A Middle School Teacher's Guide for Selecting Picture Books

***This We Believe* Characteristics**

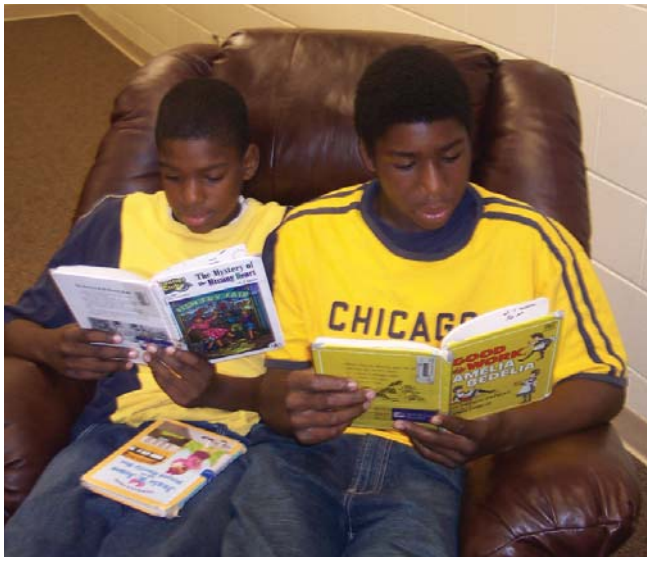
- *Students and teachers engaged in active learning*
- *Curriculum that is relevant, challenging, integrative, and exploratory*
- *Multiple learning and teaching approaches that respond to their diversity*

By Bill Costello & Nancy J. Kolodziej

Picture books have traditionally been relegated to the domain of elementary school classrooms; however, the stigma historically associated with using picture books in middle school classrooms is rapidly fading. The use of picture books as supplementary material for middle level classrooms is becoming more commonplace. By extending the textbook with picture books, a teacher can provide an "opportunity to read across a variety of types of texts," thus promoting students' reading ability (International Reading Association & National Middle School Association, 2001, p. 3). A picture book "has the potential to act as a magnifying glass that enlarges and enhances the reader's personal interactions with a subject" (Vacca & Vacca, 2005, p. 161). Not only does the use of picture books provide motivation for adolescents, but it also enables teachers to differentiate instruction by allowing students the opportunity to choose their own texts based on interests and reading levels (Ivey, 2002). Middle level teachers who have been reluctant to employ picture books as a source of supplementary materials for their content courses should reconsider their viewpoint.

Increasingly, picture books are being created specifically to address the needs and interests of middle school students. In addition, many picture books can be interpreted on several levels (Hellman, 2003); thus, they appeal to students in the middle grades as well as the primary grades. Much of the current crop of picture books particularly suit adolescents because the books are "sophisticated, abstract, or complex in themes, stories, and illustrations and are suitable for children aged 10 and older" (Lynch-Brown & Tomlinson, 2005, p. 83). Contemporary picture books explore issues such as homelessness, war, drugs, death, violence, racism, and divorce. Marybeth Lorbiecki's *Just One Flick of a Finger* (1996), for example, contends with the topic of guns in school. *Smoky Night* by Eve Bunting grapples with issues surrounding the Los Angeles riots.

Our society is becoming more visually oriented (Giorgis, 1999; Neal & Moore, 1992), and the visual



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Well-selected books are important for teaching critical elements in core subjects.

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format of picture books appeals to adolescents, who today are exposed to various visual media, including television, videogames, and computers (Brame, 2000). Consequently, they are used to relying on visual images to assist them in learning new content and concepts. Picture books, which employ visual images to convey ideas, are ideal instructional aids for today's youth (Neal & Moore, 1992). Confirming this idea, Hibbing & Rankin-Erickson (2003) found that illustrations in picture books helped students comprehend the text. This outcome is particularly important when considering the needs of English language learners (ELLs) (Wood & Tinajero, 2002). The visuals provided by picture books can reduce the "language load" (Miller & Endo, 2004) and facilitate language acquisition.

Moreover, the brevity of text in picture books is appealing to middle level students. Charles and Charles (2004) found that in regards to class activities, "completing long reading assignments" was one of the primary dislikes of middle school students (p. 40). The shorter text does not indicate easier material; the readability of picture books often exceeds the age level for which they are intended due to their complexity of vocabulary and density of information.

The majority of literature (Giorgis, 1999; Oleson, 1998) related to using picture books in middle school classrooms focuses on how to use them. Before teachers can implement a book, they must first decide which book to use, and with the plethora of picture books that exists in the marketplace, middle school teachers have a difficult time wading through the flood of titles in an effort to find books that support the curricula. To combat this difficulty, several authors (Hurst, 1997; Lanthier & Rich, 1999; Wysocki, 2004) have created lists of books that may be used in specific content areas. However, these lists tend to focus on elementary students, are not all-inclusive, and may result in the omission of excellent picture books simply because they are not contained on a prescriptive list. The purpose of this article is to provide essential criteria that a middle school teacher may use as a guide to self-select appropriate picture books for the content areas of language arts, social studies, science, and mathematics. When evaluating books, teachers should focus on the elements that are most relevant to the purpose on hand and select a variety of picture books for use in their content area classes. Students may then be given the opportunity to self-select some of their reading materials from those that the teacher provided, thus enhancing their motivation to read the texts (Ivey, 2002).

General Considerations in Selecting Picture Books

In selecting an appropriate picture book for use in any middle school classroom, teachers should consider several factors; these factors relate to the teacher, the purpose of using the book, and the book itself. One of the first and most important issues to take into account is the teacher's personal enthusiasm for the book. Patrick, Hisley, & Kempler (2002) found that teachers' exhibited enthusiasm has a positive effect on student interest and curiosity. With the wealth of high-quality picture books available, finding one that evokes excitement should be a relatively easy task.

In addition to selecting a book about which the teacher is enthusiastic, another critical consideration is the book's ability to achieve the objectives of a particular lesson. Therefore, the teacher should identify the objectives of the lesson prior to exploring possible picture books to use. Identifying objectives facilitates book selection and helps to produce a focused and effective lesson.

Many picture books can be used in more than one content area. When possible, a teacher should select a book that not only serves an instructional purpose but also can be integrated throughout the curriculum. An integrated curriculum promotes the intellectual development of middle school students and facilitates understanding of abstract concepts (Van Hoose, Strahan, & L'Esperance, 2001). One exemplary picture book that brings educators and various areas of the curriculum together is *Leonardo Da Vinci* (1996) by Diane Stanley. It could be used to supplement a science lesson on inventions, a social studies lesson on the Renaissance, and an art history lesson on Da Vinci's life. Furthermore, art teachers might employ this book to introduce lessons on painting, sculpting, and architecture.

General factors that should be considered include the book's intensity of information, ability to meet high literary standards, and portrayal of diversity. Intensity of information can be enhanced through the inclusion of special in-depth sections providing detailed information related to the subject matter. Giorgis and Hartman (2000) noted three examples of picture books that contain in-depth sections. The final segment of David Macaulay's *Rome Antics* (1997) presents a detailed aerial map of Rome and

descriptions of Roman sites. *Ride the Wind: Airborne Journeys of Animals and Plants* by Seymour Simon (1997) concludes with exhaustive information on migration. Eratosthenes is placed in historical context in the afterword of Kathryn Lasky's *The Librarian Who Measured the Earth* (1994).

Any picture book used to teach middle school students should meet high literary standards (Giorgis & Hartman, 2000; Neal & Moore, 1992). The vocabulary must be rich, and the writing should be of a high caliber. Books of superior quality are often distinguished by the recognition of a literary award. Therefore, books that have won awards such as the Caldecott Award should be given primary consideration.

When selecting a book for classroom use, teachers should consider the book's ability to depict diversity in a positive light. This trait is even more important in picture books wherein diversity may be portrayed both in text and in illustrations.

Critical Elements for Language Arts

Besides the general considerations for choosing picture books, two important elements that should be considered when selecting picture books for language arts classrooms is their ability to convey literary devices and to model creative writing. Hillman observes, "As a seventh grade language arts teacher, I often see students who are reading at a third grade level. Many students struggle with the abstract elements of literature. … Picture books communicate in ways that traditional literature for seventh graders may not" (1995, p. 387).

Literary devices include alliteration, irony, metaphors, parables, personification, rhetorical questions, and similes. A picture book can convey a literary device in a direct or indirect manner, depending upon whether it specifically addresses the device, or if it simply employs the device within its text. Most picture books indirectly demonstrate literary devices; thus, when teaching with picture books that indirectly illustrate literary devices, language arts instructors should point out the devices to students.

The use of picture books to teach literary devices and parts of speech can enhance student understanding of these concepts. The brevity and simplicity of text found in picture books facilitate the learning of these facets of English writing. These traits enable learners to focus on writing conventions without being distracted by unfamiliar vocabulary words and convoluted sentence structure (Neal & Moore, 1992). A superb resource for language arts educators is Hall's (2001) *Using Picture Storybooks to Teach Literary Devices*. It lists 120 picture books that effectively demonstrate literary devices.

The brevity and simplicity of text found in picture books facilitate the learning of literary devices in English writing.

A picture book used to enhance the content focus in language arts should serve as a good model for creative writing. Books containing ambiguity lend themselves well to this endeavor. The open-ended tales inspire students to embark on creative writing projects (Whitehurst & Snyder, 2000). Neal and Moore (1992) pointed out that students can become better writers by imitating the basic "patterns" found in picture book stories. Students can use the structure of the author's text as a model to create their own story using a similar pattern. Therefore, a language arts teacher should seek a picture book that has a well-patterned story structure with a modicum of ambiguity. The teacher can then use this book to stimulate student interest in creative writing projects. For thorough coverage of this topic, educators can refer to *Teaching Writing with Picture Books as Models* by Kurstedt and Koutras (2000).

Critical Elements for Social Studies

"Quality picture books, both fiction and nonfiction, can make historical periods and faraway lands come alive for students. … Students will relate to the life-like characters … and form a reference point for understanding the more abstract historical and geographical concepts" (Miller, 1998, p. 380). Comprehension is facilitated when students form connections between the text and themselves. The inclusion of lifelike characters will aid students' retention of the concepts being presented. Therefore, a critical element for a picture book used to supplement the content area of social studies is that it portrays characters that are realistic.

The emotional appeal of realistic characters portrayed in picture books provides relevance for adolescents, which facilitates the learning of content. A significant challenge for social studies instructors is to make content relevant so that students can personally connect with it (Owens & Nowell, 2001). According to Owens and Nowell, the

result of establishing relevance in social studies is that students will come to the realization that society and its members can enact and produce changes toward democratic ideals. Well-chosen picture books facilitate this awareness.

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Not only should a picture book feature realistic characters to which readers can relate, but it should also have an allegorical story. In other words, a hidden or symbolic meaning should be present in the text to teach ideas and ethics. A model picture book that effectively employs lifelike characters and an allegorical story is *Smoky Night* by Eve Bunting (1994). On the surface, it is the story of a young urban boy's experience during the Los Angeles riots. On a deeper level, a symbolic message underlies the narrative through a subplot involving two cats. The cats despise each other because they are different colors. As the story progresses, the cats share a frightening experience and get to know one another. Consequently, they become friends. The subplot suggests that people from diverse backgrounds should follow the example set forth by the cats and learn to value diversity.

Picture books like *Smoky Night* that offer multicultural perspectives are important in all curricular areas, but, in particular, they can enhance the social studies curriculum. Stories and illustrations depicting various cultures help students appreciate different ethnic and racial groups, creating a more constructivist and inclusive classroom atmosphere (Johnson, 2005; Miller, 1998). Often, these books convey concepts from a perspective that is different from the one contained in the textbook, allowing students to gain a more thorough understanding of the content. For example, Connor (2003) found that her students gained an enhanced "intellectual and emotional understanding" (p. 244) of the slave trade after viewing the book, *The Middle Passage: White Ships/Black Cargo*. This story is told primarily through Tom Feelings' vivid and stark illustrations. When selecting multicultural books, teachers should ascertain that the book accurately represents the culture being portrayed (Yokota, 1993). Additional traits to consider when selecting multicultural literature are provided by Yokota in her article.

Geography curricula should be based upon the essential elements and standards developed by the Geography Education Standards Project (Marra, 1996). Consequently, a critical element for a picture book used to teach geography in a middle school classroom is that it must depict the content of the National Geography Standards. A picture book can achieve this objective if it represents at least one of the following six essential elements: (a) the world in spatial terms, (b) places and regions, (c) physical systems, (d) human systems, (e) environment and society, and (f) the uses of geography (Geography Education Standards Project, 1994).

Numerous picture books that depict the content of the National Geography Standards are available to help educators teach regional, national, and international geography. Students can study American geography with *A is for America* by Devin Scillian (2001), and *The Silk Route: 7000 Miles of History* (Major & Fieser, 1996) facilitates the learning of historical international geography.

Critical Elements for Science

"Abstract concepts in science … can be given more concrete and visual connections to students' experiences by using the visual examples, models, and diagrams in a picture book on the topic being presented" (Miller, 1998, p. 377). Thus, one critical element for a picture book used to teach science in a middle level classroom is that it displays visual images to facilitate the learning of complicated content and concepts. The visual images in a science-oriented picture book should help learners "get the picture."

One picture book that makes abstruse concepts more tangible through the use of illustrations is *The New Way Things Work* by David Macaulay (1998). Macaulay, who is a former junior high school teacher and architect, blends aesthetic drawings with detailed explanations of how machines work. He demystifies complex scientific principles like how televisions function, why helicopters are able to fly backward, and how electric guitars make sound. Seemingly unrelated machines are linked according to the type of action they perform. For example, windmills and dentist drills are grouped together because their mechanical actions operate in a similar manner. These connections offer students a broad perspective of the workings of machines. In contrast, the intricate illustrations and nut-and-bolts explanations of each machine listed in the book afford students a more detailed viewpoint of machinery.

Another critical element for a picture book used to teach science is that it presents the possibility of inspiring research projects. Miller (1998) has noted the importance of assimilating the research process in middle level classrooms. Picture books that feature biographies of celebrated scientists could lead to in-depth research projects. *Starry Messenger* by Peter Sís (1996) is a consummate book to spark interest in a project about the life and work of Galileo.

Picture books about controversial ecology issues provide grist for the cerebral mills of adolescents. The divisive subject matter stimulates student interest and may serve as the impetus to work on related research projects (Miller, 1998). Lynne Cherry's (1992) *A River Ran Wild: An Environmental History* is an example of a book featuring a controversial ecology issue. Its premise is that industrial progress is detrimental to nature. A book such as Cherry's can provoke students' interest and promote a research project studying the effects of industry on nature, an interview with a nature conservationist, or a debate of the pros and cons of industrial progress.

Critical Elements for Mathematics

A critical element for a picture book used to facilitate the study of mathematics in a middle level classroom is that "the author explains some of the concepts he is illustrating and offers suggestions for helping students understand those concepts" (Sharp, 1984, p. 136). In his book, *Incredible Comparisons* (1996), Russell Ash uses comparison to help students conceptualize the size, speed, and other aspects of elements in our world.

Mathematics-oriented picture books should have stories to which adolescents can relate. For example, Jon Scieszka's (1995) *Math Curse* is a story about a girl who experiences math anxiety. She becomes perturbed when she awakens one day with a mathematical state of mind that forces her to view everything as a mathematics problem; her day consists of solving the problems. Students reading *Math Curse* will sympathize with the main character and feel a connection with the story line. As a result, they will be more likely to learn the mathematical concepts presented in the book.

Another picture book that takes a similar approach is *The Number Devil: A Mathematical Adventure* (Enzensberger, 1998). The plot involves a boy who dreams about learning mathematics from a devil. The number devil teaches the boy mathematical principles such as exponents, matrices, prime numbers, square roots, multiplication, and division. The concept of the devil as an instructor of mathematics invites adolescent readers into this tale. Even students who typically dismiss mathematics as boring will be able to relate to *The Number Devil*.

Picture book biographies that depict the lives of famous mathematicians should simultaneously inspire students and impart mathematical knowledge. *The Librarian Who Measured the Earth* by Kathryn Lasky (1994) achieves this duality. It portrays the life of Eratosthenes, an ancient Greek who used geometry to measure the circumference of the earth. Students will learn a great deal about angles and circumference when they read Lasky's explanation of how Eratosthenes employed geometry to arrive at his calculation. This book could also serve as an inspiration to adolescents interested in pursing a career in mathematics.

Final Thoughts

In their position statement regarding adolescent literacy, the Commission on Adolescent Literacy of the International Reading Association (1999) stated that "adolescents deserve access to a wide variety of reading material that they can and want to read"

Figure 1
Picture Books Cited

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(p. 4), and Roe (2004) concluded that "students benefit when teachers broaden the curriculum materials available for their use" (p. 6). Every teacher, regardless of content area, has the inherent responsibility to provide this access. By incorporating picture books in content area classrooms, teachers can provide a wider variety of reading material to enhance their curricula. Teachers should use the elements addressed in this article as guidelines and should consider those that are most appropriate for their purpose. In addition, some guidelines may be applied across content areas.

By incorporating picture books in content area classrooms, teachers can provide a wider variety of reading material to enhance their curricula.

Several recommendations can be made for educators who decide to employ picture books as a source of supplementary materials for their content courses. First, instructors should develop additional prerequisites of their own that facilitate the achievement of specific educational objectives. These prerequisites will vary according to the objectives, purpose, and student attributes and will act as additional filters that further refine the process of selecting picture books that can most effectively be used to teach adolescents.

Second, teachers should frequently read children's literature journals to keep abreast of newly published picture books. The American Library Association publishes *Book Links*, which recommends high-quality books that can be used in the classroom. Each issue focuses on a specific curriculum area. Another reputable children's literature journal is *The Lion and the Unicorn*, which is published thrice annually by Johns Hopkins University Press. Other journals include the following: *ALAN Review, Children's Literature in Education, English Journal, The Horn Book Magazine, Journal of Adolescent & Adult Literacy, Journal of Children's Literature, New Advocate,* and *School Library Journal*.

Third, picture books can be incorporated in content area classrooms in a variety of ways. Students can be assigned to read a mutual book; this reading can be accomplished independently, in pairs, or in literature circles. Alternatively, students may self-select a book from options provided by the teacher. The ability to choose their reading material will increase their sense of autonomy, which is a developmental need of middle school students (National Middle School Association, 1996). Finally, as stated in their joint position statement, *Supporting Young Adolescent's Literacy Learning*, the International Reading Association and the National Middle School Association (2001) advocate that middle school teachers read to students daily. These read alouds can enhance students' reading skills through teacher modeling of competent reading strategies, demonstration of think alouds, and motivation to read similar materials (Ivey, 2002).

Fourth, teachers should assess the usefulness of books presented in class so that ineffective books can be substituted with effective ones for subsequent lessons. With the ultimate goal of enhancing the learning environment for their current and future students, this practice will enable educators to grow in their ability to successfully incorporate picture books in the classroom.

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