



Art in Early Childhood

USING PICTUREBOOK ILLUSTRATIONS TO HELP YOUNG CHILDREN UNDERSTAND DIVERSITY

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ABSTRACT

The demographics of Aotearoa New Zealand have changed markedly over the past few decades in relation to increasing ethnic, cultural and religious diversity. These changes have resulted from immigration, refugee resettlement programmes, and globalisation. Early childhood education (ECE) settings are social, cultural and political spaces where children live with and alongside diverse others. They are ideal places for providing early learning experiences about diversity and difference which can be supported and reinforced using the picturebooks. Picturebooks can act as both mirrors and windows on the world. As mirrors they can reflect children's own lives, and as windows they can give children a chance to learn about someone else's life. More equitable outcomes for children and their families can be realised through deeper engagement with cultural diversity and issues of fairness. The illustrations in quality children's picturebooks can be a vehicle for this type of engagement showing that art can be used as a form of dialogue, if they are critiqued and analysed with children.

INTRODUCTION

Children inhabit a complex, multi-faceted social world that is socially, culturally, and linguistically diverse. Rapidly changing demographics based on immigration, refugee resettlement programmes, and globalisation have led to increasing ethnic, cultural and religious diversity. Yet often this diversity is ignored by universalising discourses that purport that we are all human or we are all the same. Macfarlane (2004) argues that "when the powerful dominant culture asserts that all children are the same, there is a real danger that individual differences, cultural identities, and culturally preferred values and practices will be marginalised or ignored" (p. 6).

To address issues of diversity and counter marginalisation and ignorance, various educational responses have developed over time. These responses include multicultural and anti-bias education, and more latterly, intercultural approaches to human diversity in education (Miller & Petriwskyj, 2013). Under this approach, one

that is reasonably common in schools and ECE settings nowadays, teachers are tasked with providing children with cultural knowledge, attitudes and skills to learn with and alongside diverse others (Ministry of Education [MoE], 2007, 2017).

Aotearoa New Zealand's early childhood education curriculum, *Te Whāriki*, originally written in 1996, has been revised and updated (MoE, 2017). A new section has been added which specifically examines identity, language and culture. Its purpose is to set out "...expectations of inclusive and responsive practice that acknowledges diversity" (p. 12). Picturebooks are referred to numerous times as helpful tools to meet these aspirations in relation to infants', toddlers' and young children's learning (see pp. 33, 38, 43-44, 49).

A number of other authors have described the valuable role that picturebooks can play in proactive and culturally responsive early education (see for example, Derman-Sparks & Olsen-Edwards, 2010; Derman-Sparks, Ramsey & Olsen Edwards, 2011; Sapon-Shevin, 2010). Gopalakrishnan (2011) suggests that teachers can help address the social, cultural, and critical issues of our times through the use of multicultural children's books. There is also numerous research evidence to support the value of picturebooks as pedagogical resources to address challenges encountered by children and families from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds (see, for instance, Daly, Limbrick & Dix, 2018; Sapon Shevin, 2010; Derman-Sparks & Olsen Edwards, 2010). Picturebooks, particularly the illustrations in them, can be children's first introduction to an outside world and can highlight important issues. *Te Whāriki* (MoE, 2017) attests to this notion stating, "children learn that text and illustrations carry a story, books can provide information and stories allow them to enter new worlds" (p. 44).

Kelly-Ware's (2018) PhD research found picturebooks had a valuable role in supporting young children's meaning making about diversity and difference. Kelly-Ware's findings suggest that "as children were constructing their identities, subjectivities, and understandings of self and others in a group setting beyond their homes, issues related to differences in biological sex, gender, sexuality, skin colour, ethnicity, and home language, and their links to fairness were found to be important to them" (Kelly-Ware, 2018, p. 253). The research indicated that teachers considered use of picturebooks and the illustrations contained in them could also make a difference to children's awareness of issues of fairness and social justice.

Epstein (2017) describes research on prejudice that shows that when individuals have direct contact with people who are different from themselves or "others" this can help to reduce stereotypes. Through this contact we see that people who initially seem different, also have much in common with us and we can learn about, and get closer to, them through their stories. Consequently, the "other" seems less removed from our own lives and less "otherly". While this is an ideal situation, it is not always physically possible to meet face-to-face. Thus, young children's encounters with "others" through the illustrations in picturebooks can be helpful. Pictures can help to

reduce stereotypes by showing the differences between self and others and this can also support the development of empathy.

PICTUREBOOK ILLUSTRATIONS AND THE CONNECTION TO VISUAL ART EDUCATION

In their discussion about multiliteracies and the arts, Makin and Whiteman (2007) focus on children's learning in the areas of marks and meaning making. These authors describe the valuable input that picturebooks have in this area. They highlight the equal partnership that exists between the visual and written components of picturebooks and describe the various ways that illustrations act in picturebooks. Illustrators can use colour to express emotions, and "...artistic elements of perspective and graphic marks that indicate movement" (p.176). Illustrations can also create visual narratives that tell a different or complementary story to the text, and they can be art works in their own right.

Discussing reading contexts and practices with children in the early childhood years, Harris (2007) describes suitable reading materials for children of various ages beginning with infants and toddlers. Alongside the discussion about appropriate reading techniques, Harris categorises the illustrations typically found in different types of books that can be effectively used to discuss issues with children. For example stiff cardboard books often have simple large illustrations set against a contrasting background which can promote discussion with very young children. Equally, cloth and soft vinyl books which use simple bright pictures against contrasting backgrounds are effective tools for discussion, as are board books and cardboard books. Books common to older children often include illustrations with more detailed information and action which can be engaging and interesting, as well as informative and thought provoking.

Picturebooks can act as both mirrors and windows on the world. As mirrors they can reflect children's own lives (familiar objects and content), and as windows they can give children a chance to learn about someone else's life (unfamiliar objects and content). These ideas are eloquently described by Bishop (1990) who states,

Books are sometimes windows, offering views of worlds that may be real or imagined, familiar or strange. These windows are also sliding glass doors, and readers have only to walk through in imagination to become part of whatever world has been created or recreated by the author. When lighting conditions are just right, however, a window can also be a mirror (p.ix)

Hence, the illustrations in picturebooks can be children's first visual introduction to an outside world. They can provide windows through which children can see and learn about other children who are different and whose lives are different from their own.

EXPLORING PICTUREBOOKS THAT HIGHLIGHT ISSUES OF DIVERSITY

When exploring picturebooks with issues of diversity in mind, several questions can be useful when critiquing these. The reader can ask:

- How is diversity represented in the illustrations in the selected picturebooks?
- Whose norm(s) is/are being represented here?
- What techniques are used by the illustrator, author/ illustrator to represent diversity and difference?
- How authentic and effective are the illustrations?

The following discussion examines four picturebooks that are widely available in New Zealand, using these questions as a method of critique. The books consider diversity in a range of ways. *Mirror* (Baker, 2010) examines aspects of ethnic diversity, *This is our house* (Rosen, 1996) focuses on children of different ages, genders and ethnicities depicted in a variety of roles, *Morris Micklewhite* (Baldacchino, 2014) tackles gender diversity, and *It's ok to be different* (Parr, 2001) addresses the gamut of diversity among people and animals.

Mirror (2010) by Jeannie Baker - author and illustrator

A powerful book, *Mirror* illustrates human connections and the small everyday ways that lives can reflect each other across the world. This picturebook does not use words, and the story is expressed by the illustrations (the exception is the brief introduction and note by Baker which both appear in English and Arabic languages).

The illustrations are intricate art works that depict the lives of two boys and their families - one who lives in inner city Sydney, Australia and the other who lives in a remote village in the Valley of Roses in Morocco, North Africa. Diversity is represented in the collaged illustrations which are made from natural and artificial materials such as sand, earth, clay, paints, vegetation, paper, fabric, wool, tin and plastic. By combining these materials Baker creates rich tapestries depicting everyday family lives.

This innovative 'dual' picturebook is comprised of two parts that are designed to be read simultaneously - one from the left, the other from the right. The illustrations are authentic and effective because they act as windows and mirrors into the lives of the two families as the video shows https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fBCBcAqQI_E. The ideas being represented here relate to the families' cultures and the countries they live in. With their strikingly different lifestyles, countries, landscapes and clothing, an African and an Australian family are, however, shown to be essentially the same. For example, their experiences and values are shared, despite geographical and cultural differences. They care for each other, they need to belong,

to be loved by their loved ones and be a part of their community (Walkerbooks, 2010).

This is our house (1996) by Michael Rosen - author, and Bob Graham - illustrator

Diversity is represented in this picturebook through the text and illustrations that feature children and a dog playing in an urban playground bordered by high rise apartment buildings. Many of the children's names, when spoken aloud, reflect their diverse ethnic and cultural origins – for example George, Rasheeda, Marley and Luther, and the illustrations show their size in terms of relative age. The children's skin, hair colours and hair styles also reflect their ethnicity. In the story that unfolds - via the text and illustrations, we see even more diversity as the children act out different roles.

Bob Graham's striking illustrations feature George, the protagonist, and his peers. George has red hair and he will not let the other children play in his cardboard playhouse. The twins, Marlene and Sharleen, are mechanics, Rasheeda likes tunnelling, Luther tries to save a plane that has crashed, Sophie is a doctor who wears glasses, and the older children look after Freddie, a toddler, and his toy pet rabbit. One of the ideas being represented here is that girls can do anything – they are leaders and can work in non-traditional occupations as mechanics and doctors. Another concept highlighted is that in a democratic environment, like this playground, the majority rules.

The illustrations are authentic and effective, reflecting the illustrator's unerring eye for detail and idiosyncrasy. Graham's easily recognisable style typically involves watercolour and pencil/pastel and watercolour-and-ink and these media are used very effectively in the illustrations in this picturebook as the video shows <http://vimeo.com/58214461>.

Kelly-Ware (2018) has reflected on the possible impact of this picturebook being read to children during an end-of-session mat-time, describing how two children might identify with characters in the book, based on the illustrations and the text.

Gabriel possibly imagined that he entered the picturebook *This is our house* (Rosen, 1996) through glass sliding doors, and there he experienced exclusion on the basis that he wore glasses. Meanwhile, maybe red-haired Jack had seen himself in the mirror of the picturebook, where his exclusionary behaviour that morning towards the boy in a dress was visible because 'the lighting conditions [were] just right' as Bishop (1990) suggests (Kelly-Ware, 2018, p. 153).

Morris Micklewhite and the Tangerine Dress (2014) by Christine Baldacchino - author, and Isabelle Malenfant - illustrator

Morgan and Kelly-Ware (2016) have provided a synopsis of this picturebook in an article profiling titles that reflect queer cultures, gender and family diversity. In this work they describe the storyline and the illustrations:

This Canadian picturebook challenges male gender stereotypes, telling the story of young Morris. He loves to wear dress-up clothes especially a tangerine dress. Because of this penchant, Morris is subjected to teasing and excluded from other children's play. "You can't wear it! You're a boy!" the other children tell him (Baldacchino, 2014, p. 9). Eventually, they see him as a desirable play-partner because of his amazing imagination, despite him still wearing that dress. The ink and watercolour illustrations portray Morris' emotions well. The tangerine dress is drawn in an ethereal, undefined way, emphasising its enchanting qualities (Morgan & Kelly-Ware, 2016, p.6).

The techniques used by the illustrator to represent diversity and difference are authentic and effective. According to Baron (2014) Malenfant "typically mixes mediums such as watercolour, pastel and charcoal to create poetic and sensitive worlds in her picturebook illustrations" (para 1) including *Morris Micklewhite and the tangerine dress*. Baron went on to say "the way Malenfant illustrated the love this child has for this dress that reminds him of tigers and his mother's hair is so simple yet powerful that my kids kept commenting on it and coming back to the page where Morris enrobes himself in the dress" (Baron, 2014, para 2), as the video shows <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pjj5yENvUj4>.

Several ideas are represented in the picturebook including the teasing and exclusion experienced by a boy wearing a dress from his male and female peers, and the challenge that Morris poses to traditional gender stereotypes. The storyline and illustrations in this picturebook connect with scenarios Kelly-Ware witnessed as a researcher, and subsequently wrote about in several works (see Kelly-Ware, 2016, 2018). She observed that, from time to time, some children tried to police or regulate/control how one of their peers (a boy with a penchant for feminine things - dresses, wigs, sandals and nail polish), performed his gender.

Making this picturebook available to children could possibly have offered a child like this a mirror, to reassure him that his ideas were OK, and offered other children a window or a sliding glass door (Bishop, 1990) into new ways of reacting to their peer. The children in this setting could have seen visual of individual differences as well as hearing about them. This picturebook could have supported the development of empathy for diversity among the young children as well as being a provocation for imagination, fantasy and dramatic play.

It's okay to be different (2001) by Todd Parr - author and illustrator

The final picturebook explored in this article has become a popular resource for teaching about diversity and tolerance. The concept being represented here is that it is okay to be different, and that we should recognise and accept diversity. The illustrations are authentic and effective at presenting contrasts and unusual situations as the video shows <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sl5U2Z0oQok>.

Parr's (2001) trademark techniques include using simple drawings, rainbow colours, colourful illustrations of easily recognisable people and animals in cartoon-like forms. These visual techniques to represent diversity and difference are vividly described in a review by *Publishers Weekly* (2001) that focuses on the illustrations and the subject matter:

A fuchsia elephant stands against a zingy blue background ("It's okay to have a different nose") and a lone green turtle crosses a finish line ("It's okay to come in last"). By picturing a smiling girl with a guide dog ("It's okay to need some help"), he [Parr] comments on disability and he accounts for race by posing a multicolored zebra with a black-and-white one. An illustration of two women ("It's okay to have different Moms") and two men ("It's okay to have different Dads") handles diverse families sensitively - this could cover either same-sex families or stepfamilies -and also on the opposite page, a kangaroo with a dog in its pouch ("It's okay to be adopted"). He wisely doesn't zero in on specifics, which would force him to establish what's "normal." Instead, he focuses on acceptance and individuality and encourages readers to do the same (para. 1).

This book and its sibling *The Family Book* (Parr, 2003) have featured in previous picturebook research about same-sex parented families (Kelly, 2013). Kelly identified that these books were available to children at the setting before the research took place and teachers believed that this, and thus their familiarity with them, increased their popularity with children who often chose them or joined the audience when they were being read and discussed. Sapp (2010) also found that these two books were favourites with young children because of their bold, simple, colourful, and humorous illustrations. Children's enjoyment of the illustrations - for example, pink hair, long noses and even a child's comment that her "mother is an alligator" were noted in several of the teachers' logs analysed in her research (Kelly, 2013), suggesting their effectiveness.

CONCLUSION

Four picturebooks and the ways in which issues of diversity are represented in them have been described in this article. Typically in picturebooks, authors rely on the text as well as the illustrations to tell the story. However, some picturebooks like *Mirror* (Baker, 2010) do not use words at all so the illustrations are even more significant for telling the story. According to Gleeson (2000, as cited in Makin & Whiteman, 2007) wordless books need great illustrations "...to create the visual narrative that takes you beyond the words, that helps the reader to construct meaning from the whole" (p.176).

Quality picturebooks and their illustrations are valuable and powerful tools that can help ensure that multiple perspectives on the world are made explicit in ECE settings. They can act as both mirrors and windows on the world. As mirrors they can reflect children's own lives, and as windows they can give children a chance to learn about someone else's life. In Aotearoa New Zealand, in keeping with

curriculum obligations, teachers need to actively support children's engagement with picturebooks to facilitate meaning making from the text and the illustrations, and to recognise their interdependence. We have suggested that using such picturebooks is a potentially effective approach to exploring diversity in ECE settings. However, we acknowledge that further research is needed into ECE pedagogy associated with intercultural education, diversity and difference. Such research needs to look specifically at the role picturebooks and the illustrations can play in children's learning.

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Janette Kelly-Ware is a lecturer in early childhood education at The University of Waikato in Hamilton. She completed her doctoral research in 2018 which explored adults' provocations and responses to young children's working theories about diversity and fairness in the social world. Her previous research and publications include a focus on social justice and sexualities and gender. Janette has a special interest in the arts and picturebooks. She is the Co-Director of the Waikato Picturebook Research Unit - WaiPRU <https://education.waikato.ac.nz/waipru/> with her co-author Nicola Daly.

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Nicola Daly is a senior lecturer at The University of Waikato in Hamilton teaching children's literature and language teaching. She has developed two picturebook collections: The New Zealand Picturebook Collection and the New Zealand Pacific Picturebook Collection <https://education.waikato.ac.nz/waipru/>, and along with Janette Kelly-Ware is the Co-Director of the Waikato Picturebook Research Unit - WaiPRU. Nicola is particularly interested in the representations of language in Dual Language picturebooks. She is one of the six 2019 Fulbright New Zealand Scholars and is currently teaching and researching multilingualism in children's literature at the University of Arizona in Tuscon, Arizona.