

Picturebooks as a resource for exploring language and identity in English language teaching

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Introduction

Picturebooks provide teachers with a treasure trove of possibilities for creating motivating and meaningful English lessons for Grades 1-7. Besides the benefits of teaching English through authentic multimodal texts, picturebooks “cover a myriad of themes, which can provide a variety of socially, culturally and historically appropriate material for the classroom” (Mourão, 2022, p. 36). They engage children in discovering different cultures, developing intercultural citizenship and investigating

global issues. This article explores the picturebooks *My Map Book* (2007) by Sara Fanelli, *Marisol MacDonald Doesn't Match/ Marisol MacDonald no combina* (2011) by Monica Brown and Sarah Palacios (illustrator) and *Mixed: a colourful story* (2018) by Arree Chung as resources for engaging with diverse voices and identity and representation of minorities through a translingual/transcultural lens. It examines the picturebooks from a peritextual, visual and textual perspective and gives examples of hands-on activities that aim to

develop children’s sense of self and their relationships with others in an inclusive and diverse environment.

Identity development through texts in the Norwegian National Curriculum

The concept of identity permeates both the Norwegian Core Curriculum (LK20) (Overordnet del, 2020) and the Curriculum for English (Læreplan i engelsk, 2020). One of the core values of LK20 is *Identity and cultural diversity* (2020, pp. 5-6), which

envision the development of a pupil's identity within historical, diversity, linguistic and wellbeing perspectives. Historical perspectives bring understanding, cohesion and a sense of belonging to a society into which a child is socialised. However, with increasing diversity in schools, pupils are encouraged to gain "insights into how we live together with different perspectives, attitudes and views of life" (p. 5). It is in this encounter with "different cultural expressions and traditions that pupils form their identity" in a society, which is founded on "the ideals of inclusiveness and diversity" (p. 5). Developing a personal identity is not an isolated endeavour with a narrow focus on exclusive local mono-cultures, but an interactive reciprocal experience, cemented by language. It is social, participatory and dependent on negotiating intercultural competence in translanguaging spaces, in interaction with different people and through everyday language experiences (Ibrahim, 2019). The interdisciplinary theme, Health and life skills, emphasises the development of a 'positive self-image and confident identity' (p. 14). The Curriculum for English reiterates the role of language in identity development in diverse societies: "They shall build the foundation for seeing their own identity and others' identities in a multilingual and multicultural context" (p. 3) and investigate "ways of living and traditions in different societies in the English-speaking world and in Norway and reflect on identity and cultural belonging" (p. 8). What the curriculum lacks is clear guide-

lines for teachers to create and deliver lessons that lead to these outcomes.

Picturebooks as artefacts, critical discursive spaces and language resources

Children's literature is positioned as a privileged space for developing identity narratives of belonging and cultural awareness. An encounter with English texts goes beyond purely linguistic and narrow cultural objectives. They contribute to developing "the pupils' insight into ways of living, ways of thinking and traditions of indigenous peoples" (Læreplan i engelsk, 2020, p. 3) and migrant populations. In LK20, picturebooks are positioned as texts that cover a myriad of topics: migration, climate change, gender equality, anti-bullying, sharing, inclusion, equality and diversity, intercultural citizenship, feelings and emotions and challenging issues, such as war and displacement, illness and death. Hence, through the interplay between the words and the illustrations, picturebooks support critical and discursive approaches to addressing complex themes in primary classrooms.



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Picturebooks as artefacts: peritextual ponderings (Valente, 2023)

Knowledge of the picturebook as a holistic resource is fundamental for an in-depth exploration of the theme of identity. According to Bader (1976),

A picturebook is text, illustrations, total design; an item of manufacture and a commercial product; a social, cultural, historical document; and foremost, an experience for a child. As an art form, it hinges on the interdependence of pictures and words, on the simultaneous display of two facing pages, and on the drama of turning the page. On its own terms its possibilities are limitless.

Hence, every aspect of the book, including the peritext, which constitutes the front and back covers, spine, endpapers, title page, copyright and dedication pages, dust jacket and flaps provides a pedagogical window for eliciting the theme of identity. Most importantly, this springboard initiates an age-appropriate journey into critical discussions around predicting the story, as children and teachers co-analyze the peritext, as exemplified below.

Marisol MacDonald Doesn't Match/ Marisol MacDonald no combina

Figure 1 is a dual language English-Spanish picturebook that recounts the story of a bilingual/bicultural Peruvian-American young girl, who lives between two cultures. "Her life at home, her physical appearance and her choices are a patchwork of the multiple cultural and

linguistic experiences, which are interwoven into the bilingual text and the subtle artistic elements in the illustrations" (Ibrahim, 2020, p. 25). Her mixed, colourful world includes languages, "speaking Spanish, English and sometimes both/ hablar Español y inglés, a veces al mismo tiempo" (pp. 8-9); clothes, "green polka dots and purple stripes/lunares verdes y las rayas moradas" (pp. 6-7); her Spanish/Scottish name written in cursive and print, "But I like how looks/a mí me gusta cómo luce cuando lo escribe" (p. 10); playground games, "soccer-playing pirates/ los piratas futbolistas" (p. 13); food, "peanut butter and jelly burrito/un burrito de mantequilla de maní y jalea" (p.16-17). This fluid interconnectedness decentres the monocultural norm. However, throughout the story, Marisol is constantly told she "doesn't match/no combina". Even though Marisol tries to "match" and decides to yield to the pressure of belonging on somebody else's terms, she suffers from being forced to accept an identity that is not subjectively negotiated, but socially imposed. In the end, Marisol's mixed identity is legitimized by the teacher's acceptance of her uniqueness, which is reinforced by the discovery of the teachers' own hybrid Japanese-American identity, subtly divulged in her note to Marisol, which she signs as, *Tamiko Apple*.

The peritext reflects Marisol's bilingual/bicultural world, but also reminds us that despite the many influences that constitute her identity, Marisol is still a child

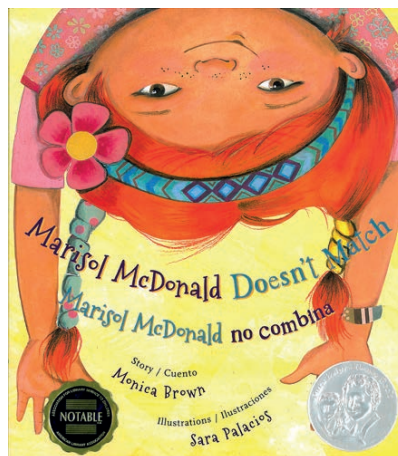


Figure 1: Marisol MacDonald Doesn't Match/
Marisol MacDonald no combina
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like any other. The upside-down image of Marisol on the front cover suggests an unconventional character, living with two languages. These are identified in the title as English and Spanish, in that order, which emphasises the majority Anglophone context she inhabits. The title page includes an illustration of food: a jar of jelly, one of peanut butter and a packet of tortillas, with a peanut butter and jelly burrito on a plate. This is an excellent opportunity to initiate a discussion of bilingual (front cover) and bicultural (title page) mixing that constitutes a bilingual identity. From a linguistic perspective, children can expand their food vocabulary by creating their own strange and wonderful dishes for a multicultural menu, based on their own backgrounds.

The endpapers consist of children's drawings, Marisol's favourite activity. There are no references to Marisol's bilingual identity, but they draw the reader's attention to the world of the child, with fantastic creatures, flowers, the sun. The endpapers remind the reader that children, no matter what their identity, require a safe learning environment, a listening adult, freedom to choose how to express, and be themselves. This picturebook gives the bilingual child a voice, visibility, and reflects the struggle to be accepted as simply a child with a unique cultural and linguistic heritage. From an interdisciplinary perspective, dual language books can build bridges between language classes, in this case Spanish. The author's homepage includes read alouds in English and Spanish, <http://www.monicabrown.net/teachers/index.php>, as well as an activity kit with identity related ideas. Including the author's voice positions the story of Marisol and Monica Brown, the American Peruvian author, within the #ownvoices movement and decolonial practices.



QR-code 1:
Free Teacher's Guide



QR-code 2:
Activity kit

Picturebooks as identity discursive spaces: mirrors, windows and sliding glass doors

Picturebooks exist in the relationship between pictures and words. In the interstices of that interdependence, complex ideas of belonging and non-belonging, social diversity and personal identity can be explored. As classrooms around the world become culturally and linguistically diverse, it is important for teachers to engage with these multiple languages and identities, not as separate entities from far-away lands, but through an exploration of local and indigenous diversities. Through the metaphor of mirrors, windows and sliding glass doors, Sims Bishop (1991, p. 1) described the invaluable role of books in ensuring representation: as windows, they offer “views of worlds that may be real or imagine, familiar or strange”; as mirrors, the children can find themselves “reflected in the books they read”; and as “sliding glass doors, readers only have to walk through in imagination and become part of whatever world has been created or recreated by the author.”

My Map Book (this picturebook was part of the ICEPro course in the Erasmus+ project ICEPELL <https://icepell.eu>) consists of twelve detailed and colourful maps, drawn from a child’s perspective, that examine children’s place in the world around them. Every double spread is a personal, yet humorous expression of self, for example, a map of my tummy, a map of my dog, a map of my heart. Hence,

this picturebook provides teachers with a flexible resource for connecting the diversity of the classroom to personal representations of the children’s lives as they search for a place of belonging, explore their sense of self and accept their multiple identities.

After a first read-aloud, where the children discover the authors’ maps, they can create their own identity maps and display them in a class Gallery of Diversity. As they explain their map choices to the class, they become both mirrors to the child’s perception of self and windows into their classmates’ world, thus deepening the connection between them. Through drawing and mapping, children can focus on important aspects of their lives, those that they treasure the most and are willing



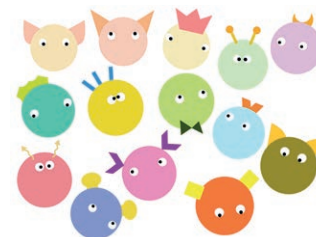
Figure 2: Map of my Thoughts.
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to share with their friends. These maps can be created by adults too, and reflect the creativity of the endeavour. Figure 2 is a thought map of a teacher who attended the English workshop on using picturebooks at the European Day of Languages conference organised by the *Fremmedspråksenteret* in September 2023.

Picturebooks as language resources: from linguistic bullying vs linguistic wellbeing

The pressure to conform, depicted in Marisol’s personal journey of acceptance, is explored in the picturebook, *Mixed* at a societal level. The picturebook celebrates individual differences and talents that contribute to a healthy society, where understanding, acceptance and peaceful co-existence prevail.

The author uses splashes of colour to depict a diverse society, which consists of the loud Reds, the bright Yellows and the calm Blues, all living together. However, this harmonious co-existence is disrupted when the Reds claim to be the best and destabilise the balance of a just and equal society. The colours move to different parts of town, living behind high walls, barbed wire and massive gates. A love



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story between a Yellow and a Blue, firstly frowned upon, brings the different communities together and little Greens are born. A metaphorical explosion of colours, visible in the endpapers, attests to the journey of acceptance and representation of mixed biracial families, that are required to navigate a blended and colour-conscious identity (Husband, 2019).

Mixed offers opportunities for developing both cross-curricular and multilingual practices in the English classroom. An art project can explore the results of colour mixing, which the children use to create their own mixed families. In the social science class, the teacher can initiate a discussion on the dynamics of different family types and the basic values that constitute the foundations of any family: love, support, kindness, honesty, respect, presence. From a linguistic perspective (the simplicity of the language, the clear lexical sets - family, colours, city, adjectives- and simple sentences), this picturebook can be transferred to other language classes. As it has been translated into other languages (Chinese, French, Italian, Portuguese and Spanish), children can engage in metalinguistic discussions around the different translations of the titles and the values they foreground. They can then choose an appropriate title from a language they know and explain their choices. The class can create a multilingual glossary of colours in different languages and scripts, with accompanying adjectives. Juxtaposing the different languages and language structures in

the translated versions allows for guided discovery of grammatical and syntactical differences, for example, the position of adjectives, and the development of strategies, such as, identifying cognates and meaning from context. The author page includes read alouds <https://arree.com/books-mixed/> and activity guides <https://arree.com/guides-activities/>, that can be adapted to different educational contexts, thus extending post-reading creativity in the Grade 1-7 classroom.

Conclusion

These literary encounters in the English language classroom constitute a reciprocal process and an unprecedented opportunity to mirror, to create a window and to explore multicultural-multilingual identities. Through a complex interplay of the text and peritext, instances of translanguaging or translations, the illustrations, the three picturebooks depict the meshing and fluid lives of children negotiating plurilingual identities. They serve as windows to the hidden diversity in the 21st century English classroom and constitute an unprecedented opportunity to address the ideals of inclusiveness and diversity in the curriculum.

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