

‘Seeing beneath the surface’

The Open University Picturebook Framework

The Open University

READING FOR PLEASURE

'Seeing beneath the surface'

The Open University Picturebook Framework

Picturebooks are a delight! Captivating pictures alongside exciting or soothing words enrich children's reading experiences. Many picturebooks contain complex meanings in the language, the illustrations and in the relationship between the two. These meanings may not be immediately obvious. Different illustrative and language choices reveal more details about characters' thoughts, feelings and actions. Paying close attention to the choices enhances our understanding of the narrative and allows us as readers a number ways to connect to characters and their worlds. This prompts deeper engagement and richer comprehension.

The Open University's Picturebook Framework offers a way to 'see beneath the surface' of children's picturebooks to draw out messages of hope, understanding and acceptance. Some picturebooks are powerfully positioned to support children who are faced with difficult moments in their lives (a bereavement), live in challenging circumstances (living with illness) and are learning to negotiate relationships (making friends). Equally they can serve to enhance children's wellbeing, empathy and understanding of the worlds around them.

The Framework draws closely on the scholarly work of Painter, Martin and Unsworth (2013) and their research into children's picturebooks, and is located in Halliday's (e.g. 1975, 2014) theory of language, which argues that language simultaneously represents the world and negotiates relationships.

Using The OU's framework will enhance your understanding of picture fiction books and enable you to see in more detail:

1) how the characters are described and depicted,
2) what happens in the story, including the smallest actions and moments, to gain a deeper appreciation of the characters' worlds,
3) what the characters say, think and know to develop your awareness of characters' world views, beliefs, strengths and challenges,
4) how characters relate to each other and to the reader, offering a richer connection to them,
5) the emotions, through positive and negative expressions of feelings and choices of colour, to connect with character, theme, and narrative,
6) the power relations and how these shape the characters' worlds, their perceived place in it, and their vulnerabilities and strengths. words and images may reflect the same or different meanings,

In this booklet you'll find The OU's Picturebook Framework. Each aspect is examined using an exemplary picturebook, acknowledging that words and images may reflect the same or different meanings. The framework does not seek to evaluate the text, but to enhance children's understandings of how meanings are constructed and developing their early critical literacy. The aspects of the framework work together and may not be reflected equally in every book.

The aim of the framework is to enable practitioners and children to see beneath the surface of any picturebook and discuss this together. For support for book talk and reading for pleasure see www.ourfp.org

Halliday, M.A.K. (1975) *Learning how to mean – explorations in the development of language*. London, Edward Arnold.
Halliday, M.A.K. and Matthiessen, C.M.I.M. (2014) *Halliday's introduction to functional grammar* 4th edition. London, Routledge.
Painter, C., Martin, J.R., Unsworth, L. (2013) *Reading visual narratives. Image analysis of children's picture books*. Sheffield, Equinox.

'Seeing beneath the surface' The OU Picturebook Framework

the characters

How are they depicted?

How are they described?

what happens and the action. what the characters say, think, feel and know

What do the characters think, feel and know?

Direct speech

What do the characters do?

What do the characters report that others say?

connecting with emotions and understanding power relations

Positive/negative expression of feelings

Dominant colours

Vertical/ horizontal view?

Expressions of power and vulnerability

connecting with the characters

Eye contact/observe?

Close-up/ full length?

1st/3rd person perspective?

Vicarious/direct?

The Open University Reading for Pleasure

the characters

How are they depicted?

How are they described?

Paying attention to symbolic characters reveals how they can play an important part in a storyline. Main and symbolic characters may be animate or inanimate.





See how the main character, the boy, is very small compared with the monster suggesting that despite its friendly appearance, the monster dominates him.

'My monster got bossier!'

'It was GIGANTIC and it was in a bad mood.'

'It was always BIG.'

The monster, the symbolic character, represents the boy's worries. It's described as, big, growly, bossy. These descriptions reinforce the monster's power (i.e. the boy's worries), look how it stops the boy from going out to play football





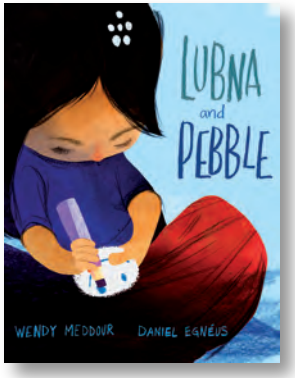
When the boy talks about his worries, the monster shrinks and fits inside the boy's pocket and becomes less intimidating. Whilst he acknowledges that the monster *'is part'* of him he feels *'OK knowing it's there'*.

How is the action depicted?

What do the characters do?

what happens and the action

Focus on what happens and the action to reveal subtle meanings. Paying attention to the language choices can highlight powerful themes in the storyline, which are sometimes hidden by the 'main events'.



'Lubna clutched Daddy's hand and gripped her pebble.' The verb *'clutched'* suggests that Lubna draws on her father's strength to face the refugee camp. She *'grips'* her pebble, hinting at the significance of this symbolic character.



Daddy's news that *"We are leaving. We have found a new home!"* is depicted with his wide smile and open arms.



The prospect of leaving is not positive for Amir, *'Amir cries'*.

'Pebble always listened to her stories. Pebble always smiled when she felt scared.' These comforting behaviours, that *'always'* happen help Lubna as she faces her challenges.





The significance of Pebble as a friend is highlighted when Lubna gives it to Amir. Lubna transfers her source of comfort to Amir, and in recognition Amir *'nodded and held the shoebox tight'*.



Unwell and vulnerable, Amir's poor health and harrowing journey is highlighted subtly by his actions *'just blinks and sneezes and stares'*.

How is thinking, knowing and speech depicted?

What do the characters think and know?

Direct and reported speech

what the characters say, think, feel and know.

A spotlight on thinking/knowing/remembering draws attention to the characters' knowledge and experience of the world.

Paying attention to when speech is direct and/or reported can reveal insights into the storyline and the characters' worlds, including why a character feels or behaves in a particular way.





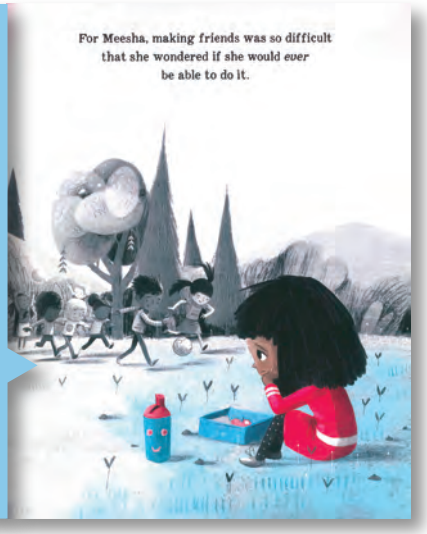
Focusing on what Meesha knows, or doesn't know, highlights her difficulty in engaging with other children: *'When she tried, she didn't know what to do, what to say or when to say it.'* This is her experience of trying to play with other children.



Meesha's mum said *'there would be lots of nice people there. She said it would be fun.'*

Look at the contrast between her mum's words and Meesha's uncertainty.

'For Meesha, making friends was so difficult that she wondered if she would ever be able to do it'. These feelings are not expressed by Meesha, but by understanding what she thinks or wonders, the reader has insights into her innermost thoughts.





When Meesha sees that a boy is watching her as she makes her toy friends, what he says is important:
"Hi, I'm Josh. Can I see what you're making?"
– Josh's words reach out to Meesha in a way that she hasn't experienced before.

connecting with the characters

Close-up or full length?

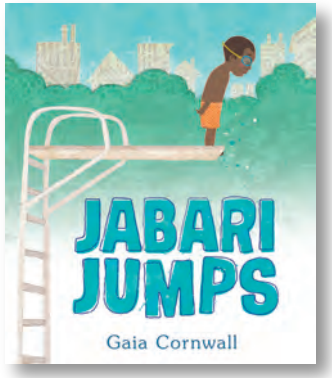
A vicarious view of the world?

Direct eye contact?

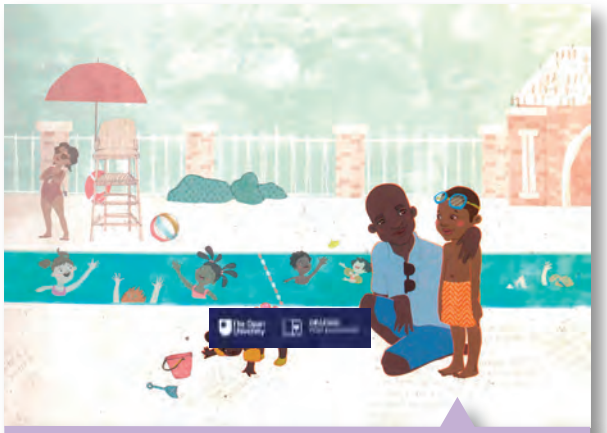
1st or 3rd person?

Focusing on how characters are depicted and written about, allows readers to understand how the author and illustrator create degrees of intimacy between the reader and the characters, and between the characters.

Differences in close up or full length images together with a direct or vicarious view of the world and direct eye contact all offer different layers of connection to the characters.



Through using 1st person, the reader is brought close to the character's perspective thoughts and feelings, *'I'm a great jumper' said Jabari.*



See how Jabari is comforted by his dad. Observing in this way allows the reader to see the contrast between Jabari's fear and the delight of the other children in the pool

The full-length view draws attention the height of the ladder as he scales it.



In the 3rd person, the reader observes Jabari from a distance *'Jabari stood at the bottom of the ladder. He looked up'*





In this view, we observe Jabari, yet almost vicariously, we too view the pool far below. Seeing Jabari's toes, we know he is right at the edge of the board. Notice how small his Dad and sister appear, indicating how far he climbed, and underlining why Jabari was so hesitant.



Notice how the close-up allows the reader to share Jabari's joy as he overcomes his fear and plunges into the pool.

Use of colour and depiction of characters

Positive and negative expression of feelings

connecting with emotions

Understanding how emotions are conveyed through positive and negative expressions of feelings and choices of colour, allows the reader to connect with the character, theme, or narrative in greater depth.





Notice the dark colours that fill the pages at the beginning. The sombre buildings and trees, with Felix dressed in black underscore him as *'terribly unhappy'*.

See how Felix's posture is stooped at the beginning of the book with the weight of his grief in contrast to later when he jumps for joy.



Explicit language choices convey Felix's emotions e.g. *'...terribly unhappy boy'* or *'...so happy'*. The books' theme and Felix's emotions are also conveyed indirectly *'He returned home empty handed but with a heart full of happiness'*.



After the *'storm'*, now dressed in a blue jumper, Felix's world is brighter too with joyful colours.



At the climax of the narrative, *'Felix found himself in the middle of a storm'*, notice how the scale of his emotions is depicted.

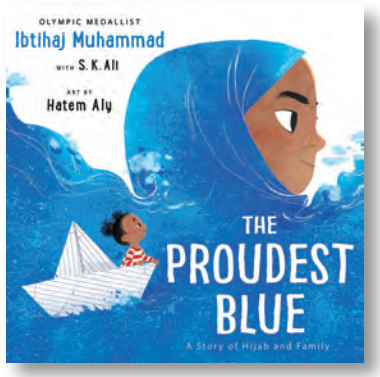
understanding power relations

Vertical/ horizontal view?

Words or expressions of power/vulnerability

Connecting with meanings that offer an understanding of the power relations in the book contributes to the reader's understanding of the characters' world, their perceived place in it, their vulnerabilities and their strengths at different times. Words or expressions convey power & vulnerability.

Vertical/horizontal views of a character illuminate how characters are positioned in relation to each other and how the reader is positioned in relation to the characters. The reader's perspective in relation to the characters offers insights into power imbalances, positions of vulnerability and strength.





See how this horizontal view shows balanced power relations between the sisters revealing their mutual respect.

In Mama's words: *'It [the hijab] means being strong'* conveying the inner strength offered by the hijab as the sisters face the bullies.

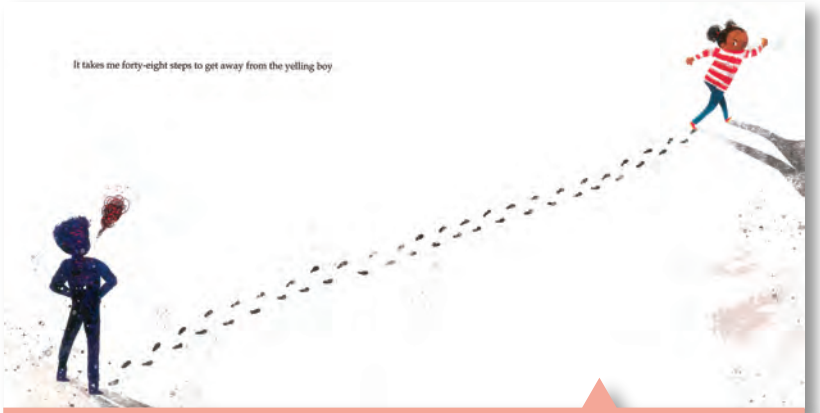


Notice how the close-up and direct eye contact puts Asiya in a powerful position in relation to the reader. Are we her friend or one of the bullies?





Here, Faizah looks around to see if the bullies are nearby, imagining their threatening presence. The vertical view of Faizah highlights her vulnerability.



Faizah strides away from the *'yelling boy'*, her high position on the page reflects her defiance in relation to the bully

'Seeing beneath the surface' The OU Picturebook Framework

the characters

How are they depicted?



'It was GIGANTIC'

'My monster got bossier!'



How are they described?

what happens and the action. what the characters say, think, feel and know.

Direct speech

'"Hi, I'm Josh. Can I see what you're making?"'



What do the characters think, feel and know?



'She didn't know what to say... She said would be fun'

What do the characters report that others say?

What do the characters do?



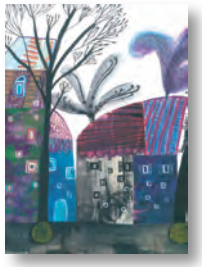
'Lubna told Pebble everything. Pebble always listened to her stories.'

connecting with emotions and understanding power relations

Positive/negative expression of feelings



'...with a heart full of happiness'



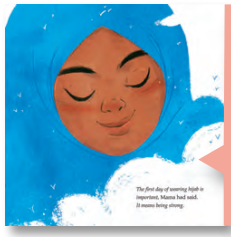
Dominant colours



Vertical/ horizontal view?



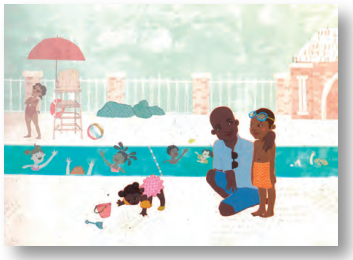
Expressions of power and vulnerability



'The first day of wearing hijab is important, Mama had said. It means being strong.'

connecting with the characters

Eye contact/observe?





Close-up/full length?



'His toes curled around the rough edge.'



Vicarious/ direct?

'"I'm a great jumper" said Jabari.'

1st/3rd person perspective?

The Open University Reading for Pleasure



‘Seeing beneath the surface’

The Open University Picturebook Framework

To reference the Framework: Mukherjee, S.J., Cremin, T., Charlesworth, R. and Therova, D. (2024) *The OU Picturebook Framework*

The Open University

READING FOR PLEASURE