"My Fish Died and I Flushed him Down the Toilet": Children Disrupt Pre-service Teachers' Understandings of 'Appropriate' Picturebooks for Young Children

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Abstract

Although the literature on picturebooks is extensive, very little work focuses on how they are integrated into teacher education curricula. We contend that effective use of these resources requires an understanding of the relationship between pre-service teachers' conceptions of children and picturebooks. Second year South African undergraduate pre-service teachers were asked to review 12 picturebooks of their own choosing, discuss some of these books with children and write reflections on what they learnt from the children's responses. Two hundred and thirty picturebook reviews and 62 reflections were analysed. The data show that pre-service teachers' criteria for choosing books were disrupted by children's views. We conclude by considering our own assumptions about our students and the implications for teacher education curriculum design.

Introduction

One of the expectations for early years teachers (preK-3) is that they have an extensive knowledge of children's literature and that they can choose appropriate, culturally diverse, and engaging books for young readers in their classrooms. In South Africa not all pre-service teachers (referred to throughout this article as 'students') come to university with a deep knowledge of children's literature from their own childhoods. In addition, many schools are under-resourced, so access to both children's fiction and non-fiction texts is limited. It is only recently that attention is being paid to publishing children's literature in African languages (Evans, Joubert, & Meier, 2017). Unless our students have had stories read or told to them at home, their knowledge is often limited to graded readers and sometimes big books that they encountered at school. Too many of our students enter university not considering themselves to be readers. The challenge for us as teacher educators is to find a pleasurable entry point for undergraduate students into children's literature, and to extend and consolidate their knowledge so that they are comfortable working with a wide range of literature in their classrooms.

To introduce them to children's literature we began with picturebooks. We regard picturebooks as narrative or information texts where there is an interplay (Bland, 2013) or synergy (Sipe, 1998) between the words and the pictures. According to Sipe:

> In a picturebook both the text and the illustration sequence would be incomplete without the other … the total effect depends not only on the union of the text and illustration, but also on the perceived interactions or transactions between these parts (pp. 98-99).

The two work together in harmony or through dissonance to create complex meanings that are able to engage children cognitively, emotionally and imaginatively. Picturebooks have the potential to introduce children to the pleasures of literacy – literary language, complex

characters, narratives, ideas, social issues, emotions and images. Because their purpose is not specifically to teach children to decode print, they invite a more holistic response.

The Context of the Study

The South African *Curriculum and Assessment Policy Statement* (*CAPS*) for Literacy in the Foundation Phase (K-3; DBE, 2011) positions picturebooks differently. Despite stating that picturebooks are at the heart of a balanced reading programme, the 12 references to picturebooks in *CAPS* mainly describe them as resources for independent reading that increase in length and complexity, and where pictures help readers to decode the text. This undercuts the value and pleasure of shared reading and discussion. Graded readers/reading schemes feature more prominently, with 17 references, and are seen as the primary resources for teaching children to decode print. Even with this limited view, teachers and students still need a good understanding of the range of picturebooks now available for children.

Teacher education therefore has to develop students' knowledge of and experience with picturebooks. The structure of the Wits School of Education four-year Bachelor of Education (B.Ed.) programme specialising in pre-school and the early grades makes this a challenge. Insufficient time is allocated to literacy in the B.Ed. (60 contact hours annually for three years). Children's literature is allocated only a small portion of the third-year curriculum. As a result, it does not equip students with the knowledge and skills they need.

Kerryn Dixon is responsible for teaching Literacy I in the second year of the B.Ed degree. The second-year course focuses on the development and acquisition of language in a multilingual society and the implications for teaching English to children who speak African languages. Kerryn wanted to find a way to (re)introduce students to children's literature in a pleasurable, low-stakes way, in preparation for Literacy II. So, in 2015 and 2016 she chose to do this as an independent credit task so that it was economical in relation to the institutional constraints of curriculum and staff time. The task required students to read a range of

unfamiliar picturebooks from the University library over the academic year, write a short summary of each book, consider the appropriateness of the illustrations, write down their favourite sentence, and say whether they would recommend the book or not. The reviews together with an image of the book's cover were displayed in a public space and thus shared across the school.

While the students enjoyed this task, we were concerned that their reviews often revealed naïve views about the suitability of books, about children, and about childhood. Their unmediated responses are valuable because they provide insight into students' knowledge and understanding. However, they are problematic and need to be disrupted. How we might do this provided the impetus for this research. Thinking that engagement with children might shift students' taken-for-granted assumptions, in 2017 we asked them to read aloud and discuss *with* children three or four of the books they had reviewed during their teaching practicum. Afterwards they had to produce written reflections about what they learnt from children when they took them seriously as informants (Dixon, 2013). This research thus addresses the following questions:

1. Do children's responses to picturebooks disrupt students' preconceived beliefs about children and books and in what ways?

2. What do teacher education courses need to include so that students are able to choose and use picturebooks effectively with children?

Research on Picturebooks

There is a good deal of literature on picturebooks per se, but surprisingly little on picturebooks in teacher education. The literature on picturebooks includes research on definitions and attributes (Horning, 2010; Horst & Houston-Price, 2015) and criteria for choosing picturebooks (Centre for Literacy in Primary Education, 2016). The research on post-modern picturebooks (Anstey, 2002; Pantaleo, 2004) and controversial picturebooks

(Evans, 2015) shows that attributes are unstable and can be disrupted. Synthesising the research on picturebooks, Bland (2013) provides a comprehensive description of the genre and its structured format.

The literature also examines the complexity of picturebooks in relation to levels of meaning, purpose, language and text structure (Siershynski, Louie, & Pugh, 2014). Serafini and Coles (2014) show how humorous picturebooks often contain sophisticated elements of satire, irony, and parody which require readers to think in complex ways. It is clear that complex picturebooks provide opportunities for readers to consider the lives and emotions of characters in relation to their own experiences, thus extending their understanding of people.

Much of the literature discusses how the different modes used in picturebooks contribute to the narrative and emotional appeal of stories, and how the modes interact to make meaning (Evans, 1998; Haynes & Murris, 2012; Sipe, 1998; Unsworth & Wheeler, 2002).

The literature deals with what children learn from picturebooks. The best of this work is based on classroom research. Lysaker and Tonge (2013) show how picturebooks can develop a "social imagination" and Mantei and Kervin (2014) show children connecting picturebooks to their own lives and experiences. More critical concerns deal with what children learn from what picturebooks construct as normal, from who is included or excluded, and from the representations of "sanitized ideal worlds" (MacDaniel, 2004). The more critical picturebooks embrace gender stereotyping of female characters (Evans, 1998; Hamilton, Anderson, Broaddus & Young, 2006), archetypes of masculinity (Zambo, 2007), and the relative absence of marginalised ethnic, racial, and cultural groups (Lysaker & Sedberry, 2015; Meier, 2015). There is also a body of work that shows how picturebooks support children's writing (Hager, 2015), children's vocabulary and language (Wasik & Bond, 2001), and sense of narrative and voice (Carter, 1993).

We were disappointed to find so little material on picturebooks in curricula for teacher education. What little we did find dealt with pre- and in-service teachers' decisions about what books are inappropriate for children (Wollman-Bonilla, 1998); a cross-Canada research project in which researchers used picturebooks with multiple and diverse representations of Canadians with children to explore the pedagogical possibilities of the picturebooks and to discuss cultural identities (Hammett & Bainbridge, 2009), and Carter's (1993) work on the importance of story in teacher education. What makes this investigation different from the previously published research is that we are concerned with extent to which children can disrupt students' unmediated assessments of picturebooks and of children.

Constructions of Childhood

The research on picturebooks provided lenses through which we read our students' responses to the picturebooks they chose. Although necessary, this was not sufficient because how students imagine children and childhood is central to how they decide on what books are suitable for children (Lesnik-Oberstein, 2002). The literature on childhood is extensive, but four discourses on childhood within the literature suffice for our purposes. The first discourse, emanating from the work of Jacques Rousseau, constructs children as innocent, pure and good, needing adults to protect them from life's harsh realities. The second, based on the ideas of John Locke, sees children as tabula rasa, who with guidance from adults, become rational human beings. They are always in a state of becoming and need adults to direct and control them. The third, stemming from developmental psychology, describes the developmental process, with different stages and transitions, that children have to go through in order to become rational adults. These stages are tied to physical and cognitive changes at different ages. The last discourse, emerging from the sociology of childhood, recognizes that it is a biological fact of life that children are immature (James & Proutt, 2015) but that

children in the process of 'becoming' are also 'beings'. As Uprichard (2008) wrote:

> Notions of 'being' and 'becoming' are intrinsic to childhood research. Whilst the 'being' child is seen as a social actor actively constructing 'childhood', the 'becoming' child is seen as an 'adult in the making', lacking competencies of the 'adult' that he or she will 'become' (Abstract).

The construction of children as becoming are future oriented and ignores who children currently are as well as the importance of their everyday realities. A focus on children as only being in the present denies them agency in relation to the possibilities of what they might become. It is in the nature of time that everything and everyone is simultaneously both being and becoming and Uprichard (2008) argues that we need to have both perspectives in our understandings of children.

Despite the differences of setting and place and the constructions of the child and childhood in African contexts, the normalised use of Eurocentric children's literature in schools is only now beginning to change. Children in Africa still have to contend with books in school that render them invisible and are marked by absences of African culture and lived experience. The overt and implicit messages contained in these books are often cultural impositions which require a decolonising gaze.

Research and Data Analysis

The data set consists of 230 credit task picturebook reviews completed over a semester and 62 reflective essays produced as a take-home examination. The review task required students to select 12 picturebooks that they had not read before. The point was for them to have complete freedom of choice and consider the appropriateness of the picturebook for South African children in general. The 230 reviews, which include 226 different titles, are of the three or four books they chose to read and discuss with children in class during their teaching practicum. For this article we are less concerned with the actual books, which varied

in quality, date of publication, seriousness, content and style, and more with students' assessments of the books. We were, however, disappointed that students chose so few South African, African language, non-conventional, and multicultural picturebooks. The 62 reflective essays were written after using the books during their practicum. We required them to reflect on their reviews based the responses of the children they taught.

Students in Kerryn's second-year Literacy I class were invited to participate in this research. 62 of the 75 consented to do so and ethics clearance was obtained for using their work. These students are diverse. We have data on some of their social affiliations (i.e. race, gender, language, age); we do not have data on others (i.e. sexuality, class, religion, ethnicity, nationality). While these differences undoubtedly contribute to the views expressed in their reviews and to what they are capable of learning from the diverse children they teach, the effects of the complex interplay of these affiliations is beyond the scope of this study. Our work with these students suggests that very few have up-to-date knowledge of picturebooks or a deep understanding of their value in early childhood pedagogy, despite their differences. Although many studies in literacy tend to foreground race, class, and gender, we have no reason to believe that these affiliations are more significant than others in relation to what students can learn from children. We have therefore chosen not to use students' social affiliations as analytic categories. We are also cognisant of the way in which educational research often produces results that contribute to deficit constructions of African children, teachers, and families, which is deeply problematic particularly in the South African context.

The children referred to in this study are equally diverse, as is typical of the demographic of schools in Johannesburg. They are the children our students worked with during their practicum. Our analysis is based on what the students reported in their reflections and no reflections include references to children's race. By way of contrast there are references to children's gender and language(s).

The data was combed to find:

1. The reasons students give for choosing the books they discussed with children. The unmediated responses in their picturebook reviews provide a baseline against which to establish changes in their thinking.

2. Changes in students' understandings of picturebooks.

3. Changes in students' conceptions of children after reading and discussing books with them.

Each students' data set was given a code, containing a letter and a number. The letter refers to the coder and a number given by the coder. Each of the chosen books, including author and title was recorded along with the reasons given. The unmediated reviews were subjected to a content analysis from which key themes were generated and subsequently organised into five categories. Then we analysed the reflective essays concentrating on similarities and differences across the same five categories. Finally, we conducted another content analysis pertaining to the constructions of children across the reviews and reflective essays.

Data Analysis: Students' Reasons for Choosing the Books

Students' reasons for choosing picturebooks fall into five main categories: whether or not they like the book, the images, the content of the stories, the use of language, and what the story teaches children.

Students' Preferences

If students liked or disliked the stories or the images, they assumed that children would react similarly. Fewer students wanted to test their views. Many of the students at this stage appeared not to be capable of, as Vasquez et al. (2003) termed, getting beyond "I like the book" or "I like the images".

Images

Students chose books if the images were "nice" or "good" (25) "bright and colourful" (17) "simple" (3), "accurate" (1) "beautiful" (8), "enjoyable"/"fun"/"cute" (9), "funny" (4), or large enough for a class to see (1). Ten students recognized that images contribute to the pleasure of the books. None of the students considered the role played by the images in contributing to the meaning of the text.

Story Content

Students' reviews with regard to the content of the stories were also limited. They liked stories that were "informative", "interesting" (9), "simple" (7), "interactive" (5) "speak to kids own lives" (J14), and that stimulate the imagination. Again, they valued humour (26) and fun (6) and in the case of content, a few students chose books that provided alternative perspectives, promoted thinking and provided opportunities for discussion (8). Students valued books that children could relate to but interpret what is relatable as narrowly tied to their lived experience – bedtime, losing a tooth, chores, bath-time, school. In general, the students appear to prefer 'safe' books.

Language

Students (27) said that language influenced their choice of a book. The level of the language and the vocabulary had to be accessible to children and they valued the pleasure produced by the sound of language – rhythm, rhyme, alliteration and onomatopoeia. Tongue twisters were the closest they came to seeing language as humorous.

Didactic message

By far the most frequent reason given for choosing a book is that it has something important to teach children – a moral, a lesson or values, what Hunt (2002) refers to as the *ducis et utile* philosophy. Nodelman (1996) made the point that "many readers approach texts with the idea that their themes and messages can be easily identified in a few words" (p. 54)

but miss the deeper meanings. When students read in this way they miss the complexities of the text.

The didactic messages found in students' reviews fell into 6 categories. Each category is followed by illustrative examples.

1. Emotions: Conquer your fears; it is alright to be sad/scared; love must be unconditional; love is a gift.

2. How to behave: Be considerate/kind; watch what you say; share; work hard; persevere; practise; help others; go to bed; exercise; recycle

3. Identity: It is alright to be different; respect and help people with disabilities; it is alright to be your age and size; you must learn to be independent; everyone is special/unique/beautiful; life is not fair; everyone has worries; solve your problems; anyone can do anything they want to do; gender should not be an obstacle.

4. Values: Be patient; cleanliness/hygiene is important; do not judge people on their looks; forgive; be grateful; friendship is very important – look after your friends; help others; help old people.

5. Families: Home is best; love your family; respect parents; love the baby.

6. Advice: There are no short-cuts to knowledge; what to do when lost; what to do when you have chicken pox/hiccups; save money.

A preoccupation with didacticism has a history in literary criticism that influences early colonial books for children and continues in Christian Nationalist methods of teaching in the Apartheid era. It also speaks to the impact of developmental discourses and to theories of childhood that see children as becoming and in need of moral guidance. If children's cognitive development is unsophisticated then the messages in books need to be made explicit.

The students largely respond to the didactic messages of the books as ideal readers, accepting what the authors advocate. For example, if a book advocates forgiving someone for something terrible that they did to you, they just accepted this (e.g., *Let's be friends again* by Wilhelm, 1986); when a child goes looking for her unborn sibling, they raised no questions about adults lying to children (e.g., *Are you there baby bear?* by Walters, 1999); when idealised families are presented, this is not challenged (e.g., *Just like a baby* by Bond, 1999). They did not interrogate the stories they read that teach children that they can overcome their difficulties by hard work, practice and perseverance. They took books at face value, rarely engaging with them critically.

Understandings About Choosing Books After Reading With Children

Our analysis of the reflective essays shows that the categories for selection remained constant but there is evidence of a shift in most students' thinking.

Students' Preferences

Students realised that their personal preference was no guarantee that children would also like the book. For example, when students stated:

Learners won't always like the books you assume they will like (K6).

Not all children in my class have the same interests as me (J29).

Contrary to my opinion [the] majority….in the group enjoyed it (K11).

Images

The variability of personal preference also related to images in picturebooks. Over 60 percent of students considered images as an important criterion for choosing picturebooks. Their responses can be divided into those that remained at a superficial level – pictures need to be "bold", "vivid", "simple", "colourful", "children need pictures", and more nuanced responses, with some students realising that children used images to make sense of a story. They were surprised that children could "analyse illustrations" (J23) and "read feelings"

(K24). There was also a recognition of how important images are as a support for children who do not speak the language in which the book is written.

Story Content

Students paid less attention to content in their reflections. They realised that many of their assumptions about the kind of books children like are not correct. These included assumptions that children prefer information books, boys do not like books that deal with emotions, children like simple stories, books should be realistic, and books should avoid difficult topics such as death.

In comparison to their initial assessments of the books, the number of references to humour decreased dramatically to eight. Only one student explained the type of humour children appreciate (i.e.,"overexaggeration" and "bizarre"; S5). Another student (K21) recognized that humour is not necessarily an automatic entry point for children's understanding of a story when a child told her that "this [Dr Seuss] book sounds funny, but I don't really know what is going on."

There was a realization that the content of books could stimulate discussion and that children "love exploring and talking about things that are happening in their own lives" (K15). Students' understanding of how children relate books to their own lives acquired more substance. One student shared, "Children like stories where they feel a part of the story and can connect to the characters" (H4).

Language

In their reflections students focused less on humour and language as criteria for choosing books than they did in their reviews. While children may respond to the music of the language—the rhyme (8), rhythm (3), and repetition— this is no guarantee that they understand the words. Students began to recognize the importance of finding the correct level of vocabulary and language. In one case "simple language…helped keep their interest"

(J28), in another "the story was too short, and the sentences were too little for kids in Grade 2" (K23). S29 observed that "children who had larger vocabularies were more attentive" (K29).

Didactic message

The category where there was the least change due to the engagement with children is that books should be didactic. Almost half the students continued to assume that the message was important and that it was important to children. Despite the overwhelming insistence that stories should be didactic, students began to recognize that picturebooks could have other benefits. They enable:

- More holistic learning; "I would have never thought that when picking a book, it would be important to find books that children would be able to relate to or that they would learn something from" (K20).

- Pedagogical engagement; "Reading the right book which stimulates the imagination of a child allows you to teach them more than what you would have been able to do in a formal lesson" (K8). Another student thought "it was interesting that they could read feelings" (K25).

- Learning that goes beyond socialising children into the moral order; "I learned that no story is a waste of time. If they did not understand the story it is always a good opportunity to teach children and expose them to abstract ideas or ways of thinking. Picturebooks have a subtle way of teaching children and getting them to use their brains and make connections to the real world and their imaginations" (K21).

Practical Considerations

One further category emerged from the exigencies of the classroom that relates to choosing appropriate books. In addition to recognizing the importance of finding books at a

language level children can understand, students wrote about images being large enough for children to see and about the length of stories in relation to children's ability to concentrate. These shifts in relation to determining the suitability of books for children is largely a function of what students learnt about children from working with them as opposed to their working with their preconceived ideas of what children at different ages like and can do. The experience they gained with real, diverse children shifted their understanding of what is possible. How their understanding of children changed and expanded is discussed in the next section.

Realizations about children after engaging with them during the practicum

The data show that, for the majority of students, their understanding of who children are and what they are capable of was disrupted. Originally the discourse of the child as 'becoming' was prevalent in students' unmediated responses, and most evident in the belief that the function of picturebooks is didactic, mediated by a competent adult. In their reflections it was evident that the children's responses to the stories resulted in students having to rethink their constructions of children. A realisation does appear to have emerged that 'children are not tabula rasa' as succinctly stated by one student (K25). The analysis of the student reflections reveals that they were developing a more complex picture of who children are. The following themes emerged from a content analysis of the full data set: Children are meaning makers, embodied learners, knowledgeable about the world, have life experience, are literary critics, and individuals.

Children as Meaning Makers

Students recognized that children are able to "actually understand more than what you think" (K26). They are capable of making sense of picturebooks and have the skills to do so. Students referred to children's ability to access stories by being able to "follow a sequence" (K21), "think and talk about words and pictures in a story" (K7), make intertextual links

(K9), and "think immediately" (K25). What is interesting about these comments is not so much that children are sophisticated meaning makers who are able to follow a story, but how taken aback students appeared to be by this ability. Such as one student who stated, "I was surprised to hear a 7-year-old giving such powerful feedback" (K2).

They conceded that they "underestimated" the children (K4, H12, S8, S21), and realised that children are "smart" (J8), "insightful" (J4) and "able to see complexity" (H7). The developmental discourse that constructs children as being incapable of abstract thought plays a powerful role in shaping students' expectations of children:

> I initially thought that children were only capable of working with knowledge/ information as it were presented to them on that present situation. I also thought that children would give me more literal interpretations of the books (K14).

Although this student reflects on and recognizes her assumptions as problematic, we argue that many students do not have access to an alternative discourse to reframe this disruption. This is evident in responses like the one below of the student who recognizes that children are able meaning makers and should be given opportunities to work with texts that extend them, but frames this as a duty rather than a shared goal, "The children need to be given credit…it is our duty to try and present the kinds of pictures they want by being open minded and creative" (K12).

Children as Embodied Learners

There was also a recognition that meaning making is not purely a cognitive process. Rather it is an embodied one. Engaging with picturebooks is a sensory experience – children actively observe what is in front of them. They "notice the smallest details" (K6), are "observant" (J1), and can "answer questions" (K21). They are listeners who "respond well to books and like the sounds of language" (K2). Reading is also about affective connections. Children were disturbed by some stories, scared, did not like "books that produce bad

feelings"(H3), often wanted "happy endings" (K22, J21, J22, H13, H9), and are quite capable of sympathy, and able to decipher characters' feelings. One student had to confront her own set of gender stereotypes when she discovered that boys also respond to emotions (K23). Children display their agency in wanting to discuss the stories and to "talk about things in their lives" (K15).

Children as Knowledgeable About the World

The construction of the child as innocent, and unaware of the world they live in, was disrupted too, as students realised that children have knowledge of the world. This knowledge of the world is not just a general knowledge but an awareness of complex issues that affect the lives of children, issues that teachers are often reluctant to discuss. A student chose to read David Bedford's *Lost Little Lamb* because it had a didactic focus and she wanted to teach children what to do if they got lost. She acknowledged that she had underestimated children's "knowledge of the real world" and wrote, "The story as predicted, evoked a discussion – children brought up the topic of human trafficking and rape which surprised me" (J22).

Children Have Life Experience

Children are agents and actors in their world (James & Prout, 2015) rather than empty vessels. Students had not considered the possibility that children could relate stories to their own life experiences. One student shared, "I also feel I was unprepared for all the different interpretations that the children had, and it showed me how the children all view things in a way that's relative to their own life experiences" (J21).

Children as Literary Critics

Children draw on their knowledge of the world and their embodied experiences to make sense of texts. They are able to move beyond just literal interpretations. There were several instances of children interpreting texts far more critically than some of the students.

I was definitely shocked at some of the responses I got from the children about the

moral or what the story was about. I learned that they actually understand more than

what you think. Sometimes they deducted (sic) meanings from books that I didn't

even pick up on (K26).

As beings who deal with the complexities of living, children do not need to be protected from

what adults perceive to be controversial, or 'touchy topics' as expressed by K20, "I thought

that learners wouldn't be able to make meaning of the story and idea of death. … It was one

of the best books I had chosen." She also learnt that children can be very pragmatic. In the

discussion one child said matter of factly, "My fish died, and we flushed him down the toilet"

(K20).

Children as Individuals

Finally, students realised that children are individuals with their own opinions, likes

and dislikes, rather than a homogenous and unthinking group. Students wrote comments like:

I assumed that everyone in the class would come to the same conclusion about

certain aspects of the books, but I was proved wrong (K16).

Not all children in my class have the same interests as me. … they have their own

perspectives on certain things (J29).

The simple request that students select a book, read it aloud and talk to the children about

what they understood disrupted their assumptions about what are appropriate books and who

children really are. Talking to children who demonstrated that they were capable, articulate,

and had resources to engage meaningfully, challenged the powerful discourses of innocence

and developmentalism, that shape students' thinking about children.

As literacy educators it is important for us to consider the mutually constitutive

relationship between constructions of child and constructions of children as readers. Students'

reflections reveal that children are far more than decoders. They are capable of being text

users, text participants, and text analysts (Freebody & Luke, 1990). When the *CAPS* curriculum (DBE, 2011) foregrounds a skills-based approach to early literacy it is at odds with the agentic children who respond to texts in complex ways. Such an approach is tied to what Barthes (1970) would call simple readerly texts. However, many picturebooks are multilayered, complex writerly texts.

Implications for Pre-Service Teacher Education

There is much that we as teacher educators have learnt from this work with students. It has given us a window into the kinds of books students choose and the assumptions they have about classroom texts. This provides a good starting point for curriculum design. We learned that what is obvious to us—for example, children are different and respond differently to the same picturebook or that children bring their experiences and emotional lives to their engagement with books—is not obvious to our students. We need to consider more carefully what needs to be made explicit.

We have learned that engaging with practical criteria that set up some guidelines is important for students. Nevertheless, we have to guard against students' desire to use available checklists of appropriate criteria that are underpinned by developmental approaches, modelled on a middle class white English speaking child (e.g.,Joubert, 2017 in Evans et al, 2017). By working with children, our students also learned that no list of criteria can guarantee the suitability and/or appropriateness of as well as engagement with a picturebook, because children are likely to have different interpretations and responses. Rather books that generate discussion about ideas or emotions, and books that children can connect with their own knowledge about the world and their own experiences and feelings, are good pedagogical choices. To this end we need to decolonise what counts as children's literature and direct them to African and critical multicultural picturebooks which they did not choose/find on their own.

Not all of our students have the tools of literary and visual analysis, to get beyond decisions based on 'I like the book' nor do they have tools for critiquing the ideological underpinnings of picturebooks and their didactic messages. They need the conceptual tools for understanding the synergy between text, image, and a literary metalanguage that includes words such as plot, setting, narrative point of view, narrative structure, allegory, characterisation, metaphor, amongst others, and practice in using them to talk about texts. Similarly, our students need a metalanguage for visual literacy that includes and goes beyond Western modes of visual analysis. Moreover, they need to be able to articulate the synergy between images and words in order to understand how they interact to make meaning. Finally, they need a language that enables them to question representations of gender, good and bad behaviour, children, and difference. And finally, they need to see pleasure and enjoyment of books as worthy ends in themselves.

More positively we learnt that students respond with enthusiasm and pleasure to picturebooks. They engage with both the stories and the images. Most importantly, they are willing to learn from the children they work with, are able to recognize where children's insights exceed their own, and are (mostly) open to revising their assumptions. This bodes well for their ongoing ability to learn from classroom practice. Our students have been entrenched in an education system that values right answers in high stakes settings, so curriculum design needs to find ways to create safe spaces that reward 'wrong answers' and risk taking. The review task, which was not assessed, gave students the freedom to be wrong and invited them to take up the position of researchers of children. This constructs them in an agentic role. The reflection task reversed the normal power dynamic in the classroom, encouraging teachers to take young children's responses seriously and to learn from them. This challenged constructions of childhood in a practical rather than conceptual way.

We recognize that developmental discourses are dominant in our teacher education programme and policy documents and, concur with Ryan and Grieshaber (2005), who argue that it is important to expose students to other theoretical paradigms. It is crucial that a curriculum that deals with children's literature also engages with diverse cultural constructions of child and childhood. It is important to create opportunities for students to interrogate their own belief systems and to expose them to a range of discourses, including postcolonial discourses, to expand their thinking. We need to encourage them to include books that challenge social norms and invite them to think critically about social issues as preparation for teaching. Finally, we understand the important role children play in disrupting students' beliefs with their different interpretations, open mindedness, and ability to question and disagree with texts.

Our aim in asking students to measure their views about picturebooks against those of children was designed to develop their ability to use classroom experience to reflect on their preconceptions. This kind of disruption begins to destabilize the taken-for-granted, without undermining the students' sense of self, but it cannot be relied upon to have long-term results. Teacher education has to provide ongoing opportunities for students to learn from children as well as the knowledge and tools that they need to make sense of these experiences. But the benefits of knowing how to work productively with children, so that as teachers they can engage actively with them, are what we would like our students to take into their classrooms.

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