Using Picture Books to Build Common Schema in the Middle School English Classroom

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in the Middle School English Classroom

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Kristina Lynn Albarello

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Using Picture Books to Build Common Schema

in the Middle School English Classroom

A single class is made up of thirty students, thirty individuals with their own experiences, knowledge, skills, beliefs, and understandings. Then, of course, multiply that by six classes a day. A middle school teacher is met with the overwhelming task every day of connecting these 180 individuals to the skill or standard they need to learn that day. Despite any teacher's best efforts to get to know his or her students, no teacher will ever be able to know exactly what each student's schema (a framework of prior knowledge that helps a person make sense of experiences) includes about a given topic. Even if a teacher did know this, how could he or she tap into 180 students' different schemata?

Knowing that people learn by adding new information to the scaffolds that already exist in their brains, I knew I needed to meet the tremendous task of finding a way to reach all my students in one way rather than 180. I began the journey of tackling this task looking at theory in a content literacy education course. During that course, I was introduced to using picture books with middle school students, despite the preconceived notion that picture books were only for elementary school aged children and younger. A semester later, upon reflecting on my practice in an education course focused on middle school curriculum and instruction, I recognized the success of creating a common experience for my students. My lesson plan for an eighth grade Language Arts class included a simple shared experience as an anticipatory set that we were able to relate to throughout the following lesson, which helped create a concrete image of the lesson's skill in the students' heads. These two ideas, picture books (found in theory) and
creating shared anticipatory experiences to which a classroom of students can all refer (found in practice), merged into one.

What follows is an explanation of my exploration of using picture books to build common schema with middle school Language Arts students. I worked with small groups of students to investigate what happens when a teacher uses picture books to create a common experience, which all share and to which all can relate and reference throughout the ensuing lesson.

The Literature

Before investigating how tapping into students' schemata using picture books as a common anticipatory experience, the current research and literature on schemata and the use of picture books in the classroom need to be explored.

Schemata and Vygotsky's Zone of Proximal Development

Each student has different previous experiences and thus varying schemata and background knowledge. As touched on earlier, schemata are patterns, networks of ideas, or mental models that help make sense of experiences; they are structures of prior knowledge (Chapman, 1993, 24). In essence, schemata are the frameworks that hold all of a person's background knowledge and previous experiences.

Students require schema, or hooks onto which one can "hang" new knowledge, for a topic or task to understand and interpret new information about that topic or task (Chapman, 1993, 25; Graves & Graves, 1994, 35; Kucer, 2001, 113; Gipe, 2002, 221). For example, a student growing up in the deep south would be unable to effectively
interpret a text about a blizzard unless a teacher relates it to schemata the student does have, such as hurricanes, ice, and tragedy (Gipe, 2002, 221-222).

For a student who does not have schema that supports learning of a particular new topic, Marzano (2003) finds that stories are effective at building schema (113). He reports that dramatic instruction allows for supplemental information, personal connections, and is in a format that is familiar for most students (Marzano, 2003, 113). Gipe (2002), similarly, finds that although firsthand experiences with new content are best, secondhand and vicarious experiences (stories, pictures, films, and video clips) are necessary for students to have the appropriate schema to learn new information (222). Considering Marzano’s and Gipe’s findings, picture books would provide that vicarious experience using dramatic instruction, incorporating both stories and pictures, for students who lack the firsthand experience and schema for the new topic at hand.

The necessity of a student needing schema goes hand-in-hand with Lev Vygotsky’s theory that one must be within the zone of proximal development (ZPD) in order to learn. Sternberg and Williams (2002) define the ZPD as the “range between a child’s level of independent performance and the level of performance a child can reach with expert guidance” (56-57). This expert guidance could even be from another child who has slightly more experience or understanding of the topic at hand. Teachers must ensure that students are in their individual ZPDs (Eggen, 2001, 57). If the objective requires students to apply a skill, a teacher may have to meet a student in his or her ZPD and provide expert guidance to help the student to be able to define and understand the skill independently, before guiding them to application.
Based on the knowledge of their students’ ZPDs, teachers must help students constantly strive toward independent understanding—to be able to meet the lesson’s objectives without assistance. Teachers can accomplish this through scaffolding. Just as a scaffold builds on itself to help a construction worker climb up a building, teachers help students reach new skills and concepts by building upon the knowledge the students already possess. By responding to learners’ needs (their capabilities and levels of understanding), teachers can help students travel into their ZPD, where optimal learning takes place, so they can reach independent understanding of the topic or task (Eggen, 2001, 59). With different schemata, students require different levels and places to begin scaffolding. Their ZPDs vary both because of their different schemata and because of their different ability levels, thus complicating a teacher’s ability to help each student reach his or her individual ZPD and tap into his or her individual schemata.

The Advantages of Picture Books

While picture books have been traditionally relegated to elementary school children, many contend that picture books are appropriate for and can be enjoyed by readers of all ages (Matulka, 2008; Kasten, Kristo, McClure, & Garthwait, 2005; Danielson, 1992), with some even promoting the use of picture books with middle school, high school, and undergraduate students (Tiedt, 2000; Giorgis, 1999; Hadaway & Mundy, 1999; Carr, Buchanan, Wentz, Weiss, & Brant, 2001; Hibbing & Rankin-Erickson, 2003; Meyerson, 2006). Their length, traditionally only thirty-two pages, can be beneficial in classrooms. Not only can they be taught in one sitting, in a single class period, they also can be less intimidating for students who struggle with long assignments.
Giorgis (1999) describes that the short length can benefit students in a variety of ways. She found that secondary students were completely engaged with the text and because of its brevity students could enjoy the entire book rather than just an excerpt (51-52). Also, because picture books are short and less complex than most novels, students are able to take a more nuanced look at the subtle issues in the text (Carr et. al., 2002, 148).

While many might assume picture books are just for elementary-aged children, they are often times filled with sophisticated topics and writing, suitable for secondary students. Kasten et. al. (2005) describes that the “writing is not simplistic, choppy or condescending to children” (147) and filled with figurative language (159), which is appropriate for secondary students. Besides having sophisticated writing, picture books also sometimes contain difficult topics or themes to which older students can relate, which can lead to powerful discussions (Giorgis, 1999, 52).

Picture books’ content and language is developmentally appropriate for older students and the integration of visual aids and art can benefit students. Hibbing & Rankin-Erickson (2003) describe how some students struggle to form mental pictures as they read, inhibiting comprehension. Picture books provide that image which can aid these students’ reading comprehension and help students make meaning of the text (762-764). The authors describe that if students struggle because they are unable to visualize or have limited background knowledge on a topic, images can aid understanding (769). For example, if a student has no prior learning experiences about the Holocaust, seeing images of it can provide enough background knowledge to visualize what is taking place in the novel, thus enhancing their understanding of the plot and nuances of the novel.
In addition to the benefits of the visual aids as instructional strategies to enhance student understanding, the art in the picture books can be valuable for their aesthetics alone (Carr et. al., 2001, 147). In an interdisciplinary way, the art in picture books can also prompt students to talk about art (Kasten, 2005, 165). Teachers can incorporate an appreciation for the arts into their core content classes while still meeting the standards they are required to teach. Due to the novelty and images, many authors cite picture books as powerful motivators for older students (Danielson, 1992, 652; Giorgis, 1999, 53; Carr et. al., 2001, 147).

The Students Who Benefit

While all students can benefit from picture books’ short length, sophisticated topics and writing, the visual aids and aesthetic appeal, and the increased motivation, one must recognize that not all students share common cultural experiences. To assume so alienates and disconnects the students who do not share those experiences from the content. Picture books, as shared experiences, can provide encounters that all students can connect to regardless of their cultural experiences, thereby preventing teachers from using examples from popular culture to which not all students may relate.

Picture books can aid students whose native language is not English or are from other cultures (Costello & Kolodziej, 2006, 28; Danielson, 1992, 652; Billman, 2002, 49) because, as Hadaway and Mundy (1999) suggest, there are visual clues and less language in picture books (465). Tiedt (2000) suggests using wordless picture books with English Language Learners (ELLs) because they do not require students to know the language to understand the story. Wordless picture books, thus, can provide an opportunity for ELLs
to work with the content and tell the story in their own words, whether that be in English or their native language. While many native English speakers or students who have grown up in the United States would have similar background knowledge, those who are ELLs or from another culture may not. Thus, the background knowledge and help with visualization that picture books can provide may be crucial for these students.

Reluctant, struggling, or uninterested readers may benefit from using picture books in a secondary classroom as well. Tiedt (2000) also suggests using wordless picture books with reluctant readers and have them tell the story to promote literacy. Kasten et. al. (2005) also deems the use of picture books in a classroom with older students appropriate for special education students because students with special needs may also be students who struggle with reading (165). Pairing the visual with the text helps struggling readers. The visually presented material in picture books allows teachers to reach struggling readers by laying a foundation to eventually scaffold to independent understanding of a new topic (Carr et. al., 2001, 147; Billman, 2002, 51). People in general, today, have become more visual due to television and video games (Costello & Kolodziej, 2006, 82), and as a result, picture books’ illustrations can aid in learning new content or material because today’s students are used to having a lot of visual stimuli. Students who are visual learners will benefit from the illustrations, which are usually absent from novels (Carr et. al, 2001, 147). The illustrations accompanying the text can even make readers more enthusiastic because it is different and aids their comprehension of the text (Hibbing & Rankin-Erickson, 2003, 763).
**Developing skills.** Picture books can be used to help students develop language and writing skills or to develop content knowledge in an English Language Arts classroom. Authors point out that picture books can be used to help students focus on language and the literary devices used (Tiedt, 2000, 47; Kasten et. al., 2005, 165; Costello & Kolodziej, 2006, 29). Some picture books are written with the intention of teaching these skills, while others can simply be models of using these skills. Students can develop skills and understanding of imagery, plot development, characterization, point of view, genre (Tiedt, 2000, 69), main idea, setting, cause and effect, prediction, inference and drawing conclusions, word study, alliteration, onomatopoeia, similes (Gibson, 2002), dialect and character development, jargon and lingo, and parts of speech (Danielson, 1992, 652). Picture books can also become models for writing by helping students to write poetry, short prose, and nonfiction because picture books are written in all of these different styles of writing (Tiedt, 2000, 50).

**Introducing themes.** In addition to teaching language skills, teachers can use picture books to help students develop content knowledge or explore themes and topics (Tiedt, 2000, 79; Costello & Kolodziej, 2006, 28; Giorgis, 1999, 51-52; Carr et. al., 2002, 147; Billman, 2002, 50). Giorgis (1999) found that picture books that are about more difficult topics can lead to powerful classroom discussions (52). Having a foundation or background in new content is very important for students when a teacher will be introducing new material; picture books are able to provide this background and act as a springboard for learning (Billman, 2002, 50). Some themes and topics picture books address that would be appropriate for a secondary classroom include self-esteem, lying, fear, friendship, newcomers, diversity, cultures, stereotypes, self-identity, conflict,
family, intergenerational relations, gender, stereotypes, diversity, immigration, love, death, freedom, slavery (Tiedt, 2000, 129), homelessness, war, drugs, death, violence, racism, and divorce (Costello & Kolodziej, 2006, 28).

**Differentiating for multilevel learners.** Since picture books are accessible for so many types of students, there are many ways teachers can differentiate or incorporate them into their classrooms. All students can read the same book (independently or in literature circles), students can self-select, or picture books can be used as a class read-aloud (Costello & Kolodziej, 2006, 32). Picture books can be read at a surface level or can be analyzed as a complex piece of literature, thus making it good for multilevel classrooms (Duncan, 2009, 74; Hadaway & Mundy, 1999, 464).

While picture books are accessible and provide support for learners with specific needs, studies have even been done using picture books with undergraduates. Peter Meyerson is an undergraduate psychology professor who used picture books to illustrate very basic versions of the theories he was teaching his class. He found that using the picture books improved student comprehension and students self-assessed that the picture books helped them understand the theories and make connections (Meyerson, 2006, 260). He received a very positive reaction from his students; on a Likert scale, student reaction was a 4.57 average on a scale of one to five, with five being excellent (Meyerson, 2006, 260). With the high level at which undergraduates learn in mind, one reasons that not only can picture books be used to aid students who need extra help, but picture books can also be used to enhance and stretch instruction for advanced learners. Picture books can be incorporated into a wide range of classrooms, regardless of age, ability, cultural background, language comprehension, differences in schema, or special needs.
The Approach & Methodology

The Question

Educators use action research in the classroom because it is "a systematic and orderly way for teachers to observe their practice or to explore a problem and a possible course of action" (Johnson, 2009, p.1). As a result, I used an action research framework to systematically investigate what happens (Johnson, 2009, p.1) when picture books are used to create a shared anticipatory experience, to which all students can refer, with middle school Language Arts students. I hypothesized that due to the thoroughly documented benefits of picture books and the advantages of teaching students who have a common experience, the shared picture book anticipatory set would be a positive learning experience. I anticipated that students would be making connections to the picture books during the rest of the lesson, referring to easier examples they had seen in them, as they grappled with understanding the new Language Arts material.

The Setting

The study was conducted in a seventh grade Language Arts classroom at a middle school located in a metropolitan school district of Indianapolis, Indiana. The middle school is comprised of a student body diverse in socioeconomic standing, ethnicity, race, and ability level. Due to this diversity, the Language Arts classrooms operate using a reading workshop approach where all students have a choice in their independent reading book to allow students to read at their own reading level and pick books that they can connect with rather than having a common novel the whole class studies. Each lesson in the Language Arts classrooms thus consists of a short mini-lesson covering a skill or
concept followed by independent work time during which students are reading and applying the skill or concept, often times using their independent reading book.

The Participants

With the help of the classroom teacher, who chose to be known as Mrs. Smith, five students were selected from each of her first two classes. Instead of students volunteering to participate, students were selected in order to create a more accurate cross-section of a seventh grade class. Following the study, in order to retain their confidentiality, the students were given the opportunity to choose the pseudonyms they would like to be referred to as throughout the study. The students chose the following names: Allison, Brian, La’Shuna, Michael, and Edina, who were in the first period small group; Amber, Connor, Ambrojia, Alyssa, and Jay, who were in the second period small group. As I got to know these students personally during the study and from conversations with Mrs. Smith, I understood them to be a diverse group ranging from quiet to boisterous, generally behaving poorly to behaving well, refusing to turn in work to always turning in work, requiring prompting to participate to dominating the conversation, discouraged to confident, and distracted to focused.

Establishing Trust with the Participants

Prior to beginning the actual study, I taught the lesson that Mrs. Smith was teaching the whole class with my small group each period on two different occasions so that students could become familiar with me as their instructor. If students were unfamiliar with working in a small group setting or with me, the data collected would be
less accurate. Creating a level of familiarity prior to beginning data collection allowed for the observations recorded to be based less on other confounding variables. For example, students’ behavior and participation would not vary due to the novelty of working in a small group or with a different instructor. Instead, by beginning the study on the third lesson, the novelty was more likely to have worn off and students’ behavior and participation would be more characteristic.

Research Design

Since teacher action research requires data collection to span at least two weeks (Johnson, 2009, 2), the study was conducted over the course of five weeks near the end of the fall semester, with no more than two meetings per week. Eight total lessons made up the study; however, due to technology failure, one of the lessons was not recorded. Since data could not be collected for the unrecorded lesson according to the same standards found consistently across the other seven lessons, the unrecorded lesson was not included in the analysis of the study.

The unit the students were studying, while I was working with them, was fiction. Toward the end of the study, coincidentally, the students were beginning to write their own children’s books in an interdisciplinary project with Social Studies. Mrs. Smith would provide me with the lesson plan for each lesson I taught to the two small groups in advance. Knowing the goals and topics of each lesson, I would conduct a search for picture books, looking for ones that would help introduce and teach the lessons. As I searched, I kept in mind their reading levels, ages, genders, and ethnic backgrounds, aiming to provide a variety of different kinds of children’s books. For example, I used the
picture book *Grace for President* by Kelly DiPucchio to teach first person point of view. (See Appendix A for a full list of dates of lessons, picture books used, and the corresponding lesson topics.)

Prior to teaching the lesson, I would review the picture book that I had chosen and anticipated which specific pages I would use to teach the lesson in order to create a more systematic approach to using the picture book during the lesson. Each lesson followed the same format. To begin, I would read the picture book to the students. Often, we would review the plot if it had any confusing parts. Then we would begin the mini-lesson that Mrs. Smith was teaching to the rest of the class, beginning by referencing the picture book we had just read. Transitioning into the specific lesson Mrs. Smith had prepared, I would refer to the picture book for additional examples, with the hope of increasing student understanding. Finally, students would apply their newly learned knowledge and skills by reading and working independently with their own independent reading books.

**Data Sources**

Following each lesson, the student participants would fill out a Post-Lesson Rating Scale (see Appendix B) that asked them six questions about their opinions regarding the picture book and the lesson (Johnson, 2009, p.18). While teaching, I took quick notes in a field journal during and following the lesson to record my first impressions and connections made (Johnson, 2009, 10). Also, the lesson was filmed to better record data (Shagoury & Power, 1993, 96). While reviewing the videos, I took notes and created a transcript of the lesson. Based on these two sources of data, I was
able to make connections and draw initial conclusions based on what I was experiencing as I taught.

Following the study, students filled out two post-study documents. The participating students filled out a Post-Study Survey, on which they were able to describe their opinions about the study in their own words for the first time by responding to six questions. The second document was a Post-Study Rating Scale. This numerically recorded their opinions about the study as a whole, answering some similar questions to the Post-Lesson Rating Scale.

After the study concluded and all of the rating scales were completed, I compiled the data into a spreadsheet, recording each of their responses for each of the picture books, using a numerical scale. A "Definitely No" response was assigned a 1 up to a "Definitely Yes," which was assigned a 5. To compile the data for the Post-Lesson Rating Scales, for each question, I calculated each student's average answer for all of the books and I calculated the average response of all the students for each book. Finally, I found the average response of all the students to each question for all the books. I repeated a similar process for the Post-Study Rating Scale.

**Analysis of the Data**

Using indexing—making a list or "table of contents" of categories found reoccurring in the data—I began to narrow my focus when wading through my notes and transcripts of the lessons (Shagoury & Power, 1993, 99). I began by reading through all of them for any immediate observations I could gather, making connections and notes in the margins and then noting themes and patterns I discovered on a separate sheet of paper.
(Shagoury & Power, 1993, 99). I found broad themes of student engagement, connections made, picture book choice, and comparing the picture book to other texts used during the lessons. Next, I reduced the data by looking at conclusions I could draw about these different broad themes. Writing in the margins, highlighting, and taking notes about connections between observations made regarding the lessons led me to the different conclusions I could make about the data.

Of the different broad themes I identified, connections made required the most coding and analysis to reduce the data down to workable and usable information. I began by identifying all instances of connections made from the picture book to the content of the lesson, by the students or me, in my quick notes or transcripts of each lesson. Then I coded this data as student-made connections or teacher-made connections. This solidified my impression that there were far more teacher-made connections: there was only one instance that was coded as a student-made connection. From there I realized I needed to break down the teacher-made connections further to analyze how and why I drew the connection between the lesson and the picture book. Comparing the data, I reviewed the teacher-made connections looking to define categories. As I continued coding the data into the different categories, using the constant comparison method, I was able to refine the categories to create definitions I could follow; the constant comparison method involves taking the categories created, seeing how they may relate in a larger framework, which then allows one to make theoretical claims and emergent theories (Shagoury & Power, 1993, 115). This ultimately left me with three different categories of teacher-made connections: using the picture book as a model to prepare students for what they
need to be able to do, giving more examples/providing comparisons, and returning to the shared picture book experience for students struggling to understand the concept.

For the teacher-made connections, when looking at integrating the categories with their properties (Shagoury & Power, 1993, 115), I reviewed the different examples of each of the categories, looking for answers to the questions "why?" and "how?" Through this analysis of the first category, using the picture book as a model to prepare students for what they need to be able to do, the benefits of why the picture book was a good model was explored to better define the category. For the second category, giving more examples/providing comparisons, when analyzing examples that fit this category, I reviewed my data to answer the following questions: how and why were the comparisons made, to what were the comparisons made, and why were these examples and comparisons valuable. When further defining the third category, returning to the shared picture book experience for students struggling to understand the concept, I closely investigated the value and necessary characteristics of those shared experiences.

Returning to the student-made connections, since there was only one instance of a student making a verbal connection from the lesson to the picture book, I could not look for patterns and trends in my observations, notes, and transcripts to further categorize student-made connections. I began by looking at what this one instance might indicate. Upon seeing that the student, Alyssa, used the picture book in a way that fit my purpose—using it as a way to introduce a new concept and as a reference tool—I turned to see if I could triangulate these findings with other measures (Shagoury & Power, 1993, 124). Reviewing the data from the Post-Lesson Rating Scales, I was able to find supporting related evidence about students’ perceptions of the picture books’ relevance to
the lessons and whether the picture books enhanced understanding of the lessons’ topics.
To further triangulate these findings, I explored the Post-Study Survey, compiling
responses corresponding with students’ impressions of the study’s purpose. Their
responses consistently pointed to an understanding of the picture books as an
instructional tool.

Seeing that students had seen a purpose to the picture books led me to consider
data about student enjoyment: would the students still enjoy the picture books if they saw
an educational value for them? Returning to the data collected from the Post-Lesson
Rating Scales, I examined their responses about enjoyment over the course of the seven
lessons. Then, I compiled the responses about student enjoyment by looking at what
students liked and disliked about using the picture books to introduce the lessons on the
Post-Study Survey. After surveying and indexing their responses, I was able to draw
conclusions that led me to return to the transcripts and observations in my field journal to
once again triangulate my findings and integrate these conclusions with the purpose of
my study as a whole.

Findings & Implications

After compiling all of the data into themes and categories in my analysis, the
following conclusions and classroom implications were derived.

Teacher-Made Connections

Utilizing the picture book as a model & mentor. The findings. For the first
category, using the picture book as a model to prepare students for what they need to be
able to do, I found thirteen occurrences. When students are working on their own writing, whether it is for a children’s book, an autobiography, an editorial, or a fictional narrative, a picture book can be valuable for providing examples for students. Students can see, in context, how an author weaves a specific skill into their writing and they can use this as a model.

For the last lesson, I used *Freedom River* by Doreen Rappaport to begin the lesson on how to use vocabulary words in a way that would allow the readers of the children’s books they were writing to understand the vocabulary word without being provided the definition. Essentially, the goal was for the students to write using vocabulary words in context. So the students could quickly get to work, the mini-lesson in the regular classroom that day was a brief explanation of their goal and then the students were each provided with a Post-it note on which they needed to record the three social studies vocabulary words they were going to include in their stories. During their work time, the following conversation took place:

**Me:** If your first vocab word is Luxor, what context clues can you include? In here [*Freedom River*], they show us them [the slaves] travelling under straw in a wagon to give us an idea of what the Underground Railroad is like. What is important to Luxor? What context clues can you provide just like they did for the Underground Railroad in here?

**Brian:** It’s a town.

**Allison:** Yeah, we put in “the small town, Luxor”

**Me:** Perfect. What else can you include? What other important information would I need to know about Luxor, Egypt?
Allison: It's like close to the Nile and stuff. It's in the desert.

Me: That's info I might want to know. If I've never heard anything about Egypt, or specifically Luxor, I am going to want to know that. Just like if I've never heard anything about the Underground Railroad before, I need to know it's not actually a railroad, that it has safe houses and wagons and such. What kinds of context clues can you include for [Luxor] then?

Allison: Well, later down the page we have them carrying a bucket from the Nile.

Me: Perfect. You know it's close to the Nile because they're carrying a bucket of water from it.

This conversation was much more concrete because we could relate it to a specific example, rather than a fabricated example or just describing the requirements. My job as a teacher became much less challenging because I had a concrete example of what I expected and the example was in context. Students saw how the story flowed because the author did not have to stop and define the word. Whenever the students needed to complete any writing, for a quick write or a more formal piece, I was able to provide a concrete example of what was expected so there was less confusion and more productive work time.

The implications. I cannot imagine having to come up with examples off the top of my head or trying to quickly find examples in their independent reading books in order to teach this lesson. As a result, I will use picture books as a mentor text in my classroom to provide concrete examples the class can share to model for students. This will reduce
the amount of time spent coming up with abstract examples or searching the students’ independent reading books from their readers’ workshop.

Using the picture book as a basic example. The findings. For the second category, giving more examples/providing comparisons, I found eight occurrences. While giving more examples helped solidify a concept in the students’ heads, the picture books also could be a more basic example for students, enhancing their understanding. When reading *Too Many Tamales*, we were learning about falling action and resolution. The lesson that followed required us to look at another picture book, *Fire on the Mountainside*, as well. After identifying the falling action in both *Too Many Tamales* and *Fire on the Mountainside* independently, I then compared the two, showing the similarities in their falling actions, even though they were two very different stories in content.

After listing the similarities of their falling actions, Jay even articulated what I was doing aloud, “You’re comparing them,” and I responded, “Right. They both have those falling actions.” By looking at the two stories, I exposed the literary term of “falling action” without the students seeing the term as solely one example. It also allowed the students more opportunities to learn the concept. If one example was confusing for a student, maybe the other was not. While not crucial to ensure student learning, providing more examples and making the comparisons also modeled for students the important skill, making text to text connections. Because I did it explicitly enough, students like Jay caught on.
Most of the time, Mrs. Smith’s mini-lessons used a shared experience to provide examples of a new skill or concept. She often used excerpts from different novels or short stories to teach different skills. However, during the study, I found that the students connected with the picture book better than the other excerpts that followed the picture book. After reading *Fly Away Home*, we also looked at an excerpt from the novel, *Freak the Mighty* to further explore first person point of view. In my notes from that day’s lesson, I wrote my impression, “[It] seemed they had a better grasp of the value/importance of first person narrative in *Fly Away Home*.”

When attempting to learn other qualities of first person point of view (knowing the narrator’s thoughts and feelings), we looked at the *Freak the Mighty* passage, but the students became confused. I asked the students about other things that help us know it is first person besides just the pronouns, Jay answered, “Little critters.” This novel has a very distinct writing style and uses the word “critters” a lot, which seemed to confuse the students. I asked another question and the students still were unsure. At this time, by looking at *Fly Away Home* and through teacher questions and student answers, we were able to discover that the narrator in the picture book reveals his emotions. This provided students with an easier, more direct example of what they were looking for and so when looking at *Freak the Mighty* again, Alyssa was immediately able to identify a passage that included the narrator’s emotions. Then to conclude the lesson, I provided a comparison of the examples from each of the texts to solidify their understanding. While reading comprehension is an important skill to address, when looking at other skills in Language Arts, such as first person point of view, reading comprehension (or lack thereof) should not be the inhibitor of learning the new skill. The picture book provided
more accessible and basic examples, making it easier for students to understand the comparisons I made to the complex mentor text because the students were able to understand and connect with the examples coming from the picture book.

Not only did the picture books provide good examples because they are basic, but also because they provided examples of concepts in context. Full-length novels, because of the amount of content to wade through, do not provide students with a focused look at the specific concept or skill. On the other hand, excerpts taken from longer texts do not provide students with how the concept fits in the big picture. However, with the picture books, students were able to remain focused because the picture books combined the short length and the ability to look at and learn the concept in context. These aspects of a picture book, I found, became most important when a Language Arts skill or concept was really dependent on the context in which it was found. When teaching the parts of a plotline, I reflected on the value of the length and full story a picture book provided. When teaching rising action in Saving Sweetness, I noted that identifying the climax allowed the students to more easily identify the rising action. Teaching the rising action isolated, out of context, would have been nearly impossible.

The implications. Using picture books for additional examples and comparisons to more complex texts not only increases the quantity of examples of a concept students receive, but also provides students with examples that are accessible. I will use picture books as examples of Language Arts concepts to enhance student understanding because they focus on the skill rather than comprehension and provide students with examples that are in context rather than isolated.
Returning to the picture book for the shared experience. The findings. For the third category, returning to the shared picture book experience for students struggling to understand the concept, I found four occurrences. While this category did not occur as often as the other two, it was incredibly important. As described previously, picture books are often simpler in content than other kinds of mentor texts coming from short stories or novels. So when explaining a difficult concept, the picture book allows for a simpler look at the concept. For example, when looking at *Grace For President* to learn about third person point of view, we also looked at the short stories *7th Grade* and *The Treasure of Lemon Brown*.

After identifying that *Grace for President* was told in third person limited point of view, we looked at the other two mentor texts. The students had trouble keeping the different kinds of points of view separate. They were getting confused and were just guessing from which point of view *7th Grade* was told. I stopped, reminding them, “Let’s go back to *Grace for President*. The narrator wasn’t in the story. It wasn’t Thomas. It wasn’t Grace. It wasn’t anyone in the story. It was someone we don’t know, looking down and telling the events. In this case—” La’Shuna then finished my sentence about *7th Grade*, “It is third person limited because we only know Victor’s thoughts and none of the others.” Without the simpler example from *Grace for President*, I would have just had to apply the definition for the students to explain why it was third person limited. With the picture book example that I could return to, the students were able to look at a concrete example of the definition of third person limited in action, thus giving them a firmer understanding.
When returning to the shared experience of *Freedom River* while helping students understand how to incorporate vocabulary words in context, I realized that maybe not all skills and concepts need to be or should be taught using an entire picture book. While picture books are short in length, they still take valuable time to read. Despite the success of having examples from *Freedom River* to teach this lesson like I discussed previously, an excerpt from this story or another could have sufficed, saving precious work time for the students. Students successfully learning how to use vocabulary words in context did not depend on students knowing the entire story.

Reflecting on the advantages and disadvantages of using an entire picture book to teach using vocabulary words in context led to the conclusion that one picture book could have been used to cover multiple skills. Considering the time it takes to read a picture book, but also knowing the valuable examples *Freedom River* provided for using vocabulary in context and what valuable examples it *could* have provided for other concepts such as plot structure or social studies themes, it would have been efficient and effective to use one picture book in multiple lessons.

Even before that lesson, I began reasoning that one picture book should be used to teach multiple concepts or skills after teaching rising action with one book, *Saving Sweetness*, and falling action and resolution with another book, *Too Many Tamales*. My research design necessitated that I use a different picture book for each lesson; however, immediately upon reflecting on the two lessons, I recognized that reading a second book was inessential and redundant. The benefits of the picture book rested in the fact that it was a shared experience we could all return to and reference as a group; as a result it was unnecessary for it to be a new shared experience every time a concept or skill was taught.
The implications. With many Language Arts concepts being abstract or having definitions that are difficult to comprehend, examples are necessary to help students understand. However, many of the texts that would provide examples are complex, adding to students’ confusion rather than alleviating it. Instead, I will use a shared experience of a picture book that includes simpler, concrete examples that will allow students a firmer understanding of that concept. Additionally, I can best utilize our time by employing backwards design. Backwards design requires an educator to consider the enduring understandings students should have, the standards that need to be met, and the assessments that will be used to judge whether or not students have gained the understandings and met the standards before planning the lesson activities. Through consideration of the enduring understandings, standards, and assessment pieces, an educator can then choose a shared experience that incorporates multiple skills from a unit of study. The class can then return to that shared experience whenever students struggle throughout the unit.

Student-Made Connections

Seeing the picture book as an instructional tool. The findings. When looking at data regarding students referring to the picture books during the lesson, I found only one student-made connection. In my observations, notes, and transcripts of the videos, Alyssa was the only student to ever make a reference back to the picture book independently of me. When we read Rose Blanche, she asked to see the picture book three times to help her group write parts of their own picture book. At one point, she noted aloud, “That gives me a good example for writing the book,” referring to writing her own picture book.
for the Language Arts-Social Studies interdisciplinary project. Later, she asked, “Can I look at that book [Rose Blanche]? Just to get an idea? We’re doing first person so we are going to introduce him in the same way.” The goal of this lesson was to show how plot structure fits into a children’s picture book and Alyssa made these references to Rose Blanche, showing her connection between writing her own exposition and utilizing an experience she had with Rose Blanche’s exposition. She then asked for her group’s feedback on introducing their character the same way as the main character was introduced in Rose Blanche. She clearly saw the picture book as a model for what she needed to accomplish in her writing.

While Alyssa was the only one during a lesson to verbally make a reference back to the picture book as a learning tool, the students still saw the purpose of the picture books. The students averaged responses of 3.99 and 3.75, both rounding to 4 indicating “Yes” responses, for if they thought the picture book was relevant to the lesson and if they thought the picture book enhanced their understanding of the skill later discussed in the lesson, respectively. The responses of the Post-Study Survey support this conclusion as well. Of the ten total students, nine made a comment about the picture book introducing the lesson, the picture book helping them learn the lesson better, or the picture book providing examples of what the lesson was about. I had anticipated that some students might not see the point of using a picture book as an introductory experience for a new skill; I thought some students would enjoy them solely because the picture books seemed like a break from learning or because they had pictures.

To my surprise, the students saw the picture books as instructional tools rather than a “fun break.” The students’ positive responses to the seven lessons involving
picture books (all the Post-Study Survey questions averaged a response of a 4 or higher, meaning the students averaged all “Yes” responses) were due to them recognizing the value of picture books as helping them learn. On the Post-Study Survey, seven of the ten students reported, in their own words, they liked using picture books to introduce the lesson because they helped with understanding the lesson. One student did not answer what the question was asking, one student liked when they learned about something historical, and one student liked how they read it instead of the teacher just saying it. Even those three students who discussed other reasons for liking picture books or did not properly address the question, in another answer they later described that the purpose of the picture books was to aid learning or give examples.

Despite being aware of their instructional purpose, the students’ responses about their enjoyment of the picture books remained steadily positive over the course of the seven lessons, always rounding to a 4 or “Yes” response, as seen in the graph below.

Figure 1. Did you enjoy reading/listening to the picture book? This figure illustrates that student responses about enjoyment of the picture book steadily averaged a “Yes” response.
Students were aware of the picture books' purpose as an educational tool and still enjoyed them.

While students overall gave positive feedback about their enjoyment of the picture books on the Post-Lesson Rating Scales, their written responses on the Post-Study Survey provided feedback on specific reasons why not all books got their stamp of approval. When the students were given the opportunity to describe what they disliked about using picture books to introduce the lesson, five of the ten students responded that there was nothing they disliked, three responded that some of the picture books were confusing or were difficult to understand, and two responded that sometimes the picture books were boring.

Connor was one of the students who said the picture books were sometimes hard to understand. When I taught the lesson about first person point of view using the picture book, *Fly Away Home*, I recorded that Connor had trouble focusing when I was reading the book. After viewing the video, it reinforced my observations because he was looking all over the place instead of just at the picture book. Looking at his responses for the Post-Lesson Rating Scale, he listed "No Opinion" about if he enjoyed reading/listening to the picture book and "No" about if he found himself referencing back or relating to the picture book throughout the lesson. His responses on the rating scale demonstrate the importance of how engaging students in the shared experience has an impact on student learning. Connor lacked a connection to the picture book, which may have been due to its difficulty or inability to inspire interest. Regardless of the reason, without engaging in the picture book, it became impossible for Connor to have the same the shared picture book
experience that the rest of his classmates did. Therefore, Connor was unable to refer back to the common shared experience throughout the lesson.

In contrast, the students showed me how valuable a picture book can be when well chosen. An engaging picture book can excite students and pique their interest. After a few lessons, Edina asked if we could use a specific picture book that she had previously read next time. Allison joined in on the request because she knew the picture book too. Their enthusiasm demonstrated the level of engagement picture books can create. Students requesting specific texts illustrated their interest and attention.

**The implications.** Since the students recognized the purpose of the picture books and *still* enjoyed them, I do not anticipate the students losing interest in using picture books as an introductory experience. The students were not “tricked” into learning something. They did not appear to be under any illusion of reading picture books only for fun, thus the novelty of picture books should not wear off rapidly. However, if a goal of using picture books is to create a shared experience, the teacher needs the students to actually experience the picture book. Students cannot truly experience something if they do not understand it. When the picture book does not capture the students’ attention, they are not truly experiencing it either. As a result, the picture book loses its value when it fails to engage due to its low level of appeal and comprehension because it is no longer a shared experience.

Consequently, I will choose picture books that are not overly complicated for students to understand, in order to provide them with a break from the more difficult texts they typically read in class. By looking for picture books that will capture my students’ interest and by allowing students to add suggestions to a list of potential picture books to
use for future lessons, I can increase student investment and enjoyment. Utilizing these strategies, I can increase student engagement, thereby increasing the number of students who are truly involved in the shared experience, and thus encouraging students to view using picture books as instructional tools in a positive light.

**Conclusion**

With any classroom diverse in culture, ability, and experiences, a teacher must recognize the importance of tapping into all the students' individual schema in order to move them into their individual zones of proximal development to attain optimal learning. Following my investigation into what happens when teaching using picture books as a common anticipatory experience, I discovered that having a shared experience that all students can reference, without bias to reading comprehension, past experiences, or culture, can enhance my effectiveness as a teacher.

In future investigations, the focus could shift to how using picture books as shared anticipatory experiences address specific student needs. This study attended to a variety of students, but considered them as students in general rather than based on specific needs such as gifted students who require a greater challenge, students who are reading well below grade level, students who have difficulty focusing in class, or students who have a low level of English comprehension.

Future explorations could also consider student attitudes toward picture books that specifically include different cultures or experiences. During this investigation, I discovered that picture books can widen students' horizons. With such emphasis on standards and testing, the curriculum can feel restrictive at times. Picture books become a
vehicle for incorporating other experiences, historical events, and cultures into the curriculum without sacrificing time spent on the required standards. In just seven lessons, students asked questions about, had first encounters with, and learned more about the Underground Railroad, Holocaust, women’s rights and empowerment, homelessness, and Mexican culture. Students were able to make connections from the text to the world around them, enriching their understanding of other people and places in the world, while always maintaining an easy segue back to the Language Arts skill we were learning about. It would be interesting to analyze students’ responses to learning about the variety of cultures and experiences.

Considering the countless picture books available, knowing where to begin and what constitutes a good picture book to use for a shared anticipatory set can become daunting and tedious. Consequently, for future study, one might research and establish criteria for determining high quality picture books to use. Possible criteria for examination include reading levels, themes addressed, skills or units that can be taught, aesthetic value, or the kinds of students that engaged in and enjoyed the picture books. Narrowing down the limitless categories that could be studied and investigating a method for selecting the books would be of great value to educators looking to put picture books to use in their classrooms.

Additionally, picture books as a shared anticipatory experience were not found to be valuable solely because of their intrinsic value as picture books. As a result, their ability to spark interest and create shared, basic examples that can be referenced throughout a lesson may be found in other media or kinds of shared experiences. For future investigations, one may explore other forms of media such as videos or magazine
articles, looking at similarities and differences with picture books and how each engages students. Also, since shared anticipatory experiences do not necessarily require media, one could further examine other kinds of shared experiences to begin a lesson or unit, such as simulations.

Overall, using picture books as shared experiences to begin the lessons with middle school students was positive for the students and my effectiveness as an instructor. The picture books provided models and examples that were concrete, accessible, and in context for students. Thus, students were able to focus and learn the skill prior to applying it to more difficult texts. The picture books were valuable because they were shared experiences to which all could relate, not because there was a new shared experience for each skill or concept. As a result, using backwards design to determine the skills and concepts to be covered in a unit prior to selecting picture books will allow an educator to choose one picture book to teach multiple skills. The value of using picture books as shared experiences to build common schema amongst middle school students was confirmed both by my own observations and by students, whose responses on the surveys and rating scales clearly indicated their positive recognition of picture books as helpful instructional tools.
### Appendix A

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<th>Date</th>
<th>Picture Book Citation</th>
<th>Lesson Topic</th>
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Appendix B

Lesson: ___________________            Student Identifying # ____
Picture Book: ________________

Post-Lesson Rating Scale

Circle the responses that best describe your answers to the following questions. Your responses will not affect your grades or relationship with Ms. Albarello or Mrs. Smith or anyone else related to the study. Your responses will remain confidential. Your answers will not be reviewed until the conclusion of the research study.

1. Did you find the picture book relevant to the lesson?
   Definitely No   No   No Opinion   Yes   Definitely Yes

2. Do you feel that the picture book enhanced your understanding of the lesson's concept or skill later in the lesson?
   Definitely No   No   No Opinion   Yes   Definitely Yes

3. Did you find yourself referencing back or relating to the picture book throughout the lesson?
   Definitely No   No   No Opinion   Yes   Definitely Yes

4. Did you enjoy reading/listening to the picture book?
   Definitely No   No   No Opinion   Yes   Definitely Yes

5. Did you enjoy the lesson following the picture book?
   Definitely No   No   No Opinion   Yes   Definitely Yes

6. Would you suggest using this picture book with this lesson to a teacher who is teaching another 7th grade Language Arts class?
   Definitely No   No   No Opinion   Yes   Definitely Yes
Appendix C

Post-Study Rating Scale

Circle the responses that best describe your answers to the following questions. Your responses will not affect your grades or relationship with Ms. Albarello or Mrs. Smith or anyone else related to the study. Your responses will remain confidential.

1. Do you feel that the picture book enhanced or aided your understanding of purpose/content of lesson of the lessons?
   - Definitely No
   - No
   - No Opinion
   - Yes
   - Definitely Yes

2. Did you enjoy reading/listening to the picture books?
   - Definitely No
   - No
   - No Opinion
   - Yes
   - Definitely Yes

3. Did you find yourself referencing back or relating to the picture book during the lessons?
   - Definitely No
   - No
   - No Opinion
   - Yes
   - Definitely Yes

4. Did you think it was helpful when the small group all had one experience they could relate and reference to during the lesson?
   - Definitely No
   - No
   - No Opinion
   - Yes
   - Definitely Yes

5. Do you think picture books are relevant to you?
   - Definitely No
   - No
   - No Opinion
   - Yes
   - Definitely Yes

6. Would you suggest using picture books to a middle school teacher as a good way to introduce a lesson?
   - Definitely No
   - No
   - No Opinion
   - Yes
   - Definitely Yes
Appendix D

Post-Study Survey

To the best of your ability, respond honestly and accurately to the following questions. Your responses will not affect your grades or relationship with Ms. Albarello or Mrs. Smith or anyone else related to the study. Your responses will remain confidential.

1. What did you like about using picture books to introduce the lessons?

2. What did you dislike about using picture books to introduce the lessons?

3. What did you like about working and learning in a small group?

4. What did you dislike about working and learning in a small group?

5. What do you think the purpose or the point of using picture books to begin the lessons was?

6. Do you think the picture books enhanced or aided your understanding of the lessons? Why or why not?
References


