**Picture Books: An essential link in creating a reading culture**

**The case for Picture Books**

Cathy Kreutter

I write picture books.

And I get all kinds of comments here in Uganda: from “Wow look at these illustrations!” to “amazing quality, these were published HERE?”

Comments are generally positive, but other comments that I have received include, “Isn’t writing for babies just a waste of time and resources?” or “Why don’t you have more words in your books, I want my kids to READ.”

The above two comments are what I want to address in this paper because my *passion* *is* picture books and giving children, before they can actually read, an experience of books and pre-literacy skills. Picture books are an essential link in creating a reading culture. And picture books do not get the respect they deserve in the literary world.

Inherent or imbedded in these comments is the belief or attitude that children cannot learn before the age of five. That kids are just to be babysat. It hits square on the cultural belief of a child’s value or contribution at an early age: are children really worth talking to or listening to?

And another scenario- A school I am working with here in Uganda has implemented a phonics program and has put the wonderful P2 teacher—whom I will call Mr. Sam—in charge, in addition to helping with P7 English. There was almost a civil war in the school, with the teachers themselves telling Sam that he was being “wasted” in P2. It was so much more prestigious being in P7. BUT do you know why Sam was in P2? Because he IS the best teacher. In baby class P1, and P2 we have some of the bravest teachers and yet they are looked down upon by the rest of the school. They are the lowest paid and required qualifications are the lowest for these positions. Yet baby class, (nursery) P1, P2 are all about numeracy and literacy, and these 2 things are the bedrock of the rest of a student’s academic career. The rest of their schooling depends on a strong P1, P2 class.

I stumbled upon this secret as an employer. For 25 years I was a Head Librarian, and I looked at many job applications and interviewed dozens of applicants. The letter of introduction and the passing of our employability activities were very revealing, and I soon recognized a common thread. The applicants from schools that had a strong literacy component in P1 and P2 were the best candidates as adults—their literacy abilities followed them throughout their school career.

I will address this later, but my strong opinion is that we need to flip our school system here and put our *best* teachers in P1 and P2, and we need togive them picture books that support early literacy. So we need more culturally appropriate picture books to read aloud to our students in these classes.

Let me address the first question about books: Why *picture* books?

**1. Definition of the picture book**

Alice *from Alice in Wonderland* wonders “….and what is the use of a book without pictures or conversation?”

Picture books are most often aimed at young children, and while some may have very basic language especially designed to help children develop their reading skills, most are written with vocabulary a child can understand but not necessarily read. Picture books are not necessarily easy books. In a picture book, text alone will not carry the story — the author and the illustrator jointly share the responsibility for the book to ”work”. In a successful picture book, text and illustration work together to make an interactive whole that is greater than the sum of its parts.

The organizers of the Caldecott award, which is is for the best picture book of the year published in the USA., explain the difference between a picture book and a book with illustrations in this way:

* A “picture book for children” as distinguished from other books with illustrations, is one that essentially provides the child with a visual experience. A picture book has a collective unity of storyline, theme, or concept, which is developed through the series of pictures of which the book is comprised.
* A “picture book for children” is one for which children are an intended potential audience. The book displays respect for children’s understandings, abilities, and appreciations. Children are defined as persons of ages up to and including fourteen and picture books for this entire age range are to be considered.

Chi-Fen Emily Chen of Taiwan gives this answer to the question “What are picture books?”:

Picture books are profusely illustrated books in which both words and illustrations contribute to the story's meaning. Illustrations in picture books are integral to the story, providing actual plot or concept information as well as clues to character traits, settings, and moods.

Picture books are written in all genres. They have illustrations on every page or at least every other page. As a general rule, picture books are 32 pages long and usually have about 500 words. Books with occasional illustrations that serve to break up or decorate the text or add interest are not picture books; they are called illustrated books. Illustrations in these books are incidental or nonessential to the content.

Elizabeth Kennedy (2019) tells us that the general purpose of a picture book is to express ideas, characters, stories and themes through a merging of text and image. The images are used to create worlds, characters and meanings beyond the text alone. Traditionally, it was common to view picture books as reading tools for younger children. When you combine words with illustrations, whether it's a drawing or an actual picture, the reader can gain a better understanding of the topic. . Regardless of whether you are a young child or an adult, illustrations have the ability to make a book more fun and easier to read, and help hold the reader's attention. For this reason, picture books tend to have two functions in the lives of children: they are first read to young children by adults, and then children read them themselves once they begin learning to read

**A child’s brain: lets look briefly at brain research and how a child develops**

All of us professionals know that a child learns language- any language- by hearing it, practicing it, seeing it. But let’s look briefly at actual brain research.

Research by Jill Stamm (2008) tells us that at birth a child’s brain can have 100 billion brain cells, but only a small number of these cells—the ones for vision and hearing—are connected. The brain is only about a quarter of its adult size. By the child’s second birthday the brain has achieved 75% of its adult weight and volume, and by age five, it has reached 90%. Researcher David Souza (2011) states that brain connections, called synapses, are established when a child has repeated sensory experiences- .i. e.: seeing, hearing, tasting, touching, smelling—and associates them with particular responses, for example, words. The complex synaptic activity is often referred to as the “wiring of the brain”. Synapses have the potential to grow rapidly during the early years. In fact, these early years are described as “windows of opportunity” because of the large number of brain connections that can be made. Young children can learn a wide range of skills with relative ease and speed.

he first three years of a child’s brain are the most important, although the brain will continue to form connections easily up through puberty. From birth to three children learn motor development and emotional control; their vision develops, social attachments are made, and vocabulary is established.

Children do not need fancy programs to thrive. Again, according to Stamm (2008), they need the ABC’s. Attention, Bonding and Communication. Marilee Springer and the McCormick Foundation give us 10 ways to boost a baby’s brain power:

* Interaction with others
* Loving touch, including plenty of hugs
* Stable, reliable relationships
* Safe, healthy environments
* Positive feedback and appropriate challenges that build self esteem
* Good childcare
* Communication- talking and listening
* Play
* Music
* Daily reading to the child to visually challenge the brain

Notice the last one – daily reading to the child. Even if the family does not have books, at least in school, children should be read to daily.

Children need to be read to daily and to have sensory experiences. Interacting with a book is a great combination of the two.

**Why kids need picture books—they learn a language by hearing, speaking (practicing) and seeing.**

The first thing a child learns to “read’”is a picture.

Let’s start with the fact that before kids can read, they enjoy looking at pictures to decode the meaning of words as they listen to a story. Think about the unique contribution that illustrations make to highlight, clarify and reinforce a story. As a child listens to a parent, an older sibling, or a teacher read a story, they can scan the illustrations to understand the action and to gain a better sense of the plotline.

Pratt Library (2019) gives a very good explanation of how reading loud to children specifically aids literacy:

* The experience of reading with a child creates a bond, hones a child's social skills and demonstrates the value the adult places on stories and reading. Research shows that children should be involved in the process of reading a book.  Allow the child to talk about things in the book by asking her questions and helping her to describe what she sees, in a non-academic way.
* Reading with a child develops a number of the crucial building blocks of literacy:
* Phonological awareness—the ability to hear anduse the smaller sounds in words (Phonics)
* Vocabulary - Knowing the names of things
* Print awareness—Knowing how to handle a book, follow text on a page and notice the words around them.
* Narrative skills—The ability to tell their own stories.
* Letter knowledge—Knowing the difference between the letters by their shape, name and sounds.

Ebsco, a respected multi media information company, lists the following as benefits to reading picture books early in childhood.

* *Building Language Skills*– When reading through picture books during story time, at home or in the classroom, children can practice sounding out the language while adults introduce and explain new and interesting words. The rhythm and rhyme of picture books makes them easy to understand and fun to read aloud, allowing children to learn words quickly. In addition, repeatedly ,reading the same story [increases vocabulary by 12%.](http://gravitybread.com/books-and-mealtime/read-it-again-why-repeated-book-readings-can-help-your-child/)
* *Inspiring Visual Thinking*- Illustrations in a picture book help children understand what they are reading, allowing new readers to analyze the story. If children are having difficulty with the words, the illustrations can help them figure out the narrative, which can increase their comprehension.
* *Increasing engagement*—Picture books allow teachers and parents to spend time discussing the story, pictures and words. This gives young readers confidence and allows them to talk in a nonacademic way about what they see on the page, what happened in the story, what the characters are doing and which events have unfolded.
* *Delivering Interest*—Picture books should always make the reading experience fun. If a child’s first experience with reading is a negative one, and it is looked at as a chore, reading appears to be work rather than fun, which might hinder a child’s progress from picture books to books with more linguistic content.

(Ebsco, 2017)

**What are the other benefits of picture books?**

Jessica Sanders in her 2014 article lists the following as the importance of picture books to learning:

*Language*

Though most picture books only have about 500 words, they’re effective tools for teaching language. “Picture book writers must distill language to its very essence. This is why the text in the picture book is often rich, evocative and engaging. Hearing this type of language will enrich a child’s own language development,” says [Terry Pierce](http://terrypierce.blogspot.com/2010/10/five-reasons-why-children-need-picture.html), a children’s book author .

*Questions, Inquiry, Curiosity*

Without words, your students must decide for themselves what’s happening in the book, which leads to questions: *What do you think? What does my friend think? Is the character happy or sad?* This is especially true for books with abstract images that are harder to decipher or understand.

*Self-awareness*

Picture books help children develop a sense of self. “Long before they can read, children respond to images in an effort to place themselves and the others in their lives into the world around them,” according to [*Reading is Fundamental*](http://www.rif.org/us/literacy-resources/articles/getting-the-most-out-of-picture-books.htm), This makes picture books critical for academic learning and mental development.

*Participation, imagination, engagement*

Without words, picture books beg for reader participation; they require that students use their imagination to determine what’s happening on the page. The theatrical aspect of picture books helps to keep all your students engaged and interested—everyone wants to act out or tell their version of what’s happening. Stories that have actions to go with repetitive phrases are ideal to draw a student in. Use this as an opportunity to weave in a lesson that you think may be especially difficult to teach while they’re sitting at their desks.

**Conclusion**

When our students in Uganda start nursery school their brains are at the height of their synapses’ developing connections. They are ready to learn, and learning using as many senses as possible is key. They may also be starting school in English, a language new to them. They need to be read aloud to in an interactive way so that they get comfortable with English. For example, The *Rock and Roll Rolex* has repetitive phases, a drum beat, predictable action. After hearing the story 10 times, they can retell it on their own and have fun with it.

This is why it is so important to support the lower primary school teachers. They have to give their students the best environment to keep learning progressing. They are setting up literacy and numeracy for the rest of a child’s school career. I have also heard many times from P4 and 5 teachers: “I want to teach the curriculum but my students can’t read- they can not make sense of notes” We need to appreciate every single P1 and 2 teacher here and encourage them with the tools they need for literacy development: quality picture books in the local context.

Australian writer Mem Fox (2008) states that literacy experts suggest that children who know eight nursery rhymes by heart by age four will be among the best readers by the time they are eight. This is especially important to children who come into our schools not knowing English- they need to feel comfortable with English:

* Spend at least ten wildly happy minutes every single day reading aloud. From birth and in the classroom!
* Read at least three stories a day: it may be the same story three times. Children need to hear a thousand stories before they can begin to learn to read. Or the same story a thousand times!
* Read aloud with animation. Listen to your own voice and don’t be dull, or flat, or boring. Hang loose and be loud, have fun and laugh a lot. There is no right or wrong way.
* Read with joy and enjoyment: real enjoyment for yourself and great joy for the listeners.
* Read the stories that your students love, over and over, and over again, and always read in the same “tune” for each book: i.e. with the same intonation, volume, and speed, on each page, each time.
* Let children hear lots of language by talking to them constantly about the pictures, or anything else connected to the book; or sing any old song that you can remember; or say nursery rhymes in a bouncy way; or be noisy together doing clapping games.
* Look for rhyme, rhythm or repetition in books for young children, and make sure the books are really short. Adapt a book to your own class.
* Play games with the things that you and the child can see on the page, such as letting kids finish rhymes, and finding the letters that start the child’s name and yours, remembering that it’s never work, it’s always a fabulous game.
* Never ever teach reading with a stick, or get tense around books.
* Please read aloud every day because you enjoy being with your students, not because it’s the right thing to do!

**I will end with an example of a Picture book read aloud:**

***The Rock and Roll Rolex* by Cathy Kreutter**

Dedication: To Toto and Kent, who did not like to read until he read *Mzee* and asked me to write another funny book.

Ochan the Rolex Man was at his stand early preparing for his daily customers.

“Rolex! Egg, cabbage, onion, tomato topped with chapatti-rolled up nice and neat,

fast food ready for you to eat!”

Kato was driving his lorry full of rocks down the hill. He had been at work three hours already and was hungry for breakfast!

Kato stopped at Ochan’s Rolex stand and one of his rocks wiggled and wobbled….

…and fell off the side of the truck and hit the edge of the rolex pan. The pan flipped up and hit Ochan’s outstretched hand….

…sending that freshly made and wrapped Rolex up high into the sky and clean out of sight.

Rat was rubbing sleep from his eyes when a paper bag landed in front of him,

Rat wiggled his nose, twitched his whiskers and sniffed a nice fresh rolex. What luck!

But the rolex began rolling down the hill. Mr Rat ran after his breakfast from heaven, which was the rolex that flew from Ochan the Rolex Man’s hand.

And it rolled, and rolled, and rolled…

Cat was stretching his back when he saw Rat run by chasing a bag.

Cat grew very curious so began to chase after Rat who chased the Rolex that rolled down the hill.

The rolex that flew from Ochan the Rolex Man’s hand.

And it rolled, and rolled, and rolled…

Dog came around a corner when he saw Cat run past and he thought this looked fun,

So Dog chased Cat, Cat chased Rat, Rat chased the Rolex that rolled down the hill.

The rolex that flew from Ochan the Rolex Man’s hand.

And it rolled, and rolled, and rolled…

The little boy woke up wondering where his dog had gone and saw the tail flash past, so …

the boy ran after the dog, who chased the cat, who chased the rat who chased the rolex as it rolled down the hill.

The rolex that flew from Ochan the Rolex Man’s hand.

And it rolled, and rolled, and rolled…

STOP! The Mother yelled at the boy to stop! Then…

…the Mother chased the boy, the boy ran after the dog, who chased the cat, who chased the rat, who chased the rolex as it rolled down the hill.

The rolex that flew from Ochan the Rolex Man’s hand.

And it rolled, and rolled, and rolled…

The rolex that flew from Ochan the Rolex Man’s hand rolled and rolled.

And at the bottom of the hill came to the same rock and rolled up the rock, flipping through the air and…

Ochan the Rolex Man caught it!

“Well, there you are” said Ochan.

“Kato is gone but thanks for bringing customers!”

“Hey wait!” Ochan called to them.

But they all went home tired, scratching their heads and Rat was still hungry!

*Moral:*

*Think before you follow, the one in front may not know where they are going either.*

**References**

Chen, Emily, PhD. *What are Picture books?.* Lecture slide show available at

http://www2.nkfust.edu.tw/~emchen/CLit/Picturebooks.htm

EbscoHost Librarianship. Seeing is Believing - *The benefits of picture books for building reading skills.*

https://www.ebsco.com/blog/article/seeing-is-believing-the-benefits-of-picture-books-for-

building-reading-skil . 2017)

Fox, Mem. *Reading magic: Why reading aloud to our children will change their lives forever*, 2nd edition.

Mariner Books, 2008

Kennedy, Elizabeth. *What is a picture book?* https://www.thoughtco.com/what-is-a-picture-book-626980. 2019

Pratt Library. How do picture books help a child learn to read?

https://www.prattlibrary.org/research/tools/index.aspx?cat=99&id=4554. 2019

Sanders, Jessica. *The importance of picture books for learning*. http://blog.whooosreading.org/the-

importance-of-picture-books-for-learning/. 2014

Souza, David. *How the brain learns*. (4th edition). Corwin Press. 2011.

Stamm, Jill. *Bright from the Start: The simple, science backed way to nurture your child’s developing mind*

*from birth to age 3*. Gothem books, 2007.