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Explorations through picture books: Opportunities for teaching and learning

A B S T R A C T The argument is put forward that graphic or illustrated material can make a valuable contribution to reading and viewing with discrimination and enjoyment in all school phases. This article focuses on the genre of the picture book, one that is frequently associated with pre-school children or beginner readers. It raises examples of how picture books can add another dimension to learning, particularly in the field of language. It is argued that this genre can play a useful role both in the education of children throughout their primary school years and beyond, and in the field of language methodology and related areas in teacher education. The writer cites examples of his own experience when working with pre-service students. This includes the facilitating of ideas for teaching and learning, for example in language study, or exploring themes such as satire and humour. The study of picture books as a genre also encourages visual literacy through revealing connections between graphic art and verbal text. It is maintained that picture books encourage variety in the teaching of literature and language and in engaging with meanings at different levels. Ultimately, the study of quality picture books raises questions about the elusiveness and complexity of verbal and pictorial texts, and challenges the notion that outcomes in reading can be tied to meanings that emerge from the printed page alone.

Keywords: Pictorial themes, verbal language, decode, top-down, image, prediction, response, nuance, meaning, symbiosis, imagination, interactive genres

1. Introduction

The question raised in this article is about the potential of picture books to offer opportunities for educators to add another dimension to the depth and breadth of their teaching, especially in the area of language. Such a dimension is capable of transcending common practices and approaches to curriculum delivery. Exploring picture books, and the themes that emerge in them, also provides opportunities for bringing together traditionally demarcated learning areas,

for example the languages and social sciences. Picture books are, moreover, not necessarily limited to the early phases of schooling; they have the potential to offer value to very young learners as well as to those well into their school careers.

In an age when so much emphasis is placed on the visual image, one hardly needs to be reminded of the importance attached to readers and viewers of all ages knowing how to decode pictures in much the same way that they know how to decode verbal texts. On the other hand, engaging with the printed medium of any kind, including illustrations in works of fiction or cartoons in the news media, generally requires more dedication than responding to the moving images of film. What holds sway in our 'ephemeral' age is the fleeting image, or verbal text reduced to its most basic elements of meaning in the interests of rapid communication. Currently the close study and retention of recorded pictorial or verbal information are being put under pressure by rapid developments in multi-media communication. The latter place far more value on instant accessibility to infinite sources of information and rapid processing thereof, than to engagement with the details of texts (verbal and pictorial) that might open up a whole range of possibilities in meaning. What, therefore, can be done to encourage young people to exploit the potential of printed texts in an authentic and spontaneous manner? It is suggested that responding to picture books is one such approach.

Millman refers to how the picture book "integrates written text and images" and how it invites the viewer to "create meaning from that union". She sees some justice in arguments that the genre should be regarded "as a fine art form" that takes account of "visual art, the narrative and the meanings" (Millman, 2005: 391). Sipe and McGuire draw attention to one of the "peritextual" features of picture books, namely the endpapers, which perform various roles, such as "setting the tone or mood of a story" or referring "more specifically to elements of the story" through visual components such as colour and illustration (Sipe & McGuire, 2006: 293-4). Fine art form aside, the picture book has certainly developed into a complex literary genre. As Michaels and Walsh (1990:1) point out, the process of reading "involves far more than simply decoding words. The pictures themselves need to be 'read', involving close and careful observation and refining of these observations". In the context of teacher education, students themselves need to become aware of what it means to read for meaning in verbal and pictorial texts. They then need to find ways of passing on the insights and skills associated with this to learners in their own classrooms. In this article, reference is made to various attempts to develop and refine my own students' awareness of the possibilities offered by this genre. I refer to work done between 2004 and 2007, both with students following a Children's Literature module as part of their English studies, and with second- and third-year pre-service students, many of whom are studying to become Intermediate Phase teachers.

2. Picture books in children's literature

For the past several years, students registered for the Bachelor of Education Foundation and Intermediate Phase and BA / Media and Communication programmes, have taken a module in Children's Literature that I have offered as an additional or alternative module in their first-year English course. The module introduces concepts and genres relevant to the field, including a study of picture books. Students explore examples of the wordless, illustrated, interactive and dual narrative type. They study different artwork techniques and media as well

as the relationships between words and pictures in selected works. They also pay attention to various themes that emerge.

Although the main focus of this particular module is not methodology, students become aware of the potential of picture books for creative instruction in the classroom. One of the most important aspects focused upon is the interactive nature of pictures and words (visual and verbal texts), with its commensurate demand for close observation on the part of the reader. Maurice Sendak's *Where the Wild things Are* is a prime example of this. A reading of a dual narrative work such as Pat Hutchins's *Rosie's Walk*, on the other hand, reveals humour arising from the irony of an innocuous and rather bland verbal text in tandem with illustrations that add a wholly new dimension to the story. Young readers can make up their own verbal text by commenting on the action conveyed only by the pictures and by predicting events that are still to come.

When readers bring their own experience of life to bear upon what they read or see in verbal and/or visual texts, they bring a unique and personal element into their reception of the text. In pedagogical terms one would refer to this kind of reading as a top-down process. It has been given much attention by critics associated with reader response and reception theory. Baecker claims that "all texts contain gaps that all authors ask their readers to complete" (Baecker, 2007: 200). Bielby, on the other hand, suggests that even if "the reading process is not a one-way street, most of the traffic goes one way – from the printed text upwards" (Bielby, 1999: 3). Students need to know the difference between top-down processing, in which prior experience influences what the reader makes of the text (and in which encounters with new texts modify prior reading encounters) and the 'bottom-up' process, in which the essential meaning is gleaned from the word on the page quite independently of the reader's individual response. Good quality picture books often contain complex elements of both graphic and verbal text that can be challenging, and which invite individual response and interpretation through an appeal to the personal schemata of the reader. One work in particular that I have used for illustrating this concept is Anthony Browne's *Bear Hunt*.

Michaels and Walsh have this to say in relation to the work:

> One of the issues that is raised by *Bear Hunt* is the question of just what happens in our heads when we read. Many students who have been taught to read through the phonic method, using the structured basal readers, believe that all the meaning is in the text: that readers are not expected to bring anything to the text, but merely extract information from it. *Bear Hunt* explodes this myth.. (Michaels & Walsh, 1990: 68)

They refer to this work as a parody of basal reading texts sometimes used for beginner readers in the first grade of schooling. For example, the following is the verbal text on the first three pages: "One day Bear went for a walk. Two hunters were hunting. They saw Bear." The pictures, on the other hand, convey a great amount of detail about the nature and attitudes of some of the characters in the story that is not supplied by the words. Many of the pictures also contain detail that has no obvious link with the verbal text. The reader is rewarded when studying the pictures closely, as they contain numerous instances of wit or incongruity that are not even hinted at by the words. For example, in one of the pictures the forest backdrop contains images of fish swimming by; in another, pairs of shoes are crossing through the air from one side to

the other. Other incongruous images include a tiny traffic beacon, a very large human finger, and the tapered points of shrubs wearing collar and tie, or housing watchful eyes. In most cases these images are not directly noticeable; the reader has to pay attention to the artwork to become aware of them, to appreciate the humour and to address the challenge of creating some kind of meaning from them.

Above all, *Bear Hunt* invites readers of all ages to venture beyond the strictures of literal meaning. This is done initially by means of a pun; when the hunters, armed with rifles, see Bear, a voice other than the narrator's calls out to Bear to "look out", whereupon Bear "begins to draw". In this context, a 'top-down' reader response would perhaps associate the word "draw" with the action of drawing a gun, and this prediction would be tested on the following page. Bear, however, begins to draw a *picture* of something against a totally white background – gone is the forest backdrop as he does so – and what he draws turns out to be a trip wire, which brings down one of the hunters. The pictorial clue to Bear's response throughout the book is provided at the very start, however; Bear sets out on his walk holding a pencil. For every fresh danger posed by the hunters, Bear's ingenuity with the pencil comes to the rescue; whatever he imagines as a means of escape for each situation is brought into being by deft pencil strokes. As he does so, imagination is superimposed on the sometimes irrational 'reality' of the forest backdrop; hence the white page that supplants the busy forest scenery as Bear draws his way beyond one 'reality' towards another.

It is of course improbable that young readers could verbalise their responses in this way. It is quite unnecessary that they should do so, however, because of the beguiling nature of the pictures themselves. Readers can explore alternate meanings in both kinds of texts. They are drawn into accompanying Bear on his adventure, and come to understand how the imagination works through observing what both the words and the illustrations are doing. In a similar way, when readers respond to Pat Hutchins's *Rosie's Walk*, they can observe how the illustrations are clearly showing something that the words do not. Again, the verbal text is extremely straight-forward; it gives no clue whatsoever that Rosie the hen is being pursued by a fox while she is walking around the farmyard. In this dual narrative work, the words tell a very unexciting story, but the illustrations present alternate images of danger and absurdity. At each point in the story (and the farmyard), one page shows the fox about to pounce, while the next shows how clumsy this would-be predator is. The illustrations therefore stand in opposition not only to the words, but also to the traditional view of the fox as being stealthy and potentially dangerous, thus challenging the reader to make allowance for an alternative view.

The element of contradiction is apparent in other works as well, one of which first appeared in the mid-nineteenth century. In her article on Heinrich Hoffmann's *Der Struwwelpeter*, Elisabeth Wesseling shows how a prominent visual representation of the shock-headed title character is far from consistent with the notion of his being pilloried as a figure of scorn: a 'lesson' for juvenile readers. She points out that "although the verbal text indeed emphatically pillories this filthy child", Struwwelpeter has been pictured "on a monumental, decorated pedestal, which is a sign of honor rather than humiliation". Furthermore, "Shockheaded Peter does not betray even the faintest trace of shame or regret. He neither cowers nor casts down his eyes. On the contrary, he stares back at the spectator in defiance" (Wesseling, 2004: 328).

In 2005 *Der Struwwelpeter* was one of the texts discussed by students doing the children's literature module. I used a German-text edition, which provided opportunities for our non German-speaking students to make their own interpretations of the different stories based on the drawings alone. In most cases the didactic element came across quite unambiguously – a feature that tended to be endorsed by three visiting German students who were also doing the module as part of their international studies programme. The title character himself, however, remained something of an enigma; no one could quite put their finger on what was being said about him, given the way he is projected visually, and being the only character in the whole book who is not 'punished' for appearing the way he does. In the end, it is simply not possible to speak definitively about what meanings emerge from the text of *Der Struwwelpeter*. They could be as unfathomable as the nature of readers' responses to many a text.

Another work whose meaning does not simply emerge from the printed page alone is *Where the Wild Things Are* by Maurice Sendak. The story is about a mischievous little boy Max, whose mother sends him to bed without any supper after he has been cheeky to her when she calls him a "wild thing". Max has been testing the limits of childhood naughtiness while dressed in his wolf suit. That night a forest begins to 'grow' in his room "until his ceiling hung with vines and walls became the world all around" (Sendak, 1988: 5). He sails by boat across the seas to an island inhabited by exceedingly strange-looking creatures, the "Wild Things", who welcome him and soon make him "king of all the wild things". Max and the creatures take part in a "wild rumpus" which constitutes the climax of the story, after which he begins to miss his mother, and so, much to the dismay of the wild creatures, he embarks on his return journey. When he gets back to his bedroom, his supper is waiting for him, "and it was still hot". This suggests that the whole expedition in which he had sailed "in and out of weeks" over a whole year to reach the island, was really confined to a matter of hours. During this time he had come face to face with his impulsive behaviour and learned to tame it, just as he had tamed the "wild things".

What meaning a reader derives from *Wild Things* is part of the challenge presented by Sendak. One may see the young hero Max exploring the boundaries of latent aggression and rebelliousness at the beginning of the book. On being sent upstairs, his imagination begins to body forth scenes of untamed wildness, as the walls of his room give way to a boundless forest. When Max's imagination takes him to where the "Wild Things" live, their strange, irrational appearance mirrors the chaotic energy that is driving him along. For three consecutive double-page spreads depicting the "wild rumpus", no words are offered to describe the indulgence of Max and the creatures in their wild dance. In a recent exam which featured excerpts from this work, one student suggested that the various creatures represent the fragmentation of Max's anger, with which he is eventually able to come to terms by coming face to face with them all. Another student saw the pictures-only double spreads as an indication of behaviour that is "beyond words". The "wild rumpus" perhaps serves as a way for Max to be purged of his ungovernable behaviour, after which he calls a halt to this activity and is ready to go home. Perhaps, in the context of a work such as this, it is the (willing) suspension of disbelief on the part of the reader that helps to facilitate multiple meanings and perspectives generated by the text. Seen in this light particularly, older readers may also come to see the story as being more than just the imaginary journey of a young boy into a fantasy world.

An aspect of picture books well worth exploring in relation to ways in which meaning comes about is that of the recurring motif in illustrations. Anthony Browne provides interesting examples of this in works such as *Piggybook* and *Gorilla*. In *Piggybook* almost unnoticeable pictorial details in the background such as the tiny pattern on wallpaper begin to change in keeping with events as they unfold. In this story, a woman is treated like a 'doormat' by her husband and two sons who are filled with their own importance, until one day she disappears from home, leaving a message that they are all "pigs". As the father and sons try to cope on their own, details of their surroundings change. The tiny flowers on the wallpaper have now become pig heads, a pattern that is replicated on various items such as lampshades. Far more obvious is the transformation of the male characters themselves into pigs (Figure 1).

Figure 1: from Piggybook *by Anthony Browne*

3. English methodology group projects and the curriculum

In work done with pre-service Intermediate Phase students, emphasis is placed on the variety of learning opportunities that can be generated by the study of selected picture books. This is best done when students work in small groups and after they have had some exposure to classroom practice. Students need to bear in mind what they have already seen in the context of the school: the diversity in levels of general competency and literacy, including visual literacy, amongst learners. Many children with whom they will interact may not have had much exposure to picture books. Hence the need to remain 'grounded' in terms of what they can realistically hope to achieve. At the same time they are encouraged to explore creative pathways to language learning through picture texts, an area that is all but neglected in the National Curriculum Statement (NCS) relevant to their phase of teaching. While the learning outcome governing reading and viewing appears to target critical response to aesthetic, emotional and cultural values in texts, this is not reflected in how learner achievement is assessed. There is little explicit reference to the imagination, whereas ways and means of demonstrating reading competence are spelt out. This suggests that an instrumental purpose is linked to much of what learners are expected to achieve; students should be made aware of this and encouraged to work around and beyond such limitations.

In terms of the status and importance of picture texts being suggested in this article, it is ironic that the NCS seems to relegate them to a place of little, if any, importance. Learning Outcome 3 reads as follows: "Reading and Viewing: the learner will be able to read and view for information and enjoyment, and respond critically to the aesthetic, cultural and emotional values in texts"

(DoE, 2002 a: 72). Assessment standards for this outcome for Home Language in Grade 4 that refer to any pictorial elements at first seem to offer some potential for picture book study:

- Views and comments on various visual and multimedia texts for different purposes (e.g. pictures, posters, cartoons and, where available, computers and CD-ROMs):
- interprets message;
- identifies and discusses graphical techniques such as colour, design, choice of images, etc., and how they affect the message conveyed.
- describes feelings about the text (factual or literary, visual or multimedia), giving reasons (DoE, 2002 b: 72).

Assessment standards for Grades 5 and 6 are similar but make no reference to pictures, but symbols, font size and type, as well as layout for Grade 5. Lighting, sound effects, camera angles and shape and design augment the programme for Grade 6. In all grades attention must be paid to interpreting 'messages', which could well be taken to have transactional / instrumental rather than aesthetic purposes, despite the wording of LO 3 itself. Interpreting messages could imply that this can be done correctly or incorrectly in context, rather than in the sense of readers or viewers engaging imaginatively with layers of meaning.

In the NCS for English First Additional Language the only references to "media texts" is in relation to understanding the "layout and design of a poster or public notice" or a "magazine" (Grades 4 and 5), while the assessment standards for Grade 6 are about identifying "how advertisements persuade readers" through various linguistic devices and about layout and design of magazines and newspapers (DoE, 2002 b: 64-5).

Most tellingly of all, the NCS for English *Second* Additional Language boasts the following assessment standards (the italics are mine) for LO 3 in Grade 4:

- Reads short texts with visual support:
- matches words and sentences with pictures;
- an advertisement;
- *picture stories with simple captions; ("with captions" in Grades 5 & 6)*
- *comic strips;*
- signs in the environment (e.g. traffic signs). (DoE, 2002 c: 18-19).

Clearly, the NCS is conveying the message that pictures are there to support verbal text in cases where learners are in the most disadvantaged situation regarding the use of English. Let it immediately be said that picture text can play a very important role in the development of a language once or twice removed from mother-tongue status (I saw a student proving this very point on one occasion); on the other hand what the NCS is *not* doing is recognising its considerable potential at more advanced levels.

In 2004 I decided to try out an activity inspired by Michaels and Walsh (1990), in which different language registers in spoken and written communication were explored in Janet and Allan Ahlberg's *The Jolly Postman or Other People's Letters*. The book itself tells the story of a postman who delivers letters to different characters from well-known fairy tales such as Goldilocks and the Three Bears. The letters are contained in actual envelopes attached to certain pages in the book, and have to be removed in order to be read. They include, *inter alia*,

a note of apology from Goldilocks, an advertising brochure for products suitable for modern witches, and a lawyer's letter to a Wolf, demanding that he cease his illegal occupation of the premises belonging to the grandmother of Red Riding Hood. Each group of students devised a language activity based on one of the letters, developing their own theme and modifying the original text. Their presentations included role-play, script writing, illustrations produced on transparencies, letters, brochures and invitation cards. This project also provided an opportunity for peer evaluation of the presentations via criteria such as imagination and creativity, likely appeal for the target learners, care, and presentation skills. This exercise, above all, showed how meanings associated with the printed page alone could be transcended through what groups of readers brought to the different texts.

In the same year I decided to explore the theme of satire with a third-year class whom I had introduced to general picture book activities the year before. The texts used were *War and Peas* by Michael Foreman, *Dirty Beasts* by Roald Dahl and two works by Raymond Briggs, *Ug* and *Father Christmas*. Their initial brief was to brainstorm ideas that arose from the texts. Foreman's work, for example, tells the story of near-starving animals dwelling in a drought-stricken kingdom that a neighbouring state in a land of plenty was unwilling to assist. The arrogant and selfish king of this richly endowed land is the object of satire, as is his kingdom, with its infrastructure visually depicted in the shape of towering mounds of cakes, jelly and other items of luxurious confectionary. This provides a graphic contrast to the arid landscape of the stricken kingdom. The selfish king and his subjects duly get their come-uppance by the end of the story. This kind of denouement is also a major theme of Dahl's collection of stories, where animals turn the tables on their tyrannical human masters, with some amusing and grisly effects. The extraordinary situations in these tales also provide some foundation for social comment on the attitude and behaviour of human beings towards animals. Raymond Briggs is also adept at turning established conventions on their heads. *Father Christmas*, in the comic book-type story of that title, is anything but the jovial figure of Santa often associated with Yuletide, while the Stone Age boy called Ug, in his search for more comfortable trousers (in preference to the regulation stone ones), meets obdurate resistance from older people who are incapable of imagining a world other than the one they are living in.

After brainstorming the text, each group was to come up with ideas for getting young readers drawn into both the fun and the possible meanings of the text and pictures. Groups would share these ideas with the rest of the class, inviting them to participate in the activities concerned. Different kinds of activities for young readers were prompted by the following concepts: initial response; making connections; different styles of text and illustrations; narrative gaps; story continuations and endings; words without pictures; pictures without words; reading aloud; miming; mood; the unexpected; humour; irony; ridicule; predicting; comparing; reflecting, and other follow-up activities. Once the selection of activities or combination of activities had been done by each group for the relevant text, ideas were work-shopped, written down, in most cases illustrated and then presented or performed. By the end of this exercise, students had a reasonably sound grasp of not only the range of language learning ideas that can be spawned by this kind of literary resource, but also of how the values implicit in exploring satirical themes meant crossing traditional boundaries between various learning areas in the school curriculum. Above all, the students were learning about the value of *enjoyment* in working with illustrated fictional texts, and how, in turn, their pupils could be encouraged to enjoy interacting with

them. In the NCS, learning outcome 3 (Reading and Viewing) mentions enjoyment, but this element is scarcely mentioned in the assessment standards. It seems, however, that the South African curriculum is not alone in this respect. When addressing a NATE (National Association for the Teaching of English) conference in the UK, author and former teacher Philip Pullman made the point that amongst the myriad of activities that the National Literacy Strategy expects children to do when they read, the word "enjoy" is conspicuously absent (Pullman, 2002: 12).

Another brainstorming activity undertaken by small groups of third-year students in 2005 focused on picture books such as *Mummy Never Told Me, The Pet Shop, Beegu, What on Earth...?, Not So Fast, Songololo* and a few others. The students studied the texts and reported back on the impact of the pictures as well as themes arising from the books that could be used as focus points for learning in the Intermediate Phase classroom. Babette Cole's *Mummy Never Told Me* is about a young child wondering why her mother never told her anything about why certain people did certain things. Some of these things include what her parents get up to behind their locked bedroom door or when disporting themselves on the beach at night and why her mother insists that she goes to school when, as a schoolgirl, she was expelled from hers. The complementary nature of words and pictures is demonstrated with this last point – the words make no reference to why the mother was expelled, but the picture shows a schoolgirl in uniform with a noticeably rounded stomach (Figure 2).

Figure 2: from Mummy Never Told Me *by Babette Cole*

Together with other books mentioned in the previous paragraph, *Mummy Never Told Me* was used again with the 2006 third-year class; prompting considerable mirth (and some minor embarrassment) during discussions of themes contained in this work such as adult behaviour and different sexual preferences. A book like this not surprisingly raises questions about its suitability for use in the primary school classroom. One answer would be that when the little girl's questions are asked against the backdrop of amusing – at times hilarious – pictures, ones that essentially do not offend good taste – it is a way of touching on certain issues in a non-threatening, 'shared' manner. Indeed, the book ends with the child concluding that she is not worried, as her mother will surely tell her everything when the time comes.

With the planning of each activity, the students were able to relate what they were doing to the various learning outcomes for languages, covering the spectrum of listening, speaking, reading and writing. They had little trouble in 'clustering' the assessment standards (even though the latter made no reference to picture texts at this level), and on occasions mapping the 'skills, knowledge, attitudes and values' (SKAV) for language as well as for other learning areas. What I insisted on pointing out to the students, however, was that the language activities emanating from the picture texts lay at the heart of their efforts, and not a 'treasure hunt' for outcomes and assessment standards. Indeed, it seemed to make little difference whether these were identified at the beginning or the end – the general outcome was usually a range of creative and worthwhile learning activities that were often quite entertaining as well. In every case, the words and pictures of the various texts provided fertile ground for the exploration of different kinds and contexts of meaning.

4. Focusing on language teaching and learning

In August 2006 I carried out evaluations of third-year students' English lessons in various primary schools, and was struck by the number of times that language study focused on parts of speech (notably adjectives and nouns) – either as students' personal choices or because of suggestions or requests by the class teachers concerned. Approaches to the topic varied somewhat, yet most students opted for a fairly bland, somewhat deductive approach that was not rooted to any great extent in meaningful communicative contexts. One day, directly after observing one of the best examples of a 'safe', deductive approach to the teaching of nouns, I visited a bookshop and came across a picture book entitled *An Ordinary School Day* by Hamilton and Revell. How ironical it was that this book was of the "Create a Story" type, featuring reusable word stickers (all of which contained nouns) which the reader could use to fill in the blank spaces in the text where nouns had been deleted. Verbal and pictorial cues on each page would help the reader to come up with possible or likely ideas to fill the narrative gaps so created. If only I had encountered this book before, and shown it to this particular student a day or two earlier, I thought. Apart from encouraging readers to focus on a particular class of word in a creative manner, it would also draw attention to the almost infinite variety of storylines or meanings that could be generated.

Soon after normal lectures were resumed I introduced my third-year group to this publication, pointing out that this was also an interesting perspective on the notion, prominent in reception theory, of the active role that the reader can play in shaping the overall meaning of a story. I find myself constantly reminding students to keep in mind this 'top-down' aspect

of reading, which promotes reader engagement with texts to which they can bring insights and experiences derived from their everyday lives. All too often students (perhaps influenced by some teachers) opt for 'dependable' approaches to achieving outcomes with fictional texts. The underlying assumption appears to be that there is an 'authorised' meaning to everything in print, and that outcomes in reading are inexorably linked to what is on the page alone, the reader having nothing to bring to the text. This implies the uncovering rather than the exploration of meaning.

I also took the opportunity, with the same students, of exploring ways of teaching old perennials like adjectives by using picture books as a resource from which I could draw suitable examples of words in context. These would include verbs in the past tense, the past continuous, past participles, present participles, adjectives, adverbs and even abstract nouns, I discovered. What added interest for me was that I merely had the *idea* of what I might do with a number of transparencies or PowerPoint slides of pages from various picture books; what we in fact covered in discussion unfolded as we proceeded during the lecture (a point I hoped was not lost on my students). It wasn't possible to set a time limit for each part of the discussion; the process was likely to be quite unpredictable, as different students would have different things to say about what they observed. Indeed, it was quite impractical to try and 'nail down' in advance all the categories and examples that seemed to present themselves; many more were likely to emerge – and did emerge – in discussion. Some examples now follow of how picture books provided the contexts for this kind of word study.

The first was based on an excerpt from *The Caboose Who Got Loose* by Bill Peet, featuring a double page spread (Figure 3) of "Katy Caboose" careering down a long hill and heading for a sharp bend: "...On down the grade she flew faster and faster / Straight for a curve and certain disaster". Readers can predict the word "disaster" from both the rhyme and the meaning of the words, as well as from the quite striking picture. More significantly, however, readers are in a position to elicit the (abstract) notion of "disaster", classified as an abstract noun, through its relation to a very concrete and *highly visual* context to which the reader is introduced.

The picture book *What on Earth...?* by Townson and Rees offered further examples of how concrete images can convey abstract ideas. This work is about a young girl who inhabits an imaginary world much larger than the one in which she lives. In her world of imagination she performs dangerous or heroic deeds, in which mundane household objects are transfigured into much grander, awe-inspiring objects. For example, garden hoses and deck chairs are literally manipulated by the young heroine for the purpose of feeding her highly active imagination. Pictures on the left pages depict reality, while those on the right express imaginary happenings. This suggests a sense of the literal and figurative dimensions of meaning contained in each page opening. Hence, while the heroine connects a garden hose to the kitchen tap, her imagination bodies forth an image of herself as a fire fighter at a burning building. In similar vein, manipulating the wooden frame of a canvas deck chair equates to heroic solo efforts on a deep sea yacht. Students were able to elicit concrete objects in terms of common nouns, while identifying abstractions such as imagination, courage, adventure, danger, and so forth. At the same time it was discovered that the terms deck chair and garden hose were examples of nouns that, in graphic idiom, were performing as adjectives. Again, this is all relatable to a strongly visual context.

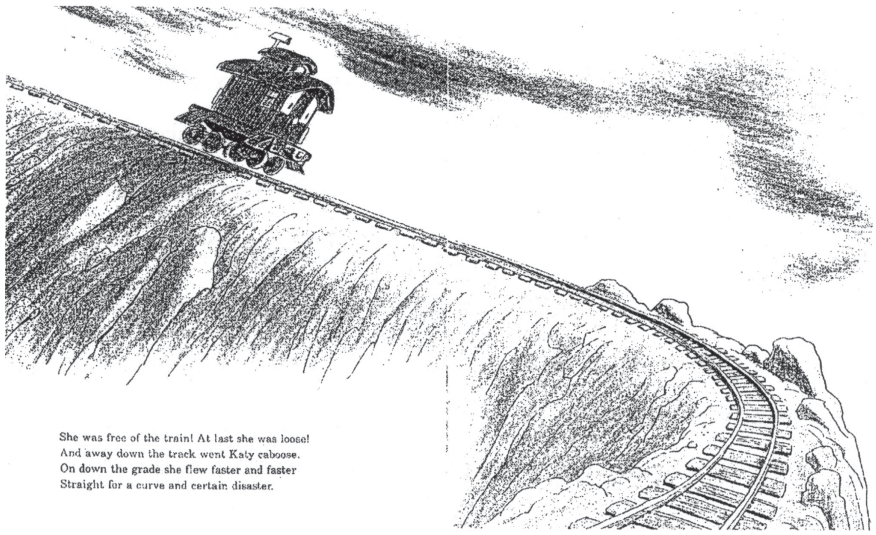

Figure 3: from The Caboose Who Got Loose *by Bill Peet*

Next was Sendak's *Where the Wild Things Are*, which provided a rich pictorial context for descriptive words. The visually powerful images of the very odd-looking creatures – the "Wild Things" – afford the opportunity to focus on the venerable adjective, clearly a classroom favourite. What is perhaps not done very often in the teaching of this word class is relating them to visual material, and furthermore, exploring them as synonyms, different words closely related in meaning, but used on a selective basis in order to differentiate, for example, between differing levels of intensity.

In order to describe the different expressions on the faces of the various creatures inhabiting the island, a selection of different descriptors is called for. Facial expressions of the different creatures may be described as obsequious, joyous, amused, or excited, and at other moments, as relaxed, puzzled, mischievous or intrigued. Moreover, not every viewer will read the same emotion in a particular face. Secondly, well-selected adjectival words can help to identify the subtle changes or shifts in nuance in the facial expressions of the same creature – the one on whose shoulders Max rides at one point during the wild rumpus. These expressions shift from benign on one page, to mischievous or conniving on the next, as he exchanges glances with a fellow-creature when Max is preoccupied. On the next page the same face looks cunning, sinister, crafty, or even devious when the boy is astride the creature's shoulders.

Words – in particular, adjectives – can be seen as a useful means of identifying the changes of expression and possibly the intentions and feelings that give rise to them. This in turn paves the way for predictions about how the story will continue. In a work such as this, where words and pictures interact in a complementary manner, observant readers can find their own verbal equivalents for the images that the writer-illustrator chooses to depict in visual form only. In the process, young readers may also become aware that the nuanced, subtle and detailed work produced by artists such as Sendak demand a more nuanced range of words to do justice to their subtlety and complexity. Bland words like naughty, evil and bad simply won't do.

5. Conclusion

Picture texts are potentially rich sources for the exploration of meaning because of the many ways in which words and illustrations interact. There is no way of anticipating quite what a particular reader will make of a specific text, especially when the symbiotic relationship between visual and verbal elements can create multiple layers of meaning and complexity. This relationship offers powerful opportunities for studying the different features of language within contexts that are both meaningful and appealing. Such contexts generate far more than "one-way traffic" from the page to the reader. Explorations with picture books offer a far richer kind of knowledge than that which can be neatly 'sewn up' and delivered on demand, thereby yielding unambiguous assessment products. This is to a great extent due to the very richness of the verbal and pictorial texts themselves, when well chosen. The beauty of picture texts is that they provide opportunities for exploring language at more than one level. In the hands of educators who have more than just a passing interest in the genre, engagements with imaginatively created texts can occur amongst learners who use language with differing levels of sophistication and at different ages. Moreover, picture books invite a range of individual responses that cannot easily be tied to pre-determined outcomes for reading, because different readers bring different experiences to the reading of texts. It is surely also because the authors themselves undergo a kind of exploration during the creative process. Perhaps this is seen in better perspective if one heeds the words of someone who creates picture books. Max Velthuijs suggests that

> Ultimately, everything comes from the soul and one can't say why it appears. I want to keep it that way. If one is too conscious of how one works, one can't be guileless any more, and something important is lost... The human brain is chock-full of ideas, but how and why these grow into a story is difficult to say. The only condition is that you give yourself space to allow your thoughts and feelings to come out (De Rijke & Hollands, 2006: 194-5).

It was suggested at the beginning that exploring picture books offers opportunities for adding further dimensions to teaching and learning. Although this may have particular application to languages, there are really no barriers between this learning area and others in which visual and verbal elements play a role in engaging readers' perceptions and responses to knowledge, aesthetic creations and value systems. Interpreting and commenting lie at the heart of much in education, and in this context, the symbiosis between pictures and words must have an important role to play.

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2) Owing to logistical considerations permission could not be obtained to use illustrated material from *Where the Wild Things Are* by Maurice Sendak.

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