

Wisdom in Education

Volume 2 | Issue 1

Article 6


5-1-2006

The Power of Visuals: Picture Books as Invitations to Literacy

Mary Jo Skillings

California State University San Bernardino

Follow this and additional works at: <http://scholarworks.lib.csusb.edu/wie>

 Part of the [Art Education Commons](#), [Bilingual, Multilingual, and Multicultural Education Commons](#), [Curriculum and Instruction Commons](#), [Educational Methods Commons](#), and the [Elementary Education and Teaching Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Skillings, Mary Jo (2006) "The Power of Visuals: Picture Books as Invitations to Literacy," *Wisdom in Education*: Vol. 2: Iss. 1, Article 6.
Available at: <http://scholarworks.lib.csusb.edu/wie/vol2/iss1/6>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by CSUSB ScholarWorks. It has been accepted for inclusion in *Wisdom in Education* by an authorized administrator of CSUSB ScholarWorks. For more information, please contact scholarworks@csusb.edu.

The Power of Visuals: Picture Books as Invitations to Literacy

Abstract

When young children are exposed to picture books, they are building important bridges to literacy. Picture books are sometimes defined as a storybook with a dual narrative. That is, the illustrations and text work interdependently, the integration of the visual and the verbal tell the story. The illustrations add a new dimension that extends beyond the words on the page; together, the text and pictures make the story stronger. A well crafted picture book is a feast for the eyes of a young child. The illustrations awaken and develop the child's visual, mental, and verbal imagination.

Keywords

reading, literacy education, elementary education

Author Statement

Dr Mary Jo Skillings is a professor in the College of Education at California State University San Bernardino

The Power of Visuals: Picture Books as Invitations to Literacy

Mary Jo Skillings

Department of Language, Literacy and Culture
California State University San Bernardino

Abstract

When young children are exposed to picture books, they are building important bridges to literacy. Picture books are sometimes defined as a storybook with a dual narrative. That is, the illustrations and text work interdependently, the integration of the visual and the verbal tell the story. The illustrations add a new dimension that extends beyond the words on the page; together, the text and pictures make the story stronger. A well crafted picture book is a feast for the eyes of a young child. The illustrations awaken and develop the child's visual, mental, and verbal imagination.

Foundations of Literacy Learning for Young Children

Infants as young as two months old respond to the stimulation of picture book illustrations. Children are born into a highly visual world where they are bombarded with the flickering images and blasting sounds of television and other media. But with a picture book, a child is able to hold an image constant to enjoy and revisit time and time again. The colors of the illustrations hold them captivated. When a book is shared with a child by a parent or other caregiver, the child begins to understand concepts about print, how reading books works; reading in English from left to right, read from top to bottom, what is the concept of word or picture in a story or nursery rhyme. The images evoke emotional reactions as the child begins to identify with the characters in the story. They laugh, show dismay, turn pages to investigate what will happen next in the story, and search for meaning. The child begins to construct meaning from the story without knowing how to decode the text.

Language development and vocabulary are expanded as children explore the images on the page. This is strengthened when a parent or caregiver reads aloud to them or makes comments or asks questions about what is happening in the illustrations and in the story. The child may begin to contribute to the story or chime in when a recurring line appears in the text such as *Margaret Wise Brown's* classic, *Good Night Moon* or *Close your Eyes*, by Kate Banks, or Helen Oxenbury's *All Fall Down* or any of her series of Baby Board books.

Picture books support the child's emerging comprehension skills in making predictions about what will happen next in the story. Because picture books add so much to the development of a child's ability to use pictorial clues in comprehending a story, many new published series include visual stories for beginning readers to enable them to know the success of "reading" before they actually learn to decode text.

One of the most compelling examples of the power of picture books is detailed in Dorothy Butler's award winning book, *Cushla and Her Books*. Butler chronicles the role picture books played in her handicapped granddaughter's language and mental development. As a newborn, Cushla was diagnosed by doctors as being mentally retarded as well as having multiple physical handicaps. Doctors recommended her parents institutionalize her. However, her parents were determined to help their infant daughter develop to her full potential, however, limited that might be. Although Cushla had difficulty focusing her eyes, her parents immersed her world with brightly illustrated picture books that they held up close to her face. They read aloud to her multiple times daily from a wide variety of children's picture books. Cushla's life was dramatically changed as an infant when she began to focus on the illustrations and the sounds of rhythm and rhyme of her books. Cushla's best friends became the characters from those books. At the age of three, Cushla was assessed by her doctors and evaluated as having average intelligence. She was still handicapped, but Cushla's book character companions contributed to her development and general understanding of the world around her.

The power of being able to visualize, is apparent for teachers of young children in primary grades who recognize that some children who are slower to speak, read, and write are frequently successful when encouraged to draw a picture of an experience prior to writing. It is only after drawing, that the child is able to include details and descriptive words that originally they could not use. They needed to see it first in the mind's eye and were empowered like Cushla to write.

Building Bridges for Older Students Using Picture Books

If picture books are useful tools for developing bridges to literacy for young children, they are also useful with older children who have had little exposure to books to enhance reading skills. Picture books, once thought to be the domain of very young children, are now being published with content suitable for older students. Teachers of middle grade students might use picture books to introduce a topic in a content area such as social studies, to build a common background of understanding prior to studying a topic or them. Books such as *A Hero of the Holocaust*, *The story of Janusz Korczak and His Children*, by David Adler and *Willy & Max* by Amy LittleSugar provide a background for studying the Holocaust. These books obviously aren't intended for young children; however, the

illustrations and text have a powerful impact on students to understand on a more personal level, the events of World War II and the Holocaust than by reading a chapter in a textbook.

Because our culture is so visual, both fiction and nonfiction texts are now published with more illustrations, photographs, graphics, and DVD clips. Some series, such as *Graphic Classics*, published by Barron's Educational Series, and the *Bone Series* by Scholastic, and a series published by Puffin, resemble comic books. This action comic format is particularly appealing to boys.

The amount of information retained from visual forms usually exceeds information presented orally. Visual images also support learners on the path of becoming strategic readers, which is a reader who has developed a variety of strategies to support the understanding of text. Strategic readers use their imaginations in a variety of ways to enhance their understanding of the text and illustrations

The desire to read and develop mental images of text does not happen naturally. Rather, the building blocks for this start early for youngsters when children are exposed to picture books and hearing books read aloud. But teachers encounter many children who have not had experiences with books and have not had reading role models. Jim Trelease, in *The Read Aloud Handbook*, suggests that parents and teachers need to use the same formula for engaging children with books that Madison Avenue uses to develop television commercials that appeal to children, such as:

1. Send the message while the child is young and receptive
2. Make sure the message has enough action and sparkle to hold their attention and
3. Make sure the message is brief enough to whet the child's appetite to see and hear it again and again before boredom sets in.

What the Research Tells Us About Developing Imagery

A body of research (Gambrell & Jawitz, 1993; Keene & Zimmerman, 1997) indicates that being able to create a mental image of text is important to developing as a proficient reader and writer, but many struggling readers are not able to construct a moving picture of the text in their heads as they read. These students are so involved in decoding text that their comprehension is derailed. This research has important implications for teachers of students of all ages and abilities. The studies suggest that teachers need to model think-alouds as a comprehension strategy for students to use. Using this strategy, teachers stop periodically and explain what they are thinking and seeing in their heads, and allow students to practice this activity. In this way, they support their students' abilities to create mind pictures, important to comprehension.

The Laboratory for Interactive Learning at the University of New Hampshire, conducted a two year study of 400 students in classroom research where teachers incorporated rich visual and sensory components to their literacy programs. Children in the study were encouraged to visualize or create a visual image and to talk about it prior to writing. This program emphasized the diversity of learning styles and encouraged children to create stories using their own unique creative processes. Their study found that children who participated in the program “demonstrated dramatic improvements in their writing abilities and gained fuller power of expression than a control group.” The researchers found that students’ writing topics were more varied, plots more developed, stories had stronger sense of beginning, middle, and end, were better crafted, and had richer descriptive language, even for emerging 1st grade students. (Olshansky, 1995).

Implications for Teachers and Parents

Looking beyond visual illustrations as engaging readers with the story, developing decoding skills and deeper levels of comprehension, the implications of using illustrations in picture books to enhance reading, writing, and reading to learn are evident. Levin (1981) described five functions that illustrations serve in assisting readers in processing text. These functions include:

1. decorative - the illustrations embellish the page and make it more engaging
2. representational - the pictures may simply depict what the author has written on the page
3. organizational - pictures provide a structural framework for the text such as steps or sequence
4. interpretational - illustrations serve to clarify more difficult concepts; and
5. transformational - illustrations are systematic devices to assist the reader’s recall, such as recoding or depicting an image or concept in a different way.

Parents and teachers of young children are more interested in decorative and representational functions of illustrations as they use picture books because it is the child’s first introduction to books and story; however, teachers who are working with children who are already further along in their capacity to decode text are more concerned with the organizational, interpretational, and transformational functions. It is at these higher processing levels that teachers need to provide clear

instructional opportunities for students to understand and use these functions in meaningful reading contexts.

Illustrations that provide clear organizational, interpretational, and transformational models help to clarify and extend the text and support the reader's understanding of the topic. Books that demonstrate the organizational function might be *The Life and Times of the Ant* by Charles Micucci. This author has an entire series with illustrations that demonstrate the sequence of the life cycle of different living things. Another example of effective presentation of sequence is Patricia Lauber's *Volcano:*

The Eruption and Healing of Mt. St. Helen's.

Our Patchwork Planet by Helen Roney Sattler provides photographs taken from space as well as computer-generated images that illustrate, interpret, and clarify information about the earth's shifting surface. The illustrations by Maestro help clarify complex ideas about the earth's plate tectonics. Illustrations are particularly important for assisting the reader in understanding abstract concepts such as longitude and latitude. Harriet Barton's illustrations in *Maps and Globes* by Jack Knowlton provide bright pictures and focuses attention on specific concepts of simple maps. (Huck et al, 2004) If picture books are so appealing and beneficial for infants and young children as a first step to becoming a reader, then it is even more critical for older, less engaged or disabled readers to be introduced to books with accompanying illustrations that will engage them. The secret for the teacher or parent is to first discover what the child is passionate about and then find the right book with illustrations or photographs that engage them, support their comprehension, and invite them into higher levels of literacy.

References

Adler, D. (2002). *A Hero and the Holocaust, The Story of Janusz Korczak and His children.* Illustrated by Bill Farnsworth. New York: Holiday House.

Banks, K. (2002). *Close Your Eyes.* Illustrated by Georg Hallensleben. New York: Foster Books.

Brown, M.W. (1947). *Good Night Moon.* Illustrated by Clement Hurd. New York: Harper & Row.

Butler, D. (1980). *Cushla and Her Books*. Boston, Massachusetts: The Horn Book.

Carney, R. and Levin, J. (2002). Pictorial illustrations still improve students' learning from text. *Educational Psychology Review*, Vol. 14, No. 1 5-14.

Gambrell, L.B. & Jawitz, P.B. (1993) Mental imagery, text illustrations, and children's story comprehension and recall. *Reading Research Quarterly*, 28, 264-276.

Hibbing, A. N. & Rankin-Erikson, J.L. (2003). A picture is worth a thousand words: Using visual images to improve comprehension for middle school struggling readers. *Reading Teacher*, Vol. 56, No. 8. 758-771.

Huck, C.S., Kiefer, B., Hepler, S. Hickman, J. (2004). *Children's Literature in the Elementary Classroom*. 8th Edition, Boston: McGraw Hill.

Keene, E. & Zimmermann, S. (1997). *Mosaic of Thought*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.

Knowlton, J. (1985). *Maps and Globes*. Illustrated by Harriet Barton. New York: Crowell Books.

Lauber, P. (1986). *Volcano: The Eruption and Healing of Mt. St. Helens*. New York: Bradbury Press.

Littlesugar, A. (2006). *Willy & Max, A Holocaust Story*. Illustrated by William Low. New York: Philomel.

Micucci, C. (2003). *The Life and Times of the Ant*. New York: Houghton Mifflin.

Olshansky, B. (1995). Picture this: An arts-based literacy program. *Educational Leadership, ASCD*. Vol. 53, No. 1, 44-47.

Oxenbury, H. (1999). *All Fall Down*. New York: Little Simon.

Sattler, H. R. (1995). *Our Patchwork Planet: The Story of Plate Tectonics*. Illustrated by Guilio Maestro. New York: Lothrop, Lee & Shepard.

Trelease, J. (2003). *The Read-Aloud Handbook*. New York: Penguin.