



# A Picture Is Worth a Thousand Words

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While working with grade four students on a heritage fair project on quilting, teachers at Warman Elementary School were struck by the effectiveness of picture books in creating enthusiasm for the topic and developing a clear understanding of quilting among the students. Eight staff members, including two part-time librarians, decided to explore in more depth the impact of picture books. They developed a research project that examined new ways in which picture books might be used to support the teaching of the Saskatchewan curriculum. The purpose of their research was to develop a better understanding of the benefits of using picture books from the point of view of both teachers and students.

The project involved students in kindergarten to grade 6, but focussed on grades 4 to 6 where picture books tend to be used less. Students took part in a variety of activities involving picture books, and data related to their experiences were collected through student and teacher journals, samples of student work, video and audio recordings of discussions, and interviews with students. The researchers held weekly meetings to discuss professional readings, share classroom practices and instructional strategies, review the progress of the research, and plan future steps.

From the data collected from students and teachers, the researchers identified numerous themes that indicated why picture books are useful in teaching and learning across the curriculum. Picture books serve to:

- Capitalize on students' fascination with facts, motivating them to inquire further into a topic;
- Help readers think critically about content;
- Present difficult or abstract concepts in a concise and personal way;
- Connect information to the reader's own learning;
- Enhance research projects as a different source of information;
- Develop vocabulary and visual literacy;
- Foster multicultural understanding;
- Model how to write and illustrate a book; and
- Make the classroom curriculum memorable while providing a personal literary experience.

The researchers noted differences in the perceptions of younger students and older students with respect to picture books. The

younger students enjoyed the picture books but looked forward to the time when they would 'graduate' to chapter books. The older students also enjoyed the picture books but they understood that picture books have potential for learning, regardless of the reader's age. As one grade five student put it, "I found a different feeling for picture books and that picture books can actually teach you things."



Students share thoughts about their reading materials.

The researchers put forward a number of recommendations for the effective use of picture books in the schools. They also noted that the process of conducting research into an area of their professional practice contributed to their development as reflective practitioners.

*In our gonzo-techno-meet you at the mall-world, we are constantly being bombarded with input that totally robs us of the need to use our imagination. It is sometimes nice to step back from this. Picture books can allow students to do this, and as an added bonus, they [the students] absolutely love them.*



Picture books are valuable research tools for students at work in the school library.