

## **Position Statement: The Vital Role of Picture Books in the Intermediate, Middle and High School Reading Curriculum**

For the past two decades, picture books have been an important resource in the elementary reading curriculum, especially in primary grade classrooms. Most frequently used with beginning readers, picture books are seen as a support for readers that are unable to sustain long sections of written text. However, contemporary picture books contain themes, issues, artwork, and quality writing that is appropriate for older readers. Illustrations in picture books are a separate meaning system, not simply as a support for understanding the written text. This position statement focuses on the use of picture books in upper elementary, middle and high school classrooms and why they are an appropriate resources for these older readers.

An important reason for using picture books is the vast array of appropriate themes, issues and topics contained in these texts. If you haven't explored the world of picture books lately you are in for a surprise. Most noticeably is the publication of picture books that contain sophisticated writing styles, superb illustrations, complex issues and themes, and unique visual designs and formats. Drawing upon meta-fictive elements and postmodern writing techniques, contemporary picture books offer older readers challenging formats and complex relationships between text and illustrations.

Because of the relatively short length of the picture book, these texts provide information in a readily accessible format. Picture books can be used to introduce new content area topics or stimulate in depth discussions in a single class period. Because many books can be shared in a short period of time, multiple picture books can be read and shared, quickly introducing a variety of perspectives to any topic or theme.

Picture books contain quality writing that can be used to demonstrate many writing techniques during mini-lessons in the writing workshop. Cynthia Rylant, Jane Yolen, Eve Bunting, Chris Van Allsburg, William Joyce, Colin Thompson, Peter Sis and many others are excellent writers that craft sophisticated stories and draw upon a variety of writing techniques and styles. Picture books provide access to complex literary elements, for example, imagery, central tension, flashback, metaphor and others. Reading experiences with picture books will support older readers as they encounter these writing techniques and elements in more complex novels and classic

literature.

Picture books are an excellent resource for reading aloud with older readers. The lyrical writing and exceptional artwork used in contemporary picture books anchors the sounds of written language in students, provides appropriate and enjoyable literary experiences and entices readers to interact with literature in a relatively “risk-free” format. Picture books are not a genre in themselves, rather they are a particular literary format that contains many genres. Mystery stories, historical fiction, contemporary realistic fiction, fantasy, fairy tales and poetry are all available in picture book format.

The illustrations and visual elements contained in picture books may well be the first time young children are exposed to art and artistic techniques. Young readers are drawn into the world of reading and literature through the images and artwork contained in picture books. As readers get older, the picture books that are intended for them become more sophisticated. The media used to create the illustrations, the interplay between visual elements and written text, and the meanings and significance of the visual elements in picture books become more complex. Contemporary picture book illustrators draw upon a wide variety of artistic techniques including; realism, surrealism, impressionism, cubism, and postmodernism to create their illustrations and visual elements. Making connections between the art in picture books and classic art forms and styles can increase older reader appreciation of art itself. The art contained in picture books may be a door into the world of art that older readers need to make connections to the vast array of visual elements in other texts and experiences.

Older readers in today’s society experience more variety and complexity in the texts and visual media than readers of past generations. Hypermedia in the form of web-sites and music videos, the internet, multimodal art, advertisements, television and pop culture present new experiences and challenges for older readers. Picture books may serve as a bridge between traditional written texts and these new forms of writing and visual design. The interplay between written text and visual components is complex and ever changing. Illustrations no longer simply support the written text, they provide information and meaning on their own. It is not simply a symmetrical relationship (see Serafini; *Reading Aloud and Beyond* for more information) between the written text and the illustrations. Illustrations can enhance the story, adding more information and clues, or contradict the written text, offering different information than provided in the text.

As picture books grow more complex and contain more meta-fictive elements (see Postmodern Book Booklist on this website), it is necessary for readers to become more actively involved in the reading and meaning making process. Due to the non-linear structures and complex visual designs of these texts, readers are required to decide on their own how to navigate these texts and how they will construct meaning as they experience the story or stories presented. These polysemic texts contain multiple perspectives and story lines and require readers to make decisions about how the book will be read, not simply follow along with the a single, linear text. Roland Barthes calls these texts “writerly” texts and says that readers actually “write” these texts as they read them, filling in important gaps in the text to make sense as they are read.

Because of the multiple perspectives and ambiguous nature of these meta-fictive texts, readers must learn to entertain and tolerate ambiguity in order to sustain meaning while reading. There is simply no “main idea” to be found in the text. Readers must be active constructors of meaning and make decisions on their own as they navigate these complex texts. As teachers of older readers, we need to help readers assume this more active stance to reading, rather than dulling their reading senses in an attempt to “discover the main idea.”

Contemporary picture books, with their complex designs and meta-fictive elements set new expectations for readers. Readers are now required to generate meanings, negotiate these meanings with other readers and make conscious decisions during the reading of texts. As more complex picture books are presented to readers, readers begin to view reading as an exploration, an investigative search for meaning. Margaret Meek stated that texts teach readers how they are to be read. As the texts readers read become more complex, they require more sophisticated strategies and comprehension skills to be successful readers.

As readers leave elementary school and enter middle and high school, reading as a separate subject gives way to English classes and the reading of classic and traditional texts. Students no longer learn to read, they are required to read and study the texts of Shakespeare, Steinbeck, Twain and Salinger. These texts may be challenging for even proficient adult readers. Using picture books that contain the same themes, settings, literary elements and writing techniques, along with these classic novels and plays, can help readers make sense of these challenging texts. For example, reading picture books about the holocaust can provide the background knowledge and experiences that will support the reading of the Diary of Anne Frank.

Because of the short format of the picture book, multiple texts can be read in association with a particular novel to provide information and perspectives for readers unfamiliar with the novel or the subject matter contained in the text.

Picture books are just for young kids anymore! Teachers need to get over their biases about this literary format and begin to explore the abundance of quality texts that are available as picture books. The complexity and sophisticated nature of these texts will be rewarding for themselves and their readers alike. I have yet to meet a group of older readers that have not enjoyed reading picture books. Once they understand that these aren't "baby" books, they will enjoy reading these texts for years to come.