Using Crossover Picture Books As Way-In Texts To Introduce And Research Controversial Issues

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ABSTRACT

This article shares how teachers can use crossover picture books as way-in texts to introduce and research controversial issues. It begins by describing the power and potential of picture books, proposing that these books are for everyone and not just for children. Next, it identifies crossover picture books and discusses how they deal with challenging and controversial issues. Then, it describes way-in texts and provide examples of specific texts that can be used as crossover picture books. It ends with lessons learned, including inquiry questions for future research.

Keywords: crossover picture books, way-in texts, controversial issues
INTRODUCTION

I have spent much of my teaching career collecting picture books and using them to teach reading, writing, and content area knowledge across the curriculum, kindergarten through university. One of my favorite picture books is *A Day, A Dog* by Gabrielle Vincent (1999). Here is a summary.

This story is a 60-page wordless picture book told entirely through expressive and emotional charcoal sketches. It tells about a dog that is tossed onto a lonely road from the window of a moving car. Whether by instinct or desperation (or both), the dog races after the car as it speeds away, falling further behind until he is no more than a speck with a tail, as seen by the uncaring people who have abandoned him. In blind hope, the pooch bounds into the road after the next car to come by, causing a terrible accident. Lost amid the chaos, the dog barks, cowers, lifts his leg against a tire, and finally slinks away. His miserable day continues in an epic journey along a deserted beach and through alleys of an ugly city until, at last, he finds a friend in a boy who seems to be abandoned, too.

I value this picture book because it has multiple layers of meaning. At one level, primarily because it is wordless, different readers can interpret the story in different ways. One interpretation is that it provides an accurate, but sad, portrait of our society's view of disposable pets and how one particular disposable pet reacts to being disposed of. The dog experiences cruelty and suffering, but with endurance, finally finds hope and redemption.

Mostly, I value this story because it is a wonderful example of a crossover picture book. According to Beckett (2012), “a crossover picture book is one that can be read by people of any age, not just children” (27). For example, when read by adolescents, young adults, and adults, the meaning of *A Day, A Dog* can extend beyond the abandonment of a pet by its owner. Rather, it invites conversations about mature topics, such as how people treat other people with cruelty, especially how people, unlike the dog, do not endure and find redemption.

This article builds on *A Day, A Dog*, and many other picture books like it. Specifically, it shares how to use crossover picture books as way-in texts to introduce and research controversial issues. I begin by describing the power and potential of picture books, proposing that these books are for everyone and not just for children. Next, I identify crossover picture books and discuss how they deal with challenging and controversial issues. Then, I describe way-in texts and provide examples of specific texts that can be used as crossover picture books. I end with lessons learned, including inquiry questions for future research.

Power and Potential of Picture Books

According to Nel and Paul (2011), a picture book is defined as “a book consisting wholly or partly of pictures” (169). Picture books are often thought to be stories to be read by or to children. While picture books are certainly enjoyed by children all over the world, they have much power and potential beyond simple narratives and young children.

Picture books are good to read for pleasure and information. Interestingly enough, children and adolescents enjoy good stories, but narratives are not their first preference. They prefer informational or nonfiction books over fiction at approximately 80% to 20% (Duke and Bennett-Armistead, 2003).

Picture books can introduce complex topics across the curriculum. Students at all grade levels often struggle to understand complex topics, especially when they lack prior knowledge and personal experience with those topics. Short texts, like picture books, instead of long texts, like textbook chapters, can help (Harvey and Goudvis, 2017). For example, *Mountain Dance* (Locker, 2001) focuses on geology and geographic forces by using the metaphor of a “slow dance” to explain plate tectonics. All over the
world mountains move slowly over time as if they were doing a slow dance with each other. This picture book simply and briefly, but powerfully, explains complex topics about movements of the earth.

Picture books can integrate reading and writing. They use words and pictures to stimulate childhood memories, savor stories, and explore writing elements and crafts. In many ways, these books are visual reminders of an earlier time in our lives when we delighted in picture books.

Picture books can accommodate diverse classrooms. Picture books are not grade specific. Rather, they can appeal to different student interests across multiple grade levels. Moreover, picture books use authentic language with predictable and patterned text structures that make it easier for English language learners to understand the language and comprehend the text.

Picture books can, and should be, considered pieces of art. Unlike textbook chapters, short stories, and novels, artful illustrations accompanying text is a hallmark of picture books. In picture books, the text and illustrations work symbiotically, not separately, to produce an integrate whole. Both are critically important.

Picture books are great to be read aloud. Among other things, reading aloud picture books stimulates wonder. In fact, its shortness, typically 32 pages, ensures its largeness for the potential of stimulating curiosity, questioning, and inquiry.

Finally, picture books are good to use with older readers. Simply stated, picture books are for everyone. Anthony Browne, an internationally renowned author and illustrator, stated, “Picture books are for everybody at any age, not books to be left behind as we grow older. The best ones leave a tantalizing gap between the pictures and the words, a gap that is filled by the reader’s imagination, adding so much to the excitement of reading a book.” Similarly, Oliver Jeffers, a popular picture book author and illustrator, stated, “Since I began making picture books I have come to realize over time that I call them just that. Picture books. Not children's books. The reason for this is twofold; firstly, I don't believe they are just for children. I refrain from calling them children's books because that implies I write them specifically for children. I don't. I write them for myself. And for everyone.”

Challenging and Controversial Picture Books

One reason picture books are for everyone is that many of these books deal with challenging and controversial issues. According to Evans (2015), these picture books are those “whose controversial subject matter and unconventional, often unsettling style of illustration, challenge readers, pushing them to question and probe deeper to understand what the book is about” (11). Picture books with challenging and controversial issues are certainly not new. Grimm Brothers fairytales and ancient Greek myth stories often dealt with death, murder, and mayhem. This type of picture book is often referred to as crossover literature (Beckett, 2012; see also Falconer, 2009).

Crossover picture books are certainly risky. They include topics such as death, dying, love, sex, violence, depression, sadness, loneliness, intolerance, murder, suicide, drugs, bullying, racism, domestic abuse, abortion, etc. On the one hand, these picture books for many readers at all ages are considered strange, intense, unusual, controversial, disturbing, shocking, troubling, curious, demanding, philosophical, etc. – certainly not soft and cuddly. On the other hand, crossover picture books help readers relate to, and come to terms with, troubling, disturbing, and controversial issues in life.

Way-In Texts

One characteristic of good teachers is the ability to build on the genuine interests of students. One problem faced by most teachers is that students are not always interested in what teachers need to teach. It’s not always a two-way street. Way-in books can help.

A way-in book is a high-quality, even award-winning, piece of literature that has much potential to create interest in a topic or concept where no, or little, interest currently exists (Keene and
Zimmerman, 2007). A middle grades school librarian best characterizes the value of way-in books: “As a librarian, it is my policy to give young people what they wanted to read, but also “to set before them what they never knew they wanted.” Way-in books are tools for exploration, a way to inspire, an opportunity to pose questions, around curiosities, and pursue anomalies about topics of unexpected interest that hopefully will capture student imagination.

It is important to note that way-in books are not intended to help teachers teach topics that they themselves have little interest in, but feel obligated to teach. These books are not sneaky tricks or clever ploys to deceive students into exploring topics they have no interest in, but still have to learn, whether they like it or not. Lastly, way in books are not the primary source for teaching specific content area material. Rather, they are resources that teachers can use to ignite interest, capture attention, and spark imagination of students.

**Crossover Picture Books as Way-In Texts**

Crossover picture books can be used as way-in texts to ignite student interest in challenging and controversial issues. The following are several examples of crossover books and the issues they address.

*The House That Crack Built* (Taylor, 1992). A popular nursery rhyme is transformed into a powerful and controversial poem about the tragic problem of illegal drugs and all of its unfortunate victims.

*Way Home* (Hathorn, 1994). A provocative story about a little boy who finds a no-name stray cat and takes it safely through the dangers of a city to his “home” - a corner of an alley.

*I Never Knew Your Name* (Garland, 1994). A small boy is saddened and confused when he learns about the life of a teenager who always played basketball but always seemed alone and who later commits suicide.

*The Red Tree* (Tan, 2010). Sometimes a little girl wakes up and her day “begins with nothing to look forward to.” This narrative exquisitely explores the dark world of depression, but with the power of hope, renewal, and inspiration.

*Sachiko Means Happiness* (Sakai, 1990). A little girl is upset when her grandmother no longer recognizes her, but when she learns about Alzheimer’s disease, she begins to understand that they can still be happy together.

*Just One Flick of a Finger* (Lorbiecki, 1996). Jack is tired of being threatened by Reebo and brings a gun to school to scare Reebo off. But events take a turn Jack never expected.

*Sometimes My Mommy Gets Angry* (Campbell, 2003). Some mornings, Annie’s mother has dark clouds inside and does not smile at all. These days she makes her own breakfast and puts herself to bed. Ultimately, she learns why mommy is sometimes angry on the outside.

*When Andy’s Father Went To Prison* (Hickman, 1990). When Andy’s father is sent to prison for robbery and the family moves to be near him, Andy is afraid of what the kids at his new school will think.

*Angry Man* (Dahle, 2019). This captivating story captures the full range of emotions that descend on a family as they grapple with domestic violence.

*My Name is Not Refugee* (Milner, 2017). This is a powerful and timely story that helps show readers that children forced from their homes are not just refugees but children just like them.
Lessons Learned

I have learned several lessons from exploring and using crossover books as way-in texts to introduce and research challenging and controversial issues. One lesson is that what kinds of picture books we select for children to read or read with us, as well as what issues these books address, are implicitly based on our conceptions of childhood and adolescence. For example, are childhood and adolescence times in life when parents and teachers should protect children and adolescents from challenging and controversial issues, or expose them to these issues? If children and adolescents are to be exposed to these issues, who should expose them? Parents? Teachers? Both? What issues are appropriate and which are inappropriate to expose? Who decides? What we do know is that children are not afraid of challenging and controversial picture books, but adults keep “an often harsh reality out of children’s books…and that controversial topics, if handled properly, can surely all be introduced without hurt” (Evans, 2015, p.). In actual fact, many children’s lives are often filled with far greater personal worries and challenges than those they may find in picture books.

I learned about the rich history of crossover picture books. This genre is not new. However, it is not as commonly recognized as terms like children’s books, children’s literature, and children’s picture books, and most certainly not restricted to just children. Rather, Crossover picture books can, and are meant to, be read by people of any age, not just children. It is a genre for all ages because it blurs, and sometimes erases, traditional boundaries between children and adult literature (Beckett, 2013). Simply stated, crossover literature must have two addresses (Wall, 1991).

I learned about the special relationship between crossover books and Scandinavia. For the most part, throughout the Scandinavian countries children’s literature portray children as competent, valuable, and people who can, and should, make important contributions to society. Moreover, children are viewed as thinking human beings facing many of the same challenges, controversies, and issues as adults. I can learn much from this rich history and special relationship between crossover books and Scandinavia.

Finally, I learned that much more research is needed on crossover picture books. Research questions could include the following:

How can crossover books be used as Way-In texts across the curriculum, e.g. math, science, social studies?

How can crossover books be used to support student inquiry?

How can crossover books be used to help students think critically and inferentially?

How can crossover books be used to address social justice issues?

How can crossover books be used to teach and enhance visual literacy?

Ultimately, I hope this article will start new conversations among teachers and researchers the changing nature of picture books, and specifically the exciting future of crossover picture books for everyone.

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