

Ouachita Baptist University

Scholarly Commons @ Ouachita

Honors Theses

Carl Goodson Honors Program

Spring 2020

Beyond Stereotypical Picture Books: An Inquiry of Hidden Life Lessons from Patricia Polacco

Ruthie Lenards

Ouachita Baptist University

Follow this and additional works at: https://scholarlycommons.obu.edu/honors_theses



Part of the [Children's and Young Adult Literature Commons](#), and the [Sociology Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Lenards, Ruthie, "Beyond Stereotypical Picture Books: An Inquiry of Hidden Life Lessons from Patricia Polacco" (2020). *Honors Theses*. 752.

https://scholarlycommons.obu.edu/honors_theses/752

This Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by the Carl Goodson Honors Program at Scholarly Commons @ Ouachita. It has been accepted for inclusion in Honors Theses by an authorized administrator of Scholarly Commons @ Ouachita. For more information, please contact mortensona@obu.edu.

Abstract

The suggested title encourages the challenging of stereotypes of how our society views picture books. By applying a historical study of the author, Patricia Polacco, the thematic perspective is evident in her books. Many do not see those hidden life lessons due to the stereotypical norms of picture books. The reader will learn how Patricia Polacco's life lessons may not be hidden to the viewer. The definition of theme will be exploited due to the focus of the paper on the thematic issues in picture books. Knowing the definition of picture books is crucial in order to justify this problem or myth and research of the historical background is imperative towards the primary and secondary sources of this project. The reading of Patricia Polacco's picture books is crucial for this research study and will be the primary research focus. Personal communication of students from 3, 5, 7, and 9 support the justification of the mature thematic lessons in Patricia Polacco's books. Contributing to this issue, educators should view that picture books are appropriate from grades kindergarten through tenth and are not merely a compilation of illustrations, but a mature depiction of relevant themes and issues above reproach. Elementary and secondary educators opinions support this statement by applying pedagogies that include read aloud of Polacco's books to enhance the cognitive development of a student.

Keywords: thematic, stereotypes, historical background, mature depiction, pedagogies, cognitive development

Beyond Stereotypical Picture Books: An Inquiry of Hidden Life Lessons from Patricia Polacco

When you think of the words *picture books*, most people do not think about the complex life lessons taught in numerous children picture books. Children's picture books are portrayed as counting, recognizing colors, or simple concepts. Picture books are appropriate from grades kindergarten through tenth and are not merely a compilation of illustrations, but a mature depiction of relevant themes and issues throughout. In order to evaluate this problem, people need to be aware of a profound children's book author, Patricia Polacco, and how she addresses this issue in children's literature. Patricia Polacco's books portray meaningful stories that are real. Students are learning more than counting blocks; they are learning lessons that have or will be applied to their life.

The main goal of education is to aid students in becoming productive members of society. Students learn how to apply the themes or moral lessons from the stories to their lives. Patricia Polacco utilizes her personal stories to teach children tangible practices. Polacco grew up with her Russian culture influencing her childhood and those experiences impacted the stories that are written in all sixty of her books. Picture books are appropriate from grades three through ten and are not merely a compilation of illustrations, but a mature depiction of relevant themes and issues throughout Polacco's works. Polacco's thematic perspective is evident in her books. Many do not see those hidden life lessons due to the stereotypical norms of picture books.

Biography

Patricia Polacco was born on July 11, 1944, in Lansing, Michigan. Her mother's family were Jewish immigrants from Russia and The Ukraine. Her father's heritage was from The Limerick County, Ireland. Similar to today's culture, Polacco's parents divorced when she was young. This caused her to move around constantly, from her mother's family farm in Union

City, Michigan to Lansing where her father lived. Both cultures valued and kept their history alive by storytelling. “My fondest memories are of sitting around a stove or open fire, eating apples and popping corn while listening to the old ones tell glorious stories about their homeland and the past. We are tenacious traditionalists and sentimentalists.... With each retelling, our stories gain a little more ‘Umph’” (Penguin Putnam Books: Patricia Polacco, 200). Most of her childhood was spent between the Russian and Ukrainian family on her mother’s side, contrasting with the Irish lineage of her father.

To say it all started with a love of reading would be counterfeit because Polacco could not read growing up. Polacco’s inability to read was the cause of countless days of being bullied at school. She managed to excel to the next grade until she was fourteen. A teacher noticed that she could not read or write, and eventually she was diagnosed with dyslexia. Dyslexia is a specific learning disability; a neurological disorder. People with dyslexia have problems with the processing of the brain and can make it challenging for children to read. Due to strong guidance from her fifth grade teacher, Polacco learned to read and acknowledges her remarkable story in her book *Thank you, Mr. Falker*. From a young age, Polacco was not recognized for her creative writing, but rather her artistic talent. Despite her initial difficulties with reading and writing, she pursued her artistic ability. Patricia earned her Bachelors, Masters, and Ph.D. in Art and Art History. She has studied in the U.S., England, France, Russia and Australia.

Polacco is the mother of two grown children: son Steven, a tenured professor at Dominican University in San Rafael, California, and daughter Traci, who has made a career in the medical field also in California. Patricia lives on her farm estate in Union City, Michigan. Polacco did not begin writing and illustrating books until she turned 41. Most of her books are

written from real stories and life experiences. Her Russian lineage has impacted her life and the way she writes stories. A national public media literacy initiative offering information and resources on how young kids learn to read, Reading Rockets, includes incite about Polacco's lineage. Reading Rockets (2013) provides an interview with Patricia Polacco that discusses her family traditions and the teacher who changed everything, and overcoming Polacco's fears. Polacco talks about writing, illustrating, and the passing down of family history whose themes resonate with readers of all backgrounds. Living with her grandparents, her grandmother Babushka praised storytelling. Every night, they would do "fire talking;" this meant popcorn was popped and the fire was crackling, and sometimes fudge was indulged. After each story, Patricia would ask, "Babushka, was that a true story?" Babushka always responded by explaining "Of course that is a true story... but it may not have happened"(Transcript from an interview with Patricia Polacco, 2013). The storytelling atmosphere played a pivotal role in her reading development.

Polacco gained much success after beginning to publish her stories. She is a guest lecturer at many universities and elementary schools. She has been awarded numerous honorary degrees in Arts and Letters. Polacco has a distinguished record as an international advocate for the rights of children. She has also established literary and art courses of study for young people both nationally and internationally. She has traveled extensively to Russia and has established an art camp in Losovough, which thrives today. Polacco continues to support programs that encourage Russo-American friendships and understanding. She is also deeply involved in inner-city projects in the United States that promote the peaceful resolution of conflict and encourage art and literacy programs. Polacco has been honored by heads of state both at the Kremlin and the White House.

Patricia Polacco is a member of the National First Amendment Rights Coalition and is also known as a champion of classroom teachers, a cause sharpened by her association with Sandy Hook School in Newtown, Connecticut as a guest author and artist in residence. At Sandy Hook Elementary, Adam Lanza kills twenty first-graders and six school employees. (Sandy Hook school shooting, 2013). On December 14th, 2012, the unexpected loss of members of faculty and children, affected her life profoundly. The shock of this event caused her to collapse, be hospitalized and undergo open heart surgery to save her life. The grief of this set her on a path of establishing a series of lectures designed to raise the awareness of the plight of classroom teachers as well as encouraging students to reach out to each other and include those who are perceived to be “different” (Author Info, n.d.). She has earned national recognition through her determined anti-bullying campaign. Patricia conducts school visits all over the country. She is known as a natural storyteller and is highly praised for her work with people of all ages.

To date, Patricia Polacco has written and illustrated over 115 children picture books. Also, Polacco is a playwright and is in the process of penning for adults. Patricia Polacco is a coveted lecturer and keynote speaker and is considered one of the most inspiring speakers of our time. Thanks to her poignant writings, Patricia Polacco has created a precise understanding of how picture books should be perceived.

Research Abroad

A quaint setting that encourages children of all ages to read is located in Liverpool, England, called the Storybarn. In the heart of Calderstones Park owned by a woman who inspires children at the Reader Storybarn to spark a love of books. “An



imaginative play space dedicated to sharing the delights of reading with young children and their families, The Reader Storybarn exists to spark a life-long love of books and reading, and an unending curiosity to explore the astonishing worlds of our imaginations” (Lord, personal communication, May 16, 2019). The owner, Annie Lord, strives to cultivate an environment where children can be their playful selves. Ms. Lord declares her vision was to create an “invitation to imagination” (Lord, personal communication, May 16, 2019).

The Storybarn is really a place of fun and imagination with books and play. This dynamic attraction allows children to see real stories around them and not just in books. A collection in an crafts and arts room is included to connect to the story. A specific activity Annie conducts at the Storybarn is creating and designing pictures to a story. During some visits, students are read a poem and then they are to think about the pictures represented in the poem. Students began to explore their imaginations through sketching and coloring pictures in order to complete the picture book. The collection of pictures through design supports the tangible use of picture books toward secondary levels from a different cultural perspective and reasoning.

Nestled in the middle of Calderstones Park, the Storybarn provides a place where children can read to themselves, hear a read aloud, or bring their books to life through crafts. Each staff member at the Storybarn has a character name where they dress up and dazzle children with their storytelling talent. By bringing imagination to life, this encourages children of all ages. On the healthy development of children, Annie Lord absolutely agree(s) with the opinions that picture books Annie Lord’s opinion on the healthy development of the child “I absolutely agree with the opinion that picture books should be used in all grade level ages or even adults” (Lord, personal communication, May 16, 2019). There is a stereotype that picture books are only for primary age children and the transition to chapter books, but picture books

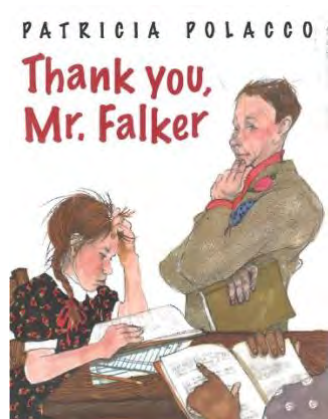
can be a universal way of connecting and tap into their imagination, regardless if the child can read or not. Chapter books can create barriers where children are expected to read.

Thematic Reasoning

Patricia Polacco has written over 115 picture books and all of them portray authentic themes throughout. Topics vary from family and friendship to war, all dealing with relationships. The heart of Polacco's books is the idea wrapped around connections with the people who surround us. The majority of the settings are in Union City, MI, where Polacco grew up. Patricia, her brother Richard, and their mother lived on their grandmother's farm. Most of the settings of her books are outdoors on the farm.

The use of common literacy elements such as motifs, metaphors, conflicts, solutions, symbolism, point of view, and repetition are exploited throughout Polacco's. By using characters based on her life, Patricia is able to reach the level of her readers. The interaction between the characters achieved in her books are dismayed by reality. A student can easily relate to her characters, regardless of their reading level. Polacco has a story to tell and all students should listen to her remarkable stories.

One of Patricia Polacco's well known books is called *Thank you, Mr. Falker*. Like many of her books, Patricia explains the relationship between a student and a teacher. Polacco ensures

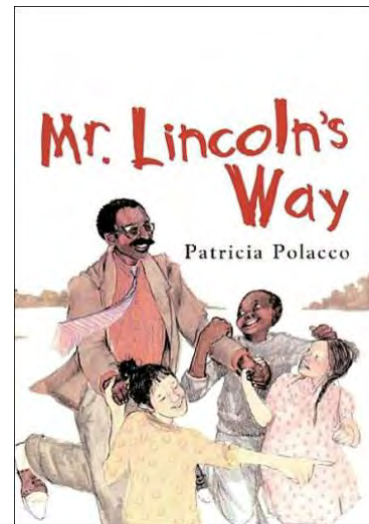


authentic material because she bases all of her books from real life experiences. Specifically, Patricia tells the story of her struggle with dyslexia and how she overcomes it through the help of her educator, Mr. Falker. Throughout her fifth grade year, Patricia is bullied and begins to question her self-worth. From her relationship with her grandmother to the outspoken personality of Mr. Falker, Patricia

receives the help all children need. Mr. Falker helped Patricia learn how to spell and read words correctly. Due to his tireless commitment to guiding Patricia, she now is a well-known children's author. The author of over one hundred picture books ironically had a difficulty with a learning disability. This powerful story enables children of all ages to know that nothing is impossible and that they are loved. Reading this book to any grade level is encouraged because all students carry baggage and the theme of student – teacher relationships is empowering.

Mr. Lincoln's Way is another book that inspires friendships between a student and a teacher. Similar to *Thank you, Mr. Falker*, bullying is addressed and stopped by educators. An underlying theme of *Mr. Lincoln's Way* is relationships and racism. Both of these thematic approaches are applicable and appropriate for a teacher to read to students. The story begins by describing the 'coolest principal in the whole word.'" His interaction with the students is

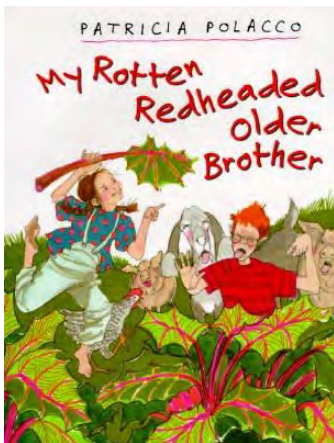
meaningful and fun. One student, a bully named Eugene, does not care for Mr. Lincoln's devotion. This young boy has earned the nickname "mean Gene." Wanting to have a connection with the student, Mr. Lincoln notices Eugene's fascination with birds, and he uses it as a way to reach out to Eugene. Mr. Lincoln explains to Eugene he wants birds to fly into the atrium at their school and gives him a book about birds. Mr. Lincoln and Eugene work together to renovate the



school atrium in order to attract birds; meanwhile, Eugene's interest in bullying begins to evaporate. A pair of ducks called mallards mate and lay eggs, but Eugene notices the ducklings will not receive water unless they are moved to the outside pond. When all seemed right, Eugene gets in trouble for insulting two students from Mexico. Mr. Lincoln talks about the issue

with Eugene, who begins to cry and says that his father was angered by Eugene's association with the principal because Mr. Lincoln was not 'our kind.' Mr. Lincoln explains that, just like the different colored birds in the atrium, people have 'cool' differences too, and asks Eugene to promise not to tease his classmates or call them names anymore. Eugene behaves from then on. The two work together to move the mallard ducklings from the atrium to the pond. Family members ask to witness this show of compassion for animals. Eugene promises Mr. Lincoln that he will make him proud. The book concludes by telling the readers that Eugene became a teacher and now calls his students "my little ducklings."

Letting students know someone cares for them is the most important aspect of not only teaching, but should also be embedded into non-instructional aspects. Empathy starts in the classroom, but non educational factors are pivotal in a child's learning experience. Though the teacher may not be able to help with all non-educational needs, utilizing educational factors in non-educational facets of life is achieved through Patricia Polacco's writing. A particular book Polacco wrote is *My Rotten Redheaded Older Brother*, and like most of her work, many things



about this book are true of the author's childhood. This story is about two siblings, Richard and Patricia, who are in constant competition. The setting of the book is Union City, Michigan. The younger sister Patricia is always trying to find ways that she can outdo her brother in at least one activity. One day, they are picking rhubarb when Richard claims he does not like rhubarb. Noting this, Patricia thinks she has finally found her chance to be better at something. They began having a rhubarb-eating contest. After Richard beats her once again, he claims he does not like rhubarb, he loves it. Later that night Patricia sees a shooting star and wishes, of course, to be able to beat

her brother at something, anything at all. The next day they go to a carnival and Patricia challenges her brother to a competition to see who can ride the merry-go-round the longest. As they begin to spin around and around, Patricia sees Richard get off. "I won!" she thinks, then she wakes up and realizes she is at her house lying down. She discovers she had passed out because of the dizziness, and Richard carried her all the way home. Yes, Patricia finally beat her brother, but he still helped her when she needed it.

The author clearly portrays the theme of family in this book. The book's theme of family comes from how caring Patricia's Babushka is for both of the children. It also depicts the family when Richard, also known as Richie, shows a caring attitude when he carries Patricia all the way home and fetches the doctor. Again, this shows that, even though they bickered, as a family, they love each other. Another non-educational theme in this picture book is that of a broken home. Though it is never mentioned, this theme is implicitly applied throughout. In the book, Patricia, Richard, and her mother live with their grandparents. That father of the family is absent, leaving Patricia's mother as a single mother raising two children. This once-unusual household combination is now considered common in many families. The thematic parts of *My Rotten Redheaded Older Brother* are beneficial when reading to all school-aged children. Broken homes and family dysfunction are sad truths for many present-day students, who will find Polacco's story both relatable and meaningful. By reading this thematic approach, the teacher can utilize non-education factors in the classroom environment.

Another non-educational themed picture book written by Patricia Polacco is *The Lemonade Club*. Cultural context is taken into account with this heartwarming story about a young girl and her story dealing with cancer. The characters of the story are best friends Traci and Marilyn, and their fifth-grade teacher, Miss Wichelman. *The Lemonade Club* tells the story



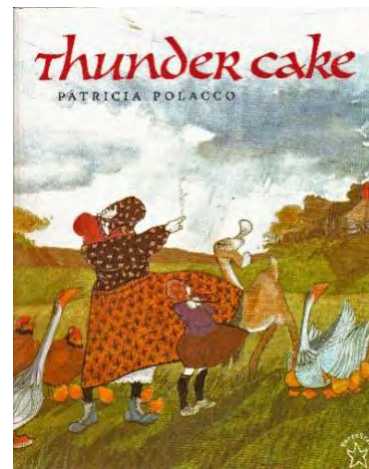
of these two best friends whose lives change when Marilyn begins to drastically lose weight and becomes fatigued. Marilyn discovers she has leukemia; her world turns upside down, and she grows stronger relationships with her friends. With the help of her family, friends, and a compassionate fifth-grade teacher, Miss Wichelman, Marilyn regains strength. Meanwhile, Miss Wichelman discovers she has her own challenge to face when she is diagnosed with breast cancer. Marilyn's strength and support her teacher to fight her own battle. The two develop a strong relationship and create the Lemonade Club, where both Marilyn and Miss Wichelman appreciate their authentic selves. Miss Wichelman acts as the deliverer of the popular theme "If life hands you a lemon or two today – and you all know how sour lemons are – just add water and sugar and what do you have? Lemonade!" (Polacco, 2007, p. 6). The motifs of Miss Wichelman emphasize the importance of finding how to shed light into a situation, even cancer. The inspiration from Polacco's writing style makes the characters' friendship relatable. Her detailed descriptions about leukemia make this complicated illness more comprehensible for young children.

Once again, Polacco draws her actual world into her stories: her daughter, Traci, had a best friend name Marilyn and an outstanding fifth-grade teacher name Miss Wichelman. Both suffered from cancer. The inspiration Polacco received for writing this non-fiction picture book derived from the strong women in her life who had succeeded in tragedy with the help to courage, faith, and most importantly, friendship. The theme of friendship is common throughout her books. *The Lemonade Club's* introduction of a difficult subject is recommended for children and primarily for older grades. This heartwarming story relates to students by dealing with the theme of friendship and how it can endure all obstacles. The power of friendship is a miraculous

relationship and Polacco demonstrates the long-lasting attitude of friendship through this true story. Also, another theme deals with overcoming challenges in life; all students can relate to Marilyn in a way, whether it is an illness, or any other struggle a student can be facing. Polacco shows the characters in the story always have encouragement and help, illustrating to students that they need to be aware of the support system they have in the people around them. With support, people can conquer overwhelming obstacles and achieve triumphant endings.

A commonly read picture book, *Thunder Cake*, displays another applicable theme as she tells another story with her Babushka. The setting of the story is her Babushka's farm in Michigan. A loud clap of thunder booms and rattles the windows of the old farmhouse; trembling Patricia wants nothing to do with this storm. "This is Thunder Cake baking weather,"

exclaims her Grandmother. Emerging from under her bed, Patricia is encouraged by her grandmother to worry about making Thunder Cake than about the thunder itself. Her Babushka tells her that, while they gather the ingredients, she should start counting when the lightning strikes and then stop counting when the thunder rolls. This number would tell her how many miles away the thunder is. Then, she helps Patricia



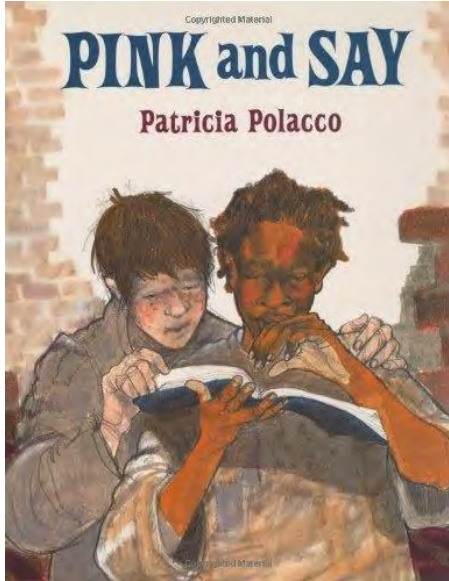
fetch all the ingredients needed to bake the cake. This recipe consists of gather tomatoes-a rather odd ingredient-eggs from the hens, and other things not easy to find, all while the storm inches closer outside. As she and her Babushka hurry to gather the ingredients around the farm, Patricia hurdles over each small fear. Fears such as: climbing up high on a trellis to retrieve tomatoes and strawberries, fetching eggs from mean old Nellie Peck Hen, milking old Kick Cow, or trudging through Tangleweed Woods. By the end of the story, her Babushka has helped her overcome her

fear of thunder by providing encouragement along the way. These doses of courage while hunting for these ingredients, allowed Patricia to show bravery as a little girl. Polacco concludes the story by having her Babushka and her Babushka bake the cake together. Little did Patricia know her Babushka was turning a frightening thunderstorm into a courageous adventure.

Thunder Cake is another memorable story of how relationships can help the characters overcome any challenges, big or small. All children have a fear of something or do not enjoying being pushed outside their comfort zone. *Thunder Cake* brings new meaning to the excitement of a thunderstorm, rather than fear itself. Similar to *The Lemonade Club*, Polacco conveys a message that is communicated through the strong relationships within the characters. Her Babushka distracted young Patricia from her fear by encouraging her to do something creative and constructive. Students can display courage in time of fear and uncertainty. Like Patricia, students can develop fear or worry and must realize their inner bravery. This reflects the ending of *Thunder Cake* by the character realizing the storm is not as bad as it seems. Teachers can use this tale to introduce to students the topic of bravery or fear and the importance of the people who surround them. Polacco often includes this theme in her books, and locates it at the heart of the relationships between characters. All themes from her books can be applied through the reading to a variety of school-aged students- even a motif such as finding courage.

An admired story that Polacco has also written is *Pink and Say*. This heart-wrenching historical picture book, published in 1994 is based on a true story, begins with two soldiers of the Civil War who become friends. Say, a white soldier from Ohio, is injured in battle. Pink, an African American soldier of the 48th U.S. Colored Infantry Regiment, intends to bring an end to slavery and return to battle. They are both fighting the ‘sickness of slavery’ when Pink finds Say wounded on the battlefield. Being a noble soldier, Pink brings his new friend Say to the slave

house where his mother, Moe Moe Bay, nurses Say back to health. A strong bond is woven between Say and Pink's mother in addition to the reunion of the mother and her son. Pink and Say's friendship flourishes and Say promises to teach Pink how to read one day. The boys then prepare to fight for the Union when they are discovered by Confederate (marauders.)



heartbreaking climax occurs when Pink's mother is killed while the boys are hiding in the cellar and the boys are later caught while striving to join the Union in battle. Pink is executed and Say is imprisoned in Andersonville. Once the war terminates, Say is released and does not keep this story to himself. The story of Pink and Say is passed down through generations to ensure Pink is known as a war hero and friend.

Family is a repetitive theme throughout Patricia Polacco's stories as they enhance relationships between the characters. *Pink and Say* includes the idea of mending a family where the characters are like brothers and Moe Moe Bay is the mother figure for Say. Polacco includes cultural factors to magnify the emphasis on relationships. Contrasting to her other stories, Patricia Polacco does not have personal experiences with this story, but it is a true story. She was able to tell this story because Say was her great grandfather. This story contains non-educational components, but also educational factors. The Theme of race and war are included in this powerful story. Polacco tells the similarities and differences between Pink and Say, but from first person point of view. Say is telling the story and his youthful naivety and innocence makes his and Pink's interactions charming and lighthearted, in stark contrast to the events of the times and to Pink's experiences. War is a major theme throughout because the setting is the Civil

War. Polacco's writings allow students to read a glimpse into the war from the perspective of the young soldiers. Intricate details about war are explained and tie the experience together. This book is useful for students to explore war, family, race, and relationships. Teachers can break down parts of the book for younger grades, but *Pink and Say* creates a unique learning environment. Tangible pedagogy can be applied both in inside and outside the classroom. Teachers can connect this books throughout multiple subjects, even those in middle school or high school. Polacco's habit of incorporating real-world scenarios into her narratives allows young readers to confront real-world issues of race, family, and relationships in a safe and relatable environment.

Picture Book Research

The justification of the importance of picture books throughout upper grades levels would not be supported without research. A field experience was conducted between the university and Arkadelphia Public Schools. Grades 3 5, 7, and 9 were studied, with two to three students from each grade and the examiner. The participants differed by nationality, gender and race. *Pink and Say* was the chosen book about which to interview the students between these grades. Students across all grades were read the book, followed by a series of guiding questions from the examiner. Guiding questions included: What is your opinion about picture books? Why, did you enjoy this book? And What do you think about when you read the book (students were encouraged to share with their partner)? After reading the book, the examiner also asked: what is your opinion about picture books and why, and would you recommend this book to a friend? The heart of this experiment dealt with asking questions about the theme, such as: what is this book mainly about or what is the moral to this story. For younger readers the question was' what did the character teach us? The last question the examinees were asked mentioned the

application of the content from the picture book. All questions were recorded with the consent of the students before the interview was conducted. Schools were not instructed to select certain students of race, gender, or academic level; this resulted in an inequivalent number of students per interview.

Contrary to popular opinion, the results of the interviews support the usage of picture books in any classroom. Three third graders participated at Central Primary School. This first round of field experience had two female students and one male. The examinees will be referred to as students: A,B, and C to retain confidentiality. The students were prompted with a beginning question. When asked what their opinion about picture books were, student A told “I think they are good because they helped me when I was little. If I did not understand some words when learning to read, the pictures helped tell the story to me.” (Student A, personal communication, November 21, 2019). Student B remarked she like picture books because they are fun and pretty (Student B, personal communication, November 21, 2019). Student C told he does like picture books, but he does not know why. With this information, reading *Pink and Say* was next on the agenda (Student C, personal communication, November 21, 2019).

The goal of the reading was to demonstrate guided reading to the younger grades. This means the teacher prompts students with engaging questions while the book is being read. Before opening the book, the students learned what the book was about and met the characters. Throughout the reading, the students soon realized this book was lengthy. The examiner had to keep their attention through expression and prosody. The guided reading with three third graders took an average of ten minutes. Further questions were asked once the reading of *Pink and Say* was completed. The first question they were asked was if they enjoyed the book. All of them enthusiastically said they enjoyed the book. Student B explained she thought so highly of the

book because of how the characters helped each other. Student A stated “I like it because it was about the army and my grandpa helped people when he was in the army. My favorite character was Pink” (Student A, personal communication, November 21, 2019). The next question that was asked was if they would recommend this book to a friend. The three of them agreed they would want to share *Pink and Say* with their peers.

Thematic reasoning is the core of this work and adjustments were made with each grade level so that the questions were age-appropriate. The main question within this experience deals with theme. The students were asked: what did the characters teach us? Wording of the question was altered due to the lack of knowledge of the definition of the word theme. Student A remarked “two friends can never be ripped apart;” this supports friendship, a common theme throughout Polacco’s books (Student A, personal communication, November 21, 2019). Student B and Student C chose not to answer this question. In the final question, the students were asked again was their opinion about picture books and why. Student A exclaimed she loved picture books still, Student B clarified she liked pictures books even more, and Student C said he liked them more. Field experience is a way to better the classroom environment and allow learning to occur. Future recommendations for reading this book are supported by the responses of the students. All three students enjoyed *Pink and Say* and would have a longer attention span if the book was integrated into multiple subjects. The students struggled to pay attention due to the length of the book. When using this book in the classroom setting, a teacher could break the book apart into certain pages a day and read the book throughout a school week. Topics Patricia Polacco addresses in *Pink and Say* are war, race, friendship, and most importantly, relationships.

University Heights Intermediate School of Medical Arts provided two fifth-grade students to engage in the reading of *Pink and Say*. When introduced to Patricia Polacco, one

student commented that a past teacher has already read *Pink and Say* to their class. The examiner asked for a variety of student backgrounds and learning differences. The anticipated reply of a fifth grader, when debating the use of picture books, would be they simply do not learn from them because those books are components of foundational learning, and do not require effort when reading them. The opinion that picture books are too childish to be useful in upper elementary grades is put into practice with these two fifth graders, and challenges the stereotypical norms of the upper elementary. When asked what their impression of picture books and if their teachers adopted picture books into their curriculum, their response supported this justification. Student D answered, “they are actually good books because you actually get to see and also get details in your head what the book is telling you” (Student D, personal communication, January 7, 2020). Student E said he feels the same because he likes how entertaining they are with scenes in the book that explain what the story is about. Two fifth-graders, who enjoy reading chapter books, also enjoy reading picture books within their learning and growth development.

Student E claimed he had read *Pink and Say* in primary school, but was anxious about reading it a second time. Following the reading, both students eagerly answered they enjoyed *Pink and Say*. Student E voiced the opinion that the book was entertaining, and Student D stated, “you could see the pictures, see what the characters were doing, and track their words with the actions.” Similar to the previous grade, both fifth-graders identify the theme of friendship in *Pink and Say*. Their responses reflected the profound friendship depicted in the book and “how a helping hand goes a long way” (Student D, personal communication, January 7, 2020). Student D mentioned the influence the separation of Pink and Say portrayed to the reader. The students remarked that their teacher does incorporate the use of picture books in their class. They stated

the books tie into a history lesson and are sometimes used weekly instead of monthly. Reflecting on *Pink and Say*, Student D added she learns better with picture books “because if you say something I will not understand it that much, but if you use a picture I will understand it better” (Student D, personal communication, January 7, 2020) Two fifth-graders proclaimed the importance a student by praising their teacher’s work with picture books.

Supporting the theme of Patricia Polacco’s *Pink and Say*, Arkadelphia Middle School’s seventh graders push the expectations of the stereotypical norms. Two seventh-graders participated in the same examination process as the students in younger grades. When asking them what their opinions about picture books were, their responses were surprising. Student F stated, “picture books are good because they paint a picture,” while Student G explained, “picture books are good because they give us a way to actually see what is going on instead of having us guess in our head” (Student F & Student G, personal communication, March 3, 2019). These students encouraged the use of picture books and wished their teachers implemented them more in their classroom.

The seventh graders were excited about the reading of *Pink and Say*. Throughout the reading, both students made comments about the plot and characters of the story. The subject of history seemed to spark the interest of the students and retain their attention span throughout the book. The remainder of the questions were asked and the responses of the students were recorded. Both students declared they missed being read to and wished their teachers shared picture books with their class. After admiring *Pink and Say* the students demonstrated positive responses regarding Patricia Polacco. Student F noted, “*Pink and Say* gave us an insider’s view through the treatment of black and white soldiers who fought for what they wanted” (Student F, personal communication, March 3, 2019). Student G mentioned the impact the book had on her

with respect to Pink's mother, Moe Moe Bay, and the ruthless Confederate soldiers. After being told that Patricia Polacco's books are always based on true stories and real-life experiences, both students agreed they thought of war and its hardship. Also, they were intrigued by the illustrations throughout, because they allowed the students to tell it was from the Civil War and displayed the brutal scenery of war times. Both students said they would recommend this book to a friend.

The seventh-graders' responses demonstrated that they were able to clearly identify Polacco's themes in *Pink and Say*. One of the final questions they were asked dealt with the moral message of *Pink and Say*. Student F portrayed a deep understanding by explaining, "race and color simply do not matter because we are the same on the inside. We might be externally different, but we are genetically alike with blood running through our veins and everyone has a heart" (Student F, personal communication, March 3, 2019). Student G stated, "if you care for people then they will care for you" (Student G, personal communication, March 3, 2019). Student F commented his teachers do not read picture books in their class but wished they would incorporate these on a weekly basis. This student also revealed the desire to read a sequel of *Pink and Say*; "I want to see Sheldon's life as a dad and how history was accounted for after he was released from Andersonville Prison" (Student F, personal communication, March 3, 2019). Further suggestion for this reading would be to include a writing prompt for the students to imagine "what would happen next" and continue the engagement of all students. The students began to have a conversation about how life was during the time of *Pink and Say* and described the book as exceptional in applying literacy to history.

The study culminated with an analysis of two ninth-graders from Nettleton High School. This final examination justifies the reason behind using picture books. Asked about picture

books in the high school classroom, both students were unsure why teachers did not use them. When asked if they were used in any of their classes, the two students, Student H and Student I, exclaimed their teachers might laugh at them if they asked for a picture book. One student said, “picture books were more associated with children, that was basically how most of us thought. I feel like we could use them in the classroom if a student is struggling and they need extra visualization to comprehend a subject” (Student I, personal communication, January 7, 2020). Both students added they are visual learners and think it is important for all teachers take into consideration all learning styles. Student H said, “Sometimes I cannot imagine things from a writing, because I cannot understand words from a text, I feel like pictures do have to be well drawn because you can tell the story by the picture. This is why picture books are great” (Student H, personal communication, January 7, 2020).

Following the reading and explanation of the text, the students answered feedback questions. When asked if they would enjoy this book in one of their ninth-grade classes, both students answered with an avid “yes.” This observation and examination time differed from the preceding ones due to the maturity level of the examinees. Rather than asking a question to each student, the two students created a partner discussion regarding Patricia Polacco’s book. The thematic approach discussed with Student I was the moral lesson about racism and “getting to know each other beyond that.” The final statement regarding picture books from Student I was, “I think picture books could be taught in our grade because it helps us imagine it more” (Student I, personal communication, January 7, 2020). Student H said, “I would enjoy class more if we got a break from textbooks or chapter books. Also, it would spice things up when every once in a while you read it and brings back nostalgic memories to a ninth grade classroom” (Student H, personal communication, January 7, 2020). Patricia Polacco’s books such as *Pink and Say*

allow variation in the classroom environment. As the responses of the ninth-grader participants affirm, picture books have authentic themes from which students can learn.

Educational Application

Various teachers strive to implement engaging activities for their students. Education curriculum and pedagogy continually evolve. Teachers look constantly for new strategies to promote learning in their classroom. Though most may not think twice before reading a picture book to their students, sixth grade teachers Sarah Berry and Caitlin Jones support the use of read aloud. Ms. Berry and Ms. Jones are language arts teachers at Little Rock Christian School. Like to many teachers, Mrs. Berry and Mrs. Jones have a drive to culturally enrich their students. When it comes to learning, these teachers apply a different approach that not only engages the students, but also displays a love for learning. Both state, “We both agree that picture books aid in the growth and development of students. We use picture books on a regular basis to not only teach students about life lessons but also for building vital reading comprehension skills. Shared reading experiences not only help students to better understand the world but helps the students and teachers to have a common language that they can use when discussing reading comprehension skills” (Berry & Jones, personal communication, January 28, 2020).

When specifically discussing *Pink and Say*, Mrs. Jones states this book addresses issues such as racism, war, friendship, and conflict. Jones encourages teachers to use picture books no matter the grade because they observe the growth and involvement of their students with engagement. Another topic discussed was the themes Patricia Polacco uses and how teachers cannot just view them as babysitting tactics, but as learning opportunities. In order to apply picture books, educators must switch their mindsets and realize mature themes, such as those depicted in Patricia Polacco’s books, are useful tools for active learning.

A junior high literacy teacher, Mrs. Byrd, responds positively to this initiative. “I believe that picture books can be incorporated into any reading curriculum at any age,” states Byrd (Byrd, personal communication, March 10, 2020). Though eighth-graders were not evaluated for this research project, the results of the seventh-graders support this reasoning. Reading picture books can be a useful supplement to a growing depth of knowledge, allows secondary teachers to incorporate age-appropriate picture books. Byrd also responded, “I read picture books on bullying issues, the civil rights, and Holocaust topics. My junior high kids love the picture books and love being read to” (Byrd, personal communication, March 10, 2020).

Conclusion

Picture serve as the manipulatives teachers, students, and parents use to learn the basic foundational skills. Picture books elevate a greater depth of knowledge and cognitive skills applicable to all grades. These books are recognized as simple stories to many, but well-known author Patricia Polacco writes beyond the simplicity of basic stories. Polacco has written over one hundred picture books that continue to provide a depth of meaning to the text. Polacco encourages the challenging of stereotypes of how our society views picture books. The reader should be enthused, about the findings of the study. By applying a historical study of the author, Patricia Polacco, the thematic perspective is evident in her books. Many do not see those hidden life lessons due to the stereotypical norms of picture books. Clearly, Patricia Polacco’s life lessons may not be hidden to the viewer.

References

- Author Info. (n.d.). Retrieved from <http://www.patriciapolacco.com/index.html>
- Transcript from an interview with Patricia Polacco. (2013, August 12). Retrieved from <https://www.readingrockets.org/books/interviews/polacco/transcript>
- Braid, C., & Finch, B. (2015). "Ah, I know why...": Children developing understandings through engaging with a picture book. *Literacy*, 49(3), 115-122. doi:10.1111/lit.12057
- Home. (n.d.). Retrieved from <http://patriciapolacco.com/>
- Massey, S. (2015). The english journal; The multidimensionality of children's picture books for upper grades. *Vol. 104(5)*, 45-58.
- Mckenna, M., Franks, S., & Lovette, G. (2011). Using Reading Guides With Struggling Readers in Grades 3 and Above. *After Early Intervention, Then What? Teaching Struggling Readers in Grades 3 and Beyond*, 207-217. doi:10.1598/0844.10
- Polacco, P. (1992). *Chicken Sunday*.
- Polacco, P. (2012). *Thank you, Mr. Falker*. New York: Philomel Books.
- Polacco, P. (2013). *Thunder cake*. Boston: National Braille Press.
- Polacco, P. (2017). *Mr. Lincoln's way*. NY, NY: Puffin Books.
- Sandy Hook school shooting. (2013, December 11). Retrieved from <https://www.history.com/this-day-in-history/gunman-kills-students-and-adults-at-newtown-connecticut-elementary-school>