Picture books provide children with the unique opportunity to peek into someone else’s mind. As children engage with picture books they also engage with characters’ feelings, their thoughts, and their reactions to other characters’ feelings and thoughts. Through the eyes of a fictional character in a fictional world, children are able to safely navigate tricky social situations and emotional experiences. This vicarious life experience provides training and preparation for the trickier moments children will encounter in real life.1

By connecting with characters in picture books children can gain a better understanding of themselves, of others, and of the world they live in. These stories create mirrors and windows for readers -- mirrors that reflect one’s own life and windows through which the life of someone else can be viewed.2 But what happens when there’s not a mirror for everyone? What happens when the windows don’t open up very wide? While progress is being made, the diversity of our world is tremendously underrepresented in the world of picture books.3 How does this impact children’s understanding of the world and their roles within it?

In this study, I analyze the role of picture books in children’s social/emotional development through the lens of developmental and social psychology. Specifically, I investigate the ways in which picture books can serve as a tool for helping children navigate a diverse world. Here, I shed light on common approaches to “teaching” about diversity through picture books, and why these approaches may not be as progressive as they seem. Through a metacognitive perspective I aim to provide a better understanding as to how children understand picture books, and how educators and parents can use picture books to their maximum potential as educational tools for children.

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