



**Visual Journeys with Immigrant Readers:
Minority voices create words for wordless picturebooks**

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Resumen: Se resume el trabajo del equipo de investigación de la Universidad de Glasgow dentro del contexto del proyecto internacional “Visual Journeys: Los niños inmigrantes y la interpretación literaria de álbumes ilustrados”, que explora cómo los niños interpretan libros álbum sin palabras a través de estrategias que los invitan a compartir sus experiencias de migración y viajes, la cultura de la lectura en su hogar y su conocimiento de la cultura popular. Los resultados muestran que estas estrategias los animan a comprometerse de manera más profunda con los textos, desarrollar sus capacidades críticas, reflexionar sobre la migración y contribuir con sus propias palabras a la historia colectiva.

Palabras clave: educación visual, inmigrantes, libros álbum, Shaun Tan, David Wiesner.

Abstract: This paper outlines the work emerging from the University of Glasgow within the context of the international research project: *Visual Journeys: Understanding immigrant children’s responses to the visual image in contemporary picturebooks* which explores how the children construct meaning from the visual images in contemporary wordless picturebooks. Results have shown that through a range of strategies that draw on their experiences of migration and journey, their home literacy practices and knowledge of popular culture, they are able to engage more fully with the texts, develop their critical literacy skills, reflect on their own and others’ experience of migration and contribute their own words to the collective story.

Keywords: visual literacy, immigrants, picturebooks, Shaun Tan, David Wiesner.

The international research project *Visual Journeys: Understanding immigrant children’s responses to the visual image in contemporary picturebooks* has been running simultaneously in the UK, Spain, Australia and the US for the past two years. The research teams involved in this project are based in the following universities: the University of Glasgow in Scotland (Dr Evelyn Arizpe, Dr Maureen Farrell and Ms Julie McAdam); Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona (Dr Teresa Colomer and GRETEL research team); University of Texas, Austin (led by Dr Carmen Martínez-Roldán); and the Australian Catholic University, Sydney (NSW) (led by Dr Maureen Walsh). Each team of researchers has been working with groups of 10-12 year old children, most of whom belong to minority ethnic communities and have recently migrated to these countries, either as children of refugees, asylum seekers or migrant workers. We defined “immigrants” as children who have had their primary education interrupted by a ‘journey’ or ‘journeys’ from their country of origin to the country in which they are living at the time of their participation in the study.

The project builds on the experiences and knowledge children bring to their reading of wordless picturebooks on the topics of migration, journeys and foreign worlds. It looks at how they construct meaning using strategies that both provide analytical data and have the



potential to develop their critical literacy skills. These strategies also encourage them to reflect on their own or others' experiences of migration. The aim of this paper is to present an overview of the methodology and highlight some of the findings and implications of the research carried out in Glasgow primary schools¹.

Wordless picturebooks and visual literacy

Picturebooks are now recognised as a sophisticated, multimedial art form with the potential for engaging audiences of all ages. Their potential for developing reading as well as critical literacy skills and for extending creativity through writing, art and drama, has also been recognised (e.g. Kiefer, 1995; Arizpe and Styles, 2003; Pantaleo, 2008; Sipe, 2008; Arizpe, 2009). Wordless picturebooks in particular present opportunities for children who find it difficult to read text: there are no right or wrong answers, the texts are open to multiple interpretations and therefore invite collaborative meaning-making through predicting, analysing the author's intentions and drawing on their own 'funds of knowledge'. They provide all children with opportunities to explore the structure and purpose of narrative regardless of their development as readers of print.

The picturebooks chosen for the project were *Flotsam* by David Wiesner (2006) and *The Arrival* by Shaun Tan (2007). Their highly detailed illustrations provide both play and humour but also lead to a serious consideration of the themes of migration, journeys and the power of the visual image itself. Without words to guide the reader, both texts require careful looking in order to decode visual signs, construct sequences and generate hypotheses that will be confirmed or redefined as the reading progresses. There is no room here to describe them but we urge readers to examine and enjoy these extraordinary texts².

Methodology

Because the visual image was at the centre of our research and because we were concerned to allow pupils to express themselves in as many ways as possible, we used a variety of methodological tools to allow the children to access the text:

¹ Similar findings are emerging in the countries involved in the project, see Fittipaldi (2008) and Martínez-Roldán and Newcomer (forthcoming 2011).

² It is also worth accessing the following websites: <http://www.shauntan.net/books.html> and <http://www.thefishknowthesecret.com/>



1. Semi-structured interviews in small groups about aspects the picturebooks including the cover, endpapers, title, author's intentions and visual elements such as colour, perspective and design.

2. Page by page "walkthroughs" of the book with researchers and teachers that encouraged open discussion about emerging topics (for example about languages, identity, food, dress and education in different countries).

3. Annotated spreads carried out individually or in pairs which involved close looking of individual images and adding comments, questions and speech or thought bubbles (Farrell, Arizpe and McAdam, forthcoming 2010).

4. Photographs taken by the children of people, objects and events that were important to them in their new country and which they would like to share with children in other countries.

5. Graphic strips which visually narrated their own or someone else's journey with the possibility of including speech, thought bubbles and captions.

Although these strategies were applied with some differences in the countries involved in the project, overall we found that these methods revealed aspects of the process of reading images and that they also encouraged closer looking and deeper reading; an interest in each others' languages and cultures and provided points of common shared experiences for discussion.

Findings so far

The research in Glasgow took place in two multiethnic schools with groups of 8-10 pupils. In the first school, half of the children were Scottish and half were recent arrivals to the UK. In the second school, all the children came from minority ethnic communities and with one exception, had recently arrived in Scotland. They spoke a wide range of home languages: Urdu, Polish, Congolese, Somali, Kurdish, Pashto, Rwandan, Ugandan, French, Italian, Russian and Arabic.

The children made use of their past lives and experiences of migration to interpret the texts, they also drew on their home literacy practices, citing examples from books read in their own language/s, movies, television and the Internet. The language support teacher noticed an increase in language use and new vocabulary, including terms to talk about images. There was also a greater awareness of cross-cultural issues. The children increased



their vocabulary and gained confidence in talking and listening as they offered their opinions and analysed the narrative. They offered us valuable insights into their home literacy practices and towards the end of the project began to show an increased awareness of each other's cultures. Although most of the children had little experience with picturebooks and did not speak English fluently, through the strategies they were able to engage with the books and arrive at sophisticated understandings of the narrative, the characters and their intentions; of the play between fantasy and reality and of the use of colour, design and layout to tell the story. They were also able to consider the intentions of the author and the implied audience.

However, what this project did was more than involve the children in developing and using their critical literacy skills, it also created a safe space for the children to begin to share their stories of immigration, not by asking them outright, but through weeks of nurturing a trusting relationship with each other as we read the wordless texts.

Implications

These findings have important implications for educators, librarians and others who work not only with immigrants but also with any other minority groups of children. Introducing and reading picturebooks like the ones used in this study can encourage readers to use both their visual and language skills and to make connections between the home and school environments. Sharing interpretations of visual narratives can lead to deeper understandings, particularly through a process of collaborating together towards making meaning that includes discussing beliefs, experiences and cultural values. It also leads to the creation of a collective story where the words of children who struggle to find their voice in a new context can be heard.

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