

Guest editorial: Reorienting our shared gaze: nurturing criticality in the classroom through justice-oriented picturebook constellations

English Teaching:
Practice &
Critique

201

At home, Papa cooks.

Keema and tikka masala.

We eat with our hands.

Stories of India.

fill the room.

bungalows and mango groves.

pink temples and red sunsets.

The rosy dusks sing me to sleep.

At home, Mama cooks bratwurst and schnitzel.

We eat it with forks and knives.

Stories of Germany.

fill the night.

castles and mountain.

old forests and fairy tales.

I am woven into those dreams.

At School, I speak English.

eat pizza, cheeseburgers and chips.

Books are full of bright heroes.

Chases and explosions.

flash on little screens.

like thunder, thunder, thunder--.

We talk fast.

We move faster.

Children and youth reconcile multiple worlds in their daily lives. As reflected in the experience of a young girl portrayed in the introductory excerpt of *I Can Be All Three* (2023), students mediate multiple identities and funds of knowledge (Moll *et al.*, 1992) from home while also encountering lively narratives and entering exciting networks of storyworlds in the books they read at school. However, when invited to share the story of who they are,



English Teaching: Practice &
Critique
Vol. 24 No. 3, 2025
pp. 201-204
© Emerald Publishing Limited
2059-5727
DOI 10.1108/ETPC-09-2025-206

students like the young girl featured in this picturebook too often find that nothing feels like quite enough. It is only in the classroom literature landscape where their many worlds are reflected and shine brightly that students thrive.

Sharing stories of who children and youth are, is powerful classroom practice. For this issue, we look to justice-oriented picturebooks as an essential literature to do just that. By “justice-oriented picturebooks,” we look to texts that center more ethical and equitable, anti-oppressive representations of children, their communities and the world around them. These texts also resist white, cisgender, ableist, standardizing English norms and embrace ecological justice. By bringing these texts into their classrooms, teachers can nurture students’ positive schooling experiences through story and cultivate picturebook discussions that make for a better world ([Zapata et al., 2025](#); [Zapata et al., 2023](#)).

Drawing inspiration from the luminosity of the night sky, we believe that constellations can be a generative metaphor for framing a justice-oriented stance to picturebooks, and for picturebook learning and instruction. Constellations draw our gaze to the dynamic features and meaning-making opportunities that are animated in a relational landscape like a classroom. Just as a constellation illuminates the night sky, so too can justice-oriented picturebooks captivate readers with print and illustrated features that burn bright and gather us together in solidarity in the classroom. In this special issue, the networks of theory and practice across different classroom systems elucidate what is possible in today’s sociopolitical education landscape.

In an escalating educational context of book banning and censorship, well-analysed examples of students and teachers responding to justice-oriented picturebooks are more important than ever. To add, research exemplars of “how” to critically curate and share picturebooks in the classroom are urgently needed in light of the field of children’s picturebooks justice-oriented turn ([Short, 2018](#); [Zapata, 2022](#)). This special issue builds upon and extends the existing literature on classroom picturebook pedagogy, highlighting the affordances and tensions of curating, sharing and responding to justice-oriented picturebooks in PK-12 classroom ([Brownell and Rashid, 2020](#); [Fontanella-Nothom, 2019](#)) and higher education settings ([Flores et al., 2019](#); [Wells et al., 2025](#)).

As you enter this collection, you will observe a primary focus on the three following dimensions:

- (1) children’s responses to justice-oriented picturebooks;
- (2) teachers’ critical curation of justice-oriented picturebooks; and
- (3) teacher educators’ and teacher candidates’ instruction and learning with justice-oriented picturebooks.

We specifically sought empirical research that brings a critical literature response or an antiracist/anti-oppressive lens to analysis of the classroom conditions classroom commitments, classroom practices and/or collaborations that mediate teachers’ and students’ critical encounters with justice-oriented picturebooks ([Zapata, 2024](#)). With a particular focus on justice-oriented picturebooks, research featured in this special issue offers insight into the ways children, youth and their teachers engage with the unique multimodal features and sociocultural narratives found in these texts and the constellation of resources, beliefs and practices that enliven these discussions. It also contends with the tensions and challenges of selecting and engaging with these books in a contested sociopolitical climate, and sheds light on the possibilities and potential of critical literature encounters in classroom spaces. The analyses featured offer important theoretical and pedagogical foundations for critical picturebook curators (e.g. teachers, librarians, teacher educators) researching and teaching with the print and visual narratives within justice-oriented picturebooks that feature diverse racial, linguistic, ethnic, ability and broader cultural representations.

In “Exploring Child-Nature-City Relations through Ecocritical Readings of a Diverse Environmental Picturebook,” Rebecca Woodard and Faythe Beauchemin explore the sharing of *Jayden’s Impossible Garden* (Mangal and Daley, 2021) in two distinct contexts: a literacy methods course for preservice teachers and a first-grade classroom. Through a cross-case analysis, Woodard and Beauchemin ask: How can ecocritical readings of a diverse picture book cultivate analyses and reimaginings of child-nature-city relations? Similarly, in “Reading the Waters: Picturebooks as Justice-Oriented Science and Civic Pedagogy,” Erika Holyoke, Lauren Fletcher and Jessica Ramos explore how early childhood and elementary educators integrate picturebooks to foster critical, justice-oriented science instruction, particularly through the lens of water as a relational, cultural and ecological concept. Both manuscripts orient readers to the significance of critical environmental studies for students and teachers alike and provide needed nuanced insights into how picturebooks can serve that effort.

Sarah Reid’s work in “Teachers as Critical Picturebook Curators” orients us to the significance of the picturebook selection process and how those critical curation processes unfold among five elementary teachers. Of note in Reid’s analysis is the nexus of assets teachers gather to curate justice-oriented picturebooks collections. Saba Vlach, Maria Lejia and Wintre Johnson in “We Read to Resist: How Critical Bilingual Educators Prepare for Justice-Oriented Interactive Read-Alouds,” also analyze the critical processes of teacher picturebook curation and the significant role their Humanizing Critical Sociocultural Knowledge plays in preparing for picturebook read alouds. In “We had no issues with this book at all: Affordances and challenges in fostering criticality through justice-oriented picturebooks,” Erin Hogan, James Chisholm and Amy Maupin Eisenback help us peel back the critical sensemaking preservice teachers engage in as they develop critical awareness from picturebooks and plan to facilitate critical conversations in their future classrooms. Rosa Chávez and Karla Lomelí also explore the learning of preservice teachers – this time in a mathematics methods course. In “A Creative Approach to Teaching Mathematics: Case Study Integrating Literacy and Social Justice Mathematics Using Justice-Centered Children’s Picturebooks,” Chávez and Lomelí analyze how five teacher candidates shared *Todos Iguales: Un corrido de Lemon Grove* (Hale, 2019) to plan and implement mathematics lessons focused on social justice. Across all four of these manuscripts, the depth and magnitude of teachers’ critical awareness for powerful picturebook practice is revealed, and direct implications for teacher learning toward critical curation and beliefs with justice-oriented picturebooks are offered.

As a highlight from the collection, we are thrilled to contribute detailed analyses of children’s responses to justice-oriented picturebooks in the classroom and the instructional approaches teachers use to support them. In “Me Encanta lo que Dijiste: Praise, Care, and Critical Conversations in Dual Language Read-Alouds,” Sandra Osorio and Sanjuana Rodriguez analyze how teachers’ learning from professional learning community picturebook learning and teaching, scaffolds students’ explorations of feelings and uses of translanguaging to respond to bilingual picturebooks. Rong Zhang, Mengying Xue and Xuewei Luo, in their paper entitled “Exploring Critical Literacy Responses through Interactive Read-Alouds on Racial Justice and Historical Understanding,” feature students’ understandings of race, social justice and historical inequity. Their analysis is guided by a critical literature response framework and highlights how students engage their sociocultural knowledge as they critically read justice-oriented picturebooks. Together, these articles showcase the ways children experience the sharing of justice-oriented picturebooks in their classrooms and enter critical discussion about their content.

Across classrooms and teacher learning settings, teachers and students alike can enter immersive experiences with justice-oriented picturebooks and emerge with renewed curiosity, commitment and care for a better world.

We would like to thank Dr Mengying Xue and postdoctoral candidate Maile Newberry-Wortham for their support as editorial assistants for this special issue. Together, we hope this

collection revitalizes research and practice with justice-oriented picturebooks and reorients our shared gaze back to the significance and radiance of critical literature discussion and the dynamic constellation of transformative learning located within them.

Angie Zapata and Emily Machado
Coeditors

Angie Zapata

Department of Learning, Teaching, and Curriculum, University of Missouri,
Columbia, Missouri, USA, and

Emily Machado

University of Wisconsin-Madison, Madison, Wisconsin, USA

References

- Brownell, C.J. and Rashid, A. (2020), "Building bridges instead of walls: engaging young children in critical literacy read alouds", *Journal of Curriculum Studies Research*, Vol. 2 No. 1, pp. 76-94.
- Fontanella-Nothom, O. (2019), "'Why do we have different skins anyway?': Exploring race in literature with preschool children", *Multicultural Perspectives*, Vol. 21 No. 1, pp. 11-18.
- Moll, L.C., Amanti, C., Neff, D. and González, N. (1992), "Funds of knowledge for teaching: using a qualitative approach to connect homes and classrooms", *Theory Into Practice*, Vol. 31 No. 2, pp. 132-141.
- Short, K.G. (2018), "What's trending in children's literature and why it matters", *Language Arts*, Vol. 95 No. 5, pp. 287-298.
- Wells, M.S., Morrison, J.D. and López-Robertson, J.M. (2025), "Critical reading, critical literacy, and critical classrooms: the power of using picturebooks with preservice teachers", *Handbook of Research on Reconceptualizing Preservice Teacher Preparation in Literacy Education 2022*, IGI Global Scientific Publishing, pp. 1-23.
- Zapata, A. (2022), "(Re)animating children's aesthetic experiences with/through Justice-Oriented literature: critically curating picturebooks as sociopolitical art", *The Reading Teacher*, Vol. 76 No. 1, pp. 84-91.
- Zapata, A. (2024), *Deepening Student Engagement with Diverse Picturebooks: Powerful Classroom Practices for Elementary Teachers*, National Council of Teachers of English.
- Zapata, A., Reid, S. and Adu-Gyamfi, M. (2025), "Teaching Justice-Oriented picturebooks through collaborative discussion and 'slow looking': implications for initial teacher education settings", *Education Sciences*, Vol. 15 No. 4, p. 447.
- Zapata, A., Kleekamp, M.C., Rodríguez, N.N. and Crisp, T. (2023), "Research in children's literature", *Handbook of Research on Teaching the English Language Arts*, Routledge, pp. 116-140.

Children's literature cited

- Hale, C. (2019), *Todos Iguales/All Equal: Un Corrido de Lemon Grove/A Ballad of Lemon Grove (Spanish and English Edition)*, Lee and Low Books.

Further reading

- Alikhan, S. (2023), *I Can be All Three (N. Sofi, Illus.)*, Simon and Schuster Books for Young Readers.
- Mangal, M. (2021), *Jayden's Impossible Garden (K. Daley, Illus.)*, Free Spirit Publishing.