The Power of Reading Picture Books Aloud to Secondary Students

CYNDI GIORGIS

A group of high school students sits impatiently, waiting for the teacher to begin the story. As the picture book is read aloud, the students lean forward in their seats, and all eyes are focused on the colorful and detailed illustrations. The text is brief, and the entire thirty-two page book is read in less than fifteen minutes. It is obvious from the thoughtful silence and audible sighs that the students have responded to the story. The students, now eager to discuss their connections to the book and to examine the artistic style and technique used by the book’s illustrator, have just been introduced to December, an engaging story about a homeless boy and his mother who encounter an “angel,” written by Eve Bunting and beautifully illustrated by David Diaz. Such read-aloud experiences occur frequently in this high school English class, and the students have come to view them as valuable aspects of the course. Reading picture books aloud to students illustrates the point that good literature, no matter in what format, can be enjoyed by individuals of all ages.

**What Is a Picture Book?**

The term picture book refers to the format that the author and illustrator have chosen in which to tell a story and is generally not indicative of reading ability or interest level. A picture book uses both text and illustration to create meaning; one is not as powerful alone as it is with the other. That is why it is imperative during read-alouds that the teacher hold the book so that students can see the illustrations.

The text in some picture books may be simplistic and not appropriate for an adolescent audience, but depending on the purpose for reading the book, most picture books can and should be shared in secondary classrooms. There are many picture books being published today that are actually intended for an older reader. One such book, *Just One Flick* of a Finger, by Marybeth Lorbiecki, is written in teenage vernacular and deals with guns, an issue that is becoming more common on middle and high school campuses. Sometimes, the sophisticated humor found in a picture book is lost on a young child, as in Diane Stanley’s *Rumpelstiltskin’s Daughter*, a wickedly funny tale that informs readers that the young girl in the original story actually married Rumpelstiltskin, not the king. Years later, however, their daughter faces the same fate of having to spin straw into gold. This retelling contains various nuances in both text and illustration that are heartily appreciated by older students.

The illustrations in recent picture books contain some of the most exquisite and exceptional artwork being created today. Illustrations by picture book artists such as David Diaz appeal to adolescents because of their detail and subtleties. As our society becomes more visually oriented, it is good to know that secondary students can gain additional knowledge of artistic style and technique through the reading and viewing of picture books.

**Value of Reading Picture Books Aloud**

Few secondary students remember having seen a picture book since entering middle or high school, much less having had one read aloud to them. A recent study of secondary teachers (Duchesin and Mealey 1993) indicated that more than two-thirds of those interviewed were read to prior to beginning school and more than half were read to by primary teachers, but the practice had ceased for most by third grade. Teachers who did read aloud during grades four to six and into middle and high school, however, made significant, positive, and long-lasting impressions on their students. As a seventh grader whom I worked with said, “It felt odd at first because I haven’t had a teacher read a picture book to me in a long time. Most people think that we are too old for picture books, but it’s interesting to listen to them.” The perception is that picture books have either no value at the secondary level or that reading such books aloud should be reserved for children still in the early stages of their literacy development.

---

Cyndi Giorgis is an assistant professor at the University of Nevada—Las Vegas.
Research studies over the years have also supported the positive correlation between a student's being read to and his or her own ability as a reader and writer. Unfortunately, many teachers believe that once students begin reading independently, the process of reading aloud to them should end. One secondary teacher in a college literature class recently asked, “Why should I read to my students when they can read for themselves?” Again, studies show that older students who have experienced reading aloud realize “the power of the spoken word and the bond that develops between speaker/oral reader and audience” (Meyerg 1993, 186).

When secondary teachers read picture books aloud, it is important that they read the entire book rather than a few pages or brief excerpt. Students gain numerous perspectives through text and illustration that they would not if one or two pages were taken out of context. A case in point is The True Story of the Three Little Pigs by Jon Scieszka and Lane Smith. This story is told from the wolf’s point of view (allowing the teacher to elucidate the literary element of point of view) and is effective with older students because they are familiar with the traditional story of “The Three Little Pigs” and they connect to the sophisticated humor in the story and illustrations. Reading the whole book conveys to students that the teacher values literature in its entirety.

How to Select Picture Books

Reading aloud to students should occur in all secondary classrooms, not just language arts classes. A number of recently published picture books deal with issues and concerns of today’s middle and high school students. These books can be integrated successfully into social studies, language arts, math, science, music, and art (see figure 1). Picture books have been published that focus on historical issues such as the Holocaust, Japanese internment, slavery, Westward expansion, and the Lowell (Massachusetts) mills. In addition, many excellent picture book biographies highlight scientists, explorers, artists, and musicians from the past and present. Teachers searching for books to support the discussion of societial issues such as drugs, homelessness, and suicide will find picture books that present these difficult topics in an powerful format that is meaningful and accessible to all students.

When selecting a picture book to read aloud, the teacher should be clear about his or her intended purpose. Books with an interesting story and appealing illustrations are key to the success of the read-aloud. Recommendations from other teachers and librarians are a good place to begin to locate picture books, although what may have worked well in one classroom or the library does not necessarily work with another group of students. Knowing the students and what may appeal to them is critical. Teachers should also select a book that they themselves enjoyed because their enthusiasm for the story will become evident once they begin reading it aloud. Finally, teachers should never assume that the meaning derived from a picture book is bound to be simplistic. Some powerful discussions in secondary classrooms can evolve from the reading of a picture book.

Strategies for Reading Aloud

Teachers at the secondary level will often read aloud poetry, short stories, or brief passages from novels. Yet, many times when a secondary teacher brings a picture book to the classroom, he or she apologizes to the students and tries to explain the reasons for bringing a book for “little kids” to the class. Students immediately perceive that they are going to be “read down to” and often are put off.
by the experience. If students reject picture books in their classroom, the question should be raised as to how the book was introduced. If the picture book is explained as an inferior text, then students will develop a negative mindset before the reading occurs, and the experience is doomed to failure.

Also, it is critical that a teacher actually use the term picture book. Recently, during a workshop on literature, a middle school teacher stated that she preferred to call them "short stories" rather than picture books so that her students didn’t reject them. However, a knowledgeable teacher who has read, and seen the potential for reading, picture books aloud should not pretend that the books are anything but picture books. By explaining to students how text and illustrations work in concert to create meaning, teachers will help students come to accept picture books as commonplace in the classroom.

When students see themselves and their life experiences in the books that are read aloud to them—such as the sibling rivalry found in Patricia Polacco’s My Rotten Red Headed Older Brother—the reading experience becomes much more meaningful. Picture books may cause students to reflect on values, both materialistic and altruistic, by discussing a book such as The Table Where Rich People Sit by Byrd Baylor. In that story, the protagonist initially bemoans the fact that her parents make very little money. She comes to realize, however, that true wealth has nothing to do with money. At times, reading a powerful picture book to secondary students may push them in their thinking because many of these books deal with complex issues.

When the picture book presents a historical perspective, it is critical that the teacher provide a context for the reading. The power of reading aloud Richard Wright and the Library Card by W. Miller, a story focusing on an incident taken from Wright’s novel Black Boy about his inability as a black man in the South to check out books from the public library during the 1920s, will be lost if students are not provided with the historical context in which to place the story. The same is also true of Sarah Stewart’s The Gardener, set during the Depression and written in a letter format telling of a young girl’s attempts to create a garden that will cheer up her seemingly crabby uncle. Once students have an understanding of the time period, they will be able to derive meaning from the text and illustrations.

An important reason for reading a picture book aloud is that the story can be shared in one class setting, an ideal situation in secondary schools, where class periods are often brief and reading and response to picture books is possible within a single period. Of course, the book can be reread time and again, but the impact will be lost if the story is carried out over several days.

Conclusion

Reading aloud to middle and high school students demonstrates a teacher’s enthusiasm for reading, an attitude that can be contagious (Richardson 1994). Hearing a good story read aloud often piques the interest of the most reluctant reader, who will then become an active listener and, possibly, a more willing reader. As one high school student said, “My outlook on picture books is that I feel it is important to keep these books throughout our school years. Although these books are thought to be only for elementary students, they are a nice way to inspire another story or use as a tool to help you open your creative doors. With all the stress and homework of high school, it’s nice to have someone read you a story.”

REFERENCES