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# The **POWER** of **Picture Books**



Using Content Area Literature in Middle School

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# 1 The Power of Picture Books

*The answers you get from literature depend on the questions you pose.*

—Margaret Atwood

Consider the following passages from social studies, science, and mathematics:

The warrior must stand in the middle of a meadow, up to his knees in rushes. Nine members of the Fianna will hurl their spears at him; he must defend himself with only a shield and hazel stick. If he is wounded, he has failed the test. (Harpur, 2007, unpagged)

The ollie is a skateboard move for hopping over objects. . . . The science behind an ollie is about shifting your weight and obeying Newton's third law of motion ("For every action there is an equal and opposite reaction"). (Mercer, 2006, p. 13)

A number's a number, right? Wrong, says Sam. We've got natural numbers (1, 2, 3, and so on) and whole numbers, which are the natural numbers and zero (0, 1, 2, 3 . . .)—hey, did you know that when Indian mathematicians first began using zero, the Europeans actually thought it was evil? (Lee & O'Reilly, 2007, p. 9)

Where might we find such rich descriptions? In a textbook? Indeed not. These passages come from "picture books" meant for older readers. These texts draw us in while simultaneously teaching something new and engaging about their topics. As textbooks expand upwards to 900 pages in length, few snag the interests of middle school students. More does not make better. Yet as educators, we realize the importance of content studies. Not only must we meet the goals of national or state content standards, but we also have the responsibility to develop informed citizens in a democratic society.

This book is a guide to literature that deepens the content we explore with middle school students. The National Council of Teachers of English (2004) suggests in *A Call to Action: What We Know about Adolescent Literacy and Ways to Support Teachers in Meeting Students' Needs* that adolescents need "sustained experiences with diverse texts in a variety of genres and offering multiple perspectives on real life experiences. Although many of these texts will be required by the curriculum, others

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should be self-selected and of high interest to the reader" (unpaged). The International Reading Association's Position Statement on Adolescent Literacy (Moore, Bean, Birdyshaw, & Rycik, 1999) suggests, "adolescents deserve access to a wide variety of reading material that they can and want to read" (p. 4) and "instruction that builds both the skill and desire to read increasingly complex materials" (p. 6). Desire to read and access to content are paramount in developing middle school students' knowledge about subject areas.

The picture book is an ideal genre for developing interest in reading and content. We define a picture book as one in which the text and illustrations have an important, supporting relationship. As Harris and Hodges (1995) explain, a picture book is "a book in which the illustrations are as important as the text" (p. 188). While picture books are often considered material for young readers, many illustrated texts are appropriate for older students in both content and visual composition. Bishop and Hickman (1992) suggest, "The standards for (picture) books particularly suited to older readers will differ from those for younger readers in degree rather than in kind. In general, they will vary along three dimensions: content, length or complexity, and sophistication" (p. 8). Therefore, we have included photo essays, illustrated texts, and many that display primary documents. Truly, many books that deal with middle school content happen to be picture books.

"But wait," you say. "This all sounds great, but I've already got a good textbook. Isn't that enough?"

Maybe not. Many teachers in the middle school do rely entirely on textbooks to familiarize students with content material. After all, students need a source for information about mathematics, science, social studies, the language arts, and the fine arts. But are textbooks really the best choice? Not entirely.

### **Limitations of Textbooks**

Take a look at the average textbook. It is filled with charts, facts, photos, sidebars, suggested activities, and more—all competing with the content area material (Daniels & Zemelman, 2003/2004). All the extras may actually create confusion and distract students from the information they are meant to learn. In other words, textbooks sometimes fail in their mission to provide content in an understandable way.

Some textbooks read like an encyclopedia. So many details are included in an effort to be comprehensive that content may be treated superficially (Daniels & Zemelman, 2004; Zemelman, Daniels, & Hyde,

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2005). In their 1998 study of textbooks, Chambliss and Calfee found this “skimpy treatment” (p. 7) in many books. They state, “a sixth-grade social studies book in our sample devotes one chapter to the continent of Africa and a short paragraph to North and South Korea” (p. 7). To no one’s surprise, many students may find such textbook formats both confusing and boring. After all, when each paragraph is stuffed with facts, there’s less room for the imaginative language that makes reading pleasurable (Chick, 2006; Sanacore, 1993).

Essentially textbooks are reference books, written by specialists with specialized vocabulary (Miller, in Olness, 2007). Not everyone takes pleasure in reading that kind of text. Yet our goal as teachers is to go beyond making students read, and to make them *want* to read (Johnson & Giorgis, 2001; Tunnell & Jacobs, 2008). Textbooks do have many strengths, but making students want to read is not typically one of them. Connecting to a student’s prior knowledge and experiences is often a problem with textbooks, thus pushing the uninterested student farther away (Chambliss & Calfee, 1998).

Let’s consider perspective. Can a textbook written in California, published in New York, and sold to schools across the United States really speak to the perspectives of local students? Obviously not. Life in California really *is* different from life in Nebraska or Rhode Island or Louisiana. So a passage that makes sense to a student from San Diego may seem silly or confusing to someone who lives in Omaha. Yet publishers frequently agree to some populous states’ demands to include certain material. That’s because whatever their selection committees choose must be used statewide (Hubisz, 2003). Relying on a single textbook for content also sends a message that it’s okay to depend on one perspective (Daniels & Zemelman, 2003/2004), a view that is counterproductive to critical thinking.

Thoughtful cultural perspectives are sometimes absent from textbooks as well. According to Manning and Baruth (2004), some of the mistakes made by publishers include showing interaction of various groups only with European Americans; emphasizing male, middle-class, and mainstream European perspectives; highlighting historical concerns rather than current ones; and including only “safe” content. Because publishing companies have to survive in a competitive marketplace, they are likely to “delete whatever might offend anyone” (Ravitch, 2003, p. 78). Though this problem will not be evident in every textbook, teachers should consider whether the text they love is lacking in cultural inclusiveness.

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A debate in the Sacramento schools demonstrates the problems some textbooks present regarding cultural sensitivity. A *San Francisco Chronicle* reporter (Burress, 2006) described a meeting of the California State Board of Education subcommittee that had to be cleared by security guards because of impassioned negative community reactions to a middle school social studies textbook. One student complained about the way her culture was represented. “Learning about Hinduism in my sixth-grade class left me feeling ashamed and angry. . . . All that was talked about was the caste system, polytheism and sati.’ (Sati is the long-banned burning of widows on a husband’s funeral pyre.)” (Burress, 2006, second paragraph).

It is surprising to learn that some textbooks fail to provide consistently accurate and current information. Gone are the days (at least for the most part) when students would read a textbook that predicts a possible moon landing some time in our nation’s future. But even when textbooks are new, the sheer volume of information created on a daily basis means “it is not humanly possible to keep current—or correct” (Raloff, in Daniels & Zemelman, 2003/2004, p. 39). A teacher using a textbook as the only basis for content must find other sources to check for accuracy (Daniels & Zemelman, 2004).

One of the most important considerations for teachers is whether textbooks match the reading abilities of students. Teachers know their students will be performing at widely different levels. Students with learning disabilities and those for whom English is a second (and maybe, emergent) language complicate things even more. Many content area textbooks are not easy to read (Sanacore, 1993; Zemelman, Daniels, & Hyde, 2005). Written to meet the needs of a “typical” student, they will not meet the reading needs of all students. It is unfortunate that some students will be unable to access the information contained in their texts (Moore, Bean, Birdyshaw, & Rycik, 1999, p. 4).

Though some textbooks try to provide reading hints, such as bold-face words followed by pronunciations, Chambliss and Calfee (1998) liken this to “reading an encyclopedia aloud” (p. 7). Instead, let’s imagine students eager to dive into a book, share personal experiences that connect to content, while expanding their subject knowledge and vocabulary. Let’s explore picture books as a perfect solution for adding depth and breadth to our curriculum.

### **Why Add Picture Books to Content Area Curricula?**

So what *is* the solution to the difficulties textbooks present? Not every textbook is deficient and not in every area. However, including children’s

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literature in the curriculum can mitigate the problems that do exist. While books of various genres are appropriate for supplementing textbooks, picture books have a number of advantages.

One feature that is unique about this genre is—the pictures! In a picture book, the illustrations complement and/or enhance the written word. They may provide a lot of informative detail not included in the text. In a sense, they “fill in the blanks” for the reader, establishing characterization, elaborating on the setting, and conveying moods and emotions (Sheridan, 2001). Because the pictures enhance the information in the text or expand the narrative in some way, students must use critical thinking to analyze what the illustrations do that the print does not. Often such analysis opens the door to discussion regarding interpretation. So the uniqueness of a picture book allows in-depth discussions that are often not possible with textbooks.

The illustrations in picture books also have value in and of themselves. They provoke an aesthetic response that draws on emotions and past experiences (Cox & Many, in Connor, 2003). The pictures, often exquisitely beautiful, are works of art. In fact, for many children it is the picture book that provides their introduction to the art world (Wolfenbarger & Sipe, 2007). So for many readers, the illustrations are a primary source of pleasure.

But picture books go beyond providing reading enjoyment. On a personal level, they also encourage the use of imagination, provide students with vicarious experiences, and help readers understand human behavior (Giorgis & Hartman, 2000). In doing so, picture books connect students to content on an affective level. Some topics cannot be easily separated from that emotional component. How can we consider slavery, for example, without also considering the emotional impact on the individuals involved? In exploring this kind of unit, teachers would want to touch not only students’ minds but also their hearts. Picture books can do that.

It is easy to put too much emphasis on the visual elements in picture books. The text, however, is very important. In a picture book, the words and illustrations work together to communicate the message. It is from this unique combination of visual and verbal elements that students construct meaning (Pantaleo, 2007). Picture book texts offer the advantage of being short or organized into sections that are relatively brief, so students are not overwhelmed by the density of too much print on a page. Unconstrained by the need to fill each page with facts, picture book authors are free to use expressive language and rich imagery that

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both educate and enrich the reader. Picture book language can even serve as a model for their writing (Saunders, 1999).

Academically, picture book topics offer valuable extensions to subject area content and, in many cases, go far beyond the basic information in the textbook (Tunnell & Jacobs, 2008). For instance, Mr. Sirotto, an eighth-grade mathematics teacher, had been teaching probability for several weeks. When one student said, "Why do we have to learn this stuff?" Mr. Sirotto turned to a picture book to show real-life application. Imagine the surprise (yet intense interest) of the eighth graders when he began a Monday class by reading aloud *A Very Improbable Story* (Einhorn, 2008). After hearing the story, the students' assignment was to find personal experiences that paralleled what happened to the boy in the story. Reading the picture book aloud made the point to Mr. Sirotto's students that probability *is* an everyday topic and really piqued their interest in learning how to apply it to the real world. And Mr. Sirotto had the opportunity to see his students apply what they were learning in math.

Picture books generally focus on relatively narrow topics, so they are useful for introducing new concepts as well (Farris & Fuhler, 1994; Landt, 2007; Olness, 2007; Wysocki, 2004). Ms. Westwood, a sixth-grade language arts teacher, found that her district's curriculum materials skimmed over the teaching of idioms. She had a high English language learner population and felt she needed to introduce some new idioms that seemed to confuse the students. So she turned to *You Let the Cat Out of the Bag! (And Other Crazy Animal Sayings)* (Klingel, 2008) to get the conversation going. She discovered that this entertaining picture book provided the perfect platform for her students to open up about the phrases that perplexed them. The book helped the students make personal connections and provided a collective experience for the entire class (Landt, 2007).

The fact that picture books can provide alternative perspectives to those found in textbooks (Chick, 2006; Olness, 2007) cannot be overemphasized. When Mrs. Bentley, a seventh-grade science teacher, overheard her students discussing global warming, she decided she needed to go beyond what their textbook offered. While the *science* of global warming was apparent in the textbook, she wanted to tap into students' emotional sides. She selected *The Down-to-Earth Guide to Global Warming* (David & Gordon, 2007). With humor and text-friendly wording, the authors appealed to the middle schoolers and the topic took on a renewed focus in Mrs. Bentley's class.

As a textbook supplement, picture books also offer opportunities for greater inclusion of various cultures. Students need to "see themselves" represented in the materials used in classrooms, but textbooks rarely have

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the space to explore any culture in depth. Picture books can help fill that gap. This is doubly important for students who are learning English as a second language. One emphasis of an English as a Second Language (ESL) or an English Language Learning (ELL) program should be “integrating students’ cultural experiences and background into meaningful language learning” (Manning & Baruth, 2004, p. 281). Picture books offer an ideal solution.

In addition to using culturally relevant texts, teachers of English language learners must also concentrate on building vocabulary. Hickman, Pollard-Durodola, and Vaughn (2004) recommend repeated readings of concise texts of 200 to 250 words, chosen to match students’ interests. While teachers could divide novels into shorter passages, another approach might be to use picture books. Many are short enough to be read in one sitting, and the pictures can provide clues to word meanings. Those written for middle school students feature both familiar and challenging vocabulary that make the books appropriate for all students. With teacher read-alouds cited as “the most consistent activity used by classroom teachers . . . to enhance the literacy of ELLs by integrating effective vocabulary development practices” (Hickman, Pollard-Durodola, & Vaughn, 2004, p. 721), it makes sense for teachers to use picture books for that purpose.

Picture books may be used to let students pursue related interests that lie outside the content of their textbooks. This takes the middle school curriculum beyond the “tradition of simply accumulating and storing facts” (Beane, 1993, p. 32) by promoting deeper understanding. Because picture books are available on many levels of difficulty, this kind of meaningful personal research is not limited only to students who are already good readers. Less able readers can also participate along with their classmates (Freeman & Person, 1998). Even students with limited reading skills can take a meaningful role in classroom activities through the use of wordless picture books or those with little text (Sheridan, 2001).

Although a teacher’s first concern is providing instruction, we must always remember that students have lives outside of the classroom. We are more than teachers of subject matter. We are also teachers of children and adolescents. As such, picture books are useful in addressing issues that may impact learning. Picture books may aid students in resolving conflicts by providing vicarious experiences and appropriate examples (Luke & Myers, 1995). They can also explore values that are largely unaddressed in many textbooks. For example, students can learn about moral courage by reading books about the Holocaust (Silverman, 2007). A relatively new problem addressed by picture books is to increase the coping

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skills of immigrant children whose lives are destabilized by the move to a new country (Baghban, 2007). Finally, picture books can be used to help students heal after experiencing some emotional trauma (Manifold, 2007), such as illness or a death in the family.

Maybe you're thinking, "Picture books sound great, and I'd really love to use them, but my students are too old for that genre." Costello and Kolodziej (2006) note that the idea that some students believe picture books are beneath them is rapidly diminishing. Indeed, the Caldecott Medal, awarded each year for outstanding children's book illustrations, "defines the picture book audience as birth to age 14" (Fingerson & Killeen, 2006, p. 32). Many topics tackled by picture book authors are more appropriate for middle school students and are created with the adolescent reader in mind. Their topics are sophisticated, inviting in-depth discussion. Issues that are important and very real to young adolescents—homelessness, crime, environmental problems (Beane, 1993)—are easily explored through picture books. The mature content of these books, written specifically for middle school readers, lends itself to opportunities for thoughtful analysis and critical thinking.

In addition, it makes no sense to downplay the importance of pictures when visual images abound in our society (Hibbing & Rankin-Erickson, 2003; Wolfenbarger & Sipe, 2007). Many students have learned to extract meaning from these visual images and rely on them to construct their understandings from text (Costello & Kolodziej, 2006). It's appropriate that they do so. After all, the arts of language are not limited to listening, speaking, reading, and writing. They also include viewing and visual representation (Lamping, Mack, & Johnson, 2007).

The way picture books are presented may also influence students' attitudes toward them. By emphasizing the rich vocabulary and high-level thought that goes into these books, teachers can show students that "the shorter text does not indicate easier material" (Costello & Kolodziej, 2006, p. 28). They can assure students that these are not just "baby" books. Seeing their teacher reading, enjoying, and discussing picture books with students and peers may also help convince them of the books' value.

"A picture book is a dialogue between two worlds: the world of images and the world of words" (Marcus, 2002, p. 3). Teachers of middle school students have the opportunity to open that dialogue with their students. By including picture books in the content areas, teachers add another dimension to literature. This added dimension could increase learning possibilities across the curriculum, not only for high achievers but also for all learners. Enjoyment, motivation, and real learning—they all flow from the power of the picture book.

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## Inviting All Learnersó Differentiating Instruction through Picture Books

Educators have long abandoned the notion that a student’s mind is a blank slate or, as the Romans put it, a “*tabula rasa*.” Each learner possesses various qualities that influence his or her learning—prior experiences, learning styles, depth of vocabulary, home languages, home cultures, desire (or not) to read, and reading abilities. In the meantime, we have pressures to teach particular content in the constraints of one school year. Add the personal engagement issue to the mix and we often feel we are rolling a bowling ball down the middle of a football field hoping to bump one pin!

How can we account for these differing qualities and create instruction that engages all learners? Asking everyone to turn to page 486 in their textbook is most likely not going to work. Yes, it will “cover” the material, but we want more. We want all students to join the dialogue about a topic, to get excited about what they are learning, and to have memorable learning experiences.

While picture books could allow differentiated instruction in a number of ways, focusing on the five areas of the language arts provides a practical way to analyze how we could teach content to include all learners. The five areas are *speaking, listening, reading, writing, and viewing*.

*Speaking* is a good place to begin differentiation. Because both text and illustrations (or photographs) are equally important in picture books, conversations naturally follow. Small groups, buddies, or literature circles (Johnson & Freedman, 2005) that assign differing conversational roles to participants encourage dialogues about books and content. Students can verbalize connections to their personal life, thus giving the teacher a “window” to their home experiences. Students reveal their understanding when conversing with a peer or teacher. They must employ new vocabulary, synthesize ideas heard from the book or during the following conversations, and develop content-specific knowledge.

In the national standards set by learned societies (see Appendix A), students are expected to actively participate in inquiry, to be able to both discuss and explain their knowledge, and to adjust their use of language “to communicate effectively with a variety of audiences and for different purposes” (ReadWriteThink.org, #4). While this seems like a tall order, the carefully selected picture book invites and inspires such conversations.

*Listening* to picture books read aloud by teachers provides a basis for developing not only content knowledge but also literacy skills. Students hear vocabulary that may be beyond their reading levels but is important to the subjects they are learning. Hearing the nuances of the language

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spoken by a native speaker provides additional support and access for English language learners. Modeling provided by the teacher may draw in reluctant readers and engage them in the enjoyment literature can bring. Teachers can also bring topics to students that they might not otherwise choose to read about. Through listening we encourage conversations. It is a natural and powerful connection.

So how powerful can the connection between the read-aloud and the content be? Carlisle (1992) read aloud picture books about elderly people to her sixth graders. She selected varying viewpoints about aging and in particular found that the picture books “provided the economy necessary to convey this message to the students quickly and intelligently” (p. 52). After hearing all the books, the students “embarked on an impressive and highly sophisticated discussion” (p. 54). These picture books and topics, most likely overlooked by sixth graders, tied listening to speaking. As one of the students in Carlisle’s class noted, “I can’t believe this one beensy book kept us talking for about six days” (p. 57). Indeed, we believe picture books can provide engaging listening experiences.

*Reading* occurs across the curriculum, regardless of content area. *Adolescent Literacy: An NCTE Policy Research Brief* (2007) suggests, “reading materials should be appropriate and should speak to adolescents’ diverse interests and varying abilities” (p. 4). As well, the goal of any teacher of adolescents is convincingly put forward in *Adolescent Literacy: A Position Statement* (Moore et al., 1999), “adolescents deserve teachers who understand the complexities of individual adolescent readers, respect their differences, and respond to their characteristics” (p. 8). By getting to know our students as learners, we can use picture books to differentiate instruction to meet their reading needs. Charts and tables that march across textbook pages often confuse struggling readers. As well, the layout of text can be difficult to follow. One look at the long list of professional materials explaining reading in the content fields gives us the notion that it’s not that easy to do or teach (e.g., Brozo & Simpson, 2007; Fisher & Frey, 2008; Richardson, Morgan, & Fleener, 2006; Sadler, 2001; Vacca & Vacca, 2008).

Even the average reader needs support in textbooks often written above their reading level. Imagine the struggling reader’s experience. Statistics from the National Assessment of Educational Progress show that “38 percent of U.S. students were found to have reading proficiency levels below ‘basic.’ Indeed, between 1992 and 2005 there was no significant change in the percentage of fourth graders reading at or above the ‘basic’ category in the United States” (Brozo & Flynt, 2007, p. 192).

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While students may have fallen behind in their reading progress, not keeping pace with content learning has future repercussions. How can we be certain that students build knowledge if they cannot access the textbooks that teach it? Picture books open the door to using texts of varying levels. Focused on the same content, the picture books can provide additional support with engaging photographs or illustrations, humorous anecdotes, selective vocabulary, and high-interest content. We have the opportunity to nudge our reluctant and struggling readers toward picking up books and connecting with them.

Students who struggle with *writing* can find approachable models with picture books. In particular, English Language Learners will find repeated experiences with high-frequency sight words, support of illustrations, and scaffolding of new vocabulary (Reid, 2002). Struggling readers or students who lack prior knowledge of a topic may find picture books useful references as they write reports, journals, or their own books modeled after a picture book.

Students will find a starting place in forming opinions and personal stances about topics taught in a content area. For instance, a social studies teacher might use the picture book *Lady Liberty: A Biography* (Rappaport, 2008) to encourage research and writing about patriotic symbols in the United States. Further research about current day monuments could extend into writing proposals for a new memorial. Using the book as a starting point, students of various levels of writing skill can begin drafting their persuasive pieces. Such drafts provide insights into students' writing abilities and vocabulary. Many picture books provide the opportunity for models of group work, thus providing peer support in the writing process. The picture book provides the perfect example of employing interesting language to "capture" the reader.

*Viewing* engages readers in the images in the text. Hancock (2007) describes this aspect of language arts as "the observation and interpretation of a visual, nonprint form or format that results in personal meaning-making" (p. 7). We attend "to communication conveyed by . . . nonverbal visual means" (NCTE, 1996, p. 76). The power of viewing becomes apparent in a study of high school students' reading *The Middle Passage: White Ships/Black Cargo*. Connor (2003) found that this wordless picture book about slavery, "with its mature themes and powerful images . . . [leveled] . . . the playing field in most heterogeneous classrooms by creating new spaces and greater opportunities" (p. 244). Here, in the pictures, everyone is a reader of the visual representation of a powerful narrative.

Authors and illustrators of picture books have the opportunity to explore topics in greater depth than textbook writers possibly can. Such

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expansive presentations allow the author to *show* their topic—through illustrations and connected text. A student with little previous experience or knowledge about a topic can *see* content. We know the amount of visual media students meet today has greatly increased (Costello & Kolodziej, 2006). Allowing students to explore the visual elements of a picture book encourages speaking and writing. The “pictures” on the page “put more ideas in your head” (Hibbing & Rankin-Erikson, 2003, p. 758) and suddenly conversations about content take off.

And so we invite you to consider your learners, the content you teach, and the engagement you hope to see in your students. Listen, speak, read, write, and view . . . picture books invite us to do all five.

### **The Adolescent Learner**

Students in middle school are different from those in the elementary grades. “Change” is a word that comes to mind when considering these students, and that change is often rapid, unexpected, and uneven. Students are developing physically and emotionally as well as cognitively. Attention to these changes must be reflected in the curriculum. “In middle level grades, more than any other, the emphasis needs to be on whom we teach rather than on what we teach” (Manning & Bucher, 2009, p. 29).

In any given classroom, a teacher may see great diversity among his or her students. Adolescents are beginning to think abstractly, so it’s important for educators to provide challenging activities. Yet many of these students also benefit from hands-on work and active learning. Having a choice of assignments will appeal to these young learners. Working in small groups may also help to individualize instruction to meet their needs.

Cognitive development affects a student’s social development and vice versa (Manning & Bucher, 2009). James Beane (1993) recommends an integrated curriculum that focuses on students’ personal and social concerns. Personal concerns include things such as their search for identity or their desire to be independent. Global warming or human rights issues are among the social concerns middle school students may have. Beane further calls for a curriculum that emphasizes reflection, problem solving, ethical considerations, and building personal values.

Picture books are perfect for integrating the curriculum, and they can help teachers meet the needs of adolescents. They address a wide range of topics that appeal to the middle school learner. In addition, they can serve as a springboard for critical reading, writing, and discussion, as well as meaningful hands-on activities. By offering opportunities for

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group discussion and projects, they also fulfill students' social and emotional needs.

Take out a picture book. Read it aloud and enjoy it with your class. Let it provide the context for learning. Then, plan a follow-up lesson that encourages students to delve into the content in ways that appeal to them. You'll find there are many reasons why picture books belong in middle school.

### **How to Use This Book**

This quick guide is organized with teachers of content areas in mind. Each chapter targets a particular area of the curriculum (social studies, mathematics, science, language arts, and the arts). Within each content area chapter we present featured picture books with related activities, cross-curricular connections, and a text set of related titles. Thus, content area teachers will find dozens of picture books that fit the middle school curriculum. So, how did we choose the featured books? We considered five important characteristics in selecting them:

- Relationship of the text with the accompanying illustrations or photographs
- Content that meets the requirements of middle school curriculum
- Sophistication of the subject matter
- Content that will engage students and teachers alike, and
- Complexity of language that respects the needs of middle school students.

Although some of the featured books have won (or may win) awards, that was not one of our selection criteria. Additionally, we limited our choices to books published in 2002 or later.

A synopsis of each book allows you to evaluate how it will fit in your planning. A number of activities to use with the book are presented. Each activity is coded to allow you to quickly assess the time needed to complete the task. One clock (🕒) identifies an activity that could be completed in one class period. Two clocks (🕒🕒) indicate an activity that may be expanded into a more in-depth study and /or may require out of class work. These activities are not meant to be prescriptive, but rather starting points for ways to use each featured book. Suggested teaching strategies in the activities are explained in Appendix B, should you be unfamiliar with them. Only you know your setting and population, special interests of students, curriculum, and team of teachers. We hope you will consider

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the activities for each of these featured books as a launching pad for your own creative ideas.

Cross-curricular connections facilitate the use of the book for interdisciplinary planning. Middle school teams will find this particularly helpful as these connections provide continued use of the books across the curriculum. Check the listing at the end of each chapter for all the books in other content areas that have a cross-curricular use. This allows a team of middle school teachers easy ways to find the interdisciplinary uses of all the books in a particular content area. Of course, these are only suggestions. Our experiences tell us that talented content teachers find multiple ways to use literature.

A final feature for each book is a text set, a “collection of books related to a common element or topic” (Opitz, in Camp, 2000, p. 400). Think back to Mr. Sirotto’s eighth-grade probability lesson with its text set to expand their studies or Mrs. Westwood’s sixth-grade language arts lesson on idioms that opened the conversation about English. As Kettel and Douglas (2003) argue, text sets with a single theme encouraged the sixth graders they worked with to have “more engagement and, consequently, more comprehension” (p. 43). They suggest beginning by introducing a picture book, followed by a focused, related set of books that helps diversify reading levels and meets the interests of adolescents.

The books that complement the featured book are presented in a text set that has four criteria: (1) integration of additional genres, (2) wider range of reading difficulty to allow for differentiated instruction, (3) expansion of student interest in the topic, and (4) use of “tried and true” titles that may already be in your school or classroom library. We identify the genre of each book in the text sets by using the following “key”:

- ABC = book organized around the alphabet
- AN = anthology
- B = biography
- FPB = fiction picture book
- FT = folktale
- FYA = fiction young adult
- NF = nonfiction
- P = poetry
- PB = picture book

Now you are armed with titles, ideas, and various Web supports . . . so what *do* you do with a picture book when you stand in front of a room full of middle school students? The books selected here can be read

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in snippets to motivate and entice, or in their entirety to create a common text for discussion and subsequent reading of related books. Ivey (2003) suggests “it is your knowledge about the world and your experiences that enable you to bring life to text—a voice to a text—that many students cannot yet achieve” (p. 813). In fact, we can think of no better “expert” to read aloud a content area picture book than a content area teacher. The read aloud provides the opportunity for you to share your passion about your subject in very unique ways. We have seen science teachers change voice, move about the room, even get into the “character” of a famous scientist as they read aloud to middle school students. We suggest you let your love for social studies, mathematics, science, language arts, or the arts guide your narration. We do think a little practice beforehand goes a long way to feeling comfortable . . . so give it a try. What better way to engage students in your subject?

“Within the pages of a picture book is the potential to entice, intrigue, and motivate . . . middle school readers as they vicariously experience times and places that make up their past, influence the present, and may have an impact upon their futures” (Farris & Fuhler, 1994, p. 47). What textbook can offer the same promise? Including picture books in the curriculum makes sense.

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# The **POWER** of **Picture Books**

## Using Content Area Literature in Middle School

Picture books aren't just for little kids.

They are powerful and engaging texts that can help all middle school students succeed in language arts, math, science, social studies, and the arts. Picture books appeal to students of all readiness levels, interests, and learning styles.

Featuring descriptions and activities for fifty exceptional titles, Mary Jo Fresch and Peggy Harkins offer a wealth of ideas for harnessing the power of picture books to improve reading and writing in the content areas.

The authors provide a synopsis of each title along with discipline-specific and cross-curricular activities that illustrate how picture books can be used to supplement—and sometimes even replace—traditional textbooks. They also offer title suggestions that create a “text set” of supporting resources.

By incorporating picture books into the classroom, teachers across the disciplines can introduce new topics into their curriculum, help students develop nonfiction literacy skills, provide authentic and meaningful cultural perspectives, and help meet a wide range of learning needs.

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This book is a needed resource. I recommend it to all who teach content literacy courses.  
— *Michael F. Opitz, University of Northern Colorado*

This book is well-timed and a perfect resource for not only middle level teachers but educators, in general, who seek effective ways to help students read and understand content area material.

— *Jan Kristo, University of Maine*

Picture books are not only for young children! Drs. Fresch and Harkins establish a strong foundation for sharing picture books in middle school. They provide wonderful examples and practical ideas on how to use picture books across all the content areas.

— *Evelyn B. Freeman, The Ohio State University, Mansfield*

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