

Teaching Humanity Using Picture Books in Preschool Education

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Keywords:

Picture books, teaching humanity, preschool education

Abstract: Picture books play a vital role in early childhood education by fostering empathy, moral reasoning, and cultural awareness through engaging stories and illustrations. By exposing children to diverse characters, situations, and perspectives, picture books help young learners understand emotions, social relationships, and ethical values in developmentally appropriate ways. This study explores the effectiveness of picture books as a pedagogical tool for teaching humanity in preschool settings. Through a qualitative approach using focus group discussions (FGD), insights were gathered from six participants which are educators, storytellers, and publishers to explore the potential and the characteristics of picture books in teaching humanity to pre-schoolers. The findings highlight that picture books are potentially used in teaching humanity because able in fostering empathy; enhancing moral and ethical reasoning; make learning more interactive and engaging; and able to promote cultural awareness and identity to children. The study also reveals six characteristic of picture books to be used in teaching humanity such as relatable and diverse character; engaging illustration; simple and clear language; moral and ethical lessons; interactive elements; and culturally sensitivity. The findings have significant implications for curriculum development, teacher training, and policy-making in early childhood education, particularly in multicultural contexts like Malaysia. This research contributes to the growing body of literature on the educational potential of picture books, offering practical insights for educators, policymakers, and parents.

Kata Kunci:

buku bergambar, pendidikan moral, pendidikan prasekolah

Abstrak: Buku bergambar memainkan peran penting dalam pendidikan anak usia dini dengan menumbuhkan empati, penalaran moral, dan kesadaran budaya melalui cerita dan ilustrasi yang menarik. Dengan memperkenalkan anak-anak pada karakter, situasi, dan perspektif yang beragam, buku bergambar membantu pembelajar usia dini memahami emosi, hubungan sosial, serta nilai-nilai etika dengan cara yang sesuai dengan tahap perkembangan mereka. Penelitian ini mengeksplorasi efektivitas buku bergambar sebagai alat pedagogis untuk mengajarkan nilai-nilai kemanusiaan di lingkungan prasekolah. Melalui pendekatan kualitatif menggunakan diskusi kelompok terfokus (Focus Group Discussion/FGD), data diperoleh dari enam partisipan yang terdiri atas pendidik, pendongeng, dan penerbit, untuk menggali potensi serta karakteristik buku bergambar dalam mengajarkan nilai kemanusiaan kepada anak prasekolah. Temuan penelitian menunjukkan bahwa buku bergambar berpotensi besar digunakan dalam pengajaran nilai kemanusiaan karena mampu menumbuhkan empati, meningkatkan penalaran moral dan etika, menjadikan pembelajaran lebih interaktif dan menarik, serta mendorong kesadaran dan identitas budaya pada anak. Penelitian ini juga mengungkap enam karakteristik buku bergambar yang sesuai untuk mengajarkan nilai kemanusiaan, yaitu karakter yang relevan dan beragam, ilustrasi yang menarik, bahasa yang sederhana dan jelas, pesan moral dan etika, elemen interaktif, serta kepekaan budaya. Temuan ini memiliki implikasi yang signifikan bagi pengembangan kurikulum, pelatihan guru, dan perumusan kebijakan dalam pendidikan anak usia dini, khususnya dalam konteks multikultural seperti Malaysia. Penelitian ini berkontribusi pada berkembangnya kajian tentang potensi edukatif buku bergambar dengan memberikan wawasan praktis bagi pendidik, pembuat kebijakan, dan orang tua.



DOI: <https://doi.org/10.52593/kid.03.2.02>

Submission: January 29, 2026, revised: February 20, 2026, accepted: February 24, 2026

eISSN: 3025-6550

INTRODUCTION

Picture books are a distinctive storytelling medium that integrates illustrations and text to create a coherent and meaningful narrative. In early childhood contexts, words and images function interdependently, with illustrations often carrying equal or greater narrative weight than text in supporting children's comprehension and interpretation (Nikolajeva & Scott, 2001; Watkins, 2019). As a long-established component of preschool education, picture books play a significant role in supporting multiple domains of development, including language, cognition, creativity, and social-emotional growth. Through repeated exposure to stories, children expand vocabulary, develop narrative understanding, and engage in symbolic and imaginative thinking, which are foundational for later academic learning (Strouse, Nyhout, & Ganea, 2018; Dunphy, 2020).

Humanities education in preschool focuses on nurturing children's understanding of themselves, others, and the world through age-appropriate, experiential learning rather than formal instruction. The humanities encompass areas such as culture, history, values, relationships, and social life, all of which contribute to the development of empathy, responsibility, and critical thinking from an early age (NAEYC, 2020; EAUDE, 2022). In the Malaysian context, these aims are reflected in the National Preschool Standard-based Curriculum, where the Humanity Strand emphasizes self-identity, community awareness, patriotism, unity, environmental care, and respect for cultural diversity (Ministry of Education, 2017).

Storytelling, particularly through picture books, is widely recognized as an effective approach to teaching humanities in preschool settings. Picture books that feature diverse characters, social situations, and moral dilemmas allow children to explore human experiences in a safe and engaging manner (Sipe, 2008). Through discussion, questioning, and reflection during shared reading, children are encouraged to consider different perspectives, understand emotions, and develop empathy. Multicultural and socially themed picture books also help challenge stereotypes and promote respect for diversity, aligning closely with the goals of humanities education in early childhood.

Given the educational value of picture books and their alignment with the aims of humanities education, there is a need to examine their role more systematically in preschool classrooms. This study therefore seeks to explore the

potential of picture books as a tool for teaching humanities in preschool education and to investigate the characteristics of appropriate picture books for this purpose. By identifying how picture books can effectively support humanities learning, this research aims to inform educators' selection and pedagogical use of picture books to foster compassionate, reflective, and socially responsible young learners.

Research Objectives

The objectives of the research are:

- i. To explore the potential of picture books as tool in teaching humanities in preschool.
- ii. To investigate the characteristics of appropriate picture books in teaching humanities.

METHOD

This study employed a qualitative approach and utilizing focus group discussion (FGD) to gather in-depth insights from a diverse group of participants. Morgan, Spanish, (1984) stated that Focus Group Discussion (FGD) is a qualitative research method that involves bringing together a small group of participants to discuss a specific topic or issue in depth. The discussion is guided by a moderator, who uses open-ended questions to encourage participants to share their perspectives, experiences, and opinions. FGD are particularly useful for exploring complex topics, understanding group dynamics, and generating rich, detailed data. This method is widely used in social sciences, education, marketing, and health research because it allows researchers to gather diverse viewpoints and uncover insights that may not emerge through individual interviews or surveys.

Participants in Focus Group Discussion

According to Merriam (2009) appropriate number of participants involved in FGD session is between six to ten expert and experienced participants on the discussed topic or issue. For this research, six experts in the area of early childhood education, story-telling, communication and children book publishing are selected to be participants. The details of the participants are explained in Table 1 below:

Table 1. Details of the Participants in FGD

Code	Profession	Academic Qualification	Year of Experience
P1	Professor in Early Childhood Education	Ph.D in Early Childhood Education	>30 years
P2	Professor in Communication	Ph.D in Communication	>30 years
T1	Preschool teacher (Private Sector)	Master in Early Childhood Education	>20 years
T2	Preschool teacher (Government Sector)	Master in Early Childhood Education	>20 years
ST1	Story-teller	Bachelor Degree	>15 years
PB1	Publisher of Children Picture Books	Master Degree	>25 years

Data Analysis

The data gathered in the interview was analysed using thematic analysis approach. Thematic analysis is a widely used qualitative method that involves identifying, analyzing, and reporting patterns (themes) within the data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The process began with transcribing the recorded FGDs verbatim to ensure accuracy. Next, the transcripts were carefully read and coded using an inductive approach, allowing themes to emerge organically from the data rather than being predetermined (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Initial codes were generated based on recurring ideas, phrases, and concepts related to the use of picture books in fostering empathy, moral reasoning, and cultural awareness.

These codes were then grouped into two main themes, which is "Characteristics of Appropriate Picture Books in Teaching Humanity," and "Potential of Picture Books in Teaching Humanity." To ensure rigor, the analysis followed the six-step framework proposed by Braun and Clarke (2006), which includes familiarization with the data, generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and producing the report. Peer debriefing and member checking were also conducted to enhance the credibility and trustworthiness of the findings (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). This systematic approach allowed for a comprehensive understanding of how picture books can be used to teach humanity, providing valuable insights for educators and policymakers.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Potential of Picture Books in Teaching Humanity

The results showed picture books hold significant potential for teaching humanity in early childhood education. Participants, including educators, storytellers, and publishers, emphasized that picture books serve as a powerful medium for fostering empathy, moral reasoning, and cultural awareness in young children. One prominent theme that emerged was the ability of picture books to create emotional connections. Participants noted that the combination of vivid illustrations and compelling narratives allows children to relate to characters and their experiences, helping them understand and empathize with diverse perspectives. For example, one teacher shared how a story about a child overcoming adversity helped her students discuss feelings of resilience and kindness.

Besides, picture books also can be used in introducing moral and ethical dilemmas. By presenting relatable scenarios, encouraging critical thinking, exploring consequences, and exposing children to diverse perspectives, picture books help children develop empathy, moral reasoning, and ethical decision-making skills. These scenarios provide a safe space for children to explore complex emotions and practice problem-solving skills. Furthermore, by using picture books moral values and ethical consideration also can be introduced to the children. For example, as stated by one of the participants (T1):

“... for example the book about Goldilocks and The Bears. The story about when you coming to people house there are things that you can't do. This story can be used to teach children about ethics when you're visiting people house...”

Next is the interactive potential of picture books in engaging children and sparking meaningful discussions. Teaching humanity using picture able to tap the attention of the children in discussion and learning session. Picture books are highly effective in engaging children and sparking meaningful discussions due to their combination of captivating visuals and compelling narratives. The vivid illustrations in picture books capture children's attention and stimulate their imagination, making

complex ideas more accessible and relatable. This point highlighted by participant (T2):

“... based on my experience when teach about patriotism, children are attracted to the illustration and it helps in engaging children in the discussion. I can ask open-ended question based on the story and illustration ...”

Picture books also have immense potential for introducing Malaysian traditions to young children, as they provide an engaging and accessible way to explore the country’s rich cultural heritage. Through vibrant illustrations and relatable narratives, picture books can bring to life Malaysia’s diverse festivals, customs, and traditions, such as Hari Raya, Chinese New Year, Deepavali, and Harvest Festival. Additionally, stories that highlight the customs of different ethnic groups in Malaysia, such as the *adat* of the Malays, the *ang pow* tradition of the Chinese, or the *kolam* designs of the Indians, promote cultural awareness and inclusivity. By incorporating these traditions into picture books, educators can spark meaningful discussions about diversity, respect, and unity, helping children appreciate Malaysia’s multicultural identity. According to Derman-Sparks and Edwards (2020), culturally relevant picture books help children see themselves and their communities reflected in literature, fostering a sense of pride and belonging. This important information highlights by participant (PB1) as follow:

“... we have great picture books about our cultural. These picture books can be used to teach children about diverse celebration in Malaysia. For examples Selamat Hari Raya, Owly!, Gong Xi, Gong Xi Owly!, and Aram Meh Gawai ...”

Picture books hold immense potential for teaching humanity to young children by fostering empathy, moral reasoning, and cultural awareness. Through engaging narratives and vivid illustrations, picture books provide a safe and relatable platform for children to explore complex emotions, ethical dilemmas, and diverse perspectives. They encourage critical thinking, spark meaningful discussions, and help children connect stories to their own lives, making abstract concepts like kindness, fairness, and respect more tangible. By introducing children to characters and

situations that reflect real-world challenges and values, picture books serve as a powerful tool for nurturing compassionate, thoughtful, and socially responsible individuals. The potential of using picture books in teaching humanity are simplified in the Figure 1 below:

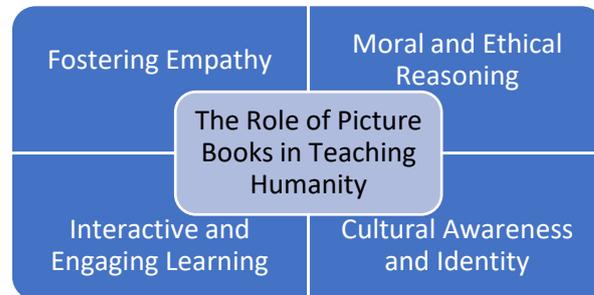


Figure 1. The Role of Picture Books in Teaching Humanity

Characteristics of Appropriate Picture Books in Teaching Humanity

Teaching humanity in early childhood education is essential for nurturing compassionate, empathetic, and socially responsible individuals. Picture books serve as powerful tools in this process, providing young learners with engaging narratives that subtly instill moral and ethical values. Through storytelling, children can explore concepts such as kindness, respect, fairness, and cultural diversity in ways that are both accessible and meaningful. The findings highlight key elements that contribute to the effectiveness of picture books in shaping young children’s understanding of humanity. These include relatable and diverse characters, engaging illustrations, simple and clear language, moral and ethical lessons, interactive elements, and cultural sensitivity. Each of these characteristics plays a crucial role in fostering emotional intelligence and ethical awareness in early learners.

Based on this study, first characteristic of appropriate picture books in teaching humanity is the picture books must have a relatable and diverse characters. Picture books should feature characters that children can relate to, including diverse backgrounds, cultures, and experiences. Representation is important because it allows children to see themselves in the stories and fosters empathy toward others. This characteristic highlight by one of the participants (PB1):

“...importance of local stories, ensuring that picture books reflect children’s own communities and social realities...”

Next characteristic is the picture books must have an engaging illustration. Illustrations play a crucial role in the effectiveness of picture books, especially in early childhood education. Since young children are still developing their reading skills, visuals serve as a primary tool for storytelling, emotional connection, and comprehension. Engaging illustrations can capture a child's attention, enhance understanding, and evoke emotions, making the learning experience more immersive and memorable. Vibrant colours, expressive characters, and dynamic compositions can evoke emotions, convey subtle details, and create a sense of wonder that words alone might not achieve. For children, especially those who are pre-literate or developing their reading skills, illustrations provide context and clues that help them follow the plot and interpret the meaning of the story. In addition, wordless picture books can be particularly effective in teaching values such as kindness and respect, as children interpret the images based on their own understanding. Engaging illustration helps children to construct their own interpretations, fostering creativity and independent thinking. This characteristic is emphasized in the session by the participant (P1), (PB1) and (P2):

“... illustration is picture books can powerfully convey moral lessons, making them accessible across different languages and cultures...” (P1)

“... engaging colours, expressive characters, and clear visuals make the book more effective in conveying messages...” (P2)

“... wordless picture books can be powerful tools in storytelling, allowing children to interpret and internalize the story through visuals ...” (PB1)

Next, the picture books must be simple and clear language. Using picture books with straightforward and clear language in educating humanity during preschool is paramount because young kids are still in the process of developing their thinking, language, and emotional sense. At this stage, they have limited vocabulary and ability to comprehend, meaning straightforward language ensures that the message is comprehensible and readily accessible. In other words, the language in picture books should be age-appropriate, clear, and engaging. Abstract or difficult concepts can be confusing, but with the addition of simple, easy-to-read text and supporting pictures, children are able to comprehend notions like kindness, empathy,

fairness, and respect. Preschoolers are also able to focus on the moral of the story and emotional nuance without being overwhelmed by difficult vocabulary and complex sentences. Furthermore, simple language allows teachers and parents to discuss the themes of the story with the children, helping them think critically about and internalize the human values. By combining simplicity with familiar stories and compelling images, picture books then become an influential means of fostering empathy and moral understanding in children. Repetitive phrases, rhymes, and simple sentence structures help children understand and remember the lessons. This point shared by participant (T1), (T2), and (P2):

“... books should present messages in a way that young children can easily understand...” (T1)

“... rhymes, repetitive phrases, and storytelling techniques that encourage participation make books more engaging ...” (T2)

“... language must be age-appropriate and easy-read-text ...” (P2)

Picture books used to teach humanity in preschool must include moral and ethical lessons because these formative years are a critical time for shaping a child’s understanding of right and wrong, empathy, kindness, fairness, gratitude, honesty and social responsibility. Rather than directly preaching morals, stories should allow children to experience these values through the characters’ actions and choices. Stories with clear moral and ethical lessons provide a safe and engaging way for children to explore complex concepts like kindness, fairness, honesty, and respect. Through relatable characters and situations, picture books can demonstrate the consequences of actions, the importance of treating others well, and the value of cooperation and compassion. These lessons help preschoolers build a foundation for ethical behaviour and emotional intelligence, which are essential for navigating social interactions and relationships as they grow.

“... I used to tell them a story about The Giving Tree by Shel Silverstein. It’s a timeless classic—a story that illustrates the concept of unconditional love and sacrifice. The simplicity of the book, combined with the depth of its message, makes it highly effective in teaching children about empathy and generosity....” (T2)

Another characteristic of the books is the book must consist of interactive elements. Interactive elements in picture books refer to features that actively engage children in the reading experience, encouraging them to participate, reflect, and connect with the story's themes. These elements can include questions, prompts, activities, or even physical components like flaps, textures, or pop-ups that require the child to interact with the book. It is important it helps in encouraging children to engage actively with the story helps them internalize moral lessons. Additionally, picture books with questions, prompts, or activities can stimulate discussions about emotions, relationships, and ethical dilemmas.

“... the book must have the interactive elements. For example, pop-up books, vibrant, colourful illustrations and the tactile. These elements will help in storytelling and able to retain the children attention. The storyteller need to be creative in engaging children in the story such as asking relevant and reflective questions...” (ST1)

“... for example, The Very Hungry Caterpillar. This books very interactive and children learn many lesson through this books. The book uses die-cut pages to show the caterpillar's journey as it eats through various foods. The holes in the pages allow children to poke their fingers through, mimicking the caterpillar's path...” (P2)

The picture books used to teach humanity in preschool must be culturally sensitive to foster inclusivity, respect, and understanding among young children. Malaysia's diverse population includes Malays, Chinese, Indians, and indigenous groups, each with unique traditions, languages, and values. Culturally sensitive picture books can reflect this diversity, allowing children to see themselves and others represented in stories, which promotes empathy and a sense of belonging. By incorporating themes of kindness, cooperation, and respect for differences, these books can help preschoolers appreciate Malaysia's rich cultural tapestry and learn to navigate a pluralistic society with compassion. Additionally, culturally sensitive materials avoid stereotypes and misrepresentations, ensuring that all children feel valued and respected.

“...we need local picture books to ensure cultural relevance with Malaysian context and this will help to provide children with stories that reflect their own experiences and values based on our culture...” (PB1)

In conclusion, based on the results, six main characteristics of picture books are essential for teaching humanity in preschool. For example, relatable and diverse characters may include children from different cultural backgrounds helping one another; engaging illustrations use clear, expressive images to show emotions and actions; simple and clear language allows children to easily understand the story; moral and ethical lessons are reflected in themes such as sharing, honesty, and kindness; interactive elements involve questions, problem-solving, or actions that invite children to participate; and cultural sensitivity is shown through respectful representations of traditions, family practices, and daily life familiar to children in a multicultural society. By incorporating all of the elements, picture books become powerful tools for teaching humanity in preschool education. The characteristics of the picture book are simplified on the Figure 2 below:

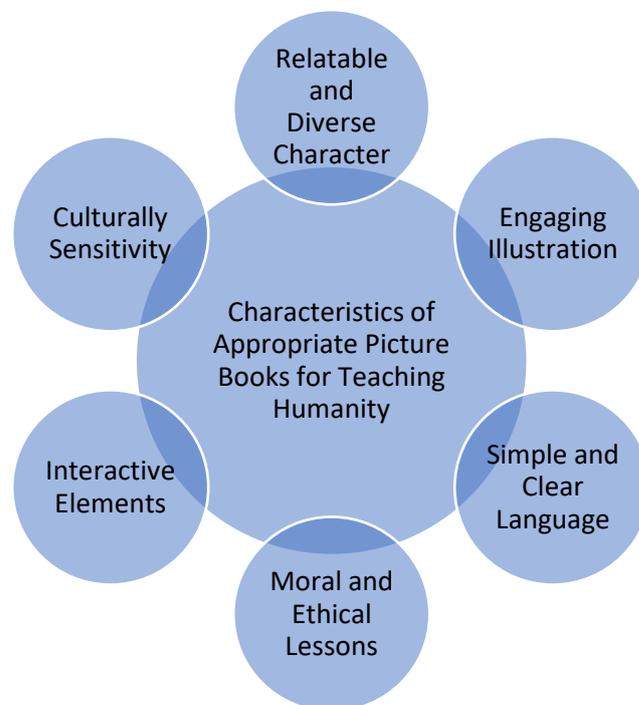


Figure 2. Characteristic of Appropriate Picture Books for Teaching Humanity

The findings of this study highlight the significant potential of picture books as a powerful tool for teaching humanity in preschool education. The results align with existing literature that emphasizes the role of picture books in fostering empathy, moral reasoning, cultural awareness, and critical thinking in young children (Sipe, 2008; Derman-Sparks & Edwards, 2020). The study underscores the importance of picture books in creating emotional connections, introducing moral and ethical dilemmas, and engaging children in interactive learning experiences. These findings are consistent with the broader educational goals of early childhood education, which aim to nurture compassionate, empathetic, and socially responsible individuals (Noddings, 2005; EAUDE, 2022).

The study also identified six key characteristics of appropriate picture books for teaching humanity in preschool: relatable and diverse characters, engaging illustrations, simple and clear language, moral and ethical lessons, interactive elements, and cultural sensitivity. These characteristics are crucial for ensuring that picture books are effective in fostering empathy, moral reasoning, and cultural awareness in young children. The findings suggest that picture books with these characteristics can serve as powerful tools for nurturing compassionate, thoughtful, and socially responsible individuals.

Based on the study, there is a need for integrating picture books into the preschool curriculum as a tool for teaching humanity. Educators should be encouraged to select picture books that align with the six key characteristics identified in the study. This includes books with relatable and diverse characters, engaging illustrations, and culturally sensitive content. By incorporating such books into the curriculum, educators can create a more inclusive and empathetic learning environment. Furthermore, it is also crucial to provide teachers with training on how to effectively use picture books in the classroom. Professional development programs should focus on strategies for selecting age-appropriate books, planning interactive activities, and facilitating meaningful discussions around moral and ethical dilemmas.

In multicultural societies like Malaysia, it is essential to ensure that picture books reflect the diverse cultural backgrounds of children. Publishers and educators should prioritize the creation and selection of culturally sensitive picture books that promote inclusivity and respect for differences. This will help children see themselves and their communities represented in literature, fostering a sense of pride and belonging. For policy makers, it is also recommended to develop the policies that support the creation and distribution of high-quality, culturally sensitive picture books that align with the educational goals of fostering empathy, moral reasoning, and cultural awareness. While this study provides valuable insights into the potential of picture books for teaching humanity, further research is needed to develop the proper module of teaching humanity in preschool that aligned with national curriculum. The research will be beneficial to the teacher and parents. In addition, another research on the exploring the long-term impact of using picture books in early childhood education is also recommended.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, this study demonstrates that picture books hold immense potential for teaching humanity in preschool education. By fostering empathy, moral reasoning, and cultural awareness, picture books can help young children develop the skills and values needed to navigate a complex and diverse world. The findings of this study provide valuable insights for educators, policymakers, and parents, highlighting the importance of selecting and using picture books that are engaging, culturally sensitive, and aligned with the goals of early childhood education.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

This research funded by Tunku Abdul Rahman University of Management and Technology (Project no: UC/I/G2024-00132). Special thanks to Tunku Abdul Rahman University of Management and Technology for the award of the grant.

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