



## Research & Policy

# The State of the Art in Picturebook Research from 2010 to 2020

Evelyn Arizpe

---

This overview of picturebook studies published in English (2010–2020) includes fundamental findings for teaching and supporting readers as well as potential new research directions.

**The prefix “multi”** is often linked to words associated with picturebooks: “multicultural,” “multilingual,” “multimodal,” and “multisensory,” as well as “multiliteracies” and “multimedia.” So it is not surprising that the maturing field of picturebook research has produced a multitude of studies from a variety of educational, literary, linguistic, psychological, cultural, and media perspectives and catering to a wide range of interests. However, it was not until recently that the extent of this growth has been recognized, as exemplified by the publication in 2018 of a 500-page handbook focused solely on picturebook studies, *The Routledge Companion to Picturebooks* (Kümmerling-Meibauer, 2018). This comprehensive edited collection includes essays on concepts (from page layout to ideology); picturebook categories; interfaces (such as picturebooks and comics); domains (such as art history, media, translation); and adaptations and remediation (such as film versions and merchandising). In explaining the expansion of this field, the editor, Kümmerling-Meibauer (2018) notes that:

[T]he pleasures as well as the learning processes evoked by picturebooks have been addressed in book-length studies, edited volumes, and journal articles, whereby scholars from different disciplines have discovered the crucial role of the picturebook in the child’s developing cognitive, linguistic, moral, and aesthetic capacities. (p. 4)

Over the last twenty years there has also been a greater recognition of the global production of picturebooks even though English-language publishers continue to dominate markets and only a few picturebooks in other languages are translated into English every year. From the academic side, it is now more common to find picturebook studies written by international scholars in English-language journals, as well as in academic journals from non-Anglophone countries. Although global knowledge exchange on picturebooks has been widened through international children’s literature congresses and specialized picturebook conferences, there is still much more room to bring together education, literacy, literature, and publishing studies professionals, not to mention those from other disciplinary fields.

With so much academic activity around picturebooks, even by narrowing the scope to published research in English between 2010 and 2020 it is impossible to be comprehensive, so my aim is instead to provide a “state of the art” that includes some bearings for those who are interested in recent developments, especially on the international scene. (For those who are new to picturebook studies, I recommend starting with Sipe and Wolfenbarger’s 2007 article for *Language Arts*.) I have clustered studies in

a way that offers a glimpse—which I hope will prove tantalizing enough for readers to follow up on—into some specific areas of growth. After first referring to early studies on picturebooks and some seminal ideas, I move into describing the four directions or ‘bearings’ that the review of studies revealed: aesthetic, material, socio-cultural, and educational. I then look in greater depth at five specific areas of growth in the field. Finally, I consider some of the lessons we can learn as well as barriers and possibilities, before ending with concluding thoughts.

From this overview, I draw attention to some fundamental findings but also to the challenges, not only for implementing them in practice, but also for furthering international and interdisciplinary exchange. I also note other promising research directions that can support teachers, researchers, and readers in making the most of this multi-faceted art form.

## Building and Expanding on Scholarship

Kümmerling-Meibauer (2018) observes that picturebook scholarship in the 1970s focused mainly on the history and development of these texts. The next two decades saw scholars sharing a concern with the “mechanics” of how words and images work together to produce a coherent, meaningful narrative and how various metaphors drawing on geology, ecology, and music were used to describe this complex interaction (Arizpe & Styles, 2003). The most widely cited foundational studies (in English) tend to be Nodelman (1988), Nikolajeva and Scott (2001), and Kress and van Leeuwen (2006), with Bader (1976) providing what is probably the most often quoted definition of a picturebook:

A picturebook 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)

While Bader’s spotlight on “the drama of the turning page” remains a central feature, new materials and artistic ingenuity have extended this and other

definitions of a picturebook to include texts in different physical formats, with pop-ups or with digital features, offering even more opportunities for research.

In 1995, Kiefer published one of the first studies on picturebooks that included a section on how young readers experienced them. The focus of the study *Styles and I* began in 1999 was on readers from four to eleven years old and how they made meaning from complex picturebooks (Arizpe & Styles, 2003). Like Sipe, who at the time was focusing on responses to picturebooks in the classroom context (Sipe, 2008), Morag and I built on Rosenblatt’s idea that meaning is created in the transaction between the text and what the reader brings to it at the moment of reading (Rosenblatt, 1978). In a new edition in 2016, Morag and I showed how interest in readers’ responses has grown, with scholars examining response either with specific groups of readers (for example minority ethnic groups), in specific contexts (such as second language learning), or to specific features of the picturebook (such as paneling or endpapers) (Arizpe & Styles, 2016).

In *More Words about Pictures* (2017), Nodelman looks back at the twenty-five years since the publication of his first book and writes that he began that study by wondering “[w]hat happened when words accompanied pictures and pictures accompanied words, with how they affected one another and what resulted from those effects” (pp. 1–2). By 2017, he adds,

[t]he focus of picture book scholarship has widened beyond “how,” and there are a number of ways in which scholars have combined the “how,” the “what,” and the “why,” particularly by revealing how picture books interact with the culture from which they emerge and to which they speak. (p. 15)

While Nodelman is right to highlight the growing awareness of the culture from which picturebooks emerge, I would also add that there is also a growing awareness of readers from other cultural backgrounds, who may not have been the intended audience, and what the picturebooks say about and to these readers. There has been a realization (which sometimes comes as a shock to parents and teachers) that picturebooks are not just simple books for the youngest children but ideological and cultural

objects that can speak meaningfully to certain groups of readers, but at the same time potentially misrepresent or silence some of them. Several of the studies mentioned here address issues of inclusion directly, but overall, recent scholarship on picturebooks shows how a better understanding of the affordances of the picturebook can at the very least raise awareness of how diverse readers might respond to them.

### **Aesthetic, Material, Sociocultural, and Educational Bearings**

In reviewing academic studies published between 2010 and 2020, I have identified four strands that can act as bearings or orientations to help form a picture of the current field of picturebooks research: aesthetic, material, sociocultural, and educational. These strands are often inextricably intertwined, but the exercise of examining each on its own can contribute to understanding the theoretical directions studies are now taking.

**Aesthetic.** This strand focuses on the formal aspects and elements of the picturebook as an aesthetic object and often considers it in relation to other artistic forms and to art movements. Studies with a strong aesthetic orientation have been examining the ways that contemporary authors, illustrators, and publishers use specific features of the picturebook like page layout (Lambert, 2018), typography (Pantaleo, 2012), frames (Smith, 2009), endpapers (Sipe & McGuire, 2006), and collage (Druker, 2018) and what the implications are for meaning-making. The aesthetic affordances of the picturebook have been examined by scholars using a variety of theoretical lenses, including art history and theory, multimodal theories (which examine the semiotics of visual narration), and cognitive studies (which are interested in how readers decode aesthetic features). That the words in a picturebook are also part of its aesthetic features is sometimes overlooked and their contribution to the pleasure and development of literary understanding must also be taken into account, for example in encouraging literary conversations with children about the conventions of fiction (see, e.g., Van der Pol, 2012).

Ultimately, the analysis of the multiple aesthetic features and modes of a picturebook from different perspectives allows us to delve more deeply into how words and pictures work together and thus increases our understanding of how these art forms both entertain and educate.

**Material.** Studies with a material orientation consider picturebooks mainly as artifacts, examining their physical, multisensory, and interactive elements. These elements are often “underappreciated” (Veryeri Alaca, 2019, p. 244) even though they play a crucial part in the act of reading. Readers themselves are also perceived as having a material presence in a physical environment—another factor that affects how meaning is made. In addition, materiality can play a part in the storytelling itself, through both the metafictional elements and the act of reading when “the boundaries between the physical object being read and the narrative” are transgressed (Do Rozario, 2012, p. 165). This orientation is part of the “material turn” of literary studies, which is reflected in children’s literature research that draws from ecocriticism, posthumanism, disability studies, and cognitive criticism (Nikolajeva, 2014). The specific material qualities of the picturebooks invite performativity, a response identified by Sipe (2008) in his work on classroom picturebook reading. Performativity includes the turning of the page and also reactions involving facial expressions, gestures, and sounds. This embodied impact is as important as the cognitive and affective impact because it has implications for literacy development: it both makes demands on comprehension skills and contributes to them through the physical qualities of the object (think of the learning involved in lifting flaps in baby books). García-González, Véliz, and Matus (2019) argue that we should think of books as “living entities interconnected with their readers, the mechanics of the publication [and] the spaces in which books are read” (p. 2)—a perspective that raises implications for understanding the impact of a picturebook on the overall experience of reading, especially on engagement, but also on the development of cognitive skills and aesthetic understanding.

**Sociocultural.** This strand includes research that responds to concerns about equity, diversity, and inclusion, either related to the way certain groups are represented in the picturebooks or to the way in which readers react to those representations. Bishop's (1990) widely used metaphor of "mirrors, windows, and sliding glass doors" is fundamental to those who advocate that readers need to see themselves in the books they read. This argument is strongly supported by the findings of surveys on the lack of Black, Asian, and minority ethnic (BAME) characters in children's literature, such as the two *Reflecting Realities: Survey of Ethnic Diversity in UK Children's Books* (CLPE, 2018, 2019) texts that have been published so far. Picturebook research has examined picturebooks as both "mirrors" and "windows," because when multicultural characters and settings do appear, there can be issues around the authenticity of those representations. Much of this research aims at improving intercultural understanding but also encouraging culturally relevant texts, with readers in empirical studies examining the impact of the ethnic background of readers on literary interpretation or the ways in which picturebooks can open discussions, sometimes affirming but other times troubling or resisting identity (Gardner, 2017), racial prejudice (Cuperman, 2013), or even White supremacy and hate (Sciurba 2020).

This sociocultural strand also includes studies aiming for awareness of injustice and paths towards inclusion because picturebooks are often used as gentle introductions to challenging topics such as war, slavery, migration, genocide, or LGBTQ+ issues. Here it is important to keep in mind the possibilities that rather than inviting understanding, in some circumstances, a picturebook could become simply "a vehicle for spectatorship" (Moebius, 2018, p. 356), and also that the reading may not necessarily lead to changing minds.

The claim for using these books for "developing empathy" also needs to be examined more closely, although this is a complex topic beyond the scope of this article. What has been shown through recent textual analysis based on cognitive studies, however, is that the combined use of word and image to represent characters and their actions

and thoughts *can* be emotional "training grounds" for the development of theory of mind—a social-cognitive skill that involves the ability to think about the mental state of others and ourselves, such as emotions, beliefs, and intentions (Kümmerling-Meibauer 2018; Nikolajeva 2014; Silva-Diaz 2015). Picturebooks can therefore improve readers' understanding of the emotions and feelings of others, but theory of mind accounts only for cognitive empathy and may not necessarily lead to a desire for change or to act.

**Educational.** While not all picturebook research is driven by a pedagogic aim, most studies have an implicit implication for learning, either within or outside the classroom, so this strand runs through much of the research mentioned here. The more explicit educationally oriented research currently involves either some aspect of literacy and visual literacy (which will be discussed further below) or overlaps with the use of picturebooks as resources for learning about diversity and inclusion within the context of language instruction. Usually the focus is on learning English as a second or foreign language, and research from a variety of perspectives suggests this is a promising way forward (see, for example, the chapters related to picturebooks in Bland, 2018; Bland & Lütge, 2012; and Mourão, 2017). Some of these studies also look to promoting intercultural learning through multilingual books (McGilp, 2014), postmodern metafictional picturebooks (Daugaard & Johansen, 2014) or through "dialogic spaces" (Heggerness, 2019).

### **Areas of Research Growth in the Last Decade**

In this section, I highlight specific areas where research has increased since 2010, focusing on studies that bring together two or more of the strands mentioned above. It is exciting to see a range of social, literary, and other theories being used to inform studies, from gender and queer studies to critical race theory and eco-criticism. While there is no room here to discuss these theoretical frameworks or the research designs and methodologies, I hope readers will be persuaded to delve

into related publications further to find out more about them. I have included both text-based and reader-based studies here to show how they complement each other.

**Enhancing Meaning-Making through Picturebooks.** Picturebook research that focuses on literacy shows us both how narratives work and how children make meaning from verbal and visual modes in order to develop literacy skills and enhance the reading of texts. The symbiotic relationship between picturebooks and literacy studies is therefore a strong starting point for developing the multiliteracies required in the twenty-first century (Arizpe et al., 2017, p. 371), including critical literacy and critical visual literacy.

Serafini's and other scholars' work using social semiotic theories has helped to expand our comprehension of visual and multimodal texts (Kachorsky et al., 2017; Serafini, 2012; 2014), while Pantaleo's (2012, 2013) research has created a detailed picture of how children's understanding of the aesthetic elements in picturebooks can be extended through visual literacy. She insists on the importance of "slow looking" (Pantaleo, 2019) as well as the teaching of design elements and a metalanguage for them to be able to respond (Pantaleo, 2018). Her findings are corroborated in Papen's (2019) reflection on an unsuccessful attempt to develop critical visual literacy through a dialogic approach when children have no vocabulary to communicate their observations. Roche (2015) provides further evidence of how a framework for "book talk," along with carefully chosen picturebooks and plenty of time for thinking and looking, adds to literacy skills.

For younger children, reading and responding to picturebooks can support literacy development through play and the creation of storyworlds. Flint and Adams (2018) show how six- and seven-year-old children created a personal space through responsive play in which they made connections with wordless picturebooks, drawing from their previous reading but also from real-life experiences, thus extending their literacy learning. Similarly, Zapata, Sanchez and Robinson (2018) found that elements of postmodern picturebooks,

such as metafictional devices, encouraged three- and four-year-olds to "engage in fantasy and complex pretence play to entertain multiple perspectives" (p. 461) and envision storyworlds. These studies help prove that the playful features of picturebooks do not only entertain but also invite creative cognitive and physical responses that enhance the meaning-making processes necessary for literary and literacy learning.

**Wordless Picturebooks.** The challenge that wordless or nearly wordless picturebooks present to meaning-making and the many forms they can take, from adaptations of fairytales and fables to panoramas and documentaries (Bosch, 2018), is an invitation to study them from a range of perspectives. The number of illustrators from all over the world publishing these texts has also increased, offering the opportunity for transcultural exchanges without immediate language barriers. The accessibility of these picturebooks also offers the opportunity for educational research related to language development and narrative skills. This is exemplified in a book by Lysaker (2019) that collates many years of research with wordless picturebooks in the United States. Lysaker reveals the detail of how these texts provide "meaningful literacy instruction for young learners" (p. 1) because "being and becoming are enacted" (p. 2) in a "orchestration" of modes during the act of reading (p. 17).

In South Africa, Haese, Costandius and Oostendorp (2018) carried out wordless picturebook sessions in three communities where parents or caregivers read the books with their three- to six-year-old children and also worked with local artists to create their own texts. Through the project, regular reading sessions were successfully introduced into "literacy poor" households, as the researchers describe them, proving that wordless picturebooks are ideal to use as first texts and can also encourage Indigenous-language storytelling, especially in contexts where books in native languages are lacking: "Reading pictures, rather than text, allowed for the books to be read in eight of the eleven official languages and for multiple stories to emerge from the same book" (p. 594). The use of wordless

picturebooks with students who are learning a new language has also been explored, for example, in a study with Polish secondary students in Glasgow, where it was found that these texts can provide a space for student reflection on beliefs and assumptions about language and language learning as well as enabling discussion around diversity and inclusion (Arizpe & Ryan, 2018).

#### **Picturebooks about Migration and Refugees.**

Given the increase in the forced displacement of populations over the last decade, the growing publication of, and interest in, picturebooks that portray the experience of migrant and refugee characters in different parts of the world is crucial. While any channel that brings the realities of this complex phenomenon and the often-appalling consequences for children and families to a wider audience is welcome, it is easy to fall into exoticizing or stereotyping characters and situations. Critical analysis is therefore vital to avoid misrepresentation, such as the analysis Duckels and Jaques (2020) conducted examining the wordless nature of some picturebooks on the topic. Although they concluded that the intention is to highlight the “unspeakable” nature of the refugee experience, they also note a uniformity in these representations of the suffering. The actual historical, social, and political factors behind forced migration often remain invisible, as Tomsic and Deery (2019) argue, which can position migrants and refugees merely as passive victims in need of aid and care. Dudek (2018) makes the link between politics and representation in several Australian picturebooks on migration and notes that the most successful ones at seeking “to redress a seeming absence of care in Australian politics in relation to refugees and asylum seekers” (p. 363) are those that invite a reflection on the tensions between messages of welcome and political reality.

How picturebooks about migration and refugees can be used to facilitate conversations and raise awareness among children from non-refugee backgrounds is the focus of another group of studies (e.g. Evans, 2015; Hope, 2017; McGillicuddy, 2018). Returning to Tomsic and Deery (2019), the risk here is that if the situation is not properly

contextualized, refugees can be positioned as “the other” even as part of a classroom lesson. While, as I mentioned above, studies looking to develop empathy must be careful about this positioning, some research has shown that reading about these unfamiliar experiences can raise the level of awareness, vicarious engagement, and empathy in readers (e.g. Arizpe et al., 2014; Hope, 2017; Lysaker & Sedberry, 2015). From the perspective of the children who have themselves experienced war, persecution or natural disasters, reading and responding to picturebooks can increase engagement in a more positive reconstruction of their own narratives through the story, as was shown in an international project that involved both refugee and non-refugee children in five different countries reading the same wordless picturebooks (Arizpe, Colomer, & Martínez-Roldán, 2014). The research teams found that refugee children felt their experiences were validated through the picturebooks and that they were not alone in confronting the issues related to displacement, while group discussions and arts-based activities supported and widened non-refugee children’s understanding of migration.

#### **Representation of Diversity in Picturebooks.**

This area of picturebook studies covers a wide range of topics, some of which have already been mentioned above. The concerns about visual representation have led to studies that advise on selection and also those that examine diversity within particular collections. For example, Daly (2017) reviewed the New Zealand Picture Book Collection, which was put together to reflect New Zealand identity, and Buchanan and Fox (2019) used a critical race methodology framework and “windows and mirrors” pedagogy to identify the gaps in a collection for teacher education in the US. Other picturebook selections have been examined in studies by Yoo-Lee and colleagues (2014), who focused on cultural authenticity in a selection of books portraying African Americans, Asian Americans, and Hispanic Americans, and by Koss (2015), who applied a useful methodological framework for examining ethnicity, gender, and disability in 455 picturebooks published in the US in 2012.

Studies have also focused on practices in the classroom around diversity that include picturebooks. Blakeney-Williams and Daly (2013) explored how teachers use picturebooks to draw on the cultural and linguistic diversity in their classrooms, while Johnston and Bainbridge (2013) led a project on preservice teachers exploring diversity through Canadian picturebooks. These and other studies in this area prove that picturebooks can be excellent resources for use in diverse classrooms but they also provide evidence that representations of diversity in English-language children's literature from different parts of the world are still limited, with many continuing to reproduce cultural stereotypes. This signals the need for teachers to reflect and select with more care as well as to consider "culturally situated reader response theory" (Brooks & Browne, 2012)—"ways literary interpretations are influenced by readers' ethnic backgrounds as well as the cultural milieu embedded in the stories they read" (Brooks & Browne, 2012, p. 76). However, it is worth noting Blakeney-Williams and Daly's (2013) observations that "teachers do not necessarily need to find picturebooks which specifically reference the various cultures and languages of the children in their classroom in order to teach in a culturally responsive manner"; rather, the researchers argue, teachers need to first choose picturebooks they themselves are "passionate about, and through which they can share themselves" (p. 49) in order to build relationships with students and stories at a personal level that will then support culturally responsive pedagogy.

Findings relevant to teaching in diverse classrooms emerge in Young's (2019) study (one of the few along with Lester's [2014] intersectional study) related to LGBTQ picturebooks. Young used critical content analysis to examine twenty-eight picturebooks that had received awards exclusive to LGBTQ literature and concluded that, in terms of Bishop's metaphor, most of them functioned more as windows than mirrors. However, they point out that teachers can use imperfect texts (as well as non-LGBTQ-related) texts to highlight issues of misrepresentation and omission, "in ways that highlight positive and problematize negative aspects so that

students can begin to think critically about a myriad of issues" (Young, 2019, p. 68). This can be applied to representation in other texts that claim to address diversity and it means that students can participate more actively in critical analysis and discussions about inclusion.

**Environmental Topics and Activism.** The visual nature of picturebooks makes them important texts in the developing area of eco-critical children's literature studies that look at how the natural environment and the living beings within it are represented together with how humans relate to nonhuman nature—an "uneasy relation" as Op de Beeck describes it (2017, p. 124). Some examine the ways in which picturebooks are forming children as eco-citizens (see the essays based on Nordic picturebooks in Goga et al., 2018) or not (for example, Allen Williams et al. [2012] found that built environments predominate over natural environments in the images of US Caldecott Award winners). There are fewer studies than one might expect on the representation of animals in picturebooks, but the effects of anthropomorphism have been analyzed from a psychological perspective by Ganea and colleagues (2014), who concluded that seeing animals talk and engage in human-like activities can have "negative consequences" on preschoolers' learning and reasoning about real animals (p. 8). Nodelman (2019) considers these effects from a post-humanist perspective as he reviews a large collection of picturebooks on fish, noting how most of them are anthropomorphic and encourage an anthropocentric view that may lead children to misunderstand animals and see them as 'lesser' beings than humans (p. 14).

In looking at texts that specifically intend to promote ecoliteracy, Ramos and Ramos (2014) consider the aesthetic, material, and narrative features of two pop-up picturebooks that highlight the interdependence of humans and their environment. They note the way in which these texts "actively engage and empower the reader (including physically)" (p. 21) by inviting manipulation and interaction as they participate in the co-construction of meaning. However, these authors also argue that, as with other

texts about the environment, “the reading should be carried out from a reflexive and informed perspective” (p. 21), echoing the concerns expressed above about complex topics like migration but also about diversity more generally.

## Barriers, Lessons, and Possibilities

There is not enough room here to refer to other rich veins of picturebook research that I would have wanted to include but I’d like to at least mention a few of them, such as crossover picturebooks (Beckett, 2012); poetry picturebooks (Neira-Piñeiro, 2016); elements of art in picturebooks (Acer & Gözen, 2020; Serafini, 2015); national identity in picturebooks (Ommundsen, 2013); and transmedial features (such as sound and interactive elements) and digital picturebooks (often referred to as picturebook apps; Al-Yaqout & Nikolajeva, 2015; Frederico, 2017). With every new picturebook published and every context in which it is read offering opportunities for new research, there will no doubt be many more examples to add to this list in the decade to come.

While the possibilities are endless and exciting, in this last section, I also want to draw attention to some of the barriers that exist in and across the different areas of picturebook research, as well as to the need for researchers and practitioners to learn from each other and from the work that has been carried out not only in the last decade but in the last thirty years.

Though we have learned a great deal, including what children bring and take from the experience of reading and interacting with picturebooks, there is still a need to bring together knowledge derived from international and interdisciplinary exchange. It is also necessary to strengthen the evidence available and understand what such exchange means for teaching and learning as well as how to apply this knowledge in the classroom, the library, and other spaces where children come into contact with picturebooks, especially if we want to go beyond exploiting picturebooks as mere learning tools or didactic vehicles. I believe that a better awareness of the bearings mentioned above—*aesthetic, material, socio-cultural, and educational*—will result

in richer understandings and better approaches to enquiry and practice.

One of the main barriers to international exchange is that Anglophone countries tend to have scant knowledge of (and access to) picturebooks published in other languages, with only a small minority of such books being translated into English. Ways of surmounting this barrier include being more aware of opportunities for accessing picturebooks online and participating in exchanges with teachers and/or researchers from other countries through social media, online workshops, blogs, or podcasts and through international congresses (e.g., the International Board on Books for Children and Young People).

There is also work to be done to surmount disciplinary barriers, as exemplified by an article that claims to map “the development of previous academic studies on picturebooks in order to provide an overview of contemporary picturebook research” from 1993 to 2015 (Wu, 2018). The bibliometric analysis carried out by Wu (2018) was based on a survey of “picturebook research articles” gleaned from the Web of Science index, but when I looked at the bibliography, only five out of the 286 references were familiar to me. I felt I had discovered a parallel universe of picturebook research until I realized that most of them were empirical studies in the fields of developmental psychology or linguistics that utilize picturebooks as research tools but say little or nothing about their aesthetic qualities, nor do they refer to picturebook theory. While Wu does acknowledge the limitations of the data collection, the title of the article is misleading because it ignores the type of studies included here. The existence of these parallel worlds of research clearly calls for more interdisciplinary awareness and work between fields, as there is no doubt that all would benefit—as was the case with the publication of the essays in the volume edited by Kümmerling-Meibauer and colleagues (2015) that looks at the skills developed through picturebooks from the fields of children’s literature and picturebook theory as well as developmental psychology, linguistics, early years education, multimodal literacy, philosophy, and even vision science.

The final barrier I will mention is the one that often exists between research and practice and occurs when conceptual researchers are too far removed from what real readers do with picturebooks and practitioners are so involved in the what they want real readers to do that they lack the awareness of what research can offer, as well as the time to find out. While I'm not advocating for all researchers to work empirically or for all practitioners to become picturebook theory experts, I would encourage a greater openness to knowledge exchange, highlighting the work of teachers as researchers, and more collaborative projects.

---

**If picturebooks are considered solely as thematic resource materials [ . . . ] isolated from the aesthetic and emotional effects of reading [ . . . ] opportunities for learning will be missed.**

---

In my experience, some teachers and reading mediators continue to think of picturebooks mainly as tools for literacy lessons or as vehicles for talking about themes such as friendship, bullying, depression, or death. One of the main lessons we have learned from picturebook research is the importance of considering all the affordances of a picturebook when used in an educational context. If picturebooks are considered solely as thematic resource materials or teaching aids, isolated from the aesthetic and emotional effects of reading, or if the “message” is given priority over the aesthetic affordances, holistic opportunities for learning will be missed. There is also the risk of confusing teaching with therapy, an activity which should obviously not be attempted without appropriate training.

Several key lessons emerge from the studies discussed here that can serve as a starting point for making the most of picturebooks as “vital spaces for collaborative imagination and inquiry” (Sipe & Wolfenbarger, 2007, p. 280):

- Build on a wide knowledge of published picturebooks (and not only in English).
- For any picturebook selected to read with children, take time to get to know their

aesthetic and material features and reflect on how the words and images work together.

- Use a critical lens to examine how narratives and representations construct inclusion and diversity.
- Allow students plenty of time for both “slow looking” and “deep thinking” and introduce visual literacy terms so they can talk about what they observe.
- Allow plenty of opportunities provided for conversation and other types of response, including visual and arts-based activities.
- Draw on a range of different types of texts including nonfiction, photographs, videos, and film to expand the space opened by the picturebook.

## Final Thoughts

As I write this article, the world is in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic and it is remarkable how the reading of picturebooks has emerged as one of the most immediate responses to the needs and anxieties produced by lockdown, at least from what I've seen on social media from people in English- and Spanish-speaking countries. Authors, illustrators, storytellers, reading mediators, teachers, parents, and children have shared videos of picturebook readings, sometimes along with games or arts-based activities that complement the reading. Picturebooks on the topic of the pandemic have also already been published, many of them online (see for example, UNICEF's *My Hero Is You: How Kids Can Fight COVID-19* at [www.unicef.org/coronavirus/my-hero-you](http://www.unicef.org/coronavirus/my-hero-you)).

But even before the pandemic, some scholars had been advocating for the benefits of using picturebooks around topics related to crisis and disaster (as in the case of the picturebooks on the refugee experience mentioned in this article) because they can serve as “a vicarious framework for preservice teachers to experience adversity, handle impending disaster, and model ways of responding to others in crisis” (Crawford, Roberts & Zygouris-Coe, 2019, p. 54). Other publications are reporting on the role of picturebooks in specific situations of complex emergency, such as the wordless picturebook library

in Lampedusa (McGillicuddy, 2018) or the work of reading mediators after the Mexican earthquakes of 2017 (Hirsu et al., 2020). Picturebooks are also at the heart of a research network, Children's Literature in Critical Contexts of Displacement, that brings together researchers and mediators around the world to share advice on selecting and using resources in these situations (childslitspaces.com). However, there is much more research to be done in the current health crisis as well as in other types of emergency contexts to examine in what ways picturebooks can be most effective.

As I noted above, we must be cautious about claiming a therapeutic role for picturebooks, but there is no doubt that at the very least, interacting with or sharing them provides a space for distraction from reality and for enjoyment (for example, there are many successful experiences of using picturebooks in hospitals or refugee camps, though few have been formally documented). While we must also be cautious about claims about the development of empathy and agency through picturebooks, it is noticeable that at times of heightened concerns around social injustice, racism, and climate change, researchers and practitioners are turning to picturebooks to inform and raise awareness and sometimes also to encourage children and young people to take some form of action, such as Marshall (2016) does when examining autobiographical picturebooks "written and illustrated by people of color and Indigenous peoples" (p. 79) and asking questions about activism. Again, we need studies that consider the issue of how picturebooks can enable social change to be meaningfully enacted. As Op de Beeck (2017) rightly points out in relation to picturebooks about the environment, "picture book reading alone cannot turn children into conservationists. Literature without critical praxis cannot change sociopolitical practices" (p. 124).

Critical praxis demands critical literacy approaches that enhance active meaning-making through close attention to the aesthetic and material aspects of picturebooks as well the examination of diversity representation. One promising approach is what Wissman (2019) calls "reading radiantly," an aesthetic reading that cultivates the "social imagination" (p. 15) and that Wissman shows can

develop the ability and inclination to address issues of inequality and injustice. In this collaborative study with teachers, not only did some of the children co-construct meaning, but some of them also acted together to enable change. This active role for the reader is central to widening aesthetic, cognitive, and affective experience through the multiple dimensions of picturebooks and also to promoting critical inquiry. With a careful methodology, a space can be opened for taking this further and including children as researchers (Deszcz-Tryhubczak, 2016)—yet another promising avenue for future picturebook studies. In the rapidly changing realities of our world, we should take advantage of the multiple possibilities that picturebooks offer to imagine and contribute toward better realities for everyone, and we also need more research with picturebooks to show how this can best be done.

### Acknowledgments

I would like to thank Rabaha Arshad for her help with the article review.

### References

- Acer, D., & Gözen, G. (2020). Art detectives: Young children's behaviour in finding and interpreting art elements within picture books. *Education 3-13*, 48(6), 716–32.
- Al-Yaqout, G., & Nikolajeva, M. (2015). Re-conceptualising picturebook theory in the digital age. *BLFT—Nordic Journal of ChildLit Aesthetics*, 6(1), <https://doi.org/10.3402/blft.v6.26971>
- Arizpe, E., & Ryan, S. (2018). The wordless picturebook: Literacy in multilingual contexts and David Wiesner's worlds. In J. Bland (Ed.), *Using literature in English language education* (pp. 63–82). Bloomsbury Academic.
- Arizpe, E., & Styles, M. (2016). *Children reading picturebooks: Interpreting visual texts* (rev. ed.). Routledge.
- Arizpe, E., & Styles, M. (2003). *Children reading pictures: Interpreting visual texts*. Routledge.
- Arizpe, E., Bagelman, C., Devlin, A. M, Farrell, M., & McAdam, J. E. (2014). Visualizing intercultural literacy: Engaging critically with diversity and migration in the classroom through an image-based approach. *Language and Intercultural Communication*, 14(3), 304–21.
- Arizpe, E., Colomer, T., & Martínez-Roldán, C. (2014). *Visual journeys through wordless narratives: An international inquiry with immigrant children and The arrival*. Bloomsbury Academic.

- Bader, B. (1976). *American picturebooks from Noah's ark to the beast within*. Macmillan Publishing Company.
- Beckett, S. (2012). *Crossover picturebooks: A genre for all ages*. Routledge.
- Bishop, R. S. (1990). Mirrors, windows, and sliding glass doors. *Perspectives: Choosing and Using Books for the Classroom*, 6(3), ix–xi.
- Bland, J. (Ed.) (2018). *Using literature in English language education: Challenging reading for 8–18 year olds*. Bloomsbury Academic.
- Bland, J., & Lütge, C. (Eds.) (2012). *Children's literature in second language education*. Bloomsbury Academic.
- Blakeney-Williams, M., & Daly, N. (2013). How do teachers use picture books to draw on the cultural and linguistic diversity in their classrooms? *SET: Research Information for Teachers*, 2, 44–50. <https://doi.org/10.18296/set.0363>
- Bosch, E. (2018). Wordless picturebooks. In B. Kümmerling-Meibauer (Ed.), *The Routledge companion to picture-books* (pp. 191–200). Routledge.
- Brooks, W., & Browne, S. (2012). Towards a culturally situated reader response theory. *Children's Literature in Education*, 43(1), 74–85.
- Buchanan, L. B., & Fox, S. G. (2019). On windows and mirrors in teacher education program materials: A content analysis of human demographics in one picture book collection. *Multicultural Perspectives*, 21(4), 189–201.
- CLPE. (2018). Reflecting realities: Survey of ethnic representation within UK children's literature 2017. <https://clpe.org.uk/library-and-resources/research/reflecting-realities-survey-ethnic-representation-within-uk-children>
- CLPE. (2019). Reflecting realities: Survey of ethnic representation within UK children's literature 2018. <https://clpe.org.uk/RR>
- Crawford, P. A., Roberts, S. K., & Zygouris-Coe, V. (2019). Addressing 21st-century crises through children's literature: Picturebooks as partners for teacher educators. *Journal of Early Childhood Teacher Education*, 40(1), 44–56.
- Cuperman, R. C. (2013). Prejudice and stereotypes revealed through reader responses in pre-school students. *New Review of Children's Literature and Librarianship*, 19(2), 119–38.
- Daly, N. (2017). Representations of diversity in the revised New Zealand picturebook collection. *New Review of Children's Literature and Librarianship*, 23(2), 172–86.
- Daugaard, L. M. & Johansen, M. B. (2014). Multilingual children's interaction with metafiction in a postmodern picture book. *Language and Education*, 28(2), 120–40.
- Deszcz-Tryhubczak, J. (2016). Using literary criticism for children's rights: Toward a participatory research model of children's literature studies. *The Lion and the Unicorn*, 40(2), 215–31.
- Druker, E. (2018). Collage and montage in picturebooks. In B. Kümmerling-Meibauer (Ed.), *The Routledge companion to picturebooks* (pp. 49–58). Routledge.
- Do Rozario, R. C. (2012). Consuming books: Synergies of materiality and narrative in picturebooks. *Children's Literature*, 40(1), 151–66.
- Duckels, G., & Jaques, Z. (2020). Visualising the voiceless and seeing the unspeakable: Understanding international wordless picturebooks about refugees. *Jeunesse: Young People, Texts, Cultures*, 11(2), 124–50.
- Dudek, D. (2018). Seeing the human face: Refugee and asylum seeker narratives and an ethics of care in recent Australian picture books. *Children's Literature Association Quarterly*, 43(4), 363–76.
- Evans, J. (2015). Could this happen to us? Responding to issues of migration in picturebooks. In J. Evans (Ed.), *Challenging and controversial picturebooks: Creative and critical responses to visual texts* (pp. 243–259). Routledge.
- Flint, T. K., & Adams, M.S. (2018). "It's like playing, but learning": Supporting early literacy through responsive play with wordless picturebooks. *Language Arts*, 96(1), 21–35.
- Frederico, A. (2017). Children making meaning with literary apps: A 4-year-old child's transaction with *The monster at the end of this book*. *Paradoxa*, 29(Small Screens Fiction), 43–64.
- Ganea, P. A., Canfield, C. F., Simons-Ghafari, K., & Chou, T. (2014). Do cavies talk? The effect of anthropomorphic picture books on children's knowledge about animals. *Frontiers in Psychology*, 10, 1–9. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2014.00283>
- García-González, M., Véliz, S., & Matus, C. (2019). Think difference differently? Knowing/becoming/doing with picturebooks. *Pedagogy, Culture & Society*, 1–20. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14681366.2019.1667858>
- Gardner, R. P. (2017). Unforgivable blackness: Visual rhetoric, reader response, and critical racial literacy. *Children's Literature in Education*, 48(1), 119–33.
- Goga, N., Guanio-Uluru, L., Hallås, O. B., & Nyrnes, A. (2018). *Ecocritical perspectives on children's texts and cultures: Nordic dialogues*. Palgrave Macmillan.
- Haese, A., Costandius, E., & Oostendorp, M. (2018). Fostering a culture of reading with wordless picturebooks in a South African context. *International Journal of Art & Design Education*, 37(4), 587–98.
- Heggernes, S. (2019). Opening a dialogic space: Inter-cultural learning through picturebooks. *Children's*

- Literature in English Language Education* CLELE, 7(2), 37–60.
- Hirsu, L., Arizpe, E., & McAdam, J. E. (2020). Cultural interventions through children's literature and arts-based practices in times of disaster: A case study of reading mediators' response to the Mexican earthquakes (September 2017). *International Journal of Disaster Risk Reduction*, 51, 1–8. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijdr.2020.101797>
- Hope, J. (2017). *Children's literature about refugees: A catalyst in the classroom*. Trentham.
- Johnston, I., & Bainbridge, J. (Eds.) (2013). *Reading diversity through Canadian picture books: Preservice teachers explore identity, ideology and pedagogy*. University of Toronto Press.
- Kachorsky, D., Moses, L., Serafini, F., & Hoelting, M. (2017). Meaning making with picturebooks: Young children's use of semiotic resources. *Literacy Research and Instruction*, 56(3), 231–49.
- Kiefer, B. (1995). *The potential of picturebooks: From visual literacy to aesthetic understanding*. Prentice-Hall.
- Koss, M. D. (2015). Diversity in contemporary picturebooks: A content analysis. *Journal of Children's Literature*, 41(1), 32–42.
- Kress, G., & van Leeuwen, T. (2006). *Reading images: The grammar of visual design*. Routledge.
- Kümmerling-Meibauer, B., Meibauer, J., Nachtigäller, K. J., & Rohlfing, K. (2015). *Learning from picturebooks: Perspectives from child development and literacy studies*. Routledge.
- Kümmerling-Meibauer, B. (2018). *The Routledge companion to picturebooks*. Routledge.
- Lambert, M. D. (2018). Picturebooks and page layout. In B. Kümmerling-Meibauer (Ed.), *The Routledge companion to picturebooks* (pp. 28–37). Routledge.
- Lester, J. Z. (2014). Homonormativity in children's literature: An intersectional analysis of queer-themed picture books. *Journal of LGBT Youth*, 11(3), 244–75.
- Lysaker, J. T. (2019). *Before words: Wordless picture books and the development of reading in young children*. Teachers College Press.
- Lysaker, J., & Sedberry, T. (2015). Reading difference: Picture book retellings as contexts for exploring personal meanings of race and culture. *Literacy*, 49(2), 105–11.
- Marshall, E. (2016). Counter-storytelling through graphic life writing. *Language Arts*, 94(2), 79–93.
- McGillicuddy, A. (2018). Breaking down barriers with wordless picturebooks: "The silent books exhibition, from the world to Lampedusa and back." *Studies in Arts and Humanities*, 4(2), 108–22.
- McGilp, E. (2014). From picturebook to multilingual collage: Bringing learners' first language and culture into the pre-school classroom. *Children's Literature in English Language Education*, 2(2), 31–49.
- Moebius, W. (2018). Research in picturebooks: The wider path. In B. Kümmerling-Meibauer, (Ed.), *The Routledge companion to picturebooks* (pp. 251–59). Routledge.
- Mourão, S. (2017). The picturebook in instructed foreign language learning contexts. In C. Beauvais, & M. Nikolajeva (Eds.), *The Edinburgh companion to children's literature* (pp. 245–61). Edinburgh University Press.
- Neira-Piñeiro, M. (2016). Children as implied readers in poetry picturebooks: The adaptation of adult poetry for young readers. *International Research in Children's Literature*, 9(1), 1–19.
- Nikolajeva, M., & Scott, C. (2001). *How picturebooks work*. Garland.
- Nikolajeva, M. (2014). *Reading for learning: Cognitive approaches to children's literature*. John Benjamins.
- Nodelman, P. (1988). *Words about pictures. The narrative art of children's picture books*. University of Georgia Press.
- Nodelman, P. (2017). Why we need more words. In P. Nodelman, N. Hamer, & M. Reimer (Eds.), *More words about pictures* (pp. 1–17). Routledge.
- Nodelman, P. (2019). Fish is people. *Bookbird: A Journal of International Children's Literature*, 57(2), 12–21.
- Ommundsen, Å. (Ed.). (2013). *Looking out and looking in: National identity in picturebooks of the new millennium*. Novus.
- Op de Beeck, N. (2017). Environmental picturebooks: Cultivating conversations. In P. Nodelman, N. Hamer, & M. Reimer (Eds.), *More words about pictures* (pp. 116–26). Routledge.
- Pantaleo, S. (2012). Middle years students thinking with and about typography in multimodal texts. *Literacy Learning: The Middle Years*, 20(1), 37–50.
- Pantaleo, S. (2013). Paneling "matters" in elementary students' graphic narratives. *Literacy Research and Instruction*, 52(2), 150–71.
- Pantaleo, S. (2018). Learning about and through picture-book artwork. *The Reading Teacher*, 71(5), 557–67.
- Pantaleo, S. (2019). Slow Looking: "Reading picturebooks takes time." *Literacy*, 54(1), 40–48. <https://doi.org/10.1111/lit.12190>
- Papen, U. (2019). Using picturebooks to develop critical visual literacy in primary schools: challenges of a dialogic approach. *Literacy*, 54(1), 3–10. <https://doi.org/10.1111/lit.12197>

- Ramos, A. M., & Ramos, R. (2014). Cross-readings and ecoliteracy in children's pop-up books. *Ocnos*, 12, 7–24. [https://doi.org/10.18239/ocnos\\_2014.12.01](https://doi.org/10.18239/ocnos_2014.12.01)
- Rosenblatt, L. M. (1978). *The reader, the text, the poem: The transactional theory of the literary work*. Southern Illinois University Press.
- Roche, M. (2015). *Developing children's critical thinking through picturebooks*. Routledge.
- Serafini, F. (2012). Expanding the four resources model: Reading visual and multi-modal texts. *Pedagogies: An International Journal*, 7(2), 150–64.
- Serafini, F. (2014). *Reading the visual: An introduction to teaching multimodal literacy*. Teachers College Press.
- Serafini, F. (2015). The appropriation of fine art into contemporary narrative picturebooks. *Children's Literature in Education*, 46(4), 438–53. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10583-015-9246-2>
- Sciurba, K. (2020) Depicting hate: Picture books and the realities of white supremacist crime and violence. *Teachers College Record*, 122(8), 1–28.
- Silva-Díaz, M. C. (2015). Picturebooks, lies and mindreading. *Barnelitterært Forskningstidsskrift*, 6(1). <https://doi.org/10.3402/blft.v6.26972>
- Sipe, L. (2008). *Storytime: Young children's literary understanding in the classroom*. Teachers College Press.
- Sipe, L. R., & McGuire, C. E. (2006). Picturebook endpapers: Resources for literary and aesthetic preparation. *Children's Literature in Education*, 37(4), 291–304.
- Sipe, L. R., & Wolfenbarger, C. D. (2007). A unique visual and literary art form: Recent research on picturebooks. *Language Arts*, 84(3), 273–80.
- Smith, V. (2009). Making and breaking frames: Crossing the borders of expectation in picturebooks. In Evans, J. (Ed.), *Talking beyond the page: Reading and responding to picturebooks* (pp. 81–97). Routledge.
- Tomsic, M., & Deery, C. M. (2019). Creating “them” and “us”: The educational framing of picture books to teach about forced displacement and today's “refugee crisis.” *History of Education Review*, 48(1), 46–60.
- Van der Pol, C. (2012). Reading picturebooks as literature: Four-to-six-year-old children and the development of literary competence. *Children's Literature in Education*, 43(1), 93–106.
- Veryeri Alaca, I. (2019). Materiality in picturebooks: An introduction. *Libri & Liberi*, 8(2), 243–55.
- Williams, J. A., Jr., Podeschi, C., Palmer, N., Schwadel, P., & Meyler, D. (2012). The human-environment dialog in award-winning children's picture books. *Sociological Inquiry*, 82(1), 145–59.
- Wissman, K. K. (2019). Reading radiantly: Embracing the power of picturebooks to cultivate the social imagination. *Bookbird: A Journal of International Children's Literature*, 57(1), 14–25.
- Wu, J. F. (2018). A bibliometric analysis of picture book research between 1993 and 2015. *Reading Psychology*, 39(5), 413–41. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02702711.2018.1451419>
- Young, C. A. (2019). Interrogating the lack of diversity in award winning LGBTQ-inclusive picturebooks. *Theory Into Practice*, 58(1), 61–70.
- Yoo-Lee Y., E., Fowler, L., Adkins, D., Kim, K., & Davis, H. S. (2014). Evaluating cultural authenticity in multicultural picture books: A collaborative analysis for diversity education. *Library Quarterly: Information, Community, Policy*, 84(3), 324–47.
- Zapata, A., Sanchez, L., & Robinson, A. (2018). Examining young children's envisionment building responses to postmodern picturebooks. *Journal of Early Childhood Literacy*, 18(4), 439–64.

**Evelyn Arizpe** is professor of children's literature at the School of Education, University of Glasgow. She can be contacted at [evelyn.arizpe@glasgow.ac.uk](mailto:evelyn.arizpe@glasgow.ac.uk).

## INTO THE CLASSROOM

**readwritethink**  
Lisa Storm Fink  **NCTE**

See how picturebooks can be used in multiple ways with these lesson plans:

“Using Picture Books to Teach Characterization in Writing Workshop”

<http://bit.ly/3oZhnRu>

“Using Picture Books to Teach Setting Development in Writing Workshop”

<http://bit.ly/2KuoD8Z>

“Using Picture Books to Teach Plot Development and Conflict Resolution”

<http://bit.ly/3mC1pLH>

“Using Picture Books to Explore Identity, Stereotyping, and Discrimination”

<http://bit.ly/20qIKQY>

Reproduced with permission of copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited  
without permission.