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Exploring Challenging Picturebooks in Education. International Perspectives on Language and Literature Learning

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Searching for an Intercultural Catalyst

My PhD research investigates in-depth intercultural learning in English language education and is underpinned by a fluid notion of culture which prioritises the 'inter' in interculturality, encompassing classroom dialogue, understanding and critical reflection. This aims to help address the often uninformed focus on interculturality in ELT, as well as to challenge the ubiquitous conceptualization of culture as being 'lands and peoples' (Dypedahl, 2020) as commonly found in pedagogical materials such as ELT coursebooks, which leads to essentializing and inevitably, Othering (Bland, 2020). Given the lacuna in English language education, a potent 'catalyst', such as the incorporation of literary texts, is vital for providing learners with more complex and nuanced cultural representations (Matos & Melo-Pfeifer, 2020). And as several of the chapters in Ommundsen, Haaland and Kümmerling-Meibauer's recently published edited volume, *Exploring Challenging Picturebooks in Education* demonstrate, carefully selected and skilfully mediated picturebooks have significant intercultural potential (and are central to my PhD project). I am therefore pleased to have the opportunity to review this timely volume for *Children's Literature in English Language Education* in considering its potential not only for researchers in the intercultural domain, but also for scholars, teacher educators and practitioners exploring the affordances of challenging picturebooks in diverse educational contexts.

Picturebook scholars have long recognized high-quality picturebooks as works of art (Bader, 1976) and while *Exploring Challenging Picturebooks in Education* clearly resembles an authoritative academic text, this book also has notable aesthetic appeal. In common with other titles in the *Routledge Research in Education* series, this beautifully presented hardback consists of silk

finish pages. Also, several chapters are interspersed with picturebook covers and useful illustrative samples of learners', teachers' and in some cases, student teachers' work. Each of the fifteen stimulating chapters are written in a clear reader- and researcher-friendly style, helpfully organized as four parts appealing to readers' interests as well as ease of searchability: *Part I: Theoretical perspectives on challenging picturebooks in education; Part II: Challenging picturebooks in early childhood and primary education; Part III: Challenging picturebooks in secondary and tertiary education; Part IV: Global perspectives pertaining to challenging picturebooks in education.* Specification of the key educational stages (early childhood, primary, secondary, etc.) is particularly useful for academics when crafting literature reviews as well as for practitioners searching for background reading with the most relevance to their craft. However, beyond solely an organizational principle, it further helps to emphasize the importance of age-relevance and sensitivity regarding both selection and use of picturebooks in education. The contributors include many leading voices already well-known in the field, as well as newcomers to this growing dynamic discipline, thus widening the research focus and potentially increasing the book's reach.

The chapters reflect a number of key research areas in picturebook scholarship, including cognition (Kümmerling-Meibauer & Meibauer), aesthetic literacy (Campagnaro), the potential of school libraries (Tveit), creative writing (Sundmark & Olsson Jers) and visual literacy (Österlund). While they may appear familiar on scanning the contents page, a close read of each of these chapters reveals how they have been purposefully refracted through variations on the concept of 'challenging picturebooks' and convincingly situated in the education sphere. For example, Campagnaro explores the development of children's aesthetic literacy through picturebooks in early childhood education and Österlund positions picturebooks as ways leading into visual literacy when contemplating the deeply felt experience of children who are refugees.

Less common research areas as well as those underexplored in the academic literature make a much-needed, welcome contribution to the book. These include the challenges which may arise when exploring polemic topics such as gender diversity in primary education (Madalena & Ramos); the challenges involved in the incorporation of biblically themed picturebooks in religious education (Haaland, Karlsson, Øgreid & Ommundsen) and the power of the picturebook and accompanying story apps when challenging the status quo in support of indigenous voices (Mackey). A particularly refreshing read focuses on an area rarely seen in children's literature in education research, which is the final chapter on publishing challenging picturebooks (Little). It

demonstrates how picturebook publishing is emerging as an academic discipline in its own right, with qualifications now established at the university level, thereby complementing this ever-diversifying field.

Operationalizing 'Challenging Picturebooks'

Considering the chapters mentioned thus far, the coverage of the book is rich, and the research perspectives are undeniably varied. However, given the book's title and its aspiration to conceptualize 'challenging picturebooks', it would perhaps have been valuable for the editors to concretize the notion more explicitly using a collection of theoretical principles and/or a flexible pedagogical framework to coherently connect the varied chapters. In their introduction, Ommundsen, Haaland and Kümmerling-Meibauer discuss the multiple, complex factors influencing a potential definition of 'challenging picturebooks' noting (2022, p 9) how, 'It addresses a wide range of thematic, cognitive, and aesthetic challenges and educational affordances of picturebooks in various languages and from different countries and studied within a variety of educational settings.'

Such an all-encompassing definition is of course what adds to the richness and attractiveness of this edited volume, where the contributing authors had agency to select and define 'challenging picturebooks' in their own academically meaningful and contextually-congruent ways. Conversely, however, for other researchers of challenging picturebooks in education, the insights gained from these varied applications and conceptualizations could perhaps have been interwoven and presented in a concluding chapter, which is missing.

In common with many readers of *Children's Literature in English Language Education* journal, as someone with considerable involvement in English language education, it is encouraging to see the inclusion of chapters which explicitly illuminate challenging picturebooks in the ELT domain. This is commendable on the part of the editors as often in children's literature research, a focus on the use of literary texts in ELT specifically is at best scant or at worst, completely absent. Therefore, with this in mind, the remainder of this review will first explore the three chapters framed specifically in ELT contexts, then three more chapters will be highlighted in relation to their insights and adaptability for researchers and practitioners engaged in English language education.

Exploring Challenging Picturebooks in ELT

Starting with the pre-primary stage, Mourão's chapter is a valuable and very honest account, reflecting the numerous challenges encountered when researching wordless picturebooks in an English as a foreign language context in Portugal. Drawing on reader-response theory, she undertook the research in her role of teacher-storyteller in the pre-primary English classroom to mediate the wordless picturebook, *The Colour of People*, by Mauricio Negro. The challenges highlighted in this chapter contribute to empirically dispelling several of the prevailing myths regarding wordless picturebooks and their use in ELT. This links to the topic of an interesting parley entitled, 'Wordless Picturebooks: Dispelling Myths' between Mourão and two of her colleagues from *Picturebooks in European Primary English Language Teaching*: <https://pepelt21.com/portfolio/new-webinars>

Bland's chapter focuses on the primary level and compellingly explores the use of challenging picturebooks to enable learners to engage in deep reading for in-depth learning. She demonstrates how, by fostering a principled literary apprenticeship in primary ELT, wider educational goals can be attained which have benefits beyond the English language classroom. Bland's analysis of picturebooks which are essentially didactic shows how these present insufficient challenges for young learners of English, and in this way deliberately didactic picturebooks are similar to ELT coursebooks. In contrast, Bland further highlights that by enabling children to make connections to the characters and their multi-dimensional identities as in the example of the picturebook, *The Day the Crayons Quit* by Drew Daywalt and illustrated by Oliver Jeffers, the potential for in-depth English language learning can be maximized.

The final chapter with an ELT focus is by Heggernes, whose research focuses on secondary education and the use of a challenging picturebook for intercultural learning with teenage learners. This chapter documents how she addressed the particular challenge of incorporating the hybrid picturebook-graphic novel, *The Wall* by Peter Sís, during lessons with learners who at first in several cases considered themselves too old for picturebooks. Underpinned by theories of intercultural communicative competence in language education, Heggernes's data captures evidence of the development of cultural awareness and empathy. The use of a dialogic approach with the picturebook images especially illuminated useful insights regarding learners' perspective changes (and lack thereof in some cases) towards a more intercultural orientation.

Identifying Other Chapters with Insights for ELT

While all the chapters in *Exploring Challenging Picturebooks in Education* have certain relevance and resonance for ELT, this section focuses on three chapters which I found particularly useful. In Part 1 theoretical perspectives, Farrar, Arizpe & McAdam's chapter valuably situates challenging picturebooks within the context of literacy studies. Their conceptualization of 'challenging' makes a contribution towards operationalizing the term as: 1. *Changing forms and formats*; 2. *Changing perspectives*; 3. *Changing boundaries*, and their unpacking of the challenges inherent in these categories offers picturebook scholars in ELT (and beyond) a potential analytical framework.

Ommundsen's chapter reports on a study of explorative learning in a Norwegian primary classroom using the picturebook, *Gorm er en snillorm* by Camilla Kuhn. She shows how the effective mediation of a picturebook such as this one with a contrapuntal relationship between the visual and verbal text can act as a catalyst for creative read-alouds as well as oral and artistic responses. Such insights could be readily transferred to and adapted for ELT by selecting an English language picturebook which also has a contrapuntal design.

Finally, Madalena and Ramos's chapter convincingly demonstrates how topics which are potentially controversial (and avoided in many educational contexts) can be explored through the use of well-selected picturebooks. Their study focused on the use of challenging picturebooks to shine a light on gender diversity in the Portuguese context. Their example of children's responses to the picturebook *Julián is a Mermaid* by Jessica Love, shows how the attitudes of tolerance and respect were encouraged with effective mediation and how these are precisely the attitudes needed for supporting people who are transgender. As promoting human rights is the responsibility of all educators, including those in ELT, there are significant learning points here.

Overall, *Exploring Challenging Picturebooks in Education* offers many fresh perspectives and insightful research findings which can be used to creatively invigorate and further enhance the field of picturebooks (and other graphic narratives) in education.

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