

The Relevance of Resources Supporting Cultural Identity for Indigenous Children

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Abstract

Cultural identity, based on individual's origin, serves as the foundation of self-perception and thrives on collective knowledge. This paper highlights the critical role of illustrations in fostering a strong sense of identity for Indigenous Children. As inheritors of a rich legacy, Indigenous Peoples, possess unique cultural traditions, and social structures that differ from predominant societies. The first intentionally drawn picture, created 73,000 years ago on a rock, symbolizes the transition from survival to expressions of human culture through images. Despite a long history of images across ages, Dr. Sarah Parks' study, "Diversity in Children's Books 2018," reveals the underrepresentation of Indigenous children in illustrations, affecting not only their self-awareness but also influencing the perceptions of white children by limiting their exposure to diverse protagonists. The study is examined with respect to the following factors: A) Illustrations serve as an educational resource. Their visual effects support a better understanding of concepts. However, illustrations can also perpetuate stereotypes, or prejudice. B) The potential alienation of individuals from other communities if protagonists consistently belong to a particular race. C) Readers' empathic feelings are related to the level of transportation involved. Transportation entails discernment, sentiments, and mental imagery proceeding from the story. Findings from this study contribute to the ongoing discourse on the importance of representation in children's literature.

Keywords: Cultural Identity, Illustrations in Children's Books, Representation in Literature

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Introduction

A couple of simple lines drawn 73,000 years ago on a flat rock found in the Blombos cave in South Africa¹ is the legacy of the first intentionally drawn picture made by primitive hands. Human symbolic thinking has found, in images, a powerful channel that transmits ideas, concepts, and emotions. This document will analyze the role and relevance of illustrations in children's books with topics related to human rights and the impact they have on the readers to increase Indigenous People's representativity and avoid social invisibility.

Social invisibility refers to a group of people in society who have been separated or systematically ignored by most of the public.² As a consequence, marginalized individuals feel unseen and unheard in society. Examples of socially invisible groups globally include the elderly, orphans, minorities, Indigenous People, impoverished individuals, the homeless, or anyone who experiences ostracism from society.

While there has been increasing international awareness of Indigenous Peoples' presence worldwide, the place that they have in society is still uncertain and secondary.³ Indigenous People face significant challenges such as poverty, health disparities, and social injustice. What happens when people are not considered part of a community? They are often dehumanized and denied respect. This lack of recognition leads to a disregard for their human rights, which are fundamental to every person's dignity.

Indigenous Children already in an extremely vulnerable position, also endure oppression, discrimination, and prejudice. One of the gravest threats to the human rights of Indigenous People is ignorance. Lack of awareness about human rights can prevent individuals from discussing, understanding the implications, defending and recognizing others as deserving of the same rights and privileges. Education plays a crucial role in combating ignorance and raising awareness about human rights. It is imperative to consider that the actions or inactions of governments impact children more strongly than any other group in society.⁴

Indigenous Peoples as the Bearers of Cultural Heritage

Inheritors of a rich legacy, Indigenous People are groups who present their own unique cultural traditions, language, and social structures that differ from the predominant society.⁵ They represent the historical continuity of society's pre-colonial or pre-settlers. These groups present another typical trait: a strong connection with territories or natural environments which are related to their subsistence, spiritual practices, and traditions.⁶ Indigenous Peoples' bond with the environment transcends generations through artistic expressions used by their communities. Indigenous People share their daily life routine, religious rituals, work, and life cycles thru creative demonstrations involved in art projects that include a combination of

¹ Lopez, Sandra y Domingo, Angel. *De Vocacion a Oficio: Una Guía Grafica para la Ilustracion Infantil*. Agencia Espanola para la Cooperacion Internacional y el Desarrollo.

² Social Invisibility definition. The Universal Encyclopedia of World Problems and Human Potential.

³ Anaya A. "Why is Mexico lagging so badly on human rights?" The Conversation. (2016)

⁴ UNICEF. "Conventions on the Rights of the Child." Unicef.org. <https://www.unicef.org/child-rights-convention/child-rights-why-they-matter>

⁵ United Nations. Department of Economic and Social Affairs. "Indigenous People" <https://www.un.org/development/desa/indigenouspeoples/about-us.html>

⁶ "10 Things We All Should Know About Indigenous People." United Nations Development Program. <https://stories.undp.org/10-things-we-all-should-know-about-indigenous-people>.

symbolism, embroidery, sculptures, songs, garments, and illustrations that reflect the heritage of their civilization and enhance their sense of community.

The Transcendence of the Universal language of Illustrations

An illustration is a graphic composition formed by drawings, pictures, and images⁷ that attracts attention and invites interpretation and awareness. The universal language of illustration has been a resource in countless civilizations in the history of humanity. From the colorful and intricate murals in ancient temples in Mayan culture to the hieroglyphics that are part of complex compositions in Egypt, illustrations represent the intention to communicate and share messages with broad audiences regardless of the audience's origin. Illustrations can transmit a message that is not limited by language barriers. According to Paleolithic archeologist April Nowell, the simple drawings of animals and handprints that are found in countless caves worldwide represent a shift in how humans interpret and interact with their environment, a transition from focusing on survival to the incipient expression of human culture.

Illustrations can be an instrumental educational resource. Their visual effects can be provocative and result in a better understanding of concepts, ideas, and definitions. An illustration in a book is also a tool that allows the communication of a more dynamic and precise element of information because it represents an intuitive way to learn something.

However, illustrations can also reinforce stereotypes, preconceptions, or prejudice. The repeated representation of a particular concept in a deterministic way may bias the reader's opinion. For example, in children's book illustrations, if the protagonists are always members of a certain race, or have certain characteristics like facial traits, live in particular conditions or their family structure is a specific one, members of other communities can feel that their reality does not match with the narrative or illustrations of the book. On the other hand, children from dominant societies can have a sense of being part of a "better" race because they appear in more resources and are portrayed as "heroes" or main characters of stories, whereas others have a secondary role in the narrative.

The Significance of Children Understanding Human Rights

From early childhood, children who learn about human rights recognize the relationship between a person's rights and responsibilities to others. Resources like books, lessons, and class discussions are particularly important because, for many children, these are their only opportunity to be exposed to human rights educational materials. In books, illustrations accompanying a text can be notably useful. In children's books, illustrations have several functions, and powerful impacts on the child, evoking a diverse range of responses.⁸ Illustrations in children's books can also attract attention through their colorfulness and creativity. They stimulate the reader imagination while maintaining their interest in the narrative.⁹

Illustrations help children who are not frequently exposed to books or who are poor readers (Donald 1983) because children who struggle with reading can depend on illustrations to

⁷ Illustration. Oxford Dictionary. <https://www.oxfordlearnersdictionaries.com/us/definition/english/illustration>

⁸ Nasser, Samiya. *What is the Importance and Impact of Illustrations in Children's Books? ASJP.2021.*

⁹ Bal, P. Matthijs, and Martijn Veltkamp. "How Does Fiction Reading Influence Empathy? An Experimental Investigation on the Role of Emotional Transportation." PLOS ONE. Public Library of Science.

understand the story. This can be particularly useful for Indigenous children, who can benefit from additional support in their education. According to the National Institute of the Evaluation of Education in Mexico, 23 % of Indigenous People 15 years and older are illiterate while only 4.2 % of the remaining population is illiterate. Additionally, 1 in 4 Indigenous language speakers does not complete high school or higher education. Illustrated books, therefore, could be a useful resource for Indigenous Children.

Indigenous Children and Human Rights

What happens when children are exposed to educational programs related to human rights? Societies that understand the urgency to be respectful and tolerant of Indigenous People who are their fellow community members can lead to a more tolerant and inclusive humanity. The way children's understanding of human rights is shaped when they learn about them and how they can recognize the relationship between a person's rights and responsibilities to others is instrumental in children's civic education. When exposed to books, children react emotionally and intellectually to the content and pictures. They will find themselves in the illustrations, recognizing passages or situations from their own lives, which can facilitate self-expression and understanding of their value as human beings and others' importance as individuals.

Indigenous children frequently rely on storytelling, observation, and an immersive consideration of their environment. The world of nature full of an array of plants and animals represents a unique part of their daily lives because it is undoubtedly related to their existence. To reaffirm this alliance, representations of plants, animals, and the natural world are expressed in their pottery, blankets, garments, ornaments, toys, murals, and paintings. Indigenous children consider the colorful combination of techniques, materials, and elements as part of their culture and identity. Illustrations provide an essential element of knowledge and information in which the artist's approach must be responsible, sincere and include relevant components to Indigenous children's lives. Illustrations in children's books can attract attention and establish the mood of the story, as they define and support the characters, this is especially effective in short narratives that do not include highly developed characters.¹⁰

There are many resources explaining the guidelines to incorporate illustrations in children's books, along with the type and format of illustrations. The guidelines include the impact of the illustrations on the comprehension level of the reader. Literacy educator Patricia Cianciolo maintained that the main purpose of children's books is to be read and that illustrations should not interfere with this goal by being too eccentric. Preferably, illustrations must help deliver the writer's message accurately. Cianciolo supported the idea of the usefulness of illustrations to attract the attention of children, which is one of the most successful methods to stimulate learning. Equally important for her was the assumption that illustrated books would facilitate the reader's comprehension and increase their vocabulary; illustrated books can help children to understand concepts of the world surrounding them.

¹⁰ Brookshire, Janye. Scharff, Lauren Moses, Laurie." The influence of illustrations on children's book preferences and comprehension." 2002 Reading Psychology. 23.
https://www.researchgate.net/publication/240238648_The_influence_of_illustrations_on_children's_book_preferences_and_comprehension/citations

Ultimately, illustrated books support a literary and cultural heritage and help in the development of appreciation and understanding of the graphic arts.¹¹

However, some authors have argued that illustrations in children's books can adversely affect the reader's understanding of the text, by diverting the attention only to the images and away from the text itself. Authors like Charles Elsters and Herbert Simons state that the way the illustrations and text interact affects the reader's ability to understand the story. They explain that a text is known as "picture- dependent" when a text can only be understood by looking at the pictures. On the contrary, a text that can be understood with or without the support of the illustrations is known as "picture- independent," because the pictures only provide additional references or clues. Elsters and Simons conclusion is that illustrations must be used only as additional support for the children helping them to understand the meaning of the words and not focus only on the pictures. The authors believe that illustrations must be coherent with the text, which will aid the story comprehension.

Even though some authors reinforce the idea that pictures can delay children's ability to understand a text, others have found evidence supporting the use of illustrations. One example of this evidence is the research made by scholars J. Don Read and Roger Basley, which found that illustrations in reading materials can have a positive impact when long-term memory is tested. Professor of Education Zhihui Fang also encourages the use of illustrations in children's books because they promote and develop children's interest in books, inviting them to interact with the text; the constant involvement of the children motivates them to predict the end and find similarities in their own lives or situations applicable to their own realities, as well as empathizing with the characters. Illustrations in books have the purpose of explaining, interpreting or decorating a text. Pictures and illustrations in children's books are focused on storytelling and have different functions from paintings or artistic illustrations found in galleries.¹²

Main Functions of Illustration on Children's Books

Illustrations are instrumental to the picture book; they can guide the reader through the story and provide context and additional details that would help create mental images and a frame of reference. The following are some of the important objectives of illustrations in books:

Illustrations Determine the Setting. The setting provides the story's location in time and place, historical references, and mood.¹³ Illustrations are also very constructive in determining the mood of a book with pictures. The color palette can be employed to create a particular mood or environment that can help to create sensations or feelings related to the narrative. Definition and development of characters. Children pay particular attention to the facial expressions and traits of characters in stories. They can give readers more information about the characters' feelings and intentions, helping them to connect with the story and understand it. For instance, the villain's clothes or gestures can be part of the interpretation of a character, giving the reader visual elements that will reinforce the way they recall the character later. Also, they extend or develop a storyline. Frequently, illustrated books have

¹¹ Brookshire, Jamye Scharff, Lauren. Moses. Laurie. (2002). "The influence of illustrations on children's book preferences and comprehension." *Reading Psychology*. 23. 323-339.

¹² Fang, Z. "Illustrations, Text, and the Child Reader: What are Pictures in Children's Storybooks for?" *Reading Horizons: A Journal of Literacy and Language Arts*, 37 (2).

¹³ Drago, Flavia. "Curso de Ilustracion Infantil" *Domestika*.

limited amounts of text, in which case the story's explanation will rely on illustrations. Furthermore, in wordless illustrated books the whole plot is developed through illustrations whereas, in illustrated books with text, the plot can be augmented, contradicted, or delimited by illustrations.

Illustrations Can Provide a Different Perspective. They can narrate a different or contradictory story than the text. The reader will interpret the images and learn that sometimes there can be several interpretations of the same story. Illustrations that contradict the text frequently are used to raise consciousness about a social issue. For example, the text can narrate the assumption that all children in the world have food and nice schools while the illustrations can depict children without enough food or books. Finally, they assist with textual coherence. Coherence refers to the quality of being logical, so a text is understandable to readers.

Illustrations Can Help to Textual Coherence by Providing Referential Hints for the Text / Support Text. In specific cases, the main purpose of illustrations in books is to reinforce rather than magnify or extend the text. This is particularly important to nonfiction illustrated books in which the illustrations, graphs, and diagrams offer a visual emphasis on the words. The inclusion of elements in illustrations can present many aspects of a particular scenario important to the narrative to the reader. The natural environment, food, garments, and objects can easily give readers context to the story. In the illustrated book *The Little Book of Joy* written by His Holiness the Dalai Lama and Archbishop Desmond Tutu, artist Rafael Lopez masterfully includes colorful landscapes, buildings, and toys that can transport the reader to the world of the writer's childhood. Lopez emphasizes how illustrations can help the reader explore and connect with other cultures, making them citizens of the world while learning about the lives of young people globally.

Important research to support the use of illustrations has been done, like the study conducted by semantic scholar, J Peeck, who developed a case of study to demonstrate the level of retention of a story with or without illustrations. Peeck showed a group of participants some cartoon strips that included text and images, and to another group he only shared text. After an unannounced retention test, Peeck found quickly that the group that received the story with illustrations and text remembered more information than the other one. This resulted in the group that received the story with the illustrations performing significantly better. After a day or a week when the questions were again asked, the same group again correctly answered questions related to pictures only. Peeck conclusion was that retention measured from the inclusion or exclusion of illustrations can be relevant in determining whether to include or not illustrations.¹⁴

Illustrations and Narrative Transportation

The impact of reading a book extends to people's behavior in their lives, particularly in terms of empathy levels observed between fiction and nonfiction narratives. Professors Bal Matthijs from the University of London and Martijn Veltkamp, a Senior Researcher in Applied Psychology in the Netherlands, explain that readers' empathic responses are influenced by the level of transportation experienced during reading. Transportation is defined as a convergent

¹⁴ Peeck, J. "Retention of pictorial and verbal content of a text with illustrations." *Journal of educational psychology* vol. 66,6. 1974.

process where all mental systems and capacities¹⁵. Authors Bal, P. Matthijs, and Martijn Veltkamp argue that a fictional text is not evaluated on its consistency but on whether it establishes truth likeness, therefore a reader will be impacted by a fictional text only when it is realistic, inviting the reader to be drawn into the story.

Transportation entails discernment, sentiments, and mental imagery proceeding from the story. Illustrations are key components that influence the individual's mental imagery and can be associated with understanding and enjoyment. Therefore, it is more probable that readers that are more transported could adopt story-related beliefs, behaviors, and attitudes.

The Importance of Representativity on Illustrations for Indigenous Children

Children can build their reality from different components like stories, songs, movies, experiences, and many other factors that help them to interpret reality into common patterns. They can explore and discover the world through these elements, and they can also find themselves represented. Specifically, illustrated stories have a unique role in picturing children, portraying distinct cultures, information about those cultures, and guiding the reader into the interpretation of the world, transmitting values such as friendship, empathy, courage, a sense of community, diversity, inclusion, and emotions, which are fundamental for children's development and growth.

Representativity in illustrations of Indigenous children plays a crucial part so Indigenous children can build their own perspectives about their own ethnic group. What are the effects if Indigenous children do not find themselves represented in illustrations? The lack of representativity in books, and videos can lead to negative psychological effects for those with identities less represented or negatively portrayed, while the representativity in children's books or movies can promote positive attitudes and favorable interaction with members of ethnic communities.

When children encounter books where they don't see themselves reflected in the illustrations, it can lead to feelings of being unseen or less significant in society. Chimamanda Adichie, a Nigerian novelist, discusses the "Danger of a single story," which refers to the limitations imposed when resources only present one perspective, restricting the reader's understanding. Moreover, narratives with a singular type of character can perpetuate stereotypes or biases about family, friends, society, and values.

In her article "Mirrors, Windows, and Sliding Glass Doors," Sims Bishop elaborates on the metaphor of what a narrative represents for a child. Some stories act as windows, offering a clear view of the real or imagined world, while others act as glass doors, allowing children to enter and feel part of different worlds. Mirrors, however, reflect a reality familiar to the reader, enabling children to find their own identity, community, and reality within the narrative. This experience fosters empathy and a sense of being valued, as readers see similarities between themselves and the story. Reading thus becomes a form of self-affirmation, encouraging readers to seek reflections of themselves within narratives.

Children from dominant parts of society have always had an array of options in books, they can be portrayed as the protagonists of the story in which reality will feel familiar. Exposure to illustrations and stories that include diverse members of society can support a more

¹⁵ Bal, P. Matthijs, and Martijn Veltkamp. "How Does Fiction Reading Influence Empathy? An Experimental Investigation on the Role of Emotional Transportation." PLOS ONE. Public Library of Science.

tolerant and respectful community in which children learn to consider members of other communities as part of an equalitarian society. Illustrations including Indigenous children can help other children to learn about traditions, diminishing laughable or derogative representations of them.

Dr. Sarah Parks' infographic "Diversity in Children's Books 2018" illustrates the representation of minorities in children's literature. Surprisingly, in 2018, 27% of published books featured animals as the main characters, a percentage higher than all minorities combined. In contrast, white characters appeared in 50% of the published material. This abundance of resources featuring white characters allows white children to see themselves reflected, but it leaves Indigenous children significantly underrepresented, appearing in only 1% of published books and often being stereotyped.

Books serve as powerful tools for promoting acceptance and inclusion. The lack of representation not only impacts Indigenous children's self-awareness but also affects the self-perception of white children, who may not see diverse characters as main participants in stories or may encounter misrepresentations in illustrations and narratives.

Educational illustrated books for children can highlight the recognition of the United Nations Declaration on The Rights of Indigenous People which addresses the right of Indigenous families and communities to retain shared responsibility for the upbringing, training, education, and well-being of their children, consistent with the rights of the child.¹⁶ Although the rights of Indigenous peoples have been given more consideration by international organizations like the UN system, Indigenous people still are enduring disproportionately from global concerns such as climate change, COVID-19 adverse effects, environmental degradation, elevated levels of poverty, and human rights violations. Even though they represent 6 percent of the world's population, they are part of almost 19 percent of the extremely poor population in the world.¹⁷

The recognition of Indigenous Children through narratives or images can significantly impact their self-esteem and foster a sense of belonging to a larger community. This is a pertinent topic given the vast number of Indigenous communities worldwide. Indigenous People are present in 90 countries, numbering over 476 million individuals and encompassing 5,000 distinct cultures. They inhabit diverse ecosystems and possess intricate systems of knowledge.

Understanding that human rights are universal and apply to everyone globally can empower Indigenous Children to recognize their worth and importance as individuals. Embracing the universality of human rights has the potential to promote inclusion, equality, and the protection of rights not just for Indigenous Children but for all individuals. It encourages a mindset of respect, dignity, and equity for everyone, leading to a more inclusive and harmonious society.

Indigenous children require special resources that reinforce and preserve their identity, and cultural heritage and nurture their uniqueness. The consistent damage to the environment

¹⁶ United Nations Declaration on The Rights of Indigenous Children.
<https://www.un.org/development/desa/indigenouspeoples/wp>

¹⁷ United Nations. Office of the High Commission. About indigenous peoples and human rights.
<https://www.ohchr.org/en/indigenous-peoples/about-indigenous-peoples-and-human-rights>

threatens the survival of many indigenous communities because their cultural identity is related to their lands, therefore the protection and conservation of the environment must be considered a high priority for Indigenous peoples globally.

Another component that provides an equivalent opportunity for children to be aware of other communities is the teachers, parents, and caregivers' willingness to expose them to diverse cultures. These choices can be related to the inclusion of materials in which these cultures are represented. Children are naturally curious; they like to explore and learn. Exposure to different traditions could diminish future prejudice or predisposition towards minorities or underrepresented groups.

In the community, around the fire or at home, legends, stories, and fables transmit the values that shape children's everyday lives. Courage, kindness, determination, and perseverance are some of the traits highlighted in narratives. Egalitarian societies consider all people the same regardless of race, gender, religion, or age. The materials and procedures used to teach about those rights must attract the children's interest and be accessible to them. Human rights and literature scholar Michael Galchinsky believes there is a difference between vertical and horizontal orientation. Human rights culture presents civic and ethical practicalities related to human rights law, in this case, the orientation of the law is vertical, going down from government institutions to individuals. However, in children's illustrated literature, the orientation of rights culture tends to be horizontal, in which the artist approaches humans as persons. For children, literature's horizontal reach goes precisely into their imagination.

Conclusions

Illustrations can point to important concepts for children's rights such as children's justice, respect, and expression of ideas. Illustrated books about human rights transmit human rights matters to children, they can present rights-respecting or rights-denying models of how children are treated. Through time, stories for children have been used as resources to mold children according to guidelines of proper behavior. Along with this, illustrated books have also nurtured children's imagination, creativity, and autonomy.

Analyzed from the frame of reference of human rights advancement, children's literature proposes a way for younger children to think about their rights and responsibilities. One of the most important effects on children is that it exposes them to human rights ethics and principles long before they meet formal law. In addition, because adults often read with children, these literary resources can be of helpful and informative value, so adults are aware of the rights of children and the importance of representativity and inclusion of minorities and underrepresented children.

The Convention on the Rights of the Child honors children as children. They are no longer considered possessions or extensions of adults. Illustrations in children's literature provide children with moments to frequently read their preferred stories, explaining repeatedly about human rights, fair treatment, empathy, compassion, and respect. An accomplishing human rights culture is not only limited to formal documents, treaties, or conventions but also, to the educational narratives that children and adults contribute through stories.

Educational resources for Indigenous children and their families must include illustrations built on the awareness of the necessity to advance human rights, respect Indigenous cultures and address situations and behaviors that create disadvantage and exclusion. For many

Indigenous children, society declines to provide the proper conditions for inclusion and social growth. Therefore, it is now a priority to highlight the responsibility and duty of parents, caregivers, and teachers to point to materials that support Indigenous children's human rights education, because they live around the world, in rural and urban areas, thus, resources like illustrated books that honor their cultural identity, will support the protection from human right's abuses and discrimination as they are the custodians of cultures, traditions, and unique knowledge systems.

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