Teachers Find Many Reasons to Use Picture Books with Middle and High School Students

By Linda Jacobson on September 9, 2015

At a time when the conversation about literature has been focusing on students reading increasingly complex texts, Amy Krouse Rosenthal’s picture book called *Duck! Rabbit* (Chronicle, 2009) might seem a bit out of place in a high school English class.

But Brianna Crowley, who teaches at Hershey (PA) High School, sees how she can use the book to teach students about why it’s important to understand point of view in a story.

“To me, it’s an easy access point,” says Crowley, who has dedicated a shelf in her classroom to a variety of picture books that might be more common in a kindergarten reading nook. “To them, it’s going to feel so accessible, but as a professional I’m going to know how to question to help them go deeper.”

Picture books, according to some English language arts (ELA) experts, provide excellent opportunities to teach higher-level skills while still providing an engaging experience for older students who might think they don’t like to read. In fact, many picture books are quite complex, says Mary Jo Fresch, a professor emeritus at Ohio State University and co-author of *The Power of Picture Books: Using Content Area Literature in Middle School* (National Council of Teachers of English, 2009).

“Not everything is in the pictures and not everything is in the words,” Fresch says. “It takes some real critical thinking to use a picture book.”

**SUPPORT FOR ENGLISH LEARNERS**

Picture books can draw in readers of all levels, including English language learners (ELL), in a way that text-only books cannot, Fresch adds. In a post for Colorín Colorado, Judith B. Loughlin, an education consultant who taught ELL students in New Jersey, writes about how picture books help older ELL students meet the ELA anchor standards in the Common Core. But she adds that teachers should look for high-quality materials that are “free from stereotypes,” use appropriate academic vocabulary, use pictures and language to explain abstract concepts and build background knowledge.

Crowley says she came around to incorporating picture books into her curriculum for a few reasons. First, she found that her students—no matter how resistant they might seem toward reading—are always engaged when she reads aloud.
“If you’re fluent at reading and you love it, and you’re able to convey that in a read-aloud, I’ve never seen a student react poorly to that,” she says.

Then she began to read what other teachers were saying about how they use picture books with older students. One of those teachers is Paul Hankins, who teaches Advanced Placement (AP) English language and composition to 11th graders at Silver Creek High School in Sellersburg, IN, and has been using picture books as part of his instruction for many years.

To teach rhetorical situation, he introduced Jim Averbeck’s and Yasmeen Ismail’s One Word from Sophia (S. & S., 2015), a picture book about a girl whose birthday request for a giraffe is labeled by her family members as verbose, “effusive,” and “loquacious.”

“AP students are not only getting a lesson in rhetorical situation, they are also getting a quick lesson in Tier I and Tier II words that all mean ‘wordy,’” Hankins says. “I would submit that the student who can analyze a picture book like the Sophia book and make a connection back to the bigger lesson we are considering is beginning to demonstrate those skills we want to see upon an AP exam. And certainly upon the SAT/ACT many of these students will take.”

**COMPANIONS TO CLASSICS**

Several of the picture books he reads with his students are companions to the grade-level texts they are studying. Mac Barnett and Jon Klassen’s Sam & Dave Dig a Hole (Candlewick, 2014)—a story of “starts and stops and missed opportunities,” Hankins says—pairs well with John Steinbeck’s Of Mice and Men. Another example is Yansook Choi’s The Name Jar (Dragonfly Bks, 2003), which he reads with his students before they start on Arthur Miller’s The Crucible because it communicates the importance of one’s name.

Pernille Ripp, a seventh-grade teacher at Oregon (WI) Middle School, uses picture books for close reading activities and class discussions about how people can interpret information differently. The books are also a great source of more challenging words for her students.

“They’re not afraid of harder vocabulary when it’s in a picture book,” she says.

But teachers say there are other important reasons—beyond the curricular connections—to give older students access to picture books.

“There was something about the feeling that happened in my classroom when I pulled out a picture book,” Ripp says about her gradual shift in this direction. Students have also responded by reading more outside of school, she says.

**‘A COMMUNITY OF READERS’**

Crowley says she hopes to help her students understand that books have a way of creating a “community of readers,” who feel a connection to certain books, even as adults. Her principal and curriculum director even donated their favorites to her classroom and wrote about why those books
are still special to them.

Hankins adds that some of the books he reads are simply just for fun. He wrote in his blog that “books should be the treat and not the threat.”

One challenge, Hankins says, is that many older students have limited access to picture books and might only see what’s on the shelves in large stores like Target or Walmart.

“A big part of this is title awareness and knowing how a picture book might connect to the bigger picture we want students to get,” he says. “Picture books are the first format we abandon as early readers moving into chapter books for a variety of reasons, the most tragic reason of all being that someone would tell us that picture books are inappropriate for us to be reading at some point in our lives.”

About Linda Jacobson

SLJ contributor Linda Jacobson is an education writer and editor based in the Los Angeles area.

Filed Under: Books & Media, Classroom & Curricula, Teens & YA

Tagged With: (FPO), ELA, ELL, high school, middle school, Paul Hankins, Pernille Ripp, Picture Books, SLJTeen

Day of Dialog | Brooklyn

Coinciding with Brooklyn Book Festival, this special-engagement event on September 15 will feature both Festival and metropolitan-area authors with panels modeled on Library Journal and School Library Journal’s long-running and annually sold-out Day of Dialog events. Get the inside scoop on the hottest new books—plus book giveaways and author signings!

LEARN MORE

Resistance: Children’s Books in Troubled Times

Join the Horn Book in Boston, MA on October 7th to celebrate the 2017 Boston Globe-Horn Book Award winners and honor books with the annual Horn Book at Simmons Colloquium. The day includes talks, panel discussions, and small-group sessions which will examine critical issues relevant to children’s and young adult literature. Plus, registration includes admittance to the awards ceremony on Friday, October 6th!

LEARN MORE

Comments

SLJ BLOG NETWORK

NeverEndingSearch

Google launches Applied Digital Skills

By Joyce Valenza on August 26, 2017

100 Scope Notes

One Star Review Guess Who? (#58)

By Travis Jonker on August 26, 2017

Teen Librarian Toolbox

Friday Finds: August 25, 2017

By Robin Willis on August 25, 2017

Good Comics for Kids

Review: The Wendy Project

By Esther Keller on August 24, 2017

Teen Librarian Toolbox

New and forthcoming YA and MG to have on your radar

By Amanda MacGregor on August 24, 2017

100 Scope Notes

Exclusive Cover Reveal: Hi Jack!

By Mac Barnett and Greg Pizzoli

By Travis Jonker on August 24, 2017

A Fuse #8 Production
One of my favorite teachers has used “Alexander and the Terrible Horrible No Good Very Bad Day” to teach conflict resolution to college students, and that is not a lesson you forget! Great picture books have a wisdom and simplicity which is like poetry – definitely an undervalued resource!

This is a great article! As the author of many books for educators, I always advocate for the use of picture books as they are becoming increasingly sophisticated and complex. Take a look at my article on the subject in Heinemann’s Catalog Journal (2015-2016), The New picture Book: For All Ages. Several first-rate teachers contributed great ideas about how they use picture books in secondary classrooms.

Picture books can also be used as a way to discuss difficult issues with older students… Social justice issues, power struggles, gender issues, etc. The use of children's picture books can open up the floor for reflections on topics that older students may usually find difficult to talk about. I'm currently drafting a proposal for my thesis on the effects of using children's picture books as a means to infuse an early childhood ELL class with critical literacy and I plan on using "Click clack moo", "The true story of the three little pigs", "Ugly vegetables", "Voices in the park", and "Seven blind mice". Picture books have so much to offer learners throughout every stage of their lives, it’s a shame we tend to keep them on the shelves of elementary classrooms only!

Here in Australia it is normal to use picture books in high school. In fact, quite a number of these books aren't even written for small children.

I have done a presentation at several teacher/librarian conferences on just this topic: You're Never Too Old for Picture Books. I asked the participants to bring a favorite book to share, read aloud some that I thought were useful in many subject areas, and handed out annotated lists broken down by subject. I had standing room only twice! My favorite group was during a STEM conference, where one college professor who attended my presentation told us how she read a picture book aloud at the beginning of each of her early morning classes, and how her students (after the first day or two) were seldom late, since they did not want to miss the story! The really fun part was, they were not early childhood or education students, but were college-level science students who *still* wanted to hear the stories!

It's exciting to read this article because, in my experience, there's little more satisfying than having a good story read to you. Many picture books today are complex, multi-leveled, and treat important topics with wisdom and humor. Many students may not have grown up with someone
reading picture books to them. What a joy to know that they will not miss out on this experience if they land in a class with one of these teachers.

DaNel Hogan says:
September 16, 2015 at 4:51 pm

Here at The STEMAZing Project, we promote picture books for use to teach about STEM concepts. We have a series of STEMAZing Picture Book Activity Cards which can be found on our website http://www.STEMAzing.org/picture-books
Each activity card highlights an activity that can be done which is related to a theme within the STEMAZing Picture Book. Use “Those Darn Squirrels” to teach the engineering design process. Use “Rosie Revere, Engineer” to talk about the importance of failure and make connections to WWII history. And on and on! We love them!

Wendy says:
September 21, 2015 at 6:00 am

I make kamishibai which are a large picture books using a Japanese story telling format. I met a secondary teacher recently who bought one of my stories. She said they would be perfect for secondary age students. I have to say I was rather surprised by what she said, but she said something very similar to the points mentioned in this article. Each kamishibai also comes with a planning ideas pack which is aimed at EYFS/Curriculum of Excellence outcomes but I would expect some of these could be easily adapted for older students. Our story can also be easily used by teachers who use makaton or BSL as we can also provide a frame. For more info please come and take a look at our website: http://www.thesidlawhare.co.uk

Roseann Oden says:
September 22, 2015 at 4:50 pm

I love this article! I have seen several picture books that perfectly illustrate in concrete terms that abstract concept the teacher is trying to get across.

Amy says:
September 28, 2015 at 11:13 pm

I've used “The Man Who Walked Between the Towers” for years, with middle school and high school in September. Our middle school students were not born in 2001 and it is tough topic for teachers to start to address. All most of the students know is that the twin towers were attacked. The book is a really nice introduction to what landmarks the towers were in New York and really gives students some background knowledge going into lessons on 9/11.
Beyond Reading Levels: Choosing Nonfiction for Developing Readers

Four Surefire Techniques for Engaging English Language Learners

Best-selling author Daniel José Older talks to SLJ's Shelley Diaz about his Shadowshaper sequel, must-have diverse fantasy, and more. Watch the full interview at http://SLJ.com/TV...Powered by KidLit TV