

Picturebooks as Catalysts: Fostering Social Justice and Critical Consciousness in Higher Education

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Journal of Equity & Social Justice in
Education Volume 4, 2025 [a](#)

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I have no known conflict of interest to disclose. The Institutional Review Board at the author's University approved this study on 4/22/2024. The case number is 2024-053.
I would like to express my deep gratitude to my students who embraced the opportunity to connect with picturebooks and to develop personally and professionally.

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This article argues that picturebooks can be powerful tools for promoting social justice in higher education. While often overlooked as texts for only young children, their engaging narratives can foster social awareness, critical thinking, and transformative learning among university students. Drawing from a study in a first-year social justice course, this article uses students' voices to highlight how leading read-alouds themselves contributed to the cultivation of their critical consciousness. Participants gained personal insights, challenged biases, and strengthened their commitment to identity, diversity, justice, and action. This work demonstrates that accessible mediums like picturebooks can be an innovative practice for fostering deeper engagement and understanding of complex social justice issues in higher education contexts.

Keywords: Reading Instruction; Reading Material Selection; Picture Books; Social Justice; Oral Reading; Consciousness Raising

Introduction

Why would a university professor integrate picturebooks into their courses? And why would students thoughtfully share read-alouds with their classmates? To many, these activities may not possess academic rigor. This article argues that stories are a powerful medium for promoting social justice in higher education.

Picturebooks serve as dynamic tools, offering rich opportunities to cultivate crucial social awareness and critical thinking (Freire, 2018; Vasquez et al., 2019). Picturebooks are "highly sophisticated aesthetic objects" which "combine words and visual images (and occasionally other modalities) in complicated ways" (Sipe, 2011, p. 4). The text and illustrations have a synergistic relationship in which one is incomplete without the other, supporting the use of the compound word picturebook rather than picture book (Sipe, 2011).

Fostering Critical Consciousness

Despite being frequently seen as texts for young children, the sophisticated combination of words and images in picturebooks can provide accessible entry points for deep, personal reflection on complex social justice issues (Wild, 2024). Engaging narratives can provide avenues for individuals of all ages to encounter diverse perspectives, find meaningful representation (Bishop, 1990), and engage in discussions about identity, diversity, justice, and action (Learning for Justice, 2022). Moreover, these texts can foster spaces uniquely suited for discus-

sion, deep reflection, and transformative learning experiences (Lennox, 2013). This is particularly important given that social justice education is not merely a cognitive process of acquiring knowledge but also an affective and embodied experience that can evoke discomfort as existing beliefs are challenged (Hosseini et al., 2025). In an increasingly interconnected world, fostering this social awareness and critical thinking is a global imperative, demanding a nuanced understanding of issues like climate change, poverty, and human rights.

The Need for Innovation

While research has highlighted the importance of social justice pedagogy in higher education (Burbank et al., 2025; Hosseini et al., 2025; Spitzman & Balconi, 2019) and the impact of picturebooks on teacher education (Crawford et al., 2019; Flores et al., 2019), the broader application of these stories across university disciplines remains underexplored. The prevailing adherence to traditional academic texts often inadvertently limits the exploration of innovative, effective methods for fostering critical consciousness.

I contend that picturebooks are valuable pedagogical tools for all higher education students, equipping them with the empathy and knowledge necessary to navigate and contribute to a more just and equitable global society. As an assistant professor with a background in early childhood education, I have purposefully integrated picturebooks into all my courses to demonstrate their potential as approachable yet dynamic texts for analyzing systemic inequities, examining intersectionality,

and reflecting on personal and societal biases (Wild, accepted for publication). This pedagogical approach builds directly on my previous work with young children. It presents valuable opportunities for educators to challenge conventional teaching methods and incorporate creative, equity-focused practices into university settings.

Methods

Course Context and Participants

I teach at a small, private liberal arts university in the Northeast United States. During Fall 2024, I designed a first-year social justice course. The course used picturebooks as catalysts for exploring identity and diversity, recognizing and challenging injustices, and taking social action. This pedagogical approach was structured around the Learning for Justice (2022) Social Justice Standards (Identity, Diversity, Justice, and Action), as well it aligned with general education requirements at my university. The picturebooks served as approachable entry points and scaffolds for core theoretical concepts, such as Freire's (2018) concept of critical consciousness and Bishop's (1990)

"Mirrors, Windows, and Sliding Glass Doors" framework, which students explored further through academic readings and in-depth class discussion.

There were 19 students in my class, all majoring in either nursing or education. To facilitate the documentation and analysis of their experiences, I obtained Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval, and 18 students consented to participate. Participation did not impact grading or course requirements. Among these 18 students, 16 identified as cisgender women (88.9%) and 2 as cisgender men (11.1%). While the students primarily identified as White, the class also included students who identified as Asian (n=2), Black (n=1), and American Indian/Alaska Native (n=1). For this article, I focus on the reflections of eight students chosen via convenience sampling due to their detailed, rich responses (i.e. length, depth of reflection, explicit connection to course themes). See Table 1 for self-reported demographics of focal participants: Molly, Levi, Cora, and Asma from the education field, and Allie, Arya, Emnet, and Neha from the nursing field. Note that these are pseudonyms.

Table 1
Demographics of Focal Participants

| Name | Area of Study | Ethnicity/Race | Gender Identity | Sexual Orientation | Class Status |
|-------|---------------|---------------------------|-----------------|--------------------|---------------|
| Allie | Nursing | White | Cis Woman | Straight | Working Class |
| Arya | Nursing | White | Cis Woman | Straight | Middle Class |
| Asma | Education | White | Cis Woman | Lesbian | Working Class |
| Cora | Education | White | Cis Woman | Straight | Working Class |
| Emnet | Nursing | Black or African American | Cis Woman | Straight | Middle Class |
| Levi | Education | White | Cis Man | Straight | Working Poor |
| Molly | Education | White | Cis Woman | Straight | Middle Class |
| Neha | Nursing | Asian | Cis Woman | Straight | Middle Class |

Data Collection and Context

This article draws on data from a qualitative study (Creswell & Poth, 2024) I conducted to explore how engagement with picturebooks in a first-year social justice course influences understanding of social justice concepts. While I consistently read aloud with my students during each class, here I focus on students' experiences and reflections of thoughtfully sharing stories with their peers through a student-led read-aloud assignment.

Because this was an initial, exploratory study, a formal tool to measure participants' beliefs about social justice topics prior to the read-alouds was not utilized. Instead, I relied on participants' own detailed accounts of how their read-aloud reflections, weekly discussion board posts, and in-class activities impacted them or caused change.

The directions for this assignment required students to se-

lect a picturebook based on a social justice concept covered in the course (identity, diversity, justice, and action) that held particular interest for them. These were often rooted in their own lived experiences and passions. To facilitate this selection, I provided recommendations to the university library prior to the semester. This resulted in a substantial increase in their picturebook collection. Choosing from this curated library collection was one option; students were also welcome to find books independently and could consult with me at any time for guidance.

Students presented their read-aloud to the entire class and then facilitated a related activity. Depending on what would best explore the themes of their chosen book, some led small-group discussions while others guided a whole-class activity. Data were collected through written student reflections submitted after their read-aloud presentations. These reflections

addressed specific prompts related to their selection of picturebooks, their experiences leading the read-aloud, and their understanding of the social justice themes explored.

Data Analysis: Coding Process

The qualitative data from student reflections were analyzed using a thematic analysis approach, as outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006) and Nowell et al. (2017). After becoming familiar with the data by reading all 18 student reflections multiple times, I began the initial coding process by identifying open-ended, in vivo codes directly from the reflections. These codes were drawn directly from the language used by the students themselves.

In the second round of coding, I grouped the initial codes into broader, conceptual categories based on recurring ideas. These conceptual categories were then developed into three main themes: (1) Picturebooks as Effective Teaching Tools, (2) Personal Insights and Growth from the Read-Aloud Experience, and (3) Enhanced Understanding of Social Justice Concepts. This was not a linear process; instead, I moved back and forth between the data, codes, and themes in an iterative process, which ensured the analysis was grounded in the participants' own voices and experiences.

Reflexivity and Positionality

As a white, cisgender, middle-class assistant professor, my positionality and background in early childhood education have profoundly shaped my research. My previous work focused on using picturebooks with younger audiences, and my belief in their pedagogical power led me to explore their use in a new context: higher education. Throughout this study, I engaged in an ongoing process of self-reflection to acknowledge and mitigate my own biases.

I actively worked to ensure student voices were at the forefront, guiding the analysis through their own reflections rather than my interpretations. While I acknowledge that my identity and my role as their professor may have influenced their re-

sponses, I also recognize that this connection supported their learning and development.

Validity Checks and Trustworthiness

To ensure the trustworthiness of this qualitative research, I looked to Lincoln and Guba's (1985) criteria: credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. The analysis was guided by the principle of credibility, where I used member-checking by periodically asking students to clarify or expand on their reflections, ensuring my interpretations aligned with their intended meanings. This process helped to confirm the accuracy of the themes identified. Additionally, the detailed description of the research context and participant demographics enhances the study's transferability, allowing readers to judge

its applicability to their own settings. The clear and logical presentation of the research process ensures dependability, showing how the findings were reached.

Results

The qualitative data analysis led to three overarching themes that capture the students' experiences and understanding.

1. Picturebooks as Effective Teaching Tools
2. Personal Insights and Growth from the Read-Aloud Experience
3. Enhanced Understanding of Social Justice Concepts

The following subsections present these themes, with representative student quotes to illustrate and provide evidence for each, directly from the students' perspective. As demonstrated in Table 2, the books chosen by the students covered a diverse range of topics, including consent, disability, and refugee experience, all of which provided rich material for the themes presented below. This intentional focus on amplifying student voice was a foundational element of this study. It positioned students as experts on their own learning experiences. By centering their reflections, this research provided a richer, more authentic understanding of how picturebooks function as tools for social justice education.

Table 2

Focal Participants' Read-Aloud Selections and Associated Themes

| Name | Area of Study | Picturebook Title | Associated Social Justice Themes |
|-------|---------------|--|----------------------------------|
| Allie | Nursing | <i>Who do you see when you look at me?</i> (Rodgers, 2019) | Disability & Inclusivity |
| Arya | Nursing | <i>All Are Welcome</i> (Penfold, 2018) | Religious & Ethnic Diversity |
| Asma | Education | <i>Don't Hug Doug</i> (Finison, 2021) | Consent & Autonomy |
| Cora | Education | <i>The Rabbit Listened</i> (Doerrfeld, 2018) | Empathy & Emotional Support |
| Emnet | Nursing | <i>What Is a Refugee?</i> (Gravel, 2019) | Humanizing Refugee Identity |
| Levi | Education | <i>All Are Neighbors</i> (Penfold, 2022) | Community & Acceptance |
| Molly | Education | <i>In Every House on Every Street</i> (Hitchman, 2020) | Non-Traditional Family Identity |
| Neha | Nursing | <i>Red: A Crayon's Story</i> (Hall, 2015) | Challenging Stereotypes |

The Power of Picturebooks as Teaching Tools

Students consistently emphasized picturebooks as effective and accessible learning tools for introducing complex social justice topics such as racism, inequality, and injustice. They noted that these texts successfully translate abstract concepts into understandable and engaging narratives for children. Furthermore, a significant finding was the importance of picturebooks in showcasing diversity and inclusivity.

Asma: I chose the book *Don't Hug Doug* (Finison, 2021) because I feel like consent is a big topic that should be talked about a lot more with younger kids. It's something that would always be a part of their daily lives no matter what. I also think it's something that needs to be touched on earlier in their lives so it could be built upon and discussed more later on.

Asma: The first takeaway that I find is important to acknowledge is the importance of picturebooks as a means to show diversity and inclusivity, as well as injustices, in a way that even very small children can understand from different perspectives (windows, mirrors, and doors).

Cora: *The Rabbit Listened* (Doerrfeld, 2018) teaches the importance of empathy and listening to others. The rabbit, who just listens without judging, helps Taylor feel better by giving him the space to feel all of his feelings. This picturebook connects to social justice because it encourages respect and emotional support.

Molly: I chose the book *In Every House on Every Street* (Hitchman, 2020) because I babysit for a family that is interracial, where the kids are adopted. Even though they are not the same race they still do all of the things a typical family would. The story was important because race does not define family and helps understand the different dynamics a family can have.

Allie: I chose *Who do you see when you look at me?* (Rodgers, 2019). While many social justice books talk about race and gender –two very important topics, I feel like many forget about people with disabilities. My sister has a disability, so I try to talk about disabilities to the best of my abilities and explain to others that they are more than their disability.

Levi: I chose the book *All Are Neighbors* (Penfold, 2022) because this story follows a diverse group of children as they explore their neighborhood, meeting all types of different people with unique backgrounds and cultures. They discover that everyone has differences, but they are still connected through their shared space of the neighborhood. They understand that each unique characteristic from individual to individual is a valued part of their community. With themes of community, acceptance, and embracing diversity, this book delivers the strong message that everyone belongs, and the togetherness of a community is what makes it strong.

Levi: The idea of acceptance is a very important one because everyone wants to feel accepted by their environment, especially when entering a new and foreign environment it is critical that we make all people feel welcomed so that all can

thrive and reach their highest potential. The idea of embracing diversity is also very important because without diversity our world would be very boring. It is the differences between people that gives our world life, and these differences should be celebrated not chastised. We all come from different walks of life and those different paths create differences in what we eat, how we talk, traditions, etc. We should strive to learn about other differences and educate ourselves on things that maybe are unusual or not accustomed to us because that is how we learn and continue to grow as a society.

Arya: After careful thought and much searching, I landed on the book *All Are Welcome* (Penfold, 2018). I chose this particular book because not only does it stress the idea that everybody has a place in every corner of the world, but it also embraces the differences that we have physically and religiously. I personally think that this is important, because society's goal should not be to limit or ignore our differences so that we can all come together, but rather that we should embrace these differences and love one another for how they differ from us and accept them as who they are and what they identify as.

Arya: By illustrating many different flags at the top of the page, some of which are flags of sexualities, the book embraces both ethnic diversity and different sexual orientations. On another page, there is an illustration of a map of the whole world, where the kids are surrounding the map in a circle, rejoicing hands. This shows that though the world is insanely large, and many different cultures exist within it, we are all one community, using diversity as our strength to fight against adversity. Diversity is important and using it to create a community is just as important.

Personal Insights and Growth from the Read-Aloud Experience

Beyond the direct application of picturebooks, students gained significant self-insights, including increased self-awareness and a recognition of their own biases and privileges. Many expressed a willingness to work on these. They noted a growing understanding of how social justice issues affect everyday life and various groups, along with a stronger commitment to supporting diversity, challenging injustice, and educating others.

Asma: I was a little nervous at first but looking at everyone actually listening and paying attention to what I had to say was very comforting... So overall I would say it's one of the most fun and fulfilling projects I've ever done for a class.

Asma: I learned that I had unrecognized biases in some of my thinking. This class helped me to take a deeper and unbiased look at myself and find any biases or injustices that I may hold.

Asma: I've become more aware of how social justice issues affect everyday life and the impact of privilege.

Cora: During my read-aloud, I was nervous and was scared that nobody in the class would engage with my questions and

prompts. Once I started, most of my nervousness went away, and I felt confident in the way that I read. I also learned it is a lot harder than it seems to get in front of a group of adults to read a children's book.

Molly: During the read aloud I was nervous, but I knew I had the knowledge and ability to complete the story. Classmates were engaged during my read-aloud and answered my questions appropriately.

Neha: Through this experience reading *Red: A Crayon's Story* (Hall, 2015), I realized how important oral communication is in making a message clear and engaging. The way I read the book, using an expressive tone and pausing for reflection –helped keep my classmates' attention and allowed them to connect with the story more deeply.

Levi: This activity was also very beneficial for me because of the lessons it taught about teaching in front of an audience and oral communication. For me as an aspiring future teacher, I found that this activity was very useful for developing skills that are needed to be an effective teacher such as effective oral communication.

Arya: Through this experience, I learned that communication on touchy subjects can be difficult, and it takes time to truly make someone feel comfortable enough to express their beliefs. It made me realize that if we can't talk to twenty other people about social justice, how are we going to stand up to the world and fight for social justice? I realized after this experience how essential it is to incorporate social justice conversations in the classroom, even if in the beginning I didn't care for it. We need to create a space where everyone feels comfortable to fight for what they believe in and express who they are as a person.

Enhanced Understanding of Social Justice

Students recognized that picturebooks can encourage children to question fairness, think critically about power structures, and inspire them to take positive action to make a difference. The reflections also underscored the importance of introducing social justice concepts to children at a young age, stating that it's never too early for these conversations.

Asma: Seeing so many different topics like consent, freedom, and climate change really opened my view to how social justice operates in the world and affects our everyday life, in a racial, ethnic, religious, personal identity, diversity, different ability, and overall social ways. It's something you could plant in every aspect of being an educator and include it in your daily classroom routine easily.

Cora: *The Rabbit Listened* enhanced my understanding of social justice themes by displaying that social justice isn't only about large actions. It's also about how we treat each other on a daily basis. Quiet support and being there for people who are struggling is an important part of building a kind and understanding environment.

Allie: This process helped me understand social justice better because everyone chose a different book, and by that I learned not only about race, but gender, consent, bodies, and so much more knowledge that I did not have before. This process made me feel like a better person because of the new knowledge and correct terms to use in today's world. The word social justice is so much more than I thought it would be and by this project alone I learned about so many new things that have to do with justice or how to use my own voice to promote change in the world.

Levi: This assignment helped greatly in developing my understanding of social justice concepts because I had to really think about what the book was saying and the lesson that it was trying to teach. As I investigated further into the teachings of the book, I found a much greater understanding of the social justice standards that the book was trying to teach.

Arya: In a world where equality remains an idea, a dream that has not yet been achieved, the battle for social justice is more crucial than ever. We need to fight for equality, not only for ourselves, but for our friends, neighbors, families, and even strangers we pass at a crosswalk. We need to fight for equality, not just for right now, but for the future generations, for our children, so that maybe they can say that the world is a better place than the one we live in today. There are many different ways to fight for social equality and justice, one being the spread of words. This can be done through picturebooks, and I was given the chance to read a book of my choosing to my social justice class.

Discussion

Building on the existing literature examining social justice pedagogy in higher education (e.g., Burbank et al., 2025; Hosseini et al., 2025; Spitzman & Balconi, 2019) and the use of picturebooks in teacher education (e.g., Crawford et al., 2019; Flores et al., 2019), this article highlights the integration of picturebooks and social justice in higher education. The findings demonstrate how stories can be a practical pedagogical tool for recognizing and developing identity, diversity, justice, and action (Learning for Justice Social, 2022). Far from being limited to early childhood, these texts can foster critical thinking, social awareness, and transformative learning (Freire, 2018; Vasquez et al., 2019) among university students.

In this study, read-alouds (Lennox, 2013) were powerful when students facilitated them. First-year undergraduates' reflections show how these experiences fostered personal insights, challenged biases, and strengthened their commitment to identity, diversity, justice, and action. For example, Emnet, who shared *Who is a refugee?* (Gravel, 2019), articulated, "I feel like a lot of refugees come to America, yet not everyone can tell you what a refugee is. I feel like refugees deserve to be known, I've heard so many incredible stories." This underscores how picturebooks can illuminate the lived experiences of di-

verse populations, fostering a more nuanced and empathetic understanding of social justice.

This ability of picturebooks to illustrate diversity and inclusivity aligns with Rudine Sims Bishop's (1990) seminal framework of mirrors, windows, and sliding glass doors. The picturebooks served as mirrors for students like Allie, whose chosen book centered on a young girl with a disability similar to Allie's sister. For others, the texts became windows to examine experiences different than one's own, as Levi's reflection on his book highlights. Cora's book offered stepping through the sliding door to experience the emotions of main character as well as self-regulation approaches. In this way, the picturebook scaffolds the theoretical content; for example, *The Rabbit Listened* provides a tangible narrative that illustrates empathy and active listening, preparing students to engage with more complex academic discussions on social-emotional learning or trauma-informed pedagogy. These opportunities are crucial for fostering empathy and understanding, essential components of critical consciousness (Vasquez et al., 2019).

Understanding these emotional and cognitive responses is further illuminated by theoretical work from Hosseini et al. (2025). Their review emphasizes that social justice-oriented teacher education involves more than just developing new understandings. It is also an affective and embodied experience that can surface resistance or discomfort as new insights clash with existing beliefs. They highlight the inseparability of head and heart in this process. This dynamic was seen here in student reflections. For instance, Asma said, "I learned that I had unrecognized biases in some of my thinking." This willingness to acknowledge unrecognized biases aligns directly with Hosseini et al.'s (2025) framework, demonstrating how engaging with accessible mediums like picturebooks can prompt an affective response that catalyzes a deeper cognitive shift. Similarly, student reflections on initial nervousness during read-alouds or the challenge of discussing "touchy subjects" (Cora, Molly, Arya) further align with the broader research indicating that social justice education is not merely a cognitive process. The powerful articulation by Emnet and other students' revelations of navigating complex identities resonate with Hosseini et al.'s (2025) discussion regarding the experiences of students of color in social justice education. These moments highlight how curricula, even inadvertently, can silence lived experiences, and how picturebooks can counteract this by making previously unseen narratives visible and known.

Conclusion and Future Directions

This study demonstrates that picturebook read-alouds can be a pedagogical practice that is academically rigorous and facilitates social justice learning. The qualitative insights from students demonstrate growth in their critical consciousness, empathy, and commitment to social action. While this study provides valuable insights, it is important to consider the limitations. The research was conducted at a small liberal arts

university with a single, first-year social justice course, which included only education and nursing majors. Furthermore, participants consisted mainly of European American CIS women.

Despite these constraints, the results suggest a broader applicability of using picturebooks to deepen student engagement with complex social issues across various undergraduate and graduate programs. Building on these findings, future research can extend this work in significant directions. It could explore the long-term impact of such interventions on students' professional lives and civic engagement, moving beyond the immediate classroom context. Researchers could also examine the effectiveness of this approach in different disciplinary contexts, looking at how to utilize picturebooks in fields, such as engineering, or business. Finally, future studies could apply quantitative measures to assess the development of critical consciousness, complementing qualitative data.

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