

Teaching Democracy and Citizenship through picture books

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Traditionally, picture books have been positioned as children's literature primarily suited to be used with young children. In this article, I hope to show that this is a myth and demonstrate how picture books can be used in the English classroom with all age groups; it all depends on what picture books we choose and how we approach them.

In the *Curriculum in English* (Ministry of Education and Research, 2019), the competence aims after years 2 and 4 explicitly state that learners should be exposed to picture books. Although picture books

are not specifically mentioned under the competence aims after years 7 and 10, they can definitely be categorised under "various types of texts" and "self-chosen" texts. Hence, there is every reason to include picture books as part of the text repertoire for all age groups in the teaching of English.

What are the unique characteristics of picture books that make them so useful as language learning vehicles? First, picture books give access to stories; storytelling is universal and deeply rooted in cultural traditions. All of us, young or old, commu-

nicate through stories. The story structure helps readers to connect to other people's lives, cultures and ways of living and, hence, draw parallels and see relationships between the world and their personal world (Bradbery, 2012). Second, picture books combine two levels of communication, the visual and the verbal, which facilitates multiple constructions of meaning (Gweno Williams, 2021; Nikolajeva & Scott, 2006). This interdependence between what the words narrate and the pictures describe allows emergent readers to rely more on the images than the verbal text in their meaning making.

Finally, picture books pave the way for a dialogic way of teaching. Pictures speak to us in a different way from verbal text (Tørnby, 2019). Pictures trigger our personal reactions forming different interpretations in us. In this way, picture books spur personal engagement and involvement, which encourages the readers to become “co-authors”; we add a personal dimension to the story, and new stories may emerge. In the classroom, picture books can be read in one sitting and thus, constitute a means of creating a community of readers where students can engage in dialogue, share their personal experiences, explore complex themes together, learn to value others’ perspectives and develop critical thinking.

Democracy and Citizenship is one of two interdisciplinary topics in the *Curriculum in English* (Ministry of Education and Research, 2019). In the *Core Curriculum* (Ministry of Education and Research, 2017), the central foci of this interdisciplinary topic are clearly outlined; they involve providing students with knowledge about the basic tenets of democracy, developing students’ understanding of the relationship between democracy and key human rights, stimulating students to become active citizens and training students’ ability to think critically. *The Curriculum in English* (Ministry of Education and Research, 2019) further emphasises developing the students’ understanding of global citizenship and how their views about the world are deeply dependent on their own cultural background. In its nature, the English subject enables

students to communicate with others across borders and cultures and hence, gain insight into different ways of living and thinking. In sum, this interdisciplinary topic aims to help young people see new ways of interpreting the world, become engaged citizens and counteract prejudices. Although *Democracy and Citizenship* has been somewhat moderated in the *English Curriculum*, the central principles communicated in the *Core Curriculum* remain current.

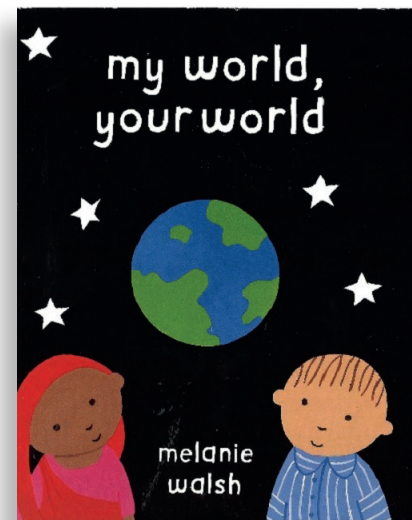
Democracy and Citizenship is a multifaceted topic including aspects such as respect and tolerance, *cultural diversity, preventing the formation of prejudices, moral decision making, social responsibility and activism, human rights, the right to vote* and last but not least, *dreaming of and hoping for a better world*. In the following, picture books that deal with these ideas aimed at different age groups are presented. However, it is important to bear in mind that many of these books can be used with a wider audience than suggested here; it all comes down to how teachers choose to approach the topic and plan their teaching.

Respect and tolerance together lay the foundation for democracy and citizenship. In picture books, children meet other children, other families and other local communities they can connect to. *My World, Your World* by Melanie Walsh (2004) encourages young students to explore differences and similarities between children around the world. The author introduces young readers to

familiar situations connected to everyday life using the following format: “Kawita wears a colourful sari to school. Jacob wears a warm jacket and snow boots. But, they both wear trainers in gym class!”

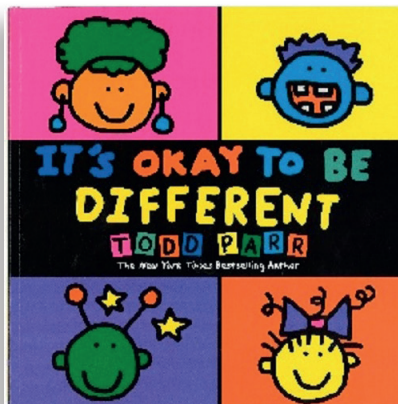
Today, our classrooms are multicultural, and children experience differences and similarities between people in their close environment. People live different kinds of lives, but deep down, people are more or less the same. Although the similarities are greater than the differences, the differences tend to occupy the foreground. Instead of disregarding the differences, we as teachers, should help students talk about them and recognise them to prevent feeding prejudices and stereotyping.

This picture book by Walsh has attractive and colourful pictures and is well suited for use with students in years 1–4.



Another picture book that encourages and embraces differences is *It's Okay to Be Different* by Todd Parr (2009). The author focuses on acceptance and individuality, as for example in, "It's okay to wear glasses. It's okay to be proud of yourself. It's okay to have different dads. It's okay to say NO to bad things." By introducing young learners to different types of families, abilities, appearances, feelings, personalities and the like, this book can serve as a springboard for teachers to initiate talk about the basic values of respect and tolerance and hence, encourage awareness of the nature and importance of democracy and citizenship in their students.

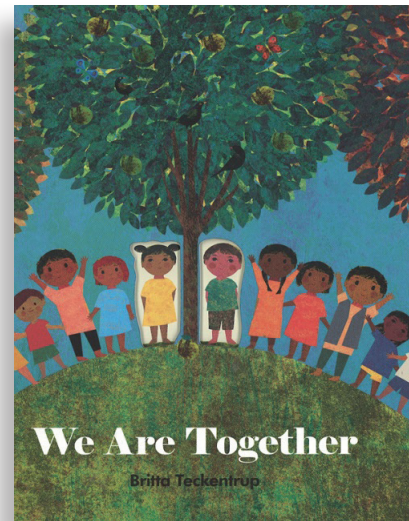
Parr's book is capable of speaking to several age groups, depending on the teacher's approach; it is recommended for primary students in years 3–5.



Closely connected to *tolerance and respect* is the concept of *cultural diversity*. As mentioned above, the interdisciplinary topic *democracy and citizenship* aims at developing an understanding of the interdependence between students' view of the world and their cultural background. In Britta Teckentrup's picture book (2019) *We Are Together*, the author celebrates cultural diversity and demonstrates the power of togetherness. It starts with our concern for our own self, dreams and hopes, but thanks to the author's creative use of peek-through pages, we gradually get to know more and more children of different ethnicities.

The message of human connectedness is clearly expressed: "Hear the song we sing to encourage and inspire. If we all sing together, one voice becomes a choir" and "We're off to climb mountains, all the way to the top. Our friends keep us going – they won't let us stop." The fact that children today are born into a society that is increasingly diverse and globalised requires teachers to create an environment in their classrooms that fosters and appreciates cultural diversity.

Teckentrup's book can help teachers nurture students' understanding of working collectively for the development of a democratic society. It is suggested for use with students in years 6–10.

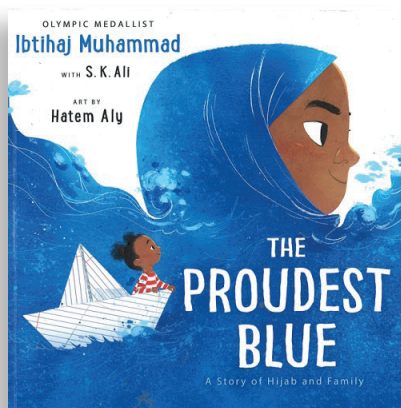


Today, myriad picture books offering an insight into different cultures are available to teachers. One example is *The Proudest Blue: A Story of Hijab and Family* by Ibtihaj Muhammad (2020). The author, who was the first Muslim American woman in a hijab to compete in the Olympic Games, tells the story of how 6th grader Asiya experiences her first day of wearing a hijab. The mixed feelings of anxiety and excitement about the start of a new school year are familiar to most students, but for Asiya, this day is very special. However, not everyone thinks Asiya's head scarf is as beautiful as the blue ocean, as she does. She is the butt of awkward questions, ridicule and even threats from her peers.

Her mother's wise words help Asiya come through the day: "Some people won't

understand your hijab. But if you understand who you are, one day they will too. Don't carry around the hurtful words that others say. Drop them. They are not yours to keep." Although our society is rich in diversity today, there are still steps to be taken before we fully acknowledge and appreciate diversity (Wolk, 2004).

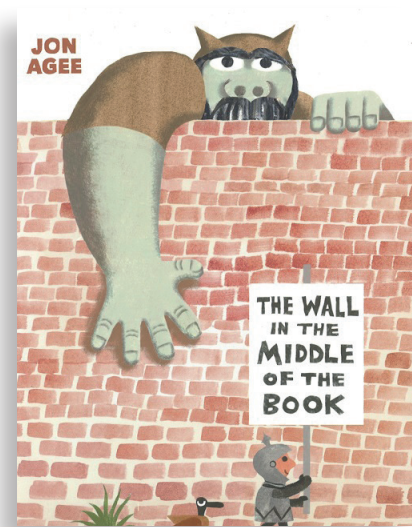
This picture book is well suited for students at upper primary level, and teachers can use it to initiate a dialogue about the meaning of the hijab and what it signifies to Muslim girls, thereby contributing to breaking down the taboo about this item. The *Curriculum in English* (Ministry of Education and Research, 2019) emphasises that working with texts will develop students' intercultural competence so that they can handle different ways of living and thinking. *The Proudest Blue* is a valuable resource for enhancing students' knowledge and understanding of global citizenship and how democracy can benefit from appreciating cultural diversity.



Preventing the formation of prejudices is a key factor in the interdisciplinary topic *democracy and citizenship* (Ministry of Education and Research, 2019). Jon Agee's picture book *The Wall in the Middle of the Book* (2019) invites readers to examine their assumptions about others. Prejudices are often associated with religion, politics and race. This book simply poses the questions: How do prejudices arise? What feeds them and what breaks them down?

In Agee's book, there is a brick wall in the middle of each double-page spread; as readers, we can observe what is happening on both sides of the wall, whereas the characters on either side cannot see those on the other. "This side of the book is safe", says a little knight, and we are sternly warned about dangerous animals and a terrifying ogre on the other side. Suddenly, rising floodwaters on the knight's side of the wall changes his world dramatically, and the only one who can save him is the ogre who turns out to be a very nice ogre. Being prejudiced against other people is like building a wall to protect "us" from "them" which may easily lead to a preoccupation with barriers and otherness.

The Wall in the Middle of the Book will help students to investigate and rethink their own assumptions about others and the world in order to break down long established prejudices. This picture book will work well with students in years 5–10.

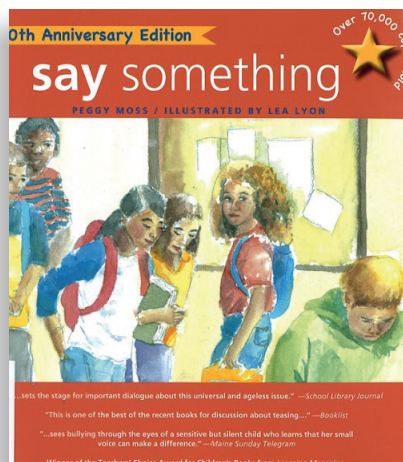


Every day we face situations that require moral decision making; for students of all ages, this is closely connected to school- and classroom-level interactions. How we choose to live our lives affects the lives of other people and the development of democracy (Wolk, 2004). Literature, and picture books in particular, introduces students to stories about other people's way of living and what dilemmas of social injustice they face.

In *Say Something!* (Moss, 2019), the author tells the story of a young girl who has witnessed fellow students being called names, having things thrown at them, and being pushed or laughed at. The main character is very clear that she would never take part in such mean things herself; she withdraws from tense

situations and says nothing to stop the bullying. Then one day, alone at lunch in the canteen, she finds herself in the hot seat when some students come up to her and start telling jokes and teasing her. Other students are watching, but they do not say anything; they remain silent bystanders just as she did herself. The next day, she decides to take some action herself and go from being a silent bystander to an upstander.

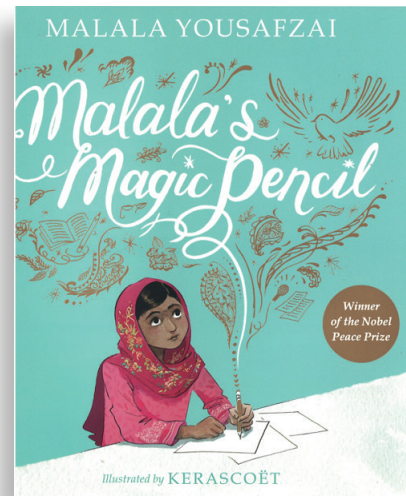
Students of all ages can connect with the protagonist in this book. There are many modes of bullying; choosing to be a passive bystander and thus, allowing others to be picked on can be seen as a kind of “soft bullying”. The *Core Curriculum* (Ministry of Education and Research, 2017) emphasises that school should stimulate the students to become active participants in society. Teachers can use *Say Something!* as inspiration and motivation for students to engage in dialogue about everyday dilemmas and moral decision making.



Moral decision making lays the foundation for social responsibility and activism which represents our personal investment in social justice and the well-being of others (Wolk, 2004). The relationship between democracy and human rights, such as freedom of speech, is clearly communicated in the *Core Curriculum* (Ministry of Education and Research, 2017).

In her picture book *Malala's Magic Pencil* (2020), the young Pakistani woman, Malala Yousafzai who was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 2014, relates how she became an activist for education for girls. As a little girl, she wished for a magic pencil to make the world become a better place. Although Malala never found such a magic pencil, she realised that she could make her voice be heard by writing and talking about her own life and the injustices she has experienced in her society such as girls not being allowed to go to school.

In her book, she concludes that “The magic is in you, in your words, in your voice. And now my voice is louder than ever. Louder because people have joined me, and together we can make a chorus, standing up for what we believe.” This vibrant picture book shows us that, although not everyone can become a Malala, everyone can support Malala and other activists, become an active citizen and foster awareness of everyone’s responsibility of reinforcing democracy. *Malala's Magic pencil* is recommended for use with students in years 6-10.s

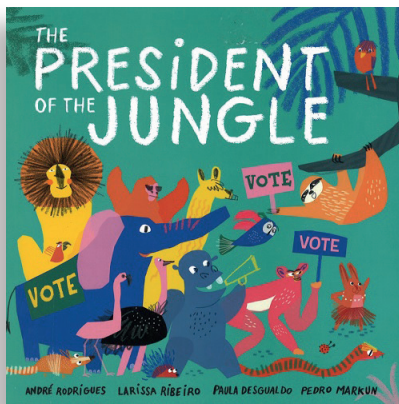


As stated in the *Core Curriculum* (Ministry of Education and Research, 2017), the right to vote is one of the basic tenets of democracy, and it is closely linked to participation in decision making processes. To empower students to become future citizens of a participatory democracy, it is critically important for students to acquire knowledge about and gain first-hand experiences of democratic elections.

In *The President of the Jungle* (2020), Andre Rodrigues gives a humorous, step-by-step introduction to how elections work. Lion, the absolute ruler of the jungle, oversteps his authority when he builds a swimming pool and diverts the river water into his own yard. The other animals object strongly to this and decide to hold an election to find a new leader, not a king this time but a president. Owl explains the

rules, and Snake, Lion, Sloth and Monkey announce their candidacy. They run campaigns, have debates, hold rallies, put up posters, take selfies with voters and sometimes argue and say bad things about the other candidates. Sloth wins the election, but not everyone is happy with the results: “So it was a good thing that there would be another election next year!”

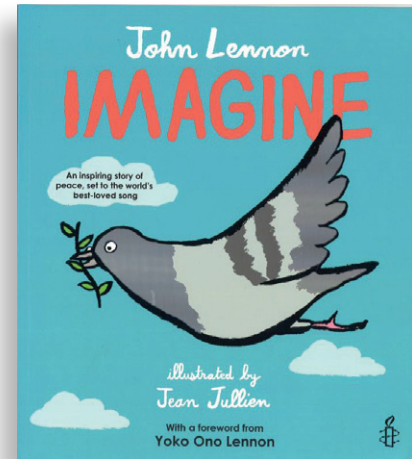
The picture book also provides the readers with a glossary of useful election terms. This lively introduction to elections is a useful resource for teachers to begin a dialogue about democratic processes directing students’ attention to our responsibilities as citizens, not justly “our rights” (Wolk, 2004). Furthermore, this picture book illuminates both the strengths and weaknesses of a democratic election process and by extension, the qualities of a democratic society. Students in years 6–10 will find *The President of the Jungle* both enjoyable and informative.



Finally, dreams and hopes can be a strong driving force for changes for a better world; history has taught us that what was expressed as a dream initially has often led to a substantial improvement in human rights, social justice and equality in society.

John Lennon’s iconic song, *Imagine*, which he wrote in 1971, is relevant today as never before: “Imagine all the people sharing all the world. You may say I’m a dreamer, but I’m not the only one. I hope some day you’ll join us, and the world will live as one.” This timeless song has been republished as a picture book called *Imagine* (Lennon & Lennon, 2018) supported by Amnesty International. A pigeon sets out on a mission to spread the word of peace directed by the lyrics of the song; on her way, she steadily gathers birds of different varieties that then stay together as a family.

This artistic and colourful picture book appeals to all age groups and should of course not only be read but also lead to music and song in the English classroom.



In the foreword to *Imagine*, Yoko Ono writes that, “We can all help to make a difference every day. Every small good thing that we can do can help change the world for the better. You can do it, I can do it, we can all do it.” These words summarise neatly the aims of teaching *democracy and citizenship* to our students. Picture books can inspire teachers to work with the different concepts of this broad topic and equip students with the necessary knowledge and devices they need to become active global citizens.

Teachers often find it demanding and time-consuming to select meaningful books that have potential to motivate students for developing reading pleasure and learning English.

As a response to this, two colleagues and I, at Østfold University College, have

created a database of picture books aimed for use in the English classroom. The books have been categorized according to age groups and themes; in addition, connections to the English Curriculum and a brief summary of each book are included.

Link to the database:



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The pictures of the covers have all been scanned by the author.