

Creating a Picturebook in Europe's Most Ancient Town

A Study on Picturebooks for Community Development

Ivan Botev

Department of International Communication and Culture

This paper describes the methodology and organization of the study. The first section presents the participants and the role of the researcher. The second section discusses the materials used including the five picturebooks and the matrix. The third describes the readings of the books and explains the procedures in the study. The fourth section discusses the design of the study including the issue of objectivity in readers' responses. Finally, the last section looks into the data collection and analyses.

The author gratefully acknowledges the support of Toyo University and The Toyota Foundation (D15-R-0331).

The Participants and the Researcher

The Participants

The study took place in two different settings, at an elementary school in Bulgaria and at a university in Japan. The elementary school is in a school district in the second largest city in Bulgaria, Plovdiv and the fact that it is my own alma mater provided easier access to students and teachers. The enrollment of the school is approximately 600 students with six classes in each grade. The student population mainly includes Bulgarian students but also most ethnic minorities in the country are represented, along with some students from Far Eastern (China) and war-torn (Syria) countries. Such school population dynamics are observable in most schools in a big city like Plovdiv. The university is centrally located in Tokyo, Japan and is the eighth largest tertiary institution by student population in the

country. While most enrolled students are Japanese, there is a growing number of international students from Asia (China, Vietnam, Korea, and others) and from other parts of the world (Brazil, Colombia, and others).

The two sites were selected for several reasons. The elementary school is in the same building as my junior high school alma mater and therefore I had easier access because some of the teachers used to teach me. Additionally, my mother is a Physical Education teacher in the junior high school and, provided that I reside in Japan now, helped me with organizational matters before and after my visits to the site. As a full-time English lecturer at the Faculty of Regional Development Studies at the university, I was able to read the five picturebooks used in this study with my own students and later collect data of their reader responses. The picturebooks contained social issues such as urbanization, environmental problems, neighborhood politics, children's rights, etc. — issues that my students learn about in their four years in college.

The overall data collection process involved nine elementary school students and their home room teacher in Bulgaria in the pilot study, 204 university students in Japan, and 30 elementary school students in the final picturebook readings in Bulgaria for a total of 244 respondents. In all, 54% of the respondents were female and 46% — male. With university students, the five picturebooks were read in a 90-minute English class setting with the readings done in English, using the original books, while pages

were also displayed using projectors and computer screens for a closer, more detailed look by students. The second group of elementary school students were gathered in a so-called book-cafe — a cafe offering free access to books for reading, as well as books to purchase. The original books in English were used and they were translated into Bulgarian by the researcher as they were read. Several homeroom teachers were present at all times and offered assistance when needed.

Role of the Researcher

Students at the elementary school had heard about me — a Bulgarian young man living in Japan who would come to their class and read some interesting picturebooks — thanks to their teachers' prior introduction, presenting me in a favorable light. Elementary school students participating in this study proved to be very disciplined for their age, listened with interest, and asked questions about the book being read, its story, and the characters in it. Although one day I would be teaching in university in Japan and on the next would be doing read-alouds with elementary school students and their teacher in their classroom in Bulgaria, feeling welcomed and the students being ready to read, discuss, and respond, provided for a very positive atmosphere for data collection.

In my role as a lecturer at the university, I was familiar with the school curriculum, the three main study areas my students focused on — community development, environmental issues, and sanitation, as well as what they were interested in academically and career-wise. The local and international problems my students were learning on the undergraduate level were what pushed me to pursue a PhD in the same Faculty's graduate school.

Preliminary Research

In the beginning of this study, I interviewed a number of teachers at the elementary school, finding

out about their students in general, learning about the current school curriculum, and also discussing the lack of local learning environment lessons (city, neighborhood, street, etc.), material, and time allotted across the curriculum. The same teachers later were very helpful in organizing class observations and picturebook readings while I visited there during school and vacation periods.

When reading picturebooks with elementary school students (second grade), one problem that arose was that the students' difficulty in expressing their thoughts and ideas mainly in written format but also orally. This had to do with the fact that they were still developing many of their communication skills. To solve this problem, I asked the students to not only answer in sentences but to draw pictures as their response to the book read in class (Pantaleo 2008). I also simplified the matrix (Yoshizaka 1973) used in this study, making it more easily accessible by young learners.

The idea about including college students as participants in this study came because of the need of an age group in which readers were still not adults, had had an experience with reading picturebooks, and could express their thoughts and ideas (responses) in a more sophisticated way. Including students from different age groups and different nationalities reading the same books also provided for the objectivity in the collected data (reader response).

When picturebook readings were done with the elementary school students, their homeroom teacher was present and was mainly focused on the overall discipline of the class but also, as someone knowing their students well, helped when students were writing down their responses (Pantaleo 2008). I read translations (I had done earlier) of the five books, in the form of read-alouds, during which pages were visible to students. After each read-aloud the picturebook was available for students to look at for themselves in detail. A short discussion followed, then students were given the simplified matrixes to

fill out and sheets of paper to draw their pictorial responses on.

With college students, each picturebook was read in a 90-minute class called Media English (the picturebooks being a media format) taught in a computer assisted language learning classroom. In the beginning of class there would be a short introduction to the book and the issues it covered, followed by a read-aloud using the actual book. After the initial reading, students were provided with their own digital copy (for use in class only), so that they could freely go back and forth as needed, as they provided their reader responses filling out the matrix provided to them on paper.

Materials

A Bus Called Heaven

Bob Graham, in his book "A Bus Called Heaven" (Walker Books, 2012), tells the story of a dilapidated bus, young Stella, and an urban community. The abandoned bus has a hand-painted sign on it — "Heaven." As Stella looks at it she says, "Mommy, that old bus is sad as a whale on a beach." Community members move the bus into Stella's yard where they clean, repaint, and turn it into a gathering space. When one day the bus is towed away to a junkyard, Stella shows strength of character and wins it back by challenging the junkyard boss at table football. This time the bus is placed into an empty lot where it is again used by Stella and her community. This book shows the longing people have for a true community and how children like Stella, with their different perspective of society and its rules, stand up to authority to do the right thing. This book teaches readers several skills: how to live harmoniously in a diverse urban community, how to follow their dreams however big or small they are, and how to hold a different perspective of the world they live in and not necessarily follow established views.



Figure 10. Bob Graham, *A Bus Called Heaven*, Walker Books, London (2012)

Belonging

A wordless book, Jeannie Baker's "Belonging" (Walker Books, 2004), follows the life of a girl, from her birth to her twenties, and the changes occurring in and around her inner-suburban home. Through the window of the girl's room we observe how her local community takes action and reclaims the street and an unoccupied lot in front of the girl's house, making them a pedestrian-only area. This in turn helps bring back nature and turns the area into an "urban oasis." Despite the lack of words, this book is compelling thanks to the detailed collages that show how an alienating city street becomes a place to call home, get married, and raise a child of your own. Picturing life in an urban area, this book teaches readers the importance of human connections and bringing nature into the city, because we do not own the land — we depend on it "to feed us and support us and inspire us" (Baker, 2004).

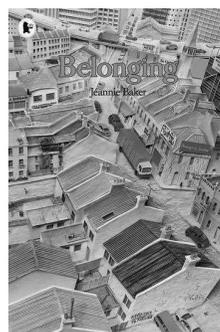


Figure 11. Jeannie Baker, *Belonging*, Walker Books, London (2004)

The Streets Are Free

The third picturebook is based on a true story, painting the life of the children in the barrio (informal settlement or a slum) of San Jose de la Urbina, near Caracas, Venezuela's capital city. After the mayor breaks his promise to build the children a playground, they realize that they have to build it themselves. This is a story of how, faced with hardships but also through discussion and taking action, a local community unites in its effort to improve the lives of its youngest members. In this book students learn about human migration and urbanization processes. The book touches on municipal politics and interests, and shows the difference between "top-down" procedures and "bottom-up" movements. While the story may be happening in a far-away corner of the world, it resonates with students now as they experience both disconnection from nature and time spent outdoors.

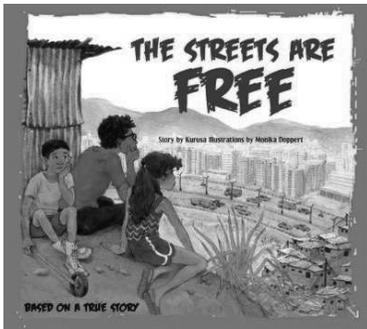


Figure 12. Kurusa, *The Streets are Free*, Annick Press, Buffalo, NY (1995)

Tar Beach

Cassie Louise Lightfoot, the main character in this book, is an eight-year-old girl who can fly above "tar beach" — her apartment building rooftop — in 1939 Harlem. This emblematic story is full of historical and symbolic references essential to African-American culture. As little Cassie dreams of power and freedom she magically helps her family by flying over buildings and thus claiming them. The story illustrates a Depression era family's struggles — e.g., Cassie's father and grandfather have been denied

membership in the union because of their race. In Faith Ringgold's award-winning book we encounter new characters and their relationships in the neighborhood and in the community. This book shares a bold idea of flying and in this way claiming buildings and landmarks to empower a little girl's family in need. "Tar Beach" gives a lesson on how not to be confined in societal dogma but to remain children at heart and to continue nurturing imagination and creativity in ourselves throughout our lives.

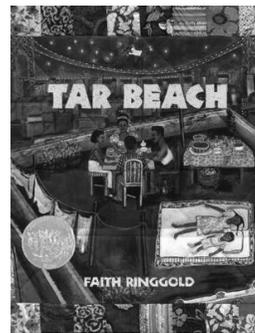


Figure 13. Faith Ringgold, *Tar Beach*, New York (1991)

This is Paris

Miroslav Sasek takes us on a journey with this travelogue book. Through exquisitely detailed pictures and a hint of mischievousness in the text, we take a Parisian stroll to meet people from diverse backgrounds, explore historical buildings and landmarks, and enjoy the nature and animals in Paris. Informative picturebooks such as this one can easily be part of a classroom book collection, ensuring frequent readings by students. This book is a great exploratory tool to either better understand one's own city or to learn more about a place one may have never visited. Students commented that it became clear that they would like to even produce a book like "This is Paris" about their own hometown; reading the book stimulated imagination and creativity in them.

The five books are examples of local living environment-themed picturebooks that can be

implemented as supplementary educational material school curriculums. These five multicultural picturebooks have been carefully selected not only as award-winning books from various countries (Australia, Venezuela, the U.S. and France) but also because of *the local living environment theme* they all represent. More specifically, these five picturebooks were used in this study because each one of them embodies one of the five elements in Yoshizaka's Concept of Local Living Environment: *people, neighborhood, community, town/city, and environment*.

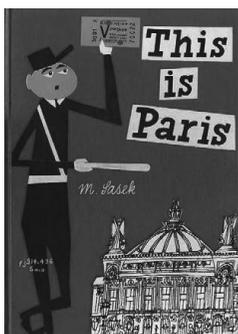


Figure 14. Miroslav Sasek, *This is Paris*, New York (2004)

Procedure

Pilot Study

First, I conducted a pilot study with a group of nine elementary school students and their teacher in Bulgaria. The purpose of the pilot study was to determine students' reactions to readings of the five selected picturebooks and to analyze students' written responses to the books. Response categories also emerged through the pilot study and were used in the main study, being included in the local living environment response matrix. The pilot study revealed that the five selected picturebooks were appealing to elementary students, which also confirmed that they were good choices for the main study. Getting to know the students, their teachers, and what is covered (and not covered) through discussions with them helped better prepare for the main study organizationally and logistically.

Originals of the five picturebooks were read aloud with translations I had prepared in advance and, since children were seated in a circle, illustrations were visible to readers. Students responded that, although they had read many picturebooks, it was their first time to read not only those specific books, but also any picturebooks displaying local living environment issues. Both students and teachers commented that they wanted to have a copy of the books for use in the classroom and that they hoped that local picturebook makers will one day produce books covering similar themes. In the meantime, students said that they wanted to design a picturebook that displays their street, their town, their school — their world.

The five picturebooks were read one after another on a summer morning in the students' regular classroom in their elementary school. Breaks were taken when necessary, taking into consideration the young learners' focus spans. Snacks and drinks were offered during the short breaks in which students, teacher and researcher discussed the previously read book.

Because the English editions of books were used in this study, the author translated them into Bulgarian simultaneously as they were read. Although the books were available to students to look at again and in more detail and titles were translated into English, the homeroom teacher and researcher offered help at all times, especially when students were writing their responses on paper, hence the correct titles of books appear in full in students' responses.

Written responses to the picturebooks showed that response prompts need to be more specific and matrix simplified to elicit some direction for the readers' responses. During the pilot study, the response prompts were somewhat general, and came from the elementary school teacher, ensuring that students answer in writing all the questions written on the blackboard and explained by the teacher. The teacher, knowing her students well, wrote four long

but simple questions on the blackboard. After that, students read the questions aloud while the teacher made sure the questions were clear. Once that was ensured, students were asked to write their answers in full sentences on the paper provided to them. (See Appendix ? for the four questions.) The questions and the responses prompted the design of the matrix used in the main study with elementary school and college students, which is also based on Yoshizaka's (1973) concept of local living environments (people, neighborhood, community, town/city, environment).

The Main Study

The main study was comprised of a larger number of elementary school students than the pilot study and more ethnicities that constitute the population of Bulgaria. It also included an element of responses in an illustrated form, giving young learners another medium in which to express themselves. In Japan, the picturebooks were to be read with college students one by one in 90-minute classes eliciting more sophisticated written responses.

Japanese university students were mainly in their first and second year and the five multicultural picturebooks about *local living environments* were read in a 90-minute English class setting with the readings done in English, using the original books, while pages were also displayed using projectors and computer screens for a closer, more detailed look. As a way of coding and categorizing responses blank tables (see the five tables in this study in chapter 4, results) were given to readers to write their responses only in the boxes they felt appropriate fit for the story right after the readings were done. Two sets of short discussions took place — one before and another after the read-aloud. The typology for the five categories used in the tables (vertical — structure and space /hard/, horizontal — functions and activities /soft/) 1. people, 2. neighborhood, 3. community, 4. town/city, and 5. (living) environment was based on Yoshizaka's concept of local living environment in

combination with responses that emerged during data collection and analysis. This was done to assign conceptual labels to respondents' statements and then group these conceptual labels into a manageable number of categories (Sipe, 2015) using the reader response theory analysis. Also, as part of the reader response theory concept, specific response prompts were used in the study to elicit some direction for the responses and to focus attention on images, format and story before picturebooks were read to students. For example, depending on which book was read students were told to pay attention to the way people behaved when facing difficulties, how the community gets stronger when united, in what way nature (and the lack thereof) is represented in an urban environment, whether people feel happiness and live in harmony with one another in neighborhoods, communities and cities, etc.

A similar procedure was followed with elementary school students in Bulgaria where students were also asked to provide an illustration as a response to the reading in addition to their written response (usually not very long). Another difference was the lack of discussions — picturebooks were read aloud, students who wanted to see the book for themselves were allowed to do that, and written and illustration responses were given right after the readings. This was done with the short attention spans of young learners in mind. Students were given enough time to complete their oral and illustration responses to their satisfaction. Students tended to focus more on the illustration responses, whereas they tried to finish their written responses quickly.

These two particular age groups — elementary school and college students — were selected for this study based on the notion that the latter have both had experience with such literature in their youth and that at their age and educational level they could express themselves in a sophisticated way in their responses, and the former is the one that is in actual need of local living environment picturebooks as

educational material. As stated earlier, collecting data through reader responses from elementary school students only became problematic in the beginning of this study due to difficulties in expression in written form by students in this age group. Although Bulgarian elementary school students, the lack of local living environment, and the use of local living environment picturebooks as the necessary educational tool to fill this gap in the current curriculum by fostering a sense of belonging in young learners are the focus of this study, university students not only delivered the necessary sophisticated reader responses but in the process also proved another point — that local living environment picturebooks can nurture a sense of belonging in variety of age groups.

Design of Study

The previous sections described the participants and the researcher's role, the materials used in the study, and the methods of the pilot and main studies. The next section will discuss the design of the study.

The *Reader Response Theory* used in this study is a method that focuses on the reader (audience) and his/her experience of a literary work. It examines the extent and diversity of reader reaction and analyzes the ways in which different readers make meaning of personal reactions and inherited or culturally conditioned ways of reading. According to Rosenblatt (1938), this method entails a negotiation between the text's inferred meaning and the individual interpretation by the reader through the lens of their personal emotions and understanding of the world; in the transaction between the reader and the text, the reader constructs meaning. Sipe (2008) examined reader response in multimodal context by looking at students' responses to picturebooks. Past experience with text and knowledge of text conventions influence the reader's response and contribute to valid interpretations. What the reader brings to the multimodal text (picturebooks) individualizes the

response (Galda & Beach, 2001). Meaning is not intrinsic in text itself — it places a demand on the reader to work together with the author/artist of a picturebook. Because thematically selected picturebooks can cultivate a feeling of belonging and a rekindled sense of identity as a member of a given community only after they have been read, the reader response theory was useful in this study in analyzing readers' reactions after readings of the five books.

Another reason the reader response theory was used in this study is because of its importance in ensuring objectivity in reader's responses. To understand whether multicultural picturebooks about local living environments can actually nurture a stronger sense of belonging, it was necessary to keep instructions to a minimum (although some instructions were necessary and were given to students in the beginning of class) before picturebook readings and ensure freedom and creativity when students filled out the blank tables (matrix) used in this study. The reader response theory is grounded exactly in this autonomy in reader reaction to a given literary work, especially when read for the first time — the case in this study. Consequently, the utilization of this theory in the study assured objective responses given by the students after readings of the five picturebooks specifically selected for this study.

Trustworthiness

In order to verify trustworthiness in this study several procedures were utilized to address the issues of reliability and validity. A good level of trust had been established between the college students and I, given the fact that I was their English teacher in more than one class. At the same time, my students knew neither that I was a PhD candidate nor anything about my research theme. Throughout the study a good rapport between researcher and elementary school students was established as well. The role of the homeroom teacher played an important part.

Cross-referencing (triangulation) of data also

played a part in adding to the trustworthiness of the data. Data was collected from students in the form of written responses, through filling out the matrix, and in an illustration form. Interviews with elementary school teachers, university professors, publishers, and journalists in Bulgaria provided a variety of compiled data as well which, once analyzed, confirmed conclusions made earlier through the above-listed collected data.

In addition, although students of different nationalities, cultures, and ages participated in this study, a remarkable aspect that became apparent in this particular study was the similarity in their responses in the way they comprehend the stories and messages in the five multicultural picturebooks.

Data Analysis and Conclusion

This study was designed to answer the research questions that follow:

- How do readers respond to living environment picturebooks?
- How do readers make meaning in a picturebook?
- Do readers recognize serious issues when presented in a picturebook format?
- How do picturebooks nurture a sense of belonging in readers?

Data collected and analyzed included student written responses, illustration responses, class discussions, interviews with homeroom teachers, local university professors, elementary school textbook publishers, and journalists covering education in the city. Student written responses, based on the reader response theory, played a major role in this study showing how students react to readings of local living environment picturebooks. Illustration responses were added towards the end of the study as a way to contribute through the creativity and imagination learners at this age possess in abundance as they responded to the thematic children's literature. Interviews conducted during preliminary, as well as in later, stages of study also added toward answering

this study's research questions.

Readers' responses were coded based on categories emerging from the data itself. The categories were predetermined only to a certain level - matrix and picturebook selection were based on Yoshizaka's concept. After the pilot study was conducted, codes began to take shape and were confirmed by data collected in the main study.

The analyses (count; categorization) were done manually and the percentage (%) shown in each box in the tables displays the frequency a word or an expression appeared in student answers. Student responses differed in word selection and I categorized them into similar groups according to their meaning. The main keywords (most frequently used) are provided in bold letters and a line has been drawn in each table following those keywords, displaying how the story in each picturebook develops. In the overall student responses after the reading of a picturebook we see different structure patterns. These patterns indicate both how a story in a picturebook unfolds and also how the students themselves understand the given picturebook story. This helps not only to show the living environment elements these picturebooks contain but also the relationship between those elements, and readers' understanding of them. These analyses help shed more light on how such literature assist in cultivating a sense of belonging in readers.

Since the discussion and the interviews were based on questions, the data was basically organized in general categories. Responses were represented according to the questions that were asked. One way the illustrations created by students were analyzed was for picturebooks conventions: perspective, narration, captions, time, motions, etc.

Bibliography:

Picturebooks

- Baker, J. (2004). *Belonging*. Walker Books: London
- Graham, B. (2013). *A Bus Called Heaven*. Walker Books: London
- Kurusa. (1995). *The Streets are Free*. Annick Press: New York.
- Ringgold, F. (1991). *Tar Beach*. Dragonfly Books: New York.
- Sasek, M. (2004). *This is Paris*. Universe: New York

References

- Arizpe, E. & Styles, M. (2008). A critical review of research into children's responses to multimodal texts. In J. Flood, S. B. Heath, & D. Lapp (Eds.), *Handbook on teaching literacy through the communicative and visual arts, Vol. II* (pp. 363-373). New York: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.
- Beach, R. (1993). *A teacher's introduction to reader-response theories*. Urbana, IL: NCTE.
- Bland, D. (1962). *The Illustration of Books (1951). Third edtn.*
- Bomer, R. (2008). Literacy classrooms: Making minds out of multimodal material. In J. Flood, S. B. Heath, & D. Lapp (Eds.), *Handbook on teaching literacy through the communicative and visual arts, Vol. II* (pp. 353-361). New York: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.
- Bowers, C. A. (2005). The false promises of constructivist theories of learning: A global and ecological critique (Vol. 14). Peter Lang.
- Brenner, R. (2006). Graphic novels 101: FAQ. *Horn Book Magazine*, 82 (2), 123-125.
- Bronfenbrenner, U. (1979). *The ecology of human development: Experiments by design and nature*.
- Carter, J. B. (2007). Introduction — Carving a niche: Graphic novels in the English language arts classroom. In J. B. Carter (Ed.), *Building literacy connections with graphic novels: Page by page, panel by panel* (pp. 1-25). Urbana, IL: NCTE.

- Christiansen, H-C. (2000). Comics and film: A narrative perspective. In A. Magnussen & H. Christiansen (Eds.), *Comics and culture: Analytical and theoretical approaches to comics* (pp.107-122). Copenhagen: Museum usculanum Press.
- Chute, H. (2008). Comics as literature? Reading graphic narrative. *PMLA*, 123 (2), 452-465.
- Culler, J. (1980). Literary competence. In J. P. Tompkins (Ed.), *Reader-response criticism: From formalism to poststructuralism* (pp. 101-117). Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press.
- De Saussure, F. (1989). *Cours de linguistique générale: Édition critique* (Vol. 1). Otto Harrassowitz Verlag.
- Dewey, J. (1891/1980). *Schools and society*. Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois University Press.
- Dewey, J. (1921). *Democracy and education: An introduction to the philosophy of education*. New York: MacMillan.
- Eisner, W. (1996). *Graphic storytelling and visual narrative*. Tamarac, FL: Poorhouse Press.
- Endoh, Y. (2015) *Konna Machi ni Sumitai Na* [In Japanese]. Tokyo: Shobunsha
- Faust, M. A. & Glenzer, N. (2000). "I could read those parts over and over": Eighth graders rereading to enhance enjoyment and learning with literature. *Journal of Adolescent & Adult Literacy*, 44 (3), 234-239.
- Fraser, J. (1981). "Internationalism" and the Children's Literature Community in the United States: A Second Look. *The Library Quarterly*, 51 (1), 54-67. The University of Chicago Press.
- Galda L, & Beach, R. (2001). Response to literature as a cultural activity. *Reading Research Quarterly*, 36 (1), 64-73.

