

Article

Picture Books, Imagination and Play: Pathways to Positive Reading Identities for Young Children

Amanda Niland

Sydney School of Education and Social Work, The University of Sydney, Sydney, NSW 2006, Australia;
amanda.niland@sydney.edu.au

Abstract: Picture books are part of many young children’s lives, whether at home or in early childhood or school settings. Their unique creative combinations of words and visual images can engage children’s attention, stimulate their imagination, and support their development as meaning-makers. Nurturing a love of books in young children can foster the development not only of early literacy skills, but also positive reading identities. Early childhood educators therefore have key roles to play as selectors, analysts and mediators of picture books. This article aims to build educators’ awareness of these roles through the analytical discussion of a small group of picture books selected for their focus on children’s imaginative worlds. Children need to see themselves in books, and given that play and imagination are central to young children’s ways of being and learning, picture books about children engaged in imagination and play can be important resources for nurturing a love of reading and fostering positive reading identities in young children. This pedagogical position paper explores a small sample of such books and discusses their value as part of early literacy curriculum.

Keywords: picture books; reading identities; play; imagination

1. Introduction—Play, Picture Books and Young Children’s Development

Play and imagination are important features of childhood—children need and love to play. Indeed, play, especially imaginative play, is generally acknowledged as being essential for children’s healthy development and overall wellbeing. This is shown in Article 31 of the United Nation Convention on the Rights of the Child [1]: “Play is one of the most important ways in which young children gain essential knowledge and skills” [2] Early childhood policy and curriculum across the world recognise play as a vehicle for early learning (e.g., [3–5]). It supports children’s development in areas such as language, motor skills, emotional and social skills, and cognition, which includes literacy and numeracy concepts. It involves curiosity, exploration and creativity, as well as interactions and communication with others; thus, play contexts are rich with possibilities for imagination and for language and literacy development [6,7].

Picture books also provide contexts that support children’s language and literacy development. This is not just because they usually contain verbal texts as well as images, but also because they engage children as active meaning-makers, stimulating conversations and the use of imagination. When read aloud, picture books become the focus of shared attention and interaction between a child (or children) and the adult (or older child) who is reading to them. Furthermore, being read to by an adult involves a particular relational context for interaction, communication and imagination that is different from the other relational contexts that are typically part of children’s lives, such as mealtimes, getting ready for the day or other daily routines. The language used in picture books, and the thinking stimulated, as well as the experience of their multimodal features, make them valuable contributors to young children’s language and early literacy development [8,9].



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2. Picture Books and Early Literacy

While oral language is central to children's experiences of picture books during shared read aloud interactions in the early years, they are also encountering written language, and are gleaning information visually through illustrations and aurally through the reader's use of voice. Through such multimodal experiences, and the conversations about the books that ensue during shared reading, children actively engage in a form of 'reading' as they engage with and make meaning from picture books. Shared reading is thus valuable for supporting the development of early literacy concepts and skills such as phonemic awareness, concepts of print, reading of visual symbols and knowledge of how books work [9]. However, equally valuable in supporting children's literacy development is the role that picture books can play in fostering positive identities for children as readers [10]. As children grow, and move on from early childhood education to school, those who enjoy picture books and being read to are more likely to become children who want to read, and who feel that the world of reading is available to and possible for them. Adults who foster such positive dispositions towards books and reading are laying crucial foundations on which young children's literacy skills and reading identities can be built.

3. Play, Imagination and Identity in Early Childhood Curriculum and Pedagogy

The relationship between identity and learning is increasingly acknowledged in education policy and curriculum development [3,11,12]. Early childhood curricula in many parts of the world highlight the need to nurture positive dispositions and a strong sense of identity in every child, recognising these as being essential foundations for learning and development. As my research and teaching are based in the Australian context, this article focuses on a selection of Australian picture books, and the Australian early childhood curriculum, *Belonging, Being and Becoming: The Early Years Learning Framework for Australia* (EYLF) [3], and its understandings of identity inform the discussion of the use of play and imagination in the chosen books. It is important, however, to acknowledge that while only relevant information and extracts from the Australian early childhood curriculum will be cited, readers in other parts of the world will be able draw connections between the exploration of imagination and play in picture books and the framing of positive learner identities and dispositions, and the early childhood curriculum in their part of the world.

The notion of belonging and the way identity develops in the context of the relationships children have with others is central to the EYLF [3]. Identity and belonging are central to its underpinning philosophy, pedagogical principles and practices, and its five learning outcomes. With regard to children's relationships and identity development, the document states: "This includes their relationships with people, places and things, and the actions and responses of others. Identity is not fixed and changes over time, shaped by experiences" (p. 30). The framework's central focus on identity is the focus of Learning Outcome 1: "Children have a strong sense of identity" (p. 30). One key indicator of Outcome 1 is that every child will "show curiosity and growing confidence in their identity as a learner" (p. 34).

In many sections of the EYLF, a strong sense of identity is linked with positive dispositions for learning, such as those of curiosity and confidence which are mentioned in the previous quote from Outcome 1. Within Outcome 4, which is "Children are confident and involved learners" (p. 50), one key indicator of this is that "Children develop a growth mindset and learning dispositions such as curiosity, cooperation, confidence, creativity, commitment, enthusiasm, persistence, imagination and reflexivity" (p. 51). Play, especially imaginative play, provides children with the ideal context for developing such a mindset and learning dispositions. Significantly also, the EYLF refers to the need for educators to intentionally select books with the potential for supporting children's experiences of belonging, their sense of identity and the development of positive learning dispositions (see Outcome 1, p. 34; Outcome 5, p. 60).

4. Early Years Educators and Picture Books

There are many facets to early childhood educators' roles as nurturers of positive reading identities in young children, which can be guided by the principles and practices of the EYLF [3]. One facet is the need to be intentional and knowledgeable in selecting picture books and understanding their meaning, making features and possibilities in relation to children's identities. Educators therefore play the roles of selectors, analysts and mediators of the texts they share with children. The importance of educators of mediators of young children's development and learning arises from Vygotsky's theory of learning as social and interactive, with educators mediating helping to guide children through a Zone of Proximal Development [13]. In relation to early literacy learning, I argue that this mediation is a holistic role that is responsive to children's backgrounds, contexts and developing identities—it aims to support children's dispositions for learning as well as conceptual awareness and skill development. This facet of educators' roles as nurturers of children's positive reading identities is the rationale for the focus of this article. Through analytical discussion of a small sub-set of picture books that feature children's use of imagination and play, my aim is to explore their particular and unique potential for engaging children's interest in ways that can support them in developing a love of books and a positive identity as a reader.

5. Children's Imagination and Picture Books

The picture books explored later in this article are Australian, as already explained. They have children as their main characters, and those children's use of imagination is central to their narrative. Given the potential of picture books for engaging children's interest and sparking their imagination, and in recognition of young children's active imaginations, some children's authors and illustrators have created texts in which child protagonists use imagination and play to deal with life's events, solve problems or overcome challenges. An especially notable example of this is the internationally beloved classic *Where the Wild Things Are* by Maurice Sendak [14], in which Max uses his imagination when he is sent to bed without supper, to escape from his bedroom and become King of the Wild Things. Max's imagination takes him "in and out of weeks and almost over a year to where the wild things are" [14]. The adventures Max experiences embody the key ideas that inform the analytical discussion of picture books in this article—the empowering and creative nature of play and imagination, and the ways in which children use them to connect and build relationships with others. Max, confined to his room as a punishment, feels small and powerless. However, he uses his imagination to escape this reality and experiences power as he becomes King of the Wild Things and joins them in play. Eventually, enriched and perhaps emotionally healed by playing, Max uses his agency to relinquish his imagined power and return to everyday reality, in which his sense of belonging to home and family is re-established through finding "his supper waiting for him and it was still hot" [14].

As it was for Sendak's Max, imaginative, pretend play is an important part of life for young children. In relation to literacy development, the development of vocabulary [15], narrative skills [16] and creative thinking [17] are often associated with pretend play, also referred to as dramatic or socio-dramatic play.

Children regularly live in the imaginary worlds they create—perhaps fantasy worlds of monsters, fairies or super-heroes, or alternative versions of the real world, which they may inhabit as dinosaurs, lions, parents caring for babies, astronauts or fire fighters, to name just a few possibilities. Many children's authors recognise the centrality of play and imagination to children's lives, and thus, imaginative play is a focus of many much-loved picture books.

In the imagined worlds of their play, children may work through different emotions such as fear, anger, sadness, anxiety or excitement [18]. During imaginary play, children are able to control themselves and their world, in contrast to their usual experiences of relative powerlessness in the rest of their lives. In picture books, children vicariously experience the play and emotional journeys of a book's characters, and may identify with aspects

that relate to their own lives. Thus, for young children, imagination and pretend play—in books as well as other parts of life—can support both emotional and literacy development. For these reasons, in this article, I have chosen to explore picture books which spotlight the imagination and imaginative play of child protagonists, and the ways they use these within the narrative to understand and navigate life situations. The purpose of this is to show the potential contributions such books can make to the emotional, creative and dispositional dimensions of early literacy development, alongside building early literacy concepts and skills.

5.1. Young Children's Imagination

Imagination, the ability to think about or visualise that which is not immediately present, is a unique and important human trait, and a central aspect of childhood. "With our imaginations, we transcend time, place, and/or circumstance to think about what might have been, plan and anticipate the future, create fictional worlds, and consider alternatives to the actual experiences of our lives" [19]. Children use imagination as they make meaning of their world, using their curiosity and sense of wonder to explore and discover. Imagination can be a way of understanding the new and unfamiliar, or of creatively envisioning alternative realities or fantasies. Imagination is often part of children's play and the stories they create and tell. Within the realm of their imagination, children have freedom to see the world in whatever way they wish. Therefore, imagination can be very empowering for children—they can use it to make meaning, creatively solve problems or exercise agency. The value of play and imagination in psychotherapy and counselling for young children experiencing trauma or other emotional challenges has been widely researched and written about, arising from the psychodynamic theories of Freud and others. The discipline of play therapy has been one important outcome of this work. In-depth discussion of psychodynamic theory is beyond the scope of this article; however, it is important to acknowledge the contribution of psychodynamic understandings of children's play and imagination to the field of early childhood development and education. Within this theoretical paradigm, research and clinical work with children experiencing emotional difficulties by Bruno Bettelheim included in depth exploration of the role of fairy tales in allowing children to work through existential issues. Bettelheim's book *The Uses of Enchantment* [20] has been a highly influential text in the study of children's literature and recognition of the emotional and therapeutic role of books and stories for children and adults. Psychodynamic perspectives have shown the importance of imagination for wellbeing, and its value in helping children deal with life's challenges. Perhaps this is because every child's imagination is arguably connected to their identity. Making use of imagination, including in play, may therefore support the development of a positive sense of identity. Perhaps because imagination and play are central to children's identity development journeys, they are often drawn to stories and picture books where children like them play and imagine.

Exploring Picture Book Portrayals of Children's Imagination

In this section, I explore four Australian picture books that feature children's use of imagination and play in their narratives—two by Stephen Michael King and two by author Libby Gleeson. The books that are discussed below are *Big Dog* [21], *Clancy and Millie and the Very Fine House* [22], *My Dad is a Giraffe* [23] and *Patricia* [24]. Author Libby Gleeson, author/illustrator Stephen Michael King, and illustrators Freya Blackwood and Armin Greder have all made significant contributions to contemporary Australian children's literature. Their books have won many awards and are much loved by several generations of children. Each of the books selected for discussion in this article contains child characters who use their imaginations in different ways, for a variety of purposes.

The analytical discussion of these books draws on qualitative content analysis [25], combined with some aspects of multimodal analysis [26]. Multimodal analysis can support educators to "identify the verbal and visual strategies used by writers and illustrators. . .

to convey a representation of reality, to create interaction with child-readers and to form coherent wholes of communication" [26]. The content analysis of the four books was underpinned by a socio-cultural theoretical framework, as this reflects the theoretical underpinnings of the Australian early childhood curriculum [3], particularly its image of children as capable and agentic learners, and its emphasis of a strong sense of identity and positive learning dispositions. This framework supports the understanding of early literacy pedagogy and the centrality of engaging children with picture books that inspired this article. The four books chosen each in their own way portrays the child characters as capable of tackling challenging life situations and expressing or working through their feelings. In the light of these portrayals, and the theoretical perspectives of this article, the analysis undertaken revealed several key themes related to the role of imagination and play in children's development that these books embody—themes of empowerment, connection, creativity and resilience.

5.2. *Play, Imagination and Empowerment*

Children often feel small and/or powerless in their daily lives. Play and imagination allow them to feel larger, more powerful and more agentic than in other life situations. As Vygotsky stated about children while playing: "in play it is as though he were a head taller than himself" [13] (1967/2002). The feeling of being small, powerless and overwhelmed as a child in a world run by adults is very much part of the experience of Clancy [22] and Patricia [24] (King, 2006). The two children's feelings are conveyed differently in each book; however, there are some common visual features used to symbolise powerlessness—in particular, size and vectors that convey the child's point of view. In *Clancy and Millie and the Very Fine House* [22], Clancy has just moved house, and is feeling out of place in the new house and neighbourhood. In early illustrations, Clancy is very small, looking up at the houses in his new street that tower over him. This perspective, a small child visually overpowered by his surroundings, including inside the new house, is the dominant impression conveyed visually by Blackwood in the early part of the book. It is these illustrations that provide most of the information about how Clancy is feeling. The verbal text accompanying the illustrations portrays an opposing point of view, which seems to strengthen readers' possibilities to empathise with Clancy. Children hear or read his mother's words as she enthuses about the good things in the new house ("this lovely lounge room, it's much better than the old one"), while we see Clancy's memories of similar aspects of the old house ("Clancy remembers the fire in the fireplace"). The verbal text (his mother's point of view) is simple, while in contrast the illustrations (Clancy's point of view) use dark, drab colours and show the small child overpowered by huge surroundings, feeling nostalgia for what was familiar but is now in the past.

King's character Patricia, in the book of the same name [24] (1997), like Clancy [22], often feels small and powerless in her home, and King also conveys this visually through size contrasts. When Patricia is trying to find someone in the family to share her "wonderful, amazing thoughts" with, and her parents are not paying attention, we see her as tiny in comparison—only as tall as her mother's knees. King also uses size to show the power that her imagination brings Patricia. When Patricia can wait no longer and lets all those "wonderful, amazing thoughts . . ." "come tumbling out" of her imagination into the outer world, there are two double-page spreads where we see what Patricia has been thinking about, with Patricia herself riding high on the head of a giraffe, feeling tall and powerful. A child's view of size relating to powerlessness or power is similarly visually conveyed in *My Dad is a Giraffe* [23], in which we also see moments where the child imagines himself sitting on the giraffe's head and towering above everyone else around.

In *Clancy and Millie and the Very Fine House* [22], Clancy and Millie, whom he meets in the new neighbourhood, eventually take power over the situation of moving house by playing together and building very large structures with all the packing boxes. Through the processes of playing and imagining together, a friendship is formed, and Clancy starts to feel a sense of belonging in the new house. Blackwood's illustrations again use size and the

children's perspective to convey Clancy's transition from feeling powerless and unhappy to taking power through creative play and connection with a new friend. At first, the boxes are a looming tower over the children, but then, we see the children climbing on the boxes, so that both the characters and readers see the boxes from a different perspective—one that is less overwhelming and much more fun. This transformation in Clancy's emotions that happen through play and imagination with his new friend Millie is portrayed through a combination of verbal text that describes the children's actions during play (such as being the big, bad wolf who huffs and puffs the box houses down), while the illustrations, as well as showing these scenes, presents a much lighter, brighter colour palette that seems to convey how the children are feeling while using their imaginations to create as they play.

Big Dog [21] is also about a small child, Jen, feeling powerless, through being scared of a big dog in the neighbourhood. In this book, the child's fear, though portrayed visually through her body language in the illustrations, is explained also in the verbal text, which is a narrative told by an older sibling who is concerned for his/her little sister. While the verbal text includes conversations in which solutions are offered by the children's parents, the children themselves (the older sibling and a neighbourhood friend) take power over the problem and find a way, through their creative play, to solve the problem themselves. As they are making a lion for Lunar New Year, the children decide to use it to scare the dog. The narrative of this book shows children who are resilient, seeking to take power in a scary situation, and find a way to, in this case, overcome their fear.

The relationship between empowerment and resilience, which is something many children identify with in *Big Dog* [21], is evident in a different way in *Patricia* [24]. While Gleeson's and Greder's Jen and her older sibling show resilience as they find a way through imaginative play to overcome a fear, Patricia shows resilience through using her imagination to solve the problem of finding someone to share her "wonderful, amazing thoughts" with. Clancy too shows resilience as he and Millie engage in creative play with the moving boxes, so that Clancy overcomes his sadness and loneliness after moving to a new home.

5.3. Play, Imagination and Relationships

In *My Dad is a Giraffe* [23], the child who narrates the verbal text uses his imagination to portray metaphorically his love and admiration for his dad. These feelings are actually stated in the verbal text, but the illustrations add many layers of meaning and links to imagination for children exploring this book to identify with and to stimulate their own imaginative thinking about their dads or other close family members. Through the illustrations, readers gain the impression that the child sees his dad as powerful, with King using very clear visual contrasts in size between the small child and the giraffe (his dad). The child's imagination drives the narrative, conveyed visually and verbally as he creates in his mind all the ways he imagines playing with his giraffe dad. For example, "I can climb up his legs, slide down his neck and ride on his back". The child's creative thinking is also portrayed through humour, for example imagining himself sitting on his giraffe dad's head at the movies, able to see everything on the screen, or imagining his giraffe dad sitting in an armchair drinking a cup of tea. It is only on the final page that we see, from behind, the child and (human) father walking up the hill, with the father's body casting a very long shadow that looks like a giraffe. This could give children reading the book food for thought about shadows, and perhaps their own imaginative play with shadows, hence creating another possibility to identify with the experiences, feelings and interests of the child in the book.

All four books in different ways show how children may use their imagination and play to build or strengthen relationships. For example, we find that Patricia [24] has a strong bond with her grandfather, who like her, loves to imagine things. This is shown visually in an illustration of imagined creatures and objects that emanate from her grandfather's mind while he is sleeping, an illustration very conceptually similar to the striking double page spreads that show Patricia's thoughts "come tumbling out". In Blackwood's illustra-

tions [22], we can see Clancy and Millie's relationship growing gradually as they create box structures and play act the story of the *3 Little Pigs*. The sibling bonds and friendships between the children in *Big Dog* [21] are shown in the way they work together to help Jen, the youngest child. Their playful creativity also leads to them building a friendly relationship with the dog that had seemed so scary, showing a different form of connection that arose for them through their imaginative play. King's *My Dad is a Giraffe* [23] is also about a parent-child relationship, portraying visually and verbally one child's use of playful imagination to explore and express their feelings about a parent.

6. Conclusions

This article contributes to literature that argues that supporting positive reading identities in young children is an important part of early literacy pedagogy. Central to this is the provision of books that resonate with children's lives, for example their need to play and their rich imaginations. The article aims to build early childhood educators' understanding of their role as selectors and mediators of texts in early childhood settings. To achieve this aim, I chose to focus on books in which the child characters use their imagination to express their feelings and navigate challenging life situations. Four books were chosen as exemplars, and I undertook qualitative, multimodal content analysis, underpinned by a socio-cultural perspective on young children's literacy learning.

Childhood is a journey of learning how to be in the world—a journey of discovery and learning from dependence to independence, within complex webs of interactions and relationships [3]. It is also a journey of wonder, with play and imagination at its heart as a key to many aspects of learning and development [3]. Early childhood educators are partners in this journey, an important part of which is learning, through play, to communicate and to make meaning in many modes of literacy [7]. Picture books are a significant and valuable resource on the journey, and children gain much from engaging with books and identifying with the characters within [8,9], especially when those characters are involved in playing and imagining.

The four books explored in this article are a few of many that portray aspects of life seen through the eyes of children who use their imaginations and play to make sense of their world [18]. The analytical discussion of the books above, while not comprehensive, aims to give educators a sense of the many layers of meaning to be explored in such picture books, and to highlight some of the visual and verbal techniques through which meaning is created. The use of a content analysis and multimodality approach was appropriate for my aim of highlighting themes that may 'speak' to children, and contribute to supporting their love of picture books and hence their development of positive reading identities. The insights educators might gain from the use of this analytical approach introduces them to tools they can use to enhance their skills and confidence as text selectors and mediators for young children. These analytical tools, when shared with children, allow them to engage in rich meaning-making, and to glean a lot of information about the experiences and feelings of the books' characters. When educators engage in shared analytical explorations of picture books such as those discussed in this article that are rich in multi-modal layers of meaning, they can experience the complex and sophisticated processes that are part of children's meaning-making about picture books. It shows the potential for educators, using their own critical literacy to think analytically about books, to in turn facilitate the development of young children's critical literacy skills. The resultant satisfaction, when the books themselves are engaging and children can identify with the characters in them, makes a crucial contribution in supporting the development of positive dispositions towards books and reading, and hence positive reading identities. The incorporation of books within classroom collections that contain characters who are themselves children, and who imagine and play just as their young readers do, can help to ensure that early childhood educators are working to support a love of books and reading by all children.

When accompanying young children on their early literacy journeys, books such as these open up valuable possibilities for building literacy concepts and skills while at the

same time nurturing children’s positive identities as readers. Repeated readings, rich conversations and guided but informal close explorations of illustrations support the development of important concepts about books and reading. Most importantly, however, these books allow children to identify with the child characters in them, especially their use of play and imagination. For educators, the play, imagination and creativity shown in the books can inspire the development of many creative play-based experiences to facilitate children’s meaning-making and literacy skill development. Children may enjoy drawing, painting or gathering materials that represent their “wonderful, amazing thoughts” after reading *Patricia* [24]. Alternatively, they might like to play with boxes as Clancy and Millie did and using their creations to imagine stories. The use of a camera or perhaps an iPad story making app to document the children’s stories and scribe the verbal narratives of their stories during this play could lead to the creation of new classroom books. In these ways, the children would become authors and illustrators, just like King, Gleeson, Blackwood and Greder. There are of course likely to be many conversations about their own experiences that may arise from the shared reading of all these books—about family members, memories, their homes, their friends or their fears. When educators select, and think analytically about, books such as these for children—books that link to their knowledge of the children’s personalities, lives, relationships and backgrounds, with consideration of their interests in play, imagination and creativity—they are supporting children in developing positive reading identities that are crucial to literacy learning.

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