

Picture Books Can Speak A Thousand Words for Peace

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## Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to outline how oral stories as picture books can foster both early literacy skills and peaceful coexistence. Nigeria has a rich tradition of oral storytelling. Traditionally, the lessons conveyed by these stories were the main instructional method for the moral instruction of young children. More recently, some of these oral stories have been effectively transformed into picture books for young children (e.g., *Why Mosquitoes Buzz in People's Ears* by Verna Aardema). The thesis of this paper is that picture books based on oral stories can play two powerful roles: fostering early literacy skills and providing a foundation for peace education among pupils of all ages. Therefore, educators and parents should more frequently transform oral stories into picture books to provide an opportunity for young children to practice their literacy skills with authentic and culturally-relevant literature. Second, parents and educators should engage children in discussions on peace principles highlighted by the stories. Nigerian educators should return to the traditional educational tools developed by the wisdom of the culture and use these oral stories to teach both peace principles and improve early literacy across the nation.

## Introduction

There are many examples of violent conflict resolution within Nigeria, particularly in the states of Plateau, Borno, and the Niger Delta area. It is clear that children are not learning the core values and practices of peace education. Therefore, Nigerian educators need to return to traditional wisdom whereby the primary role of education was to instill principles of effective social interactions. Likewise, the traditional method of using stories as the foundation for instruction should also be reconsidered.

Africans have a rich oral tradition of stories that have been passed down from generation to generation (Kiarie, 2010). The stories typically illustrate important values such as honesty, integrity, accountability, and transparency in social interactions (Omolewa, 2007). For example, a story in the appendix, *The House that Built Itself*, illustrates the values of cooperation and forgiveness amongst enemies. Oral stories were the primary mode of traditional moral education because of the inherent wisdom that the stories express (Omolewa, 2007).

Traditional education in Africa focused on developing the following lifelong attitudes and values: respect for others, sensitivity and responsiveness to needs of family and neighbours, and positive interactions with the wider society (Omolewa, 2007). These goals are quite similar to the contemporary goals of peace education, which include mutual respect among individuals, appreciation of diversity, empathy within the community, social responsibility, and conflict resolution (Lieber, 1998). Because of the similarity between the goals of traditional education and those of peace education, educators should consider incorporating traditional teaching methods in modern classrooms to improve the relevance and effectiveness of peace education.

Traditional African stories have been effectively adapted into picture books for young children. For example, Aardema's retelling of the West African story, *Why Mosquitoes Buzz*

*in People's Ears* (1975), won the Caldecott Award, a top award for picture books. In picture books, both text and appealing illustrations work together to tell a story (Tunnell & Jacobs, 2008). A picture book is a valuable resource for early reading experiences because it uses easy vocabulary and relevant illustrations to make the story enjoyable and understandable to young readers (Henniger, 2005). To adapt traditional oral stories into picture books, the text should use a small number of words (between 500 and 1500) and simple language. Adapting traditional oral stories into picture books can meet two important educational goals: improving early literacy skills and fostering peaceable attitudes, behaviors, and thoughts among pupils of all ages. These two roles will be explored in the rest of this paper.

#### Using Picture Storybooks in Improving Literacy Instruction

Most Nigerian teachers believe that effective literacy instruction consists of intensive drills on isolated reading skills (Korb, 2010). Because of this and a lack of accessible literature, reading meaningful literature such as picture storybooks is rare in the typical Nigerian classroom. However, empirical research provides evidence that literacy instruction is most effective when children learn to read using meaningful literature (International Reading Association & National Association for the Education of Young Children, 1998; Mazzoni & Gambrell, 2003). In other words, literacy instruction is most successful when young children read high quality texts that are relevant to their everyday lives and cultural experiences, as would be the case with oral stories adapted into picture books. Therefore, literacy instruction in Nigeria needs to make a transition to using meaningful texts such as picture storybooks.

The National Reading Panel (2000) emphasized that reading consists of multiple literacy skills including oral fluency, reading comprehension, and vocabulary. Teaching literacy to young children using oral stories adapted into picture books can effectively improve these three skills.

Oral fluency is the ability to read a text accurately, quickly, and with expression (Pang, Muaka, Bernhardt, & Kamil, 2003). One of the main strategies to help children develop oral fluency is repeatedly reading a text (Kuhn, 2003). When children reread a text, they practice their word identification skills which contributes to oral fluency. Interesting literature provides the motivation that children need for rereading a text (Pang, Muaka, Bernhardt, & Kamil, 2003). Both stories and the colorful illustrations that supplement picture books are inherently interesting for young children. Therefore, picture storybooks will help motivate young children to reread these stories, thereby improving oral fluency.

Comprehension is the ability to derive meaning from the text (Pang, Muaka, Bernhardt, & Kamil, 2003). As such, comprehension is the main goal of reading instruction because a learner must understand a text in order to learn from what is being read (Tompkins, 2011). Comprehension requires a reader to actively link their prior knowledge of the world to the text in order to understand the meaning of the text (Cromley & Azevedo, 2007). For example, a reader must link their prior knowledge of building houses to the storyline of *The House that Built Itself* in order to understand the meaning.

Teachers are critical for helping a child understand texts that are read in class. When reading a text, the teacher should first activate pupils' prior knowledge by engaging in a discussion about information necessary to understand the story. For example, the teacher might ask pupils how mud houses are made before reading *The House that Built Itself*. While reading the text, the teacher needs to highlight unknown vocabulary words and emphasize important events in the story. After reading the text, the teacher should help pupils deepen their understanding by engaging in a discussion about the meaning and lessons of the story. The questions posed by the teacher in a discussion that will help children think deeply about what they have read. This process helps children develop a better understanding of the text.

Readers use culturally-transmitted knowledge to help them construct an understanding of what they read (National Association for the Education of Young Children, 2009). Therefore, children will better understand texts that are relevant to their cultural experiences. Indeed, children from the United States would have difficulty understanding *The House that Built Itself* because few American children have ever seen a mud hut. As their cultural heritage, traditional oral stories will be more meaningful to Nigerian children than storybooks imported from western countries. By using locally developed storybooks, Nigerian teachers can more effectively teach comprehension strategies.

A large vocabulary is important to literacy because knowing the meaning of words, not just their pronunciation, is necessary for a reader to understand the entire text (Pang, Muaka, Bernhardt, & Kamil, 2003). To master the vocabulary needed for being literate, children have to learn an average of 4,000 to 6,000 English words per year (Anderson, 1996). However, children typically learn less than 460 words per year from direct instruction by the teacher. On the other hand, simply reading texts and inferring the meaning of unknown words can help a child acquire thousands of vocabulary words per year. Therefore, frequently reading meaningful materials is a more important source of vocabulary acquisition than direct instruction (Anderson, 1996). Indeed, frequently reading storybooks contributes to vocabulary acquisition even for children who are learning to read in their second language (Verhallen & Bus, 2010), as is the case with most African children. Consequently, more picture storybooks need to be made available in Nigeria to increase the amount of reading that young children do both inside and outside of the classroom. The more words a child reads, the more new vocabulary words they learn.

An important goal in literacy instruction is to help children develop a lasting interest in reading. First, an interest in reading provides motivation for rereading texts, important for oral fluency. Second, children who are interested in reading will read more texts, important

for vocabulary acquisition. Finally, an interest in reading helps develop lifelong readers who use books to continue learning about the world around them. Reading meaningful literature with young children fosters interest in reading (Morrow & Asbury, 2003). If a child learns to read using texts from their own cultural traditions and experiences, then they will have a greater interest in reading because they will understand the relevance of reading to their lives.

Finally, many argue that Nigeria does not have a reading culture (e.g., Griswold, McDonnell, & McDonnell, 2007), and Nigerians value reading as important only for passing exams (Tella & Akande, 2007). One potential solution to improving the reading culture in Nigeria is to create culturally-relevant picture books for young readers (Darko-Ampem, 2004). Literacy experts well know that even children who have developed adequate reading skills will not develop the habit of reading unless they have access to books that are meaningful to them (International Reading Association, 1999). Using picture storybooks as the basis for literacy instruction in Nigeria can improve oral fluency, promote vocabulary acquisition, and enhance reading comprehension for young children. Furthermore, adapting oral stories into books with appealing pictures also provides interesting reading materials for young children, which will foster children's motivation to learn to read and promote the reading culture in Nigeria.

#### Picture Storybooks in Peace Education

Peace education teaches pupils to live and work in peace among people who are different and particularly focuses on effective problem solving and nonviolent conflict resolution (Lieber, 1998). Successful peace education promotes positive attitudes, knowledge, and behavior amongst pupils of all ages. First, peace education lessons should help pupils develop positive attitudes toward diversity, nonviolence, compassion, and justice. Second, instruction aims at helping children acquire knowledge of basic concepts of human rights, peace, conflict, forgiveness, and stereotypes. Finally, class experiences should teach

behaviors necessary for effective conflict resolution including communication skills, taking others' perspectives, win-win problem solving, and negotiation skills.

Peace education is most effective when pupils make personal connections to the skills and principles of peace education. This is achieved through self reflection in reading, writing, and discussion. Furthermore, peace education should be student-centered with instruction related to pupils' interests, prior knowledge, and daily experiences. Therefore, pupils should be actively engaged in the learning process with instructional activities that require pupils to actively think, experiment, discuss, and practice skills. By using student-centered instruction, pupils will have a better understanding of peace education principles, make meaningful connections between the instruction and their lives, and have a stronger ability to apply what they learn to the conflicts they experience outside of the classroom.

An effective approach to peace education is creating a peaceful classroom whereby peace principles are integrated into the curriculum and classroom management (Bodine & Crawford, 1998). According to this approach, peace education principles are incorporated into existing content in subjects such as social studies, religious studies, and English. Using literature to teach peace education principles directly aligns with the peaceable classroom approach. Indeed, literacy experts have long recognized that multicultural literature can be an effective tool for peace education because pupils are exposed to people who are different through stories about their lives (Tunnell & Jacobs, 2008). Multicultural literature helps pupils appreciate the similarities and differences between individuals, thereby reducing bias and prejudice (Barta & Grindler, 1996). However, adapting traditional oral stories into picture books can be an even richer resource for peace education because the lessons in these stories provide an opportunity for teachers to engage in discussions that center on peace education values. Indeed, picture storybooks do not have to be limited to peace education with young children only. Picture storybooks are appealing to people of all ages (Tunnell &

Jacobs, 2008), so they can be used to facilitate discussions on more advanced peace principles with pupils throughout secondary school.

Literacy and social awareness are closely linked because the skills needed to understand a text are similar to the skills needed to understand social issues (Lobron & Selman, 2007). However, children oftentimes have difficulty understanding the stories and moral lessons without support from a parent or teacher. Both understanding a text and understanding social issues associated with peace education requires discussion between the child and an adult. Just as discussion of a text fosters greater understanding of the story, so too discussion fosters greater understanding of peace education principles.

Discussion of a story is necessary for children to understand the story, the peace education principles embedded in the story, and how the peace principles can be applied to pupils' daily lives. In this type of discussion, teachers should answer pupils' questions about the story, explain important events in the story, and then ask thought-provoking questions that relate the story to peace education principles and pupils' lives (Lobron & Selman, 2007). For example, after reading the story in the appendix, the teacher can facilitate a discussion as follows.

Teacher: Were the Bushcat and Hyena friends at the beginning of the story?

Class: No!

Teacher: How do you know that were they not friends?

Martha: They were always trying to hurt each other.

Teacher: Were they friends at the end of the story?

Class: Yes!

Teacher: What changed to make the Bushcat and Hyena friends?

Andrew: They built a nice house together.

Amos: And Bushcat and Hyena told each other that they were sorry.

The purpose of the first part of the discussion is to facilitate pupils' comprehension of the story by highlighting the important events in the story as related to the peace principle of cooperation. Instead of the teacher giving a lecture to summarize these events, the pupils were actively involved because the teacher asked leading questions to help pupils understand the story. Once the teacher ensures that the pupils understand the key events in the story, then she can ask additional questions to make the connection between the story and the relevant peace principles. The following discussion illustrates the connection of the story to the concept of cooperation.

Teacher: When Bushcat and Hyena were fighting, what happened to their property?

Thomas: They were destroyed by Bushcat and Hyena.

Teacher: When Bushcat and Hyena worked together, what happened to their property?

Sabina: They built a nice house.

Teacher: Which is better, then, working together or fighting?

Class: Working together.

Now that the importance of cooperation has been introduced, the teacher can help pupils apply the concept of cooperation to their ordinary experiences by asking pupils to role play (otherwise known as drama) possible situations at home or in the classroom where they could cooperate instead of fighting. Alternatively, the teacher can first ask children to discuss their understanding of the story with their partners before the class discussion (Lobron & Selman, 2007). By giving the pupils questions to answer in pairs, pupils' active involvement

in the lesson increases. For example, after the first discussion described above, the teacher might ask pupils to discuss the following questions in pairs, “What changed the friendship between Bushcat and Hyena? How could you do the same thing to change the friendships with people that you fight with?” After the children discuss these questions for a few minutes, then the teacher can engage in a class-wide discussion to share the ideas from the various groups.

Peace education skills and concepts are best learned when children are actively involved in the lesson. Discussion is an effective way to get pupils involved in the lesson and to help them deepen their understanding of the peace principles. Picture storybooks are an effective tool to facilitate discussions on peace education principles for pupils of all ages. By discussing characters’ feelings, thoughts, and behaviors, teachers can use the characters and plotline in a story to help pupils construct a mature understanding of these moral principles. Many stories exist in the repertoire of traditional oral stories that highlight key peace principles. Adapting these stories into the format of a picture book can increase the appeal and educational value of traditional oral stories.

### Conclusion

Adapting traditional oral stories into picture books can meet multiple demands of contemporary education. In the same lesson, a teacher can achieve two important goals of fostering literacy skills and developing an awareness of peace education principles. Indeed, the goals and methods of traditional education had profound wisdom. Nigerian educators should return to that traditional wisdom to improve society in the next generation.

## Appendix

### The House that Built Itself

Bushcat and Hyena lived next door to each other, but they were not friends. When Bushcat left her soup boiling over the fire, Hyena would spill the soup into the bush. When Hyena left her clothes to dry on the shrubs, Bushcat would throw them in the mud. One day, Bushcat told Hyena that she was going to find good land to build a new house. Hyena replied that she too was going to find good land to build a new house. Bushcat turned left and Hyena turned right to search for land. Their different paths shortly converged into the same path but Bushcat was ahead of Hyena.

Soon, Bushcat found good land with large mango trees for shade and a stream for water. Bushcat thought unkindly, "If I build my house here, I will have a better house than Hyena and on better land!" She cleared the ground for the house. That was tiring work so she climbed into the mango tree for a nap when she finished. While Bushcat was sleeping, Hyena arrived and said, "What a beautiful piece of land! The ground is already cleared very well for a house." Hyena then began making the mud bricks. After the mud bricks were set, Hyena left to find lunch. While she was gone, Bushcat woke from her nap. "Look at that! The mud bricks packed themselves, and those are fine bricks." Bushcat started stacking the bricks to make the walls. The sun was setting when the walls were finished, so Bushcat found a soft piece of ground to spend the night. Shortly, Hyena returned. "Amazing! I found a beautiful piece of land with ground already cleared for a house. Then the walls jumped up by themselves while I was eating lunch!" By the light of the full moon, Hyena searched for grass to make the roof. She finished cutting the grass just before the sun rose. Ready for a break, Hyena set off to see the nearest town.

When Bushcat awoke, she saw a pile of grass next to the house that was perfect for the roof. "Wonderful! First the mud bricks pack themselves and now the grass walked in for the roof! This is a wonderful house." She used the grass to make a thick roof for the house. After the roof was finished, Bushcat admired her house. Then she returned to her old house to collect her belongings. When she left, Hyena returned from her trip to town. "This is a wonderful house! I found land already cleared for a house, then the walls jumped up, and the roof lays down by itself." Hyena found a piece of wood for a door and carved beautiful designs for decoration. Then she returned to her old house to get her belongings.

The next morning, both Hyena and Bushcat arrived at the same time, carrying their belongings on their heads. Bushcat said, "Good morning! Look at this beautiful house I built. Did you find a piece of land to build your house? You could not have found a better spot than this to build your house!" Hyena replied, "You are mistaken, Mrs. Bushcat. I built this beautiful house. I made the mud bricks, I cut the grass for the roof, and I designed that beautiful door." Bushcat's mouth fell open and she said, "But I cleared the land, built the walls, and put up the roof." Bushcat and Hyena, who used to always fight, stared at each other for a very long time. Finally, Bushcat said, "I guess somebody had to pack the mud bricks, cut the grass, and design the door. They were done very well." Hyena said, "I guess somebody had to clear the land, set the walls, and thatch the roof. They were done very well. But since both of us built this house, who will live here?" They were both quiet for some time. Then Hyena stuck out her paw. "I am sorry for being a mean neighbor. This is a fine house. Do you think we both can live in this house that we built together?" Bushcat shook Hyena's hand and answered, "When we work together, we do things very well. Look at this house! Let us share this house and instead of fighting, let us work together to build a nice farm." And they did. By working together, Bushcat and Hyena made the nicest farm for miles around (adapted from Oram, 1996).

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