Picture Books: A key to the Australian Curriculum
(A summary of a Plenary session presented by Helen Adam at the PETAAPicture This Conference May 2\textsuperscript{nd} 2015, The Vines Resort, Perth)

Helen Adam is an academic lecturer and researcher at Edith Cowan University. She has lectured and written on the subject of children’s literature for the past seven years. Her writing and research addresses the role and importance of quality literature in the social and emotional well-being of the child. Helen authored the chapter Children’s Literature in both the first and second editions of Language, literacy and early childhood education (Fellows & Oakley, 2e 2014) and is currently a judge for Children’s Book Council of Australia Book of the Year Awards. Helen’s lecturing and writing highlight the potential and importance of quality literature in developing critical and creative thinking, ethical understandings, personal and social capabilities and intercultural understandings – all of which are highlighted in the Australian Curriculum and The Early Years Learning Framework and are important to all children. She is currently undertaking her Doctor of Philosophy studies on the topic: Investigating the use of children’s literature to support principles of diversity in long day care centres.

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Language, Literacy, Literature; cross curriculum priorities; personal and social capabilities; intercultural understandings; closing the gap... The Australian Curriculum brings both opportunities and challenges for educators. Perhaps, though, there might exist a key – an element of curriculum that can help educators unlock not only the essential requirements of one curriculum area but an underpinning structure on which to rest the Australian Curriculum and its goals and values. This session explores this key – the use of Picture Books.

The value of literature

Few would dispute the potential and importance of using literature as a resource in developing the literacy skills of reading and writing. Evidence frequently demonstrates the correlation of engagement with literature with academic achievement in areas including reading, writing, spelling, vocabulary and numeracy. Research investigating this correlation has shown that children who read daily for pleasure can show academic achievement of up to a year and half greater than those who do not (OECD, 2011).

However, the benefits of engaging regularly with quality literature extend well beyond academic achievement. It has also long been recognised that literature can be a powerful tool for developing children’s social and emotional well-being. Children who read and engage with books show stronger ability to display empathy, to consider multiple perspectives and to consider the opinions and beliefs of others (Mar and Oatley, 2010; Kidd and Castano, 2013).

Literature can provide role models for children through the exploration of the traits of key characters and so teach children important qualities such as friendship, cooperation, perseverance respect and honesty (Kara-Soteros and Rose, 2008). Values and mores can be examined through literature to “promote new ways of being and thinking” (O’Neill, 2010 p. 41). In addition to this, children’s literature can be used to extend children’s knowledge and understandings of themselves and those who may be different culturally, socially or historically. (Saxby, 1997).

When we look at these qualities of literature through the framework of the Australian Curriculum it is a small step to see that a well selected collection of children’s literature, coupled with sound practice and use of these texts within the Literature strand of the English Curriculum and across other curriculum areas, has the potential to provide a strong linking thread not only across the teaching elements of the curriculum but through all the layers of the priorities and capabilities that the Australian Curriculum aims to achieve.
Encouraging response to picture books

An important factor for educators to consider when working with picture books in the classroom is that of encouraging reader, or listener, response. Evidence suggests that oral language lies at the heart of developing literacy response in children (Sipe, 2002; Wolf, 2003). Educators are encouraged to “let go” of notions of having to control or direct the responses and input of children.

It is through talk that children can develop their skills of literary criticism through deeply pleasurable shared experiences (Sipe, 2003). At the same time, these shared experiences become the vehicle through which children can gain the previously discussed benefits and capabilities associated with academic, intellectual and personal capabilities.

Equitable education for ALL – Picture books as a key.

With this recognition of the importance of response, comes the important influence of children’s diverse backgrounds. The Australian Curriculum has its roots in the United Nations Convention of the Rights of the Child which states that: “All children have the right to an education that lays the foundation for the rest of their lives, maximises their ability, and respects their family cultural and other identities and languages “(Belonging, being and becoming: The early years). The early years learning framework for Australia, (2009). The Melbourne Declaration on Educational Goals for Young Australians by the Council of Australian Governments in 2008 committed Australian schools to promoting equity and excellence for all young Australians. (Ministerial council on education, employment, training and youth affairs, 2008)

These commitments and goals are articulated through the Australian Curriculum through cross curriculum priorities, personal and social capabilities, and, intercultural understandings. In each of these it is clear that the diversity of our nation’s population is to be appreciated and provided for with a strong goal to ensure all children have the opportunity to achieve equitable educational goals.

This focus places a great responsibility on educators to make curriculum decisions that reflect inclusive goals and practices. This is where picture books can be a particularly valuable resource to address principles of diversity while addressing curriculum requirements. By selecting picture books that are representative of diversity, pathways are open to discussion and consideration with children of important issues such as diverse perspectives, intercultural awareness, breaking down stereotypes and misconceptions. In turn, these types of conversations with children develop general capabilities such as critical and creative thinking, personal and social capabilities and, ethical and intercultural understandings.

If educators wish to achieve equitable outcomes for all children, then consideration must be given to the selection of texts that reflect the diversity within society. Research has found that when implementing an inclusive curriculum, issues such as stereotyping, lack of authenticity and misunderstood worldviews, perspectives and ideology emerge in the portrayal of non-dominant cultures in books, leading to challenges for educators in selecting and using picture books (David, 2001; Roberts, Dean, & Holland, 2005; Sims Bishop, 1997).

It is, therefore, important that all children have access to authentic and accurate representations and role models related to their cultural backgrounds and everyday lives in order to gain the demonstrated benefits associated with developing a positive sense of identity and belonging (Morgan, 2009; Gollnick & Chinn, 2006).

This brings the educator to an important bridge to cross – in recognising the value of picture books to support the Australian Curriculum, the educator must also recognise the importance of using careful and considered selection criteria for picture books to ensure that the use of those texts assist in achieving the overall goals and outcomes. They must be aware that without careful selection, their use of the texts could potentially and unwittingly result in presenting attitudes and values that are counter to the goals and ethos of the curriculum leading to inequitable outcomes for students.

Building a picture book collection

Harper and Brand (2010) developed a Checklist for selecting and evaluating multicultural picture storybooks (Appendix 1). Consideration of such a checklist can provide educators with a reliable guide to evaluate the potential of picture books for use in the classroom. It can also assist in providing pointers for discussion around such textual characteristics as text, illustrations, themes, viewpoints and perspectives.

If educators carefully select literature texts using criteria such as those provided here they can set themselves up to ensure their teaching with those texts is well situated to achieve the goals and priorities of the Australian Curriculum and truly make a difference to the lives of all their students.

The magic of picture books – a closing word

Well selected and used picture books can be powerful tools for educators. The magic of literature includes elements such as: helping children view others as
equal members of society (Morgan, 2009), promoting a more positive sense of self, helping children learn about the world, helping to cope with stress, providing insights into problems, affirming thoughts and feelings, stimulating discussion about problems, creating an awareness that others have similar problems, providing solutions to problems, communicating new values and attitudes, helping children find meaning in life, as well as many other elements (Jackson & Nelson, 2008).

When these elements are viewed in line with the aspirations of the Australian Curriculum it is clear to see that well selected and carefully used children’s picture books can and should be a vital key used by educators to unlock the Australian Curriculum, and to provide their students with personal attributes and world views that can reverberate positively throughout their lives and the lives of those they meet along the way.

References


David, R.G. (2001) Representing the Inuit in contemporary British and Canadian juvenile non-fiction. Children’s literature in education. 32 (2) 139-154


Appendix 1

Checklist for Selecting and Evaluating Multicultural Picture Storybooks


1. Author(s)
   Are the author(s)/illustrator(s) qualified to write or illustrate material relating to the culture(s) portrayed? How?
   Have the author(s)/illustrator(s) conducted related research? If not, have they lived among (either as a member of, or as a visitor to) the groups of people represented in the book?

2. Story
   Is the story interesting to children?
   Does the story contain authentic language?
   Are factual and historical details accurate?
   Overall, is this a high-quality story, independent of its multicultural aspects?

3. Characters
   Are the characters believable?
   Are universal human emotions, attitudes, needs, and experiences reflected?
   Do characters represent people from a variety of cultural groups?
   Are the lifestyles realistic?
   Are females as well as males depicted in leadership roles?

4. Setting
   Does the story reflect a variety of places and times?
   Are urban, suburban, and rural settings represented realistically?
   Are cultural settings and geographical features represented accurately?

5. Plot
   Are real situations depicted?
   Are rigid boundaries of class, culture, religion, and ethnicity dismissed?
   Are various conflicts presented for children to explore and discuss?
   How are conflicts resolved?

6. Theme
   Does the story offer children a variety of situations, concepts, and new ideas on which to reflect, question, and consider?
   Are values explored, rather than preached?
   Are there lessons to be learned?
   Are children exposed to multiple perspectives and values?
   How does the story promote understanding of our diverse society?

7. Illustrations
   Are diverse populations represented?
   Is there diversity represented within cultural groups?
   Are characters realistically and genuinely represented?
   Do the illustrations avoid reinforcing societal stereotypes?
   Do the illustrations and text use Authenticity to demonstrate respect for other cultures?
   Do the illustrations and text convey characteristics common to all people and cultures?

8. Developmental Appropriateness
   Is the story age appropriate; can children understand what is presented?
   Is the story individually appropriate in terms of children's family backgrounds?
   Does the story reflect the social, linguistic, and cultural contexts in which children live or to which children can relate?
   Will the story encourage meaningful and relevant discussions?

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