

The Benefits of Using Picture Books for Building Literacy Skills

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The Importance of Picture Books

When planning for early literacy development, oracy is one of the forgotten aspects of the curriculum. Oral language serves as a bridge to fluency in reading and writing, thinking and learning. Oracy and literacy go hand in hand in the communication process with all human beings. According to Hall (1987) oracy and literacy are the essence of social interaction and they play both meaningful and purposeful roles in all communication functions (p. 12). Reading picture books to children will arm children with oracy skills as they will be able to have access to sounds, stories, ideas and vocabulary. Egan (1993) states that children depend heavily on their spoken words to communicate their thoughts before they start to read and write (p. 121).

The understanding and the benefit of oral language research is a gateway to transit from orality to literacy. Reading picture books will give children the opportunity to build language skills when they have literate conversation with the reader. Literacy could not be instilled into the child's mind without oral language and this is because oral language is the basic support for literacy and once this is taken out, language becomes not meaningful (Egan, 1993). Sawyer and Sawyer (1993) emphasized that speaking ability, listening ability, sign language and other forms of communication must therefore be included as important literacy skills.

When parents and teachers read picture books to children, they will have intimate conversations with the characters in stories. These daily conversations will tap into each other's thoughts and ideas leading to further discussion on the words used in the book and at the same time it will demonstrate how good readers learn to make meaning of the words used in the book. Stories give children a meaningful and natural context for them to understand language. Listening to the vocabulary used in the stories frequently and repeating it will help in their language learning process. Repeating the determined words used in the stories is an important element in this process. When learners hear the objective words and structures in the language as many times as possible, the language starts to become internalised.

There are various ways in which picture book can be used in the classroom. It will encourage children to listen to the stories told in class and give them opportunities to actively analyse the stories. This in turn will improve their verbal skills, increase imagination and visualisation skills. Picture books can also be used as co-teachers

because it can create a platform for oracy and literacy. I feel that it has an essential role in the education of young children, as it will enhance their imagination and inspire them to create their own visual images and ideas. To further enhance children's literacy skills, I use picture books in thinking-aloud activities. The fundamental idea behind the thinking-aloud process is to encourage children to use their internal dialogue, which is a crucial process of what good readers should do (Allington, 2001). Thinking aloud process also helps children who are second language learners, especially during reading aloud time.

Choosing picture books is a fundamental process. It is especially useful for second language learners in the class. Books such as fairy tales, fables and myths also help as children from diverse cultures can relate to such stories to make connections and reduce their anxiety about learning a new language. For example, when second language learners listen to any stories, they will expand their schema (pre-existing knowledge). Teaching students to make connections as they read, helps them to see the power of thinking about their own schema or background. They learn that connecting their background and experiences to what they read allows them to better understand the material (Harvey and Goudvis, 2000). The thinking aloud process helps children to monitor their comprehension as they listen to stories (Block & Pressley, 2002). When children practise thinking aloud after storytelling, they will start the process of inner conversation about meaning and thus comprehension of the stories become clear. Thinking aloud makes this process observable and still, some students do have difficulty figuring it out; they passively read not expecting the text to make sense.

Reading picture books will build visual skills. Many researchers have proven that when students create images in their minds before and after reading, their reading comprehension skills will improve as being read to. An active reader will actively engage with the stories and will not take in print and receive words off the page (Braunger & Lewis, 1998). When stories are being shared to children, they will use their metacognitive thinking skills, activate their background knowledge, use inferencing skills while listening and reading and use their sensory images to synthesise the stories (Keene & Zimmermann, 2002). Thus visualization is another important comprehension strategy to enhance comprehension skills. "Creating visual images when reading affects comprehension" (Hibbing and Rankin-Erickson, 2003 p. 761 2003). Allan Paivio (1971) came up with a "dual coding" theory that suggests the verbal and non-verbal systems is another way to represent events in a story.

Which books can we choose?

While research is clear about the usefulness of picture books in developing oracy and ultimately bridging the gap between reading and metacognition, as teachers, we often wonder if there are books beyond the 'tried and tested', beyond the well-known authors

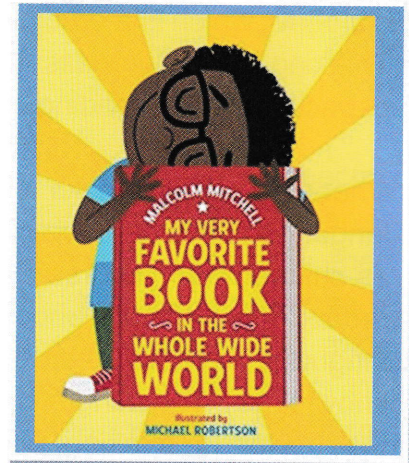
who have supported us in our teaching practice, to an endeavour of exploring newly published books, of turning that crisp, fresh-from-the-oven book and of sharing that joy and excitement with our students. With this idea, here are a few short reviews of recently published picture-books with suggested activities that can be implemented in preschool.

My Very Favorite Book In The Whole Wide World

Author: Malcolm Mitchell

Illustrator: Michael Robertson

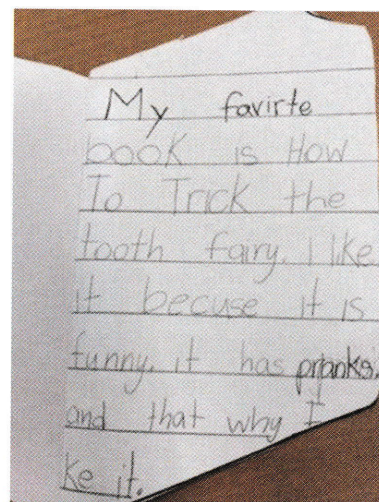
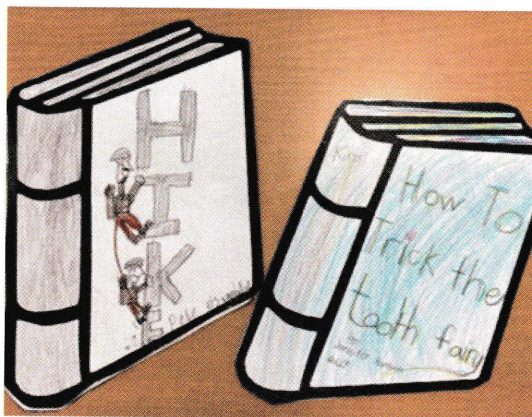
Date of Publication: December 2020

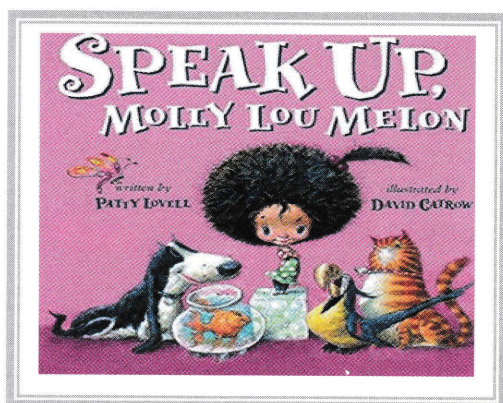


"My Very Favorite Book In The Whole Wide World" is written by Super Bowl Champion and literacy advocate Malcolm Mitchell. The main character, Henley, talks about the struggle he had to go through as a reader. As part of a school assignment, his teacher had asked him to search for his favourite book. He panicked and decided to travel to places like the library and bookstores. The person that came to his rescue was his mum – "The best stories always come from the heart." Henley then writes his own book and shares it with the class with confidence. This is a book that shows once again, that oral and written language is learned best through talking, reading and writing.

Suggested activity:

Children can be asked to design the cover of one of their favourite books that they have read. While 5-year olds will prefer just drawing the cover, 6-year olds can be nudged to write a few lines about their favourite book.





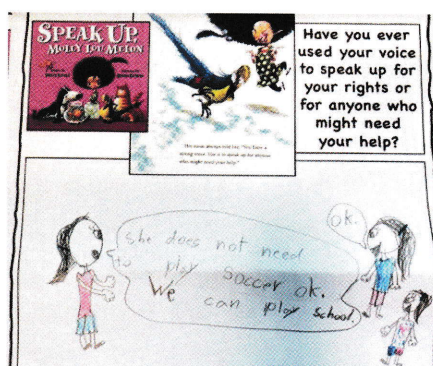
Speak Up, Molly Lou Melon

Author: Patty Lovell

Illustrator: David Catrow

Date of Publication: September 2020

This book is about speaking up for what is right and speaking up for those who need help. When Bettina Bonklehead arrived in the classroom showing signs of bullying, Molly Lou Melon used all her exuberant energy in a positive way. She worked with Bettina in a class project and didn't let Bettina's previous actions ruin their relationship. Molly kept her positive attitude and continued to inspire her friends to do good. She took the lessons she had learned from her mum – "Take responsibility for the things that you do, good or bad," and "Accept people for who they are and listen to their ideas, even if they are different from yours." Young children have an innate sense of justice and this book will resonate with the Molly Lou Melons in any preschool or kindergarten.



Suggested activity:

4-year olds could be asked to share an incident when they listened to the views of others even when it was different from theirs, or when they stood up to help someone else. 5-year olds could be encouraged to draw a picture in addition to sharing orally while 6-year olds would also write a couple of lines in addition to a discussion on the topic.

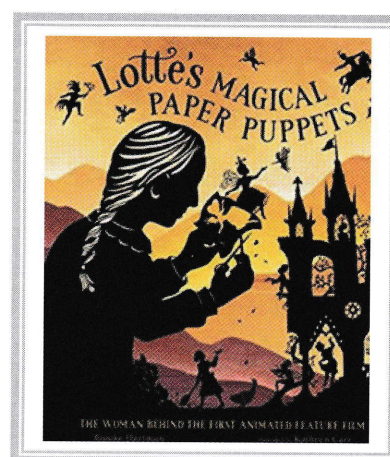
Lotte's Magical Paper Puppets: The Woman Behind The First Animated Feature Film

Author: Brooke Hartman

Illustrator: Kathryn Carr

Date of publication: October 2020

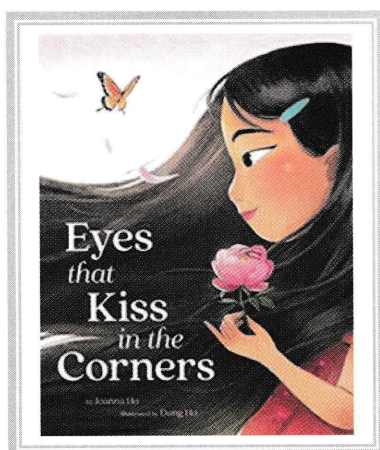
This picture book is about Lotte Reiniger, who created one of the first feature-length animated films: The Adventures of Prince Achmed. She was a feminist artist who refused to follow through to Nazi oppression rule and she bravely left her home in Germany, moving around for years. This book has a fairytale-like quality, hidden among the pages. Lotte brought many beloved fairytales to life using silhouette puppetry. Almost every



child is drawn towards animated films. This book opens up a world of imagination for children.

Suggested activity:

Children can draw a silhouette on black paper and cut it out to make paper puppets. They can stage a puppet show, linking reading and oracy.



Eyes That Kiss In The Corners

Date of publication: January 2021

Author: Joanna Ho

Illustrator: Dung Ho

This book celebrates the beauty of an Asian's girl's eyes and highlights the importance of recognising an individual's beauty, respecting family beliefs and culture. The words on each page exude positivity and puts the spotlight on how the family members teach the offspring to practice self-love. This book is one that many children

in Singapore will identify with. Dung Ho's illustrations are captivating as they complement Joanna Ho's figurative language well.

Suggested activity:

The teacher could initiate discussion on physical features unique to children in the class and celebrate our differences.

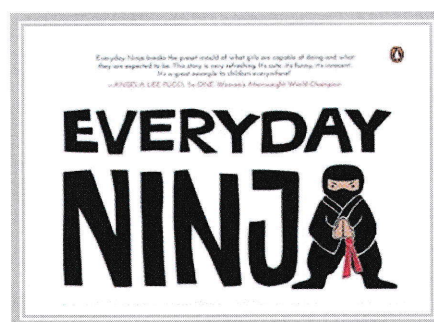
Everyday Ninja

Date of publication: February 2020

Author: Leila Boukarim

Illustrator: Barbara Moxham

What comes to your mind when you hear the word 'ninja'?



These are phrases and words from my students - black masked figures, acrobatic moves, Katana steel blade, ninja stars...the list goes on. During the medieval times, martial arts was ruled and dominated by men. These sports have the reputation of showcasing traits of masculinity e.g. strength, aggression, toughness. I am so glad Leila Boukarim and Barbara Moxham have created such a lovely book that teaches young children about breaking gender stereotypes. It all started when Kareem and Wei spotted a ninja side-kicking, backflipping, somersaulting at the park. They were so impressed by the movements that they started to practise to move their bodies

following the Ninja movements. But when the ninja did a perfect arabesque, the boys were intrigued and were taken aback that the Ninja was a girl.

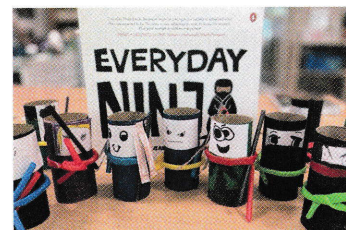


We are witnessing true activism of race and gender right now and this simple and yet powerful story is an invitation for all of us to commit in identifying gender bias that still exist around us. In other words, teachers and parents play an important role in creating such awareness. Why create this awareness in young children? Being an early childhood educator for two decades, my experience has taught me that young children learn about the world and they wonder. It will not take them long to learn that race and gender matter. They make observations and form judgements

based on things they can see. They learn very quickly about aspects valued by society, especially race and gender. Adults incidentally tend to label activities as either “boy” or “girl” over and over again throughout the day. On a positive note, we are living in the 21st century and the bravery of many educators, parents and authors for persistently trying to highlight the realities of gender bias and rigid gender roles among young people, calls for a celebration. This book is a must-read!

Suggested activity:

Provide ‘toilet rolls’, markers, paint and coloured straw to children for them to make a ninja. Initiate discussion with them on their choice of colour, expression of the ninja and the colour of the ninja’s belt, to connect art and oral skills.



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