# The Value of Diversity Picture Books: Symbolic Narration and the Free Constructing of Children's Inclusiveness Awareness in the Context of Globalization

Yuewu Bai[1,a,*]

[1]School of Education, Durham University, Durham, the United Kingdom
[a]yuewu.bai@durham.ac.uk
[*]Corresponding author

*Abstract: This article aims to analyze the extent to which diverse picture books meet the demands of the contemporary era, particularly in fostering comprehensive analytical skills and promoting the capacity for social justice. By examining the evolution of picture books, the multiplicity of symbols and narratives, and the selection of themes, this study delves into the indispensable role that diverse and inclusive picture books play in early education. These books serve not only as tools for entertainment but also as crucial means to cultivate empathy among young readers. The exploration highlights the significance of integrating picture books that reflect a broad spectrum of cultural, racial, and social backgrounds into educational settings, arguing that this integration is crucial for nurturing an environment that values diversity and encourages the development of critical thinking and social consciousness from a young age.*

*Keywords: picture books; social semiotics; multimodality; social justice; diversity*

## 1. Introduction

Picture books, as products of the Enlightenment movement, only began to gain popularity in the 19th century[2], with the emergence of books designed specifically for children, such as "*Struwwelpeter*" and illustrated versions of *Aesop's Fables*, aimed at providing moral education. Over time, children's literature started to focus more on the child's imagination and psychological development, increasingly incorporating illustrations. Barbara Bader views picture books as works that integrate culture, aesthetics, and drama, emphasizing their close connection with children [14]. At the end of the 19th century, Edmund Evans made significant efforts in color printing technology, greatly contributing to the aesthetics of children's picture books. He raised the standard for harmony between aesthetics, text, and even style [23], ushering in a new era for picture books together with artists and illustrators such as Walter Crane and Kate Greenaway. Their works were not only meant to entertain children but also to satisfy anyone's pure appreciation of beauty. Subsequently, the work of semioticians like Roland Barthes began to draw attention to the symbolic and semantic aspects of picture books. The text and images in picture books convey not just direct information but also deep cultural and social meanings. The academic discourse surrounding picture books is broad and varied. The digital age has further highlighted the importance of visual literacy, forcing a reassessment of educational priorities from basic literacy to dealing with multifaceted information [13]. In addition, with the growing recognition of the importance of racial awareness and social justice in early education, picture books have become an important tool for introducing young readers to complex social topics. They provide spaces for children to encounter, reflect on, and engage with different ethnic and cultural identities, fostering empathy and understanding across differences [28]. This paper aims to highlight the transformative potential of picture books in the global classroom, showing that they are not only aids in developing understanding, but also foundational resources that can profoundly influence ideas of race, identity, and justice. Through a detailed exploration of the pedagogical strategies and wider implications of using picture books in multicultural education, this paper critically analyzes their role in shaping the modern new generation.

## 2. Construct Meaning in Flowing Narratives and Symbols

Since the 21st century, the rise of digital media has led to an increasing number of pure text books

being replaced by images, revealing their undeniable and increasingly prominent position as carriers of information. Consequently, the focus of education has shifted: from cultivating children's literacy skills to developing their ability to process materials containing multiple types of information. Social semiotics is exploring its educational value, namely how the use of layout, text, and images can stimulate learners' greater potential [6]. Picture books, as assemblies of various forms of information, meet the aforementioned needs and have led to the development of various teaching methods and guidance models. When discussing the role of images in children's development, the academic community holds different viewpoints. On one hand, some scholars, like Lipman, disapprove of incorporating illustrations into texts. He believes that illustrations actually limit the diversity of thought and confine it to a single form, whereas children possess the ability to develop textual imagination [10]. On the other hand, picture books are considered important tools. This is also the issue that the former have been avoiding: images are non-propositional to children and need to be interpreted. That is, regardless of the scenario presented by the image, children's imagination can still construct within their own context [10]. Therefore, under the outcome of this uncertainty, "what it means to think with images" is a question for philosophy, psychology, and also pedagogy to consider together [15], in order to enable the content of picture books to provide a broad, positive, and constructive direction in the development of children. Sipe specifically uses Synergy to describe the combination of pictures and words. They create a unique narrative experience that transcends what text or images could achieve on their own [24]. Paivio believes that children's learning is achieved through the memorization of imagery, and it is particularly effective in understanding low imagery nouns [19]. Illustrations with different artistic styles and implied languages often activate perceptual, emotional, or sensorimotor mechanisms [29], thus achieving faster comprehension than traditional literary forms of reading, especially during early learning when children rely more on pictures than text for information [19].

Therefore, the images in picture books are not units that can be studied in isolation. They often serve as a complement to the text to help children further understand This is achieved through character development, sequencing of events, and narrative voice to construct these open-ended narrative structures. For example, in "*Outside Over There*" (part of Sendak's trilogy), the story of Ida searching for and rescuing her sister explores themes of growth, responsibility, courage, and family. The images present a dynamic sequence, highlighting the reflective experience brought to readers by the dual narrative of text and images, as defined by Scholes et al. [22]. Moreover, in "*Don't Read This Book!*", the author introduces unconventional characters to break traditional narratives such as *the Princess and the Pea, and Little Red Riding Hood*, surpassing ontological boundaries with a chaotic timeline structure [20]. Similar to counterpoint, a musical term explained by Schwarcz, used to describe the technique in literature of intertwining multiple narratives or character arcs that complement or contrast with each other to enrich the story. Although the narrative layers established between text and image may interfere with each other [17], an excellent narrative does not follow fixed standards or narrow interpretations. It is a concept that varies based on each child's comprehensive reading experience (deepening the understanding of core ideas), assisting them in weaving their own stories in the future. Moreover, reading picture books goes far beyond a simple reading process. Deep connections exist between the text and illustrations within picture books. Children internalize these connections through their own logical channels. Based on this, considering the role and characteristics of the readers, as well as the contexts they construct, can fully reflect the significance of picture books. When children consciously seek answers, critical visual analysis comes into play: Through basic learning about images, students can explore the nuances of picture books, such as the size of the font, the shape of the lines, and the use of color, to find the deeper meaning beyond the text [20].

## 3. Building social justice through diversity

In the context of global trends, the tapestry of race, culture, and identity that children encounter has become increasingly intricate and intertwined. This global mosaic presents a series of vibrant human experiences, underscoring the urgent need to elevate racial awareness and advocate for social justice. As children interact with more diverse racial backgrounds than ever before, understanding and respecting this diversity is imperative. A report of the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) shows that the proportion of white school-age children in the United States decreased from 62% to 51% from 2000 to 2017...Meanwhile, the proportions of other racial and ethnic groups of school-age children have increased, particularly Hispanic and Asian children [30]. In this context, picture books serve as powerful emerging educational tools, providing children with convenient and engaging ways to navigate the complexity of race and social dynamics through vivid illustrations and compelling narratives.

### 3.1. How early is too early

Perhaps some may deem discussing issues related to cross-culture and social justice with children as overly serious, and question whether they can truly comprehend, thus some adults opt to delay broaching the topic with them. This phenomenon has been confirmed in the study by Sullivan et al. [26]. However, Ausdale and Feagin's book mentions a three-year-old girl already using words like "nigger" to refer to black children [3]. This indicates that children begin to learn from early developmental stages by observing others' behaviors and their consequences, known as social learning theory [5]. In this process, imitation is a key learning mechanism, emphasizing that such complex imitation learning requires children to possess certain cognitive abilities (attention, memory, reproduction of observed behaviors, and understanding of the motive for imitation), and the observable earliest age at which such imitation occurs is 2-3 years old [1] [4]. This finding led Wild in his research to link children's picture books with social justice, attempting to create a meaningful educational approach [28]. Although the study only indicates practices and speculation, its effectiveness has not been robustly proven, but diverse picture books are helpful in reducing cognitive differences in identity among different ethnicities and enhancing empathy. The colorful pages of these books serve more than just entertainment.

### 3.2. "Mirrors, Windows, and Sliding Glass Doors"

Rudine Sims Bishop's theory of "mirrors, windows, and sliding glass doors" provides a powerful framework for understanding the role of picture books in multicultural education. According to Bishop's concept, picture books should serve as mirrors reflecting readers' own experiences, as windows offering insight into diverse lives and cultures, and as sliding glass doors serving as gateways to understanding and accepting different worldviews [7]. Children can affirm their racial identity through them while also appreciating and understanding the differences and similarities of others through these windows. The representation of marginalized and minority groups indeed, and issues such as racial centrism, not only occur in politics and economics but are also glaringly apparent in education and literature. According to Botelho's study, children's literature predominantly features characters who are white, upper-middle-class, heterosexual, able-bodied, English-speaking, and male [8]. This indicates the exclusivity of informational materials, which prevent individuals outside the mainstream from having diverse identities or positions constructed in different books' worlds. Osa[18] vehemently criticizes this in the article "*The All White World of Children's Books*," citing examples such as Joan M. Lexau's "Benjie" (Dial Press), which includes black characters only in illustrations, and "*The Lazy Little Zulu*," where the inclusion of this ethnic group is portrayed negatively [15].

In the process of children's assimilation and conformity, the repetitive emphasis and mentions of this single story may lead children to form erroneous schema based on Piaget's theory of cognitive development [21]. This could result in distorted perceptions of their own identities while reading, leading to feelings of inferiority, frustration, or even self-rejection [7]. Therefore, broadening the symbolic elements represented in picture books is particularly important for marginalized and minority groups, as they help these groups reduce simplified and stereotyped views of others' experiences and identities. The world in reading is both imagined and real. This is why finding "mirrors" becomes a component of self-esteem. It provides affirmation and a sense of belonging. By matching with similar information and characters, children understand that their lives, cultures, and challenges are also important and worthy of being told. Similarly, mainstream groups can broaden their narrow perspectives and avoid forming racial superiority or other biases and discrimination through diverse picture books. Serving as "windows," picture books provide children with opportunities to explore and understand cultures and lifestyles different from their own. This cross-cultural understanding promotes empathy and inclusivity. When children read picture books depicting multicultural backgrounds, they may encounter characters and situations different from their life experiences. Through this comparison, children may realize that their schemas are insufficient to encompass these new experiences, motivating them to adjust or form new schemas through accommodation to understand and embrace different cultural and social behaviors [21].

Using picture books to facilitate children's imagination and reflection provides significant developmental space, which is why they are particularly suitable for multicultural education compared to other forms of text [9] [27]. For example, three picture books written respectively by Il Viaggio, L'Isola, and L'immigrazione spiegata ai bambini have been applied in primary school classrooms, helping students understand coexistence, historical culture, and international perspectives on multiculturalism by telling stories about the Syrian war and refugee rescue [12]. Diversity in picture book education for younger age groups has also been applied in Malaysian kindergartens to inspire understanding of other ethnic languages [25]. Through the "windows" of these stories, children can realize that despite different

backgrounds, they share many fundamental human qualities and emotions with each other. This process not only promotes children's understanding of social diversity but also helps them establish more complex and comprehensive social schemas.

### 3.3. Sensitivity and Risk

Therefore, the selection of educational picture books needs to encompass as much diversity as possible in terms of language, themes, race, authors, and so forth. However, the choice is often made by teachers or authorities. This is risky, especially since attempting to adopt and implement these materials in a school environment may make the teacher's role appear challenging and controversial. The choice of materials to some extent represents the power of marginalized and marginalized groups. Although picture books offer freedom of content, this freedom itself implies a double-edged sword effect of open-mindedness—there is the potential to promote cognitive development, but also the risk of potential distortion or misleading of thinking [11]. The guidance, skills, attitude, and understanding of their own identity by teachers play a subtle and crucial role in practicing diversified teaching: teachers should carefully allow children to derive meaning and shape from freedom [16]. The global classroom is a microcosm of a broader world where principles of racial awareness and social justice take root. Picture books are not just supplements to education but are important resources that can change young learners' understanding of race and justice. By harnessing the power of storytelling and visual engagement, picture books have the potential to shape a generation that not only tolerates but also embraces and defends racial diversity, which is intrinsic to the human condition.

## 4. Conclusions

In summary, this paper explores the critical role of diverse picture books in children's education. The reason why picture books can be effectively absorbed by children through the diversity of narrative structure is that the multiple expressions of pictures enrich the single nature of the text. This unique illustrative skill and narrative strategy stimulated children's imagination and thinking ability [2]. By providing richer information and emotional experience through visual elements, children can more intuitively understand and feel the content and emotions of the story, so that it is easier to internalize the diversity of experiences in the story into their own understanding and feelings. Second, by expanding the diversity of picture books, children can learn to shift perspectives and experience the life experiences and challenges of people from different backgrounds, disadvantaged groups and ethnicities. The cultivation of such empathy, in a global perspective, is essential to promoting social justice and building more inclusive and harmonious societies. In short, diverse picture books not only enrich children's reading experience, but also serve as an important tool for them to understand the world and shape their values as they grow up. It is a transformative force as an educational resource and a tool for social justice. Although the research on teaching strategies and application forms of picture books is still in the preliminary stage, the value of picture books is still of great research significance.

## References

[1] Abravanel, E., Levan-Goldschmidt, E., & Stevenson, M. B. (1976). Action Imitation: The Early Phase of Infancy. Child Development, 47(4), 1032. https://doi.org/10.2307/1128440

[2] Arizpe, E., & Styles, M. (2003). Children reading pictures : interpreting visual texts. Routledge.

[3] Ausdale, D. V., & Feagin, J. R. (2001). The first R : how children learn race and racism (pp. 1–231). Rowman & Littlefield.

[4] Baldwin, J. M. (1906). Mental Development in the Child and the Race: Methods and Processes. Macmillan.

[5] Bandura, A. (1977). Social Learning Theory (Vol. 1). Prentice-Hall: Englewood cliffs.

[6] Bezemer, J., & Kress, G. (2008). Writing in Multimodal Texts. Written Communication, 25(2), 166–195. https://doi.org/10.1177/0741088307313177

[7] Bishop, R. S. (1990). Mirrors, windows, and sliding glass doors. Perspectives: Choosing and Using Books for the Classroom. Ohio State University, 6(3).

[8] Botelho, M. J. (2021). Reframing Mirrors, Windows, and Doors: A Critical Analysis of the Metaphors for Multicultural Children's Literature. Journal of Children's Literature, 47(1), 119–126. http://ezphost.dur.ac.uk/login?url=https://www.proquest.com/scholarly-journals/reframing-mirrors-windows-doors -critical-analysis/docview/2575546116/se-2

[9] Fernández, E. E., Valero, A. L., & Martínez, I. J. (2012). A study of the use of picturebooks in primary

*education in order to improve intercultural competence: A European perspective. Revista de Educación, 358, 406–425.*

*[10] Fisher, R. (1998). Stories for Thinking: Developing Critical Literacy Through The Use Of Narrative. Analytic Teaching, 18(1). https://journal.viterbo.edu/index.php/at/article/view/668*

*[11] Frawley, T. J. (2008). Gender Schema and Prejudicial Recall: How Children Misremember, Fabricate, and Distort Gendered Picture Book Information. Journal of Research in Childhood Education, 22(3), 291–303. https://doi.org/10.1080/02568540809594628*

*[12] Giusti, M. (2017). Intercultural Education against Building Walls. Educational Possibilities from Picturebooks for Children and Teenagers. Proceedings, 1(9), 888. https://doi.org/10.3390/ proceedings 1090888*

*[13] 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), 231–249. https://doi.org/10.1080/19388071.2017.1304595*

*[14] Kiefer, B. (2011). What is a Picturebook? Across The Borders of History. New Review of Children's Literature and Librarianship, 17(2), 86–102. https://doi.org/10.1080/13614541.2011.624898*

*[15] Kozak, P. (2023). Thinking in Images: Imagistic Cognition and Non-propositional Content. In Google Books. Bloomsbury Publishing. https://www.google.co.uk/books/edition/ Thinking_in_Images/ ixmqEAAAQBAJ?hl=en&gbpv=1&dq=The+non-propositional+nature +of+images&pg=PR1& printsec = frontcover*

*[16] Kucharczyk, S., & Hanna, H. (2020). Balancing teacher power and children's rights: rethinking the use of picturebooks in multicultural primary schools in England. Human Rights Education Review, 3(1), 49–68. https://doi.org/10.7577/hrer.3726*

*[17] Nodelman, P. (1988). Words about pictures: the narrative art of children's picture books. University Of Georgia Press.*

*[18] Osa, O. (1995). The All-white World of Children's Books and African American Children's Literature. Africa Research and Publications.*

*[19] Paivio, A. (1969). Mental imagery in associative learning and memory. Psychological Review, 76(3), 241–263. https://doi.org/10.1037/h0027272*

*[20] Pantaleo, S., & Sipe, L. R. (2012). Diverse Narrative Structures in Contemporary - ProQuest. Journal of Children's Literature, 38(1), 6–15. http://ezphost.dur.ac.uk/login? url=https:// www.proquest. com/scholarly-journals/diverse-narrative-structures-contemporary/docview/1266034847/se-2*

*[21] Piaget, J. (1964). Cognitive development in children: Development and learning. Journal of Research in Science Teaching, 2(3), 176–186. https://doi.org/10.1002/tea.3660020306*

*[22] Scholes, R., Phelan, J., & Kellogg, R. L. (2006). The Nature of Narrative: Revised and Expanded. In Google Books. Oxford University Press, USA.*

*[23] Shelanne Wolf, & Sipe, L. R. (2011). Handbook of research on children's and young adult literature (1st ed., pp. 1–15). Routledge.*

*[24] Sipe, L. R. (1998). How Picture Books Work: A Semiotically Framed Theory of Text-Picture Relationships. Children's Literature in Education, 29(2), 97–108. https://doi.org/10.1023/a: 1022459009182*

*[25] Subramaniam, V., Abd Rahim, N., Nik Affendi, N. R., Sujud, A., Dani, N. A., & Hamzah, Mohd. S. G. (2009). The English Picture Books on Intercultural Awareness of Malaysian Kindergateners. The International Journal of Learning: Annual Review, 16(3), 441–450. https://doi.org/10.18848/1447-9494/cgp/v16i03/46158*

*[26] Sullivan, J., Wilton, L., & Apfelbaum, E. P. (2020). Adults delay conversations about race because they underestimate children's processing of race. Journal of Experimental Psychology: General, 150(2), 395–400. https://doi.org/10.1037/xge0000851*

*[27] Tomé-Fernández, M., Senís-Fernández, J., & Ruiz-Martín, D. (2019). Values and Intercultural Experiences Through Picture Books. The Reading Teacher, 73(2), 205–213. https://doi.org/10. 1002/trtr. 1813*

*[28] Wild, N. R. (2022). Picturebooks for Social Justice: Creating a Classroom Community Grounded in Identity, Diversity, Justice, and Action. Early Childhood Education Journal, 51, 733–741. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10643-022-01342-1*

*[29] Wilson, D., & Carston, R. (2019). Pragmatics and the challenge of "non-propositional" effects. Journal of Pragmatics, 145, 31–38. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.pragma.2019.01.005*

*[30] National Centre for Education Statistics . (2019). Status and Trends in the Education of Racial and Ethnic Groups 2018. In nces.ed.gov (pp. 1–228). Institute of Education Sciences. https://nces.ed.gov/ pubs2019/2019038.pdf*