Visual Journeys

Exploring children’s visual literacy through intercultural responses to wordless picturebooks

An international research project

‘The children interpret what they see and tell the story using their own words. By doing so, they gain the confidence to contribute, adding their feelings and life experiences.’ Hagos Sinkie, EAL teacher
The Visual Journeys Project is based at The University of Glasgow

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About the Visual Journeys Project
This international project, which began in 2008, is being conducted simultaneously in four different countries: Scotland, Spain, Australia and the USA. It examines immigrant, EAL children's visual literacy and intercultural responses to wordless picturebooks on the topics of migration and journeys. Although visual skills are an important resource for migrant children, they are used to develop other literacy skills. Research on response to picturebooks has revealed how pupils can develop their literacy skills and grasp deeper layers of meaning through careful looking, story-telling and interactive discussion (Arizpe E. and Styles, M. 2003 Children Reading Pictures, London: Routledge). This project explores how the visual image can become a tool for transfiguring new educational and cultural contexts.

Picturebooks used in the study:

Project Strategies
* Walkthroughs of the book followed by discussion in pairs or small groups about the literary and visual analysis of the chosen books (from the cover and endpapers, to the author’s intentions and predictions about the text)

* Annotation of selected images from texts which gave children the opportunity to look more closely at particular images they were interested in and to make comment through writing or text marking

* The use of photographs: children invited to photograph objects/events important to them and present these pictures to the group for discussion

* The use of graphic formats, as used in the texts, to depict a journey the child has been on. Children then invited to talk about the content and design features.

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For more information on the international project or for consultancy or CPD in the UK, please contact

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Research Finding (in progress)
Findings relate to both language and literacy development:

* The children’s vocabulary and use of language showed significant development as a direct result of working with the books.

* The picturebooks provided an attractive stimulus for talking, prompting even the quiet ones to say something and relate events to what they themselves have experienced.

* The wordless nature of the books reduced the fear factor of reading books which demand a certain level of English to fully comprehend the key idea.

* The multilayered images encouraged the children to look for meaning in books and look critically – and to appreciate art for its own sake.

* All of the children were able to make sophisticated analysis of the narrative as well as the author’s intentions.

* Initially, the children did not possess a vocabulary to discuss the design features of the texts, however with ongoing discussion and the use of questions about design the children began to encompass terms about colour and layout into their responses.

* The children made use of their past lives and experiences of migration to interpret the texts, they also made frequent use of their home literacy practices citing examples from books read in their own language/s, movies, television and the Internet.

* There was an increased awareness of language diversity, personal and cross-cultural connections.