



Waikato Journal of Education

ISSN 2382-0373
Website: <https://wje.org.nz>



Wilf Malcolm Institute
of Educational Research
Te Pātahi Rangahau Mātauranga o Wilf Malcolm
THE UNIVERSITY OF WAIKATO

Volume 27, Issue 1 2022: Special Issue: Disrupting hegemonies using picturebooks

Editorial: Striving for social justice: The power that picturebooks have to counter inequitable cultural hegemony
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Cite this article: Daly, N., & Kelly-Ware J. (2022). Editorial: Striving for social justice: The power that picturebooks have to counter inequitable cultural hegemony. *Waikato Journal of Education*, 27(1), 1–4.
<https://doi.org/10.15663/wje.v%vi%i.970>

Link to this volume: <https://doi.org/10.15663/wje.v%vi%i.893>

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Editorial: Striving for social justice: The power that picturebooks have to counter inequitable cultural hegemony

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Children's literature has a long association with education. It has transmitted cultural values to readers over many centuries, often reflecting dominant identities and cultures of the time. Picturebooks, a specific format in children's literature, are unique in their marriage of image and text and can have a powerful influence on readers' perceptions of themselves, others and the world around them. Our focus on picturebooks as a subset of children's literature reflects our view that picturebooks have a particular power for a very wide age group, from those who cannot read independently, to those who are making choices on behalf of future readers. It is the fact that picturebooks are often chosen by adults, such as parents, librarians, teachers and publishers, for readers forming their views of the world that make them of particular interest when it comes to maintaining or disrupting existing power structures.

Picturebooks date back many centuries, with one of the first known being *Orbis Sensualium Pictus* published in Nuremberg in 1658 (Salisbury & Styles, 2012); picturebooks in the modern era exist both in print and digitally. As a format using images and relatively fewer words, primarily for a child audience, picturebooks are often underestimated; however, research points to their power to communicate sometimes complicated and profound ideas through the combination of succinct text and images (Arizpe & Styles, 2015; Kelly & Kachorsky, 2022; Wilson, 2021).

Picturebooks are carriers of culture and values, and as such they have the power to either support or disrupt existing power structures in a society. Bishop (1990) introduced a metaphor, comparing children's literature to windows, mirrors and glass sliding doors. This well-known metaphor reminds us that when we read picturebooks we may see ourselves (mirrors), see others (windows), and have a chance to step into other worlds (glass sliding doors). Nikolajeva (2017) explores how the combination of text and image in picturebooks creates a space where young readers can learn to deduce the feelings of others. Statistics from the Cooperative Children's Book Center at the University of Wisconsin-Madison show that minoritised groups often see more windows than mirrors in the children's literature available in the United States of America (Cooperative Children's Book Center, 2018). This means that children from dominant groups see more of themselves than others in the books they read. The corollary of this is that children from minoritised groups see themselves less frequently, and this replicates hegemonic power structures in society.

In the 21st century the dominance of some ideologies or worldviews over others is starkly evident. Dominant ideologies and discourses inform how people, including children and young people, make sense of the world and their place in it. Hegemony, a term from ancient Greece which refers to the dominance of one group over another through a variety of means, was taken up by Gramsci, an Italian



Marxist and philosopher (1891–1937). Gramsci’s notion of cultural hegemony referred to the economic, social and political dominance of one group over another. In its original form hegemony was about consent, resistance and coercion (Hoare & Nowell Smith, 1971). Artz and Ortega-Murphy (2000) argue that “hegemony as a process is neither good nor bad. Hegemony is about hierarchical relations and vested interest. The most important questions is, Who is dominant and for what purpose, and who is subordinate and what do they gain or lose?” (p. 4).

Holding the imaginary of a just and fair society in mind, anyone seeking to make a difference needs to question and judge everyday practices as well as the system (Thomson, 2002). Education settings can be seen as key sites where social and cultural hegemonic relations are reproduced. Hence in many education settings, from ECE to tertiary, educators are tasked with being culturally responsive and teaching students critical thinking skills. Following a Gramscian conception of hegemony where the focus is on “the power of ideas and consensus, the power to shape conceptions of normal seems to be at its heart” (Diez, 2013, p. 195). In Aotearoa New Zealand, for example, through the early childhood education curriculum, teachers are introduced to critical theory in order to promote equitable practices with students and their families. The curriculum authors state that “critical theory perspectives challenge disparities, injustices, inequalities and perceived norms” (Ministry of Education, 2017, p. 62).

Teaching students to question ideas about what is legitimate and normal is part of developing what Freire (1996) called “critical consciousness”—that is an awareness of social inequalities—“to read the world through the word” (p. 34). Such consciousness is fundamental to equitable and transformative practices in terms of cultural responsiveness and inclusion in education and society. Hegemony and hegemonic relations can be seen as useful constructs for understanding culture and recognising bias in terms of ability, race, ethnicity, skin colour, gender/sex/sexuality, social class, employment status, religion, spirituality and their intersections. The importance of these intersections is increasingly recognised in resisting essentialising and recognising the compounding of disadvantage that may be present in people’s lives through the different facets of their identities

Critical thinking and critical literacy—being able to see and read the world in terms of hierarchical relations and vested interest—are vital skills for 21st century learners in the complex, and increasingly global, diverse societies we live in. In order to counter inequitable and oppressive hegemony, first we need to recognise it. The new history curriculum in Aotearoa New Zealand schools, for example, is one such attempt to expose the hierarchical relations and vested interests present in whose history was being taught. The dominance of colonial power and the systematic oppression of Indigenous peoples is a familiar story in many countries. Gramsci’s original conception of hegemony was founded in history and political activity (Artz & Ortega-Murphy, 2000); the articles in this special issue continue this tradition.

For this special issue of the *Waikato Journal of Education* we invited submission of proposals for articles concerning picturebooks (both fiction and nonfiction) being used in educational contexts with children and adults to disrupt hegemonic thinking. We were thrilled with the range of articles that we received in response to our call. Each article approaches hegemonic relations from a different perspective, providing a kaleidoscope of confrontations and oppositions to the status quo.

Not only do the articles come from contexts around the world, including Aotearoa New Zealand, Australia, Canada, China, New Caledonia, and the United States of America, they also address power structures in a range of spaces—classrooms, countries, languages, cultures and identities.

Hilary Smith and Leanne Pryor share their development of bilingual picturebooks to challenge the hegemony of English, and support the reawakening of Gamilaraay, an Indigenous language of New South Wales, Australia. Their work shows how the development of bilingual picturebooks also preserves the Indigenous knowledge encoded in the picturebooks.

Florence Boulard introduces us to picturebooks from New Caledonia, arguing for the potential of these picturebooks to offer windows and mirrors into the rich multicultural and multilingual landscape of this Pacific nation. She argues that picturebooks can challenge established power structures by offering insights into traditionally less visible Indigenous cultures.

Using an autobiographical narrative inquiry in response to four multicultural Canadian picturebooks, Emma Chen and Yina Liu disrupt the hegemony of single stories in relation to identity, exploring the negotiation of transcultural identities through the theoretical lenses of transnational identity, immigrant parent knowledge, mirrors and windows, and no single story.

Patricia Ong uses a critical multiculturalism lens to analyse 15 multicultural picturebooks from a public library collection. Her critical content analysis reveals themes which give insight into aspects of the picturebooks which have the power to challenge cultural hegemonies.

Cynthia Ryman uses a critical reflexive literacy approach with a single picturebook as a catalyst and a lens to consider different forms of bias. Through critical content analysis of the various forms of bias along with a reflective exploration of the picturebook, Ryman provides a context for better understanding the subtle pervasiveness of biases and power imbalances in social systems.

Vivien van Rij also focuses on a single picturebook, highlighting how it offers the reader opportunities to consider alternatives to established understanding of history. The hegemonic voice that she questions relates to colonisation, Indigeneity and social class. She argues that this picturebook is an ideal text for teachers in Aotearoa New Zealand to use in teaching the new history curriculum.

During the recent lockdowns in New Zealand in response to COVID-19, many households put bears in their windows to give children something to search for on walks with their families. Carol Mutch wrote several digital picturebooks featuring a toy bear during lockdown and in their article Mutch and co-author Noah Romero share findings from their analysis of conversations with four families who read these picturebooks to their children. Their research revealed a challenge to the hegemony of peer group relations in school settings.

Contemporary “best behaviour” picturebooks are the focus of the article by Ying Zou and Xudong Tan. They present a critical reading of three best behaviour picturebook series available in the Chinese market. Zou and Tan argue that the dominant hegemonic voice in best behaviour picturebooks is an adult voice, and that children’s voices are constrained.

Pamela Malins and Pam Whitty conducted conversational research with parents to gauge their level of comfort with picturebooks featuring diverse gender and sexuality. Their participants shared books and stories that reflected topics of gender expression, gender identity, gender harassment and family composition. This article reinforces the power of recognition that children and young people and their families experience when encountering LGBTQ2+ characters in picturebooks.

Kate Morgan and Nicola Surtees share research about the use of picturebooks in early childhood centres to support the inclusion of gender diverse children and lesbian and gay-parented families. They argue that expanding the curriculum beyond heteronormative understandings may cause teachers some discomfort as topics may arise that are considered dangerous or risky. This article concludes with recommendations to support teachers facilitating picturebook sessions.

It is our hope that the articles in this special issue contribute to our understanding that despite the fact that we are all part of a connected humanity, inequalities are perpetuated through everyday practices and the system. As one of our authors, Cynthia Ryman explains, “... deeply held ideologies and biases impact perceptions of reality, and awareness of how biases affect one’s perception of reality is an important factor in developing greater self-awareness and combating hegemonic thinking” (p. 12). We believe the articles in this special issue clearly illustrate the power that picturebooks have to counter inequitable hegemonies which impede the pursuit of social justice for all.

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