



The Role of picture books in promoting peace education and emotional literacy in preschool children

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Abstract

Early childhood is a formative stage for cultivating empathy, cooperation, and emotional literacy. Picture books, with their engaging narratives and illustrations, provide a powerful medium for embedding peace education within preschool learning environments. This paper explores how picture books promote values of kindness, inclusivity, and non-violent conflict resolution while simultaneously strengthening children's emotional vocabulary and self-expression. Drawing from global and Indian perspectives, the review emphasizes the role of picture books in fostering socio-emotional competencies and resilience. The discussion also aligns these practices with India's National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 and the National Curriculum Framework (NCF) 2022, both of which highlight holistic, play-based, and value-driven education. The paper concludes that integrating curated picture books into early childhood curricula can significantly contribute to nurturing emotionally literate and peace-oriented future citizens.

Keywords: Picture books, peace education, emotional literacy, preschool education, nep 2020, socio-emotional learning

Introduction

Early childhood is widely regarded as a critical period for laying the foundation of lifelong learning, personality development, and social-emotional wellbeing. Research has consistently shown that the ages between three and six are crucial for the development of empathy, prosocial behavior, and moral understanding (Denham, 2007; Hyson, 2004) ^[5] ^[4]. In the 21st century, children are exposed to complex social realities ranging from media-driven aggression to cultural diversity and economic inequalities that influence their understanding of peace and relationships. Against this backdrop, peace education and emotional literacy in preschool settings acquire special importance.

Peace education, as defined by UNESCO (2014) ^[24], involves equipping learners with the knowledge, skills, attitudes, and values needed to prevent conflict and create conditions conducive to peace at personal, interpersonal, and societal levels. Maria Montessori (2007) ^[17] envisioned the child as the "constructor of peace," arguing that cultivating inner harmony during early childhood was essential for building a peaceful society. Complementing this, emotional literacy popularized by Goleman (2006) ^[9] is the ability to identify, understand, and regulate one's own emotions and empathize with others. For young children, developing this competence means being able to communicate feelings, resolve conflicts peacefully, and build strong interpersonal relationships (Denham & Burton, 2003) ^[6].

Picture books, combining vivid illustrations with simple narratives, are uniquely suited to convey abstract concepts like empathy, fairness, and diversity in ways accessible to young minds. They invite children to step into the shoes of characters, recognize emotional states, and reflect on moral dilemmas (Nikolajeva & Scott, 2019) ^[19]. Unlike didactic lessons, picture books stimulate imagination and dialogue,

allowing children to engage in meaning-making processes with teachers and peers.

In India, storytelling has been an integral part of cultural transmission, often used to communicate values and morals. With the rise of children's publishing houses like Tulika and Pratham Books, educators have greater access to quality picture books that depict relatable contexts while introducing universal values. At the policy level, the National Education Policy (NEP, 2020) and National Curriculum Framework (NCF, 2022) emphasize holistic, play-based, and experiential learning. Both highlight socio-emotional development as central to foundational learning, creating an enabling environment for the integration of picture books into peace education.

This paper, therefore, explores how picture books can promote peace education and emotional literacy in preschool children. It adopts a conceptual/review approach, synthesizing theoretical perspectives, global and Indian research, and policy frameworks.

Literature Review Peace Education in Early Childhood

The foundation of peace education in early years lies in the recognition that children are not passive recipients of knowledge but active constructors of meaning (Montessori, 2007) ^[17]. UNESCO (2014) ^[24] frames peace education as a transformative process that fosters critical thinking, empathy, cooperation, and nonviolence. Studies have shown that introducing peace concepts early helps children internalize values such as fairness, sharing, and conflict resolution (Harris & Morrison, 2013) ^[12].

Research demonstrates that peace education in preschool can reduce aggressive behaviors and promote cooperative play. For example, Bar-Tal (2002) ^[3] emphasizes the role of structured group activities in shaping children's social interactions toward peaceful outcomes. Bajaj and

Hantzopoulos (2016) ^[2] argue that peace education not only addresses interpersonal relationships but also promotes structural peace by encouraging respect for diversity and social justice.

In India, the integration of peace education in early years has often drawn from Gandhian philosophy of non-violence (ahimsa) and truth (satyagraha). However, most programs remain sporadic and lack systematic inclusion in preschool curricula. NGOs like Pratham and SEEDS have begun incorporating peace education into literacy and play-based initiatives, but there is still a long way to go in terms of formal recognition and policy-level adoption.

Emotional Literacy in Preschool Years

Emotional literacy is the ability to recognize, name, and manage emotions constructively. Denham (2007) ^[5] and Goleman (2006) ^[9] identify emotional literacy as foundational to children's academic and social success. It supports empathy, resilience, and the ability to resolve conflicts peacefully skills central to peace education.

Research highlights that emotionally literate children are better at forming positive peer relationships, exhibit fewer behavioral problems, and demonstrate higher readiness for formal schooling (Zinsler *et al.*, 2016) ^[27]. Emotional vocabulary the ability to label feelings like happiness, sadness, anger, or fear is a strong predictor of children's emotional regulation. Preschool programs that incorporate emotion-focused activities, including storytelling and role play, significantly enhance children's socio-emotional skills (Hyson, 2004; Garner, 2010) ^[8, 14].

In India, socio-emotional learning has gained attention in policy documents such as NEP 2020 and NCF 2022. Kaul *et al.* (2017) ^[15] found that emotionally supportive preschool environments in Delhi significantly improved children's learning outcomes in language and mathematics. Yet, many preschools continue to prioritize rote learning over socio-emotional development, leaving a gap for innovative methods such as picture book pedagogy.

Picture Books as Pedagogical Tools

Picture books are particularly effective in bridging the domains of peace education and emotional literacy. By combining illustrations with text, they offer a multimodal learning experience that engages both cognitive and affective domains (Nikolajeva & Scott, 2019) ^[19].

Research indicates that dialogic reading, where teachers actively engage children in conversations about the story, enhances children's comprehension, empathy, and emotional vocabulary (Wasik & Bond, 2001) ^[26]. Heath *et al.* (2014) ^[13] found that children who engaged in dialogic reading showed higher levels of empathy and problem-solving skills compared to peers who engaged in traditional read-aloud sessions.

Globally, books like *The Peace Book* (Parr, 2004) ^[20], *Last Stop on Market Street* (de la Peña, 2015), and *Have You Filled a Bucket Today?* (McCloud, 2006) ^[21] are used to introduce themes of diversity, kindness, and social justice. In India, picture books like *Why Are You Afraid to Hold My Hand?* (Tulika Books) explore themes of disability and inclusion, while *Ammachi's Amazing Machines* (Pratham Books) fosters problem-solving and collaboration.

Picture books also provide safe spaces for children to explore challenging emotions. For example, books dealing with loss, fear, or anger enable children to process these

feelings in a guided and empathetic manner. Teachers can scaffold discussions to help children connect story events with real-life experiences.

Gaps in Research and Practice

Although literature supports both peace education and emotional literacy in early years, the specific role of picture books in integrating these domains remains underexplored, especially in the Indian context. Existing research often focuses on language and cognitive outcomes of picture book reading, overlooking its potential for fostering socio-emotional and peace-related competencies (Garner, 2010; Kraftl, 2020) ^[8, 16]. Moreover, teacher preparation programs rarely emphasize the pedagogical use of picture books beyond literacy development. There is also limited availability of culturally relevant books addressing peace and emotional themes in regional languages, limiting access for diverse populations.

Theoretical Framework

This paper is grounded in four interrelated theoretical perspectives

- Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory (1979)** ^[4]: Children's development is shaped by multiple layers of their environment. Picture books act as micro-level tools that connect children to family, school, and broader cultural values of peace.
- Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory (1978)**: Learning occurs through social interaction and language mediation. Dialogic reading of picture books exemplifies this process, enabling children to co-construct meanings around peace and emotions.
- Montessori's Peace Education Philosophy (2007)** ^[17]: Montessori emphasized the cultivation of inner peace through reflection and empathy. Picture books provide narratives and imagery that nurture these qualities.
- Goleman's Emotional Intelligence Model (2006)** ^[9]: Emotional literacy, encompassing selfawareness, empathy, and regulation, forms part of emotional intelligence. Picture books scaffold the development of these competencies by presenting relatable scenarios.

Methodological Considerations

This is a conceptual/review paper, not based on primary data. It synthesizes research published between 2000 and 2024, drawing from

- Peer-reviewed journals in early childhood education, literacy, and peace studies
- International frameworks (UNESCO, UNICEF, CASEL)
- Indian policy documents (NEP 2020, NCF 2022)
- Case studies and children's literature from global and Indian contexts

The approach is thematic and integrative, aimed at building a comprehensive framework for understanding the role of picture books in peace education and emotional literacy.

Examples of Picture Books for Peace Education and Emotional Literacy

To move beyond theory, it is essential to provide concrete examples of picture books that educators and parents can use in classrooms and homes. These books have been selected for their age-appropriateness (3–6 years), relevance to peace and emotional literacy themes, and accessibility in global and Indian contexts.

Global Titles

- **The Peace Book by Todd Parr (2004)** ^[20]: Simple, colorful illustrations highlighting the meaning of peace in everyday life.
- **Last Stop on Market Street by Matt de la Peña (2015)**: Encourages empathy, gratitude, and appreciation for diversity.
- **Enemy Pie by Derek Munson (2000)**: A story about resolving conflicts and building friendships.
- **Have You Filled a Bucket Today? by Carol McCloud (2006)** ^[21]: Promotes kindness and positive behavior through the metaphor of “bucket filling.”
- **The Day You Begin by Jacqueline Woodson (2018)** ^[22]: Explores themes of inclusion, courage, and diversity.
- **The Dot by Peter H. Reynolds (2003)** ^[23]: Encourages creativity, self-expression, and confidence.

Indian Titles

- **Why Are You Afraid to Hold My Hand? (Tulika Books)**: Tackles disability and inclusion, fostering empathy.
- **Ammachi’s Amazing Machines by Rajiv Eipe (Pratham Books)**: Highlights collaboration, problem-solving, and respect for elders.
- **I Am Different, Can You Find Me? (Tulika Books)**: Celebrates diversity and acceptance.
- **Machher Jhol by Richa Jha (Pickle Yolk Books)**: A story of love, care, and intergenerational bonds.
- **Soda and Bonda by Niveditha Subramaniam (Tulika Books)**: Explores friendship, differences, and community.
- **Thatha’s Pumpkin by Lalita Iyer (Karadi Tales)**: Encourages patience, sharing, and joy in collective living.

These books exemplify how stories can be used to scaffold children’s understanding of peace, empathy, and emotions. Teachers can design activities such as role-plays, art projects, and group discussions around these stories to deepen engagement. Parents can also be encouraged to use these books at home, ensuring continuity between school and family learning environments.

Challenges and Opportunities Challenges

- Limited teacher training on socio-emotional use of picture books

- Lack of culturally and linguistically inclusive titles in regional languages
 - Overemphasis on academic readiness in many Indian preschools
 - Limited parental awareness about the role of picture books in emotional growth
- Opportunities:**
- Rising availability of quality Indian children’s literature (Tulika, Pratham)
 - Policy support under NEP 2020 for holistic and play-based learning
 - Increasing collaboration between NGOs, publishers, and educators
 - Growing research evidence linking socio-emotional skills with academic and life success

Policy Implications

1. **Curriculum Integration:** Picture books should be systematically integrated into preschool curricula as tools for peace and emotional education.
2. **Teacher Education:** Pre-service and in-service training should emphasize dialogic reading strategies and socio-emotional scaffolding.
3. **Parental Engagement:** Awareness programs should encourage parents to use picture books at home to reinforce peace and emotional lessons.
4. **Resource Development:** Governments and NGOs should collaborate with publishers to produce culturally relevant and affordable picture books in multiple languages.
5. **Equity in Access:** Public libraries, Anganwadis, and digital platforms should be leveraged to ensure access to all children, regardless of socio-economic background.

Conclusion

Picture books represent a powerful yet underutilized tool in promoting peace education and emotional literacy among preschool children. By offering engaging narratives and illustrations, they help children understand emotions, practice empathy, and embrace values of kindness, fairness, and inclusivity. The curated list of global and Indian picture books provided in this paper highlights practical pathways for teachers and parents to translate theory into practice.

Grounded in theoretical perspectives and supported by international and Indian research, picture books can bridge storytelling, pedagogy, and value education. In alignment with NEP 2020 and NCF 2022, their integration into early childhood education offers a promising pathway toward nurturing emotionally literate and peace-oriented citizens. Teachers, parents, policymakers, and publishers must collaborate to realize this vision, ensuring that picture books serve as instruments of peace and socio-emotional development in every preschool.

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