistic styles and formats. These include the development of digital elements, postmodern storylines, and the incorporation of visual features, such as panels and speech bubbles, traditionally associated with comics and graphic novels (Kümmerling-Meibauer, 2015; Pantaleo, 2014, 2016). Other trends in publication include

the development of picturebooks that offer content with varied and more abundant representations of diversity, picturebooks which reflect global trends and migration, and picturebooks which tackle sensitive and challenging topics (Arizpe, 2021b; Kümmerling-Meibauer, 2015). The 21st century has seen a burgeoning of high quality nonfiction picturebooks for younger readers; with notable growth in picturebook biographies and poetic and narrative nonfiction options (Correia, 2011; Gill, 2009, NCTE, 2023). Collectively, readers have a wealth of picturebooks that offer myriad opportunities for engagement, learning, and all-out wonder.

The Power of Picturebooks

Experts agree with the *pas de deux* of Sipe’s (2011) intricate dance or Yolen’s (2023) “subtle dance between art and text” (<http://janeyolen.com/for-writers/>). Yet, Rosenblatt’s (1978) Transactional Theory of literature, welcomes a third dancer, the reader, to the synchronized art and text. Certainly, much power resides in the creative pages of the picturebook; but, just as a song is not a song until one sings it, the reader brings the true power to the page in navigating this new *pas de trois*. Each book and each reader generate unique personal meaning because of the reader’s experiences, passion, biases, cognitive capacity, and emotional state. And, when a book is shared across even more readers, collective meaning and intimate experiences may also abound.

Much of the personal power is derived from Rudine Sims Bishop’s (1990) famous metaphor that children’s books offer both mirrors and windows. The intimate dance of the picturebook illuminates the reader to see clearer their internal selves in juxtaposition, and in kind, to the characters, as well as to critique outward perspectives. Picturebooks wield even more power in readers’ hands when children can see their genders, races, and identities represented in the illustrations and story lines. And, as a window into the lived experiences of others, picturebooks influence how children view themselves and others. “One primary motivation for reading fiction involves the pleasure that can be taken in relating to characters, their lives, their problems, and their experiences.” (Hefflin & Barksdale-Ladd, 2001, p. 810).

Since the mid-nineteenth century publication of the didactic McGuffey readers, picturebooks have also attempted to point children in the right direction, with character role models who possess a moral compass. Lickona’s (2018) character education tenets noted ways to nurture good humans as we raise readers. With a target of mostly young children, aged two to eight years, quality

picturebooks are written not to preach, but to support children's social and emotional development, vicariously allowing children to see how to tangle with bullies or stand up for themselves in difficult circumstances. From these safe springboards of picturebooks, readers can gain moral perspectives on difficult life circumstances (Crawford & Roberts, 2016; 2019; Laminack & Wadsworth, 2012; Wolk, 2013).

When one considers CASEL's (2020) Socio-Emotional Learning dimensions (i.e., self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision making) it is not difficult to see that the power of these dimensions lies directly in the *pas de trois* transaction of reader, text, and illustration through Sims Bishop's mirrors and window. Prior research (Durlak et al., 2011; Gunn et al., 2022; Vaughn et al., 2022) related to SEL reinforces its importance. SEL has been shown to improve academic achievement, increase pro-social behaviors, such as kindness, sharing, and empathy, improve children's attitudes toward school, and reduce depression and stress (Durlak et al., 2011). In a world where children need support more than ever, picturebooks serve as friendly models for managing life's challenges. In the safe places between the pages, books offer opportunities to deconstruct and problem solve issues. Vicariously, they inform, comfort, shelter, provide models of coping strategies, and even inspire (Massey et al., 2023; Crawford & Roberts, 2016; Roberts & Crawford, 2009; Roberts, 2020). Given that Kidd and Castano (2013) found that adults who read a mere 15 min of quality fiction had significantly increased empathy levels, imagine the empathetic impact of reading carefully selected picturebooks with young children. Reading high quality picturebooks that exemplify CASEL's five SEL dimensions (2020) has the potential to nurture empathy (social awareness) and resilience (self-awareness) through developmentally appropriate role models who respond to crises and coping (Crawford & Roberts, 2009; Crawford et al., 2019; Lacina et al., 2016; Leland et al., 2022; Roberts, 2020). Knowing that SEL is key to well-being (Durlak et al., 2011), reading personally and collaboratively, no doubt, can engender empathy that invites actionable paths to social justice and equity. Reading in ways that inform our actions locally and globally has the potential to reinforce positive human values of honesty, integrity, responsibility, loyalty, citizenship, democracy, and perseverance.

Recent book removals and increased efforts to ban children's picturebooks containing images of diversity or themes of inclusion (Harris & Alter, 2022) may, in part, be a response to the synergistic sparks of power gleaned by young readers and their families (Knox, 2015). Perhaps

efforts to limit children's exposure to books that support social justice might be the strongest evidence pointing to the raw power of picturebooks. In current climates, picturebooks offer readers the socioemotional mentors that young readers in today's world seem in most need.

Practices Surrounding Picturebooks

Picturebooks provide many positive opportunities for young children in and outside of school. Narrative picturebook reading helps students to understand others and their world around them (Bishop, 1990). Reading a narrative picturebook helps students to better understand their personal feelings as they read about characters who may be sad, angry, happy, or feel frustrated; students can make text-to-self connections between to picturebook character and their own personal experiences (Garner & Parker, 2018; Gunn et al., 2022). As students observe picturebook characters expressing and communicating their feelings, they may learn how to express and communicate their own feelings as well (Harper, 2016). Picturebooks also provide an opportunity for entertainment and joy. Although a less researched topic, reading picturebooks that include humor helps build positive attitudes and joy in the classroom. Serafini and Coles (2015) describe the many benefits of reading picturebooks that elicit humor; they explain that humor aids in reducing the anxiety or stress that children may feel and improves the overall climate of the classroom. Just as important, picturebooks can promote joy. Muhammad (2023) explains the history of joy among Black communities. When faced with injustice, the Black community came together and found justice, hope, and healing. Muhammad (2023) explained that with justice there is joy. Picturebooks have an opportunity to create joyful readers as students read books that show justice and hope when picturebook characters are faced with injustice and yet they persevere.

Reading picturebooks in the early childhood classroom promotes not only understanding, humor, and joy, but also builds the academic literacy skills necessary for success later in school. Both narrative and nonfiction picturebook reading is important in building comprehension skills. Through the narrative picturebook, students learn about setting, plot, character development, and conflict, and these elements of the narrative are transferable from reading to writing skills. Through reading nonfiction picturebooks, students learn the value of factual information and evidence; they learn a variety of reading processes to interpret information as well as they learn complex vocabulary (Kuhn et al., 2017; Shimek, 2018; Stewart & Correia, 2023). Recently published nonfiction offerings give readers the opportunity to construct meaning through varied types of picturebooks, including

informational, narrative nonfiction, and poetic nonfiction picturebooks (Kesler, 2017). Students must make meaning of the information provided within the picturebook text when there may be less personal meaning in comparison to a narrative text.

Picturebooks also offer the unique opportunity for students to process information both visually and verbally (Larragueta & Ceballos-Viro, 2018), while telling a story. The picturebook is a complex and important artform for students to examine and discuss in the early childhood classroom. Both authors and illustrators work simultaneously to provide interaction between the words and the art. This interaction, or synergy (Wolfenbarger & Sipe, 2007), of art and words is a way to transmit a complex story to young children (Evans, 1998; O'Neil, 2011). Illustrators may select specific colors in their picturebook art to elicit a certain feeling. Western European illustrators often use color in picturebooks in this way; for example, the color red may be associated with something that is exciting or dangerous (O'Neil, 2011). The color blue may be associated with something that is cool, cold, or calm. Other aspects of the art are also associated with different meanings, such as the quality of line. If a line or drawing is jagged, this art demonstrates an unwelcome or irritating tone (O'Neil, 2011). The visual arts are an important aspect of the picturebook that offers a model for storytelling and engagement. Researchers find that students recall a story better when the picturebook includes illustrations (Larragueta & Ceballos-Viro, 2018). Thus, it is imperative that teachers discuss the work of the illustrators just as they discuss the elements of the story when reading picturebooks to children.

Picturebooks fit within every early childhood curriculum, and they can be used to enhance content learning as well as to build culturally responsible pedagogy. In particular, it is important for early childhood teachers to read picturebooks to their students that feature a main character experiencing immigration or refugee status. Immigrant and refugee children are an important presence in schools throughout our world, and by reading these books, teachers are validating the experiences of these children (Arizpe, 2021a, b; Crawford & Roberts, 2018; Lacina, 2023; Ward & Warren, 2020). Students need to read about a wide range of experiences, and the diversification of the settings and character experiences within these picturebooks allows teachers and students to broaden their understanding about our world. Including picturebooks with immigrant and refugee experiences is also a means for holding critical conversations (Wolfenbarger & Sipe, 2007). Educators often present a more simplistic view of immigration, which may be free from the difficulties that many people face, such as xenophobia, discrimination and racism (Lacina, 2023; Sachdeva, 2024; Strelakova-Hughes,

2019), and a diverse set of picturebooks offer an opportunity to hold critical conversations.

In selecting picturebooks for critical conversations, it is important to first create a safe community and to purposefully select books (Wild, 2023). Books should be selected that offer a variety of character backgrounds and experiences; include characters that represent diverse cultural, linguistic, and racial backgrounds as well as a diversity of reasons for moving to a new country. While considering the purposeful selection of books, scholars also recommend considering the cultural authenticity of the picturebook. Cultural authenticity is an important element in books that feature Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC) as main characters (Brooks & McNair, 2015; Cummins, 2016; Lacina, 2023; Mourão, 2016). The way in which the author presents picturebook characters authentically is important, and books should be carefully examined by teachers to ensure that cultural stereotypes are not included.

Teachers can engage children with picturebooks in many ways (Serafini & Moses, 2014). A read-aloud involves a shared experience between the teacher and students. A read-aloud is an effective strategy for helping children feel connected to their peers and the picturebook they are reading with their teacher (Sipe, 2008). Read-alouds often vary. An interactive read-aloud includes a synergistic conversation between the teacher and student (Wright, 2019). The teacher thoughtfully asks questions while reading the picturebook, such as asking questions about the complex plot, characters, and/or illustrations. The teacher asks a variety of high-level open-ended questions to elicit critical thinking and discussion. Interactive read-alouds are an effective strategy for discussing a variety of topics while reading a picturebook (McClure & Fullerton, 2017; Wiseman, 2011).

Shared reading is another strategy for reading a picturebook, and is typically one that utilizes big books, as children follow the reading. The teacher and students read and re-read the book many times so that children begin to contribute to the reading of the text. Literature circles are often more commonly implemented with the reading of fiction chapter books, but may also be adapted to picturebook reading in small student-led groups. The value of literature circles can be found in the autonomous groups in which students lead the discussions and each hold a role to contribute to the conversation (Daniels, 2023; Leland et al., 2022). Sometimes, tough topics may be best navigated through support for a variety of responses to literature, including literature circles, authentic discussions, graphic or artistic avenues, or even service opportunities (Roberts, 2020; Mathis, 2016) that build strong relationships and responsible decision-making, even on the smallest scale.

Concluding Remarks

Many picturebooks offer children invitations to explore complex and challenging topics (Arizpe, 2021b; Crawford et al., 2019; Roberts & Crawford, 2008; Urbani et al., 2024; Wiseman et al., 2019). Certainly, this issue with articles from researchers around the world encapsulates the academic endeavors and challenges of studying picturebooks and using picturebooks with young children. The articles included here, much like the complexity of picturebooks and the broader expanse of children's literature, invite reflection and provide illumination. Throughout this issue, Bishop's (1990) timeless declaration that picturebooks can function as mirrors, windows, and sliding glass doors (Bishop, 1990) rings true. Because picturebooks offer touchstones that reflect a child's own life, scaffolds and glimpses into the worlds of others, portals to new places and experiences, and even models of their futures, those involved with young children must take picturebooks seriously. Therefore, considering both the research and the pedagogy surrounding the use of picturebooks in terms of potential, power, and practice is essential. Through picturebooks, educators and other caring adults can nurture children's transactions with picturebooks in supportive, developmentally appropriate, and impactful ways.

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