

How do teachers use picture books to draw on the cultural and linguistic diversity in their classrooms?

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KEY POINTS

- Picture books are effective resources in culturally and linguistically diverse classrooms with students aged 8–10 years.
- Teachers should choose picture books which resonate with them personally.
- Teachers can provide opportunities to explore and experience informal and formal language structures and vocabulary using picture books.
- Group work in response to picture books enables students to share who they are.
- A range of ways of responding to picture books, including writing, visual art, research, and drama, can be used to recognise a diversity of learning styles.

Picture books are ubiquitous in Western early childhood and primary settings. This article explores how picture books are being used in culturally and linguistically diverse settings, by describing and exploring the practice of two New Zealand teachers who use picture books extensively in their classrooms. Findings from interviews, observations, reflections, and collaborative workshops indicate the power of picture books within a diverse classroom population and the importance of several factors: the personal resonance of picture book selection, exploration of language structures and vocabulary, and the importance of using group work in activities across the curriculum in response to picture books.

Introduction

Libby Gleeson defines a picture book as one in which “the written text could not tell the story alone, but rather the illustrations are absolutely necessary to carry part of the story or narrative. However in some cases the illustrations alone are all that is needed” (Gleeson, 2003, p. 2). Picture books are ubiquitous in Western early childhood and primary settings. The combination of the visual and the textual in picture books is very appealing, and research shows close examination of text and image enhances comprehension and extends language (Hsaio, 2010; Pantaleo, 2008; Shatzer, 2008; Sneddon, 2009; Taliaferro, 2009). International literature on the use of picture books in classrooms suggests these resources can be useful in many curriculum areas including mathematics (e.g., Shatzer, 2008), social studies (Taliaferro, 2009), and the arts (Hsaio, 2010). Pantaleo (2008) worked with Canadian school students to show how picture books can be used to develop visual literacy. Sneddon (2009) has documented how dual-language picture books can be used in multilingual classrooms in London. Increased knowledge of Māori cultural practice is reported by Daly (2009) in a study where adults read picture books using a high frequency of words borrowed from the Māori language to their preschool children. Research also indicates that picture books have strong potential in addressing diversity in the classroom (e.g., McKenzie, 2008; Pantaleo, 2008; Taliaferro, 2009).

New Zealand society is increasingly diverse. The focus of the present research was to examine the picture-book practice of two classroom teachers teaching in a multicultural primary school setting with middle-level students. The study involved four

researchers: two classroom teachers who made extensive use of picture books and two university researchers. An action research (Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, 2000) cycle was followed over an 8-week period to allow the two university researchers to learn from and with the teachers about how picture books can be used in their classrooms, and for the teachers to have the opportunity to explore, reflect on, and develop further their teaching pedagogy with picture books. The research question was: How are picture books being used in culturally and linguistically diverse classrooms?

Setting, participants, and process

A multicultural urban school with a diverse range of ethnicities and high percentage of English-language learners was selected. The roll comprised 35 percent New Zealand European/Pākehā, 26 percent New Zealand Māori, 9 percent Southeast Asian, 9 percent Pasifika, 4 percent Indian, and 17 percent other. Two teacher researchers volunteered for the research project based on a desire to reflect on their current practice and build on existing knowledge.

The two teacher researchers were Grace, a teacher who had over 20 years’ classroom experience across all levels of primary education, and Pip, a teacher with 7 years’ experience. Grace was co-teaching in a Years 5/6 class, over a third of whom (nine) were English language learners. Pip was in sole charge of a Year 3/4 class, a third of whom (eight) were English-language learners. Ethnicities in their classrooms included Filipino, Somalian, Fijian, Māori, Pasifika, Indonesian, Egyptian, Indian, Papua New Guinean, and Malaysian. The Faculty of Education university

researchers were Marilyn and Nicola, who teach in the areas of language and literacy education.

The action research process of conversation, observations, and workshops (Table 1) generated new ideas, shared experiences, thoughts, and feelings. All four researchers felt enthused and energised within an active and collaborative partnership. Pip and Grace developed personal goals, such as “to become more familiar with the meta-language of words and images in picture books” using professional reading provided for them (Braid, 2005). Pip also wanted to focus on “using drama in conjunction with a book”; while Grace wanted to “explore interaction between fiction and nonfiction” and “to look at current practice linking internet research with traditional skills”. Thus, while it was clear that the teachers were already using picture books in a range of ways, they were still very keen to develop their strategies further within collegial workshop settings.

In sum, there were three different forms of data for this study: transcribed initial conversations; notes and written reflections from workshops; and field notes from five classroom observations. Thus the data presented here represents the voices and thoughts of all four researchers. Student voice is not reflected as this was not the focus of this study.

Findings and discussion

We have distilled five main findings in answer to our research question of how picture books are used in culturally and linguistically diverse classrooms.

Teacher beliefs and pedagogy

Fundamental to our findings was the teachers’ belief in the power of picture books as effective resources for their culturally and linguistically diverse classroom contexts. Both teachers immerse their students in book experiences. The students’ work on the classroom walls reflects “who they are” and “where they come from”, with multiple examples of how the students interpret illustration and text: written language is handwritten in students’ own words and language structures, diagrams come from prior knowledge and discussion of books, artwork is expressive and reflective of visual images. As Grace said, “I absolutely love picture books myself, I love sharing them with students. I do a lot of work with picture books, it’s a regular part of my programme and I get so much out of it and the kids do too.” Pip’s teaching persona focused on humour and laughter, as reflected in her choice of books. “I love reading to them and having fun. I don’t like to be too serious; books are used as motivation for discussion.” In addition, they discussed how “reading to” students, with close viewing of written text and visual imagery, adds to a student’s repertoire of knowledge and experience. They stressed the importance of text and illustrations as an incentive to read, especially for English-language learners and reluctant readers, and they understood the versatility of picture books in catering for diverse needs, especially when accompanied by conversation and dialogue.

These teachers work in ways that cater for multiple levels and multiple cultures/languages at the same

TABLE 1. CONTENT OF THREE WORKSHOPS

Workshop 1 (Full day)	Workshop 2 (Half day)	Workshop 3 (Half day)
<p>Connect</p> <p>Collaborative tasks, e.g., analysed a previously unseen picture book cover and double page spread from <i>Collecting Colour</i> (Dunstan, 2008).</p>	<p>Review</p> <p>Reflected on classroom observations and interactions. Emphasis on learning from one another, using students’ work samples in nonhierarchical manner</p>	<p>Review</p> <p>Teacher researchers and university researchers shared further understandings and reflections of observations and practice over the previous weeks.</p>
<p>Explore</p> <p>Who are we? Definition of culture. Read and identified books which reflected each person’s identity from the New Zealand Picture Book Collection (NZPBC).</p>	<p>Explore</p> <p>Examined how cultural and linguistic diversity are portrayed in a range of picture books. Began to jointly construct and write a definition of what we were trying to achieve in terms of picture books and their use in linguistically and culturally diverse classrooms. Research question focus.</p>	<p>Define</p> <p>Re-examined definition of picture books from previous workshop and what we had achieved—expanded on teaching pedagogy. Worked on summing up what had been learnt in relation to research question, jointly recorded through collaborative writing.</p>
<p>Decide</p> <p>Negotiated teaching goals for next two weeks.</p>	<p>Decide</p> <p>Re-evaluated and set further teaching goals for next two weeks.</p>	<p>Decide</p> <p>Discussed where to next?</p>

time—in part because of personalised teaching and in part because picture books have inbuilt affordances to be “read” for different ideas and at different levels of complexity. In Grace’s words, “picture books appeal to all levels of language and in particular for English-language learners. The content and visual elements assist in their learning. Picture books affirm but also introduce other cultures and provide doorways into other worlds. You can live experiences by reading books.”

Teachers chose books they love in order to capture the child’s mind

We believe that an important aspect of the success with which Grace and Pip used picture books in their diverse classrooms was contingent on their choice of books that had personal resonance for them. It could be argued that the best way to select picture books for a diverse classroom population would be to think carefully about the range of ethnicities and languages present, and locate picture books which reflect these communities. However, this approach is fraught with the potential for stereotypes and incorrect assumptions as is documented by Dudley-Marling (2003). Our observations with Grace and Pip showed us that an alternative and patently very effective approach is to first choose books with which the teacher has a strong connection, and then provide many and varied opportunities for the children to share their ideas, their voices, and their responses with one another. The books in Grace and Pip’s classrooms were chosen as a framework for reflecting experiences such as growth, trauma, self-discovery, conflict, and change. It is the teacher modelling, discussion, and teaching from the picture books that provides the space for children to draw on their range of life experiences and cultural contexts.

In this sense, storytelling seems to be a key component of success for these two teachers. During our classroom observations with Pip she read to her students *Milly Maloo* (Kloster, 2011), a story about a charismatic, flamboyant character (a monkey called Milly Maloo) who enjoys being different and has been invited to a party where you have to wear a hat. The basic theme revolves around friendship. We saw Pip weave in and embellish her personal experiences of seeing monkeys on a trip to Thailand, and then later telling her class about a toy monkey she had as a child. She improvised as she read to the students, making “monkey” faces and expressions. The students were in fits of laughter and were prompted to turn to a partner and tell something of their own.

Picture books provided an avenue for the teachers to share their stories with students at a very personal level and vice versa, a necessary prerequisite for relationship building, which is at the heart of culturally responsive

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pedagogy (Bishop & Berryman, 2009). The use of picture books with strong personal resonance also models to students personal attachment and engagement with books; they show how important books can be in a person’s life. This was clearly evident when Grace shared a personal story about a book she had read as a child and still has—how she visited the places in the book (Alaska) and talked to the author, who actually signed it. Grace was very emotional as she read with tears in her eyes and a trembling voice. This was a sincere, emotive story, which sprang from the picture book and encapsulates what Grace believes: “I never read a book I don’t like, so my love for what I’m doing comes through clearly and inspires and motivates the kids, such as taking different perspectives and using sophisticated picture books to share in ‘reading to’ sessions.” Pip adds more: “vibrant language, strong characters and high visual content are included in my choices.”

Teachers provided opportunities to explore and experience informal and formal language structures and vocabulary in picture books

Our observations of Pip and Grace reading picture books showed that opportunities were available for students to explore language structures and vocabulary. Reading picture books aloud has been shown elsewhere to enhance language growth and vocabulary acquisition, expose students to complex sentences, increase literal and inferential comprehension skills, and assist in gaining greater story-concept development (Elley, 1987; Huck, Hepler, Hickman, & Kiefer, 1997; Isbell, Sobol, Lindauer, & Lowrance, 2004). When Pip was reading to her class, she always read expressively, exaggerating at times, using body language, voice, and frequent use of pauses to provide opportunities for the students to join in when appropriate. For example, when reading the picture book *In the Beginning* (Gossage, 2006), she placed stress on words with action, such as “heaved and strained” and “cramped and dark”, using wonderful facial expressions

and body movement. In turn, the students role played their interpretation of these words. In another instance, reading the same picture book, she encouraged students to think of other points of view using key phrases from the book such as “We should leave things as they are.” She also stopped just before the conclusion of this story and invited the students to turn to a friend and tell their ending, anything they wanted. Pip was clearly involving students in effective listening and active participation.

Grace used context to place emphasis on symbols, vocabulary, and phrases from picture books. For example, she read aloud over several days *The Deliverance of the Dancing Bears* (Stanley, 2003), which reveals the plight of the dancing bears of Turkey and Greece. Grace wrote key content words on the whiteboard as they occurred in the story, and then had students (in pairs) find the meaning of vocabulary items. In subsequent sessions, as the picture book continued to be read, students explained the meaning of their words at appropriate places. This gave purpose for the activity while encouraging use of their own language structures and independent word study from a range of resources. Again, these opportunities for hearing clear and expressive language, exploring new vocabulary and phrases, and recycling language in discussions with peers provided important language-learning opportunities not only for the English-language learners in the classroom, but for all learners in the classroom (Ministry of Education, 2008).

Teachers used group work to enable students to share their language and identities

Group work engaged students in a variety of language/reading/writing experiences before and after being read to. Students make meaning in multiple ways through

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problem-solving and open-ended activities that focus on oral and visual language, providing speaking and listening opportunities. Nicola and Marilyn observed students in both classrooms asking one another questions, arguing, discussing, and giving advice. Students used their own dialects and experiences without the restrictions of having to use standard English. Pip stated succinctly, “oral language lays the foundation for reading and writing and books provide the models.”

Grace used artefacts to elaborate on the content of a picture book whenever possible. In one example from *The Talking Stick* (Meharry, 2008), she brought a walking stick to school and used this to engage curiosity and provide an important opportunity for the students to tell stories about the importance of taonga in their lives. This activity provided further opportunities for English-language learners to hear different ways in which language is structured and presented (Ministry of Education, 2008; Vine, 2003).

In both classrooms there was a constant balance between talking and listening, reading and writing, viewing and presenting in response to fiction and nonfiction picture books. The principle of ako (Bishop & Berryman, 2009) was evident as learners and teachers learned from one another. The teacher was not the fount of all knowledge, and the use of small groups allowed students who might never speak in a whole-class situation to try out ideas and share personal experiences and stories. In turn, teachers used these opportunities to “listen in” to their students’ thoughts and feelings for greater understanding between all.

Teachers used picture books across a wide range of curriculum areas

As mentioned earlier, international research indicates that picture books can be used across a wide range of curriculum areas (Hsaio, 2010; Pantaleo, 2008; Shatzer, 2008; Taliaferro, 2009), and this was increasingly evident in the classroom practice of Grace and Pip. For example, Pip used visual art for asking students to predict and draw main characters (having not seen the illustrations); and writing activities for response to the picture books she read; Grace provided opportunities for research (researching the village of Mousehole after reading *Mousehole Cat* by Barber, 1991), listening to music (for example, after reading *Whale Song* by Richardson, 2012), individual reading, and building vocabulary. However, Pip’s personal goal was to develop her ideas on using drama, and she developed a series of lessons related to a particular picture book (expanded below) while Grace wanted to develop her skills in the use of nonfiction picture books, particularly those with an accompanying narrative.

In Pip's lessons using *Watercress Tuna and the Children of Champion Street* (Grace, 2005), a book about a tuna (eel) with a magic throat who travels through a New Zealand urban street presenting gifts to the children who live there, she asked groups of students to re-enact the story to their classmates. Nicola observed that the groups were buzzing with activity and discussion. As part of their presentation, the groups had to decide how to present the story through words, body movement or symbolic actions and not follow a prescribed script; they had to take different perspectives and place themselves in the "eyes" of that person. The teacher reinforced new and inventive ideas, encouraging and fostering creativity of oral/visual language. It was not a retelling of the story, but reinventing some of the events from the story in the students' own way of telling. Hence the starting point was the students' knowledge, building on the language structures and ideas they already had. This active process has a greater chance of making learning relevant through the experiences of the book, rather than having to copy what the author/illustrator have told and/or shown.

Conclusion

In our final research workshop we worked collaboratively to answer the question of how teachers use picture books in culturally and linguistically diverse classrooms based on our shared analysis of our experiences, reflections, and observations. After much debate and discussion, editing and revision as we wrote our group thoughts, this is the written statement we formulated:

Teachers use picture books in the classroom for drawing on cultural and linguistic diversity by choosing books they love in order to capture children's minds and engage reluctant learners; to expand, enrich and challenge learners' knowledge of the world. Picture books give purpose to language processes by using the oral/aural/visual elements. They provide opportunities to explore and experience informal and formal language structures and vocabulary. Teachers help children make connections between the ideas in picture books and their own world. They use group work with picture books to encourage and develop relationships, self-confidence and risk taking, which leads to a co-operative and collaborative construction of understanding. Picture books allow for a range of means for responding to ideas including art, drama, writing, dance, and oral and written language. This enables the learner to develop a sense of self and creates a sense of community in the classroom.

In sum, the teachers in this research demonstrated a range of ways of using picture books in culturally and linguistically diverse middle-level classroom contexts. Perhaps the most notable finding in this study is

that teachers do not necessarily need to find picture books which specifically reference the various cultures and languages of the children in their classroom in order to teach in a culturally responsive manner. Our conversations and observations indicate that it is very important that teachers choose picture books which they are passionate about, and through which they can share themselves. By modelling connections with stories, students are enthused to engage in a range of group work based on image and text in which they are able to share themselves.

For us, it was exciting to work with teachers who have the confidence to work with picture books in the middle school where many students might see themselves as "beyond" picture books. It was inspiring to observe teachers who have the confidence to work with these books across several days, weaving in multiple layers and levels of response to the text and images, and to see how each exploration engaged and benefited all in the class, not just the English language learners.

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Picture books

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