

Balancing teacher power and children's rights: rethinking the use of picturebooks in multicultural primary schools in England

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Keywords: Children's literature, freedom of expression, representation, critical literacy, interpretation, autoethnography

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Abstract: This article offers an autoethnographic reconsideration of a primary school teacher’s practice and children’s interpretation of picturebooks in multicultural primary schools in England. It considers the balance teachers strike between respecting children’s rights to freedom of thought and expression, and wielding their own power as directors of learning. It links key aspects of international human rights law on children to concepts from literacy studies and multicultural children’s literature: representation of minority groups, pictorial interpretation, critical literacy and teacher power. It brings out nuanced interpretations of the picturebook *The Arrival* as a ‘mirror’ for learners from migrant backgrounds. This mirror may reflect children’s experiences but also offer a frosted, distorted or blank view where young learners do not empathise with characters. We argue that children’s rights within education should include freedom of thought and expression and freedom to interpret literature; teachers should reflect on their intentions when using literature, and not pose barriers to this freedom.

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Introduction

It was Professor Emeritus of Children’s Literature, Rudine Sims Bishop, who first described so eloquently the potential of a children’s book to be a ‘mirror’ for children, reflecting their world and themselves back to them (Sims Bishop, 1990). This metaphor may be applied as much to wordless picturebooks as to books containing text. Recently, renewed interest in the picturebook has led to it being re-considered both as a way of representing the experiences of learners from diverse cultural and migration backgrounds and also as a pedagogical vehicle through which complex and topical issues might be made more understandable and more easily relatable, not least within the multicultural environments that we find in many English schools (Arizpe, 2013; Roche, 2015; Pantaleo, 2020; Papen, 2020). One such book is *The Arrival* authored by Shaun Tan (2006). *The Arrival* tells the story of a family in the process of leaving their home country to build a new life in a distant land. It has become popular as much for its important representation of the modern reality of migration and identity, so familiar to many migrant families, as for its beautiful and

engaging illustrations. Indeed, these were some of the reasons why it was selected to be the focus of the primary school teacher practice explored in this article.

New literacy studies have recognised the centrality of context to the understanding of literature and the notion that texts may be interpreted in different ways (Lankshear & Knobel, 2007). Indeed, readers bring their own backgrounds to their reading of a text, interact with the text, and then take those meanings away with them after reading to re-interpret their own worlds. Thus, reading can involve interpretation, reflection and interrogation, and should lead to acting on and, in Paulo Freire's (1985) understanding, changing their world. Indeed, dealing with issues of power and inequality, while recognising the non-neutrality of education in general and literacy in particular, is what allows this approach to be called 'critical literacy' (Reynolds, 2007). In introducing and applying international human rights law on education and children's rights more broadly to this world of children's literature and teaching, an understanding can emerge that good quality education will be non-discriminatory and respect learners' multiple identities. Furthermore, it will allow them freedom of expression and thought, and enable them to seek out information and to have their views given due weight in issues that affect them, in accordance with the Convention on the Rights of the Child, article 2, 8, 12, 13, 14, 28 and 29 (United Nations [UN], 1989). However, given the wider scope for interpretation offered by a wordless picturebook, there is also the reality that such a book may be interpreted in a way that is out of synch with the teacher's aim or 'standpoint' (Luke, 2000). This is especially pertinent when the text has been carefully chosen by the teacher as a way to 'mirror' or represent marginalised children's experiences. In this way, it may challenge the teacher's position as the powerful gatekeeper to children's literary and imaginative worlds and, ultimately, educational attainment. It is these two balancing acts that this article wishes to convey; between representation and critical literacy on the one hand, and between children's rights and teacher power on the other. While much has been written about children's rights and the right to literacy in general (Janks, 2010; Moretti & Frandell, 2013), and there are papers that mention children's rights as a topic in children's literature (Reynolds, 2007), little has been written that is expressly about children's rights and the use of children's literature, particularly from a teacher's perspective. Therefore, this article will offer autoethnographic reconsiderations by a teacher on his practice with primary school learners in a number of culturally diverse schools in England, using the metaphor of the 'mirror' in the context of working with the book *The Arrival*. The framework of these reflections is that of children's rights, and conceptual understandings of representation, pictorial interpretation, critical literacy and power.

The article will now introduce key aspects of international human rights law on children. It will then consider the picturebook as a genre and ideas around pictorial interpretation and representation, and mirroring. Teacher power and critical literacy will also be considered. It will then offer a brief summary of the context of the practice-based work on which this article is based before presenting the findings, which are nuanced and alternative interpretations of *The Arrival* as a mirror, through reflections on the classroom-based activities used by the teacher-author. The discussion that follows will return to issues of teacher power and children's right to freedom of thought and interpretation in education when using literature, as well as representation and mirroring. The conclusion will argue that picturebooks can play a hugely significant role in children's education and literacy.

Learners can also relate this type of literature to their own lives, but they must be allowed the freedom to make meaning from it in order for their rights to be fulfilled.

Children's social, cultural and education rights

Children in England, like children across the globe, have certain rights within education. Some of these rights are enshrined in international law and applied within national law and policy. Governments have an obligation to ensure access to education for all children in the compulsory education age-range (Tomaševski, 2001). Former UN Special Rapporteur on the Right to Education, Katarina Tomaševski (2004), views a rights-based approach to education as being founded on the following: access to free and compulsory education; equality, inclusion and non-discrimination; and the right to quality education in terms of content and processes.

The International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights [ICESCR] (UN, 1966) states education to be a human right and requires that it be 'directed to the full development of the human personality and the sense of its dignity', thereby 'strengthen[ing] the respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms', and promoting 'understanding, tolerance and friendship' (Article 13(1)). Beiter (2006, p. 95) considers that the reference to human dignity implies that 'education must make the individual aware of his own inherent worth and of the human rights which accrue to him on this basis'. Interpretations of ICESCR (including General Comment 13) express these rights by stating that education should be available, accessible, acceptable and adaptable to learners (Tomaševski, 2001). Being 'accessible' in this way means that the education system should be non-discriminatory, that is, accessible to all, and efforts must be made to include socially, culturally, geographically and economically marginalised individuals (Friboulet, Niameogo, Liechi, Dalbera & Meyer-Bisch, 2006; Right to Education Project, 2018). Like Tomaševski (2004), Hanna (2016a; 2017a; 2019) argues that the concept of non-discrimination should apply to the content of the curriculum as well as pedagogy when dealing with different views and understandings in the classroom that are of particular salience in diverse and multi-ethnic societies.

The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child [UNCRC] (UN, 1989) requires all signatories – including England as part of the UK – to adhere to a lengthy list of rights. These include the right of children to non-discrimination (Article 2), to respect for identity (Article 8), to be consulted on anything that affects them (Article 12), the right to express their views and to seek information (Article 13), and the right to freedom of thought (Article 14). In terms of education in particular, Article 28 assures the right to free primary education, and Article 29(1) states that education will be directed towards goals such as the development of children 'to their fullest potential', respect for rights and freedoms, and respect for multiple identities, peace, tolerance, and equality (see Hodgson, 1993, for a more detailed outline). Ronen (2004) interprets UNCRC articles on identity as requiring that each child be regarded as an 'individualized identity' rather than simply a part of predetermined groups, and that UNCRC implicitly 'reaffirms commitment to a dynamic child-constructed identity' (p. 147) which acknowledges the multiplicity of culture as it is 'uniquely experienced by the individual child' (p. 158). Hanna (2017b) takes recognition of identity a step further, claiming that this represents the child's right to respect for his/her multiple identities as well as the active protection of these rights that should be central to pedagogy and practice in schools.

This article will argue that these rights and freedoms are relevant to a

discussion of how teachers use picturebooks with culturally diverse groups of learners, particularly in terms of representation and pictorial interpretation. Central to this discussion is the consideration of how to balance teacher's power and children's rights when engaging with literature in the classroom. These key concepts are explored in the two sections below.

Wordless picturebooks: pictures, interpretation and mirrors

A wordless picturebook is 'a text where the visual image carries the weight of the meaning' (Arizpe, 2013, p. 165) and so omits the written word. Wordless or sparsely-worded books have long been used by teachers in the primary classroom as reading books suited to emergent readers, especially as a way of developing language with the support of visual images. As Lewis (2001, pp. 136-7) notes, the picturebook is 'ideally suited to the task of absorbing, reinterpreting and re-presenting the world to an audience for whom negotiating newness is a daily task.' Over recent years, however, authors and illustrators such as Anthony Browne, Shaun Tan and Armin Greder can be credited with developing the genre as a medium that explores deeper, richer and sometimes darker themes, demanding emotional engagement and empathy from the reader. This genre of book is now growing in popularity amongst teachers of children in later primary years, who recognise the importance of visual literacy (Arizpe & Styles, 2016). Scholarly interest in picturebooks has also risen, establishing them as a more accepted part of the children's literary canon as well as a useful tool in qualitative research with children (Bosch, 2017; Hanna, 2018a; 2018b).

It is the power of the image that appears to make the picturebook so appealing for teachers. Perry Nodelman (1988) illustrates how much can be drawn from a single image, and how much skill is required in making sense of it, thereby shattering the myth that picturebooks are for those who lack the understanding or wisdom that comes with age. It has been suggested that the pared-down text creates 'textual gaps' (Iser, 1974) or 'breathing space' (Kucharczyk, 2016), offering opportunities for multiple interpretations, thus leading to them often being viewed as accessible for readers of all abilities and contributing towards 'a more democratic space for collaborative enquiry and exploration' (Roche, 2015, p. 79). The level of freedom of interpretation, however, is mediated to an extent by the teacher, an issue that will be considered later in this article.

Thus, the task for educators may appear quite straightforward, given time and material resources. Teachers are convinced by the evidence that images are powerful and that they can help children develop literacy, and so they select a picturebook that offers scope for interpretation. There is also another consideration, however, and that is representation, an issue that is of particular salience when working with culturally diverse groups of children. It has long been argued in the field of multicultural children's literature that diverse children should be represented in the books that children are offered to read. Rudine Sims Bishop has argued that 'multicultural literature is one of the most powerful components of a multicultural education curriculum' and therefore 'the choice of books to be read and discussed in the nation's schools is of paramount importance' (1992, p. 40). She describes literature as something that 'transforms human experience and reflects it back to us' (1990, p. ix), and has used a three-part metaphor to describe the potential of children's books that was used in this study: a children's book can be a 'mirror', a 'window' or a 'sliding glass door' (1990, p. ix). It is the metaphor of a book as a mirror

that is explored in this article, understood as the potential of a book to reflect children and their worlds back to them (although the ‘window’ onto another world is also mentioned later). Ross Johnston (2011, p. 154) has also written about this mirror metaphor, arguing that children’s books are ‘rather like cultural mirrors that reflect what are widely held to be acceptable social positions.’ Sims Bishop emphasises the importance of multicultural literature in allowing all children to access literature that mirrors their own lives and identities; in this way, literature may allow us all to ‘see our lives and experience as part of the larger human experience’ and so reading ‘becomes a means of self-affirmation.’ If, on the other hand, children cannot see themselves in the books they read, or only see negative or passive portrayals, ‘they learn a powerful lesson about how they are devalued in the society of which they are part.’ (Sims Bishop, 1990, p. ix). Children’s literature has attracted much recent criticism for being largely unrepresentative of the audience reading it, posing a particular problem for under-represented groups such as Black, Asian and minority ethnic and migrant learners. The Centre for Literacy in Primary Education’s [CLPE] 2018 report on the extent of the problem is particularly disappointing, noting the lack of ethnic diversity amongst main characters in children’s fiction does not reflect cultural diversity in the UK (CLPE, 2018).

Teacher power and critical literacy

It may be argued that the ease with which readers engage with picturebooks can sometimes lead teachers to believe that they can be used in a functional way, to transmit an idea clearly and quickly, without the need for extensive explanation or contextualisation. In this case, then, the amount of power held by teachers is potentially great, and their aim in selecting books becomes crucial. Luke (2000) refers to this as the teacher’s ‘attitude’ or ‘standpoint’. Nodelman (1999, p. 73) suggests that picturebooks are ‘a significant means by which we integrate young children into the ideology of our culture’, and Barton and Hamilton (2000, p. 12) highlight how ‘people appropriate texts for their own ends’. In this way, it is people interacting with texts that imbues them with meaning. Therefore, it may even be that adults (teachers) in the classroom – as experienced readers – may not be engaging in the act of ‘creating and negotiating meaning’ that Pantaleo (2002, p. 81) describes as central to work that uses picturebooks with children. As adult readers, perhaps ourselves socialised into a certain approach to reading, we can fall into the trap of trying to decide on a clear narrative path without letting ourselves explore the possibilities which picturebooks with many layers can offer. This can be even more so for teachers who may have planned a journey through a book for their class in advance, before asking for the children’s interpretations. In this case, children travel through the book ‘on rails’, gazing at the other possibilities as they pass on the route pre-designed by their teacher, rather than exploring it step by step together, led by their curiosities.

While teacher power might seem to be significant in this context, it is important to appreciate the moral and practical quandary these decisions represent for the teacher. While they may wish to offer representation to the children, these decisions may also be taken to ensure ‘good’ educational outcomes. It is a tempting reflex for a practitioner who may have one eye on assessment data and performance targets. These reflect reactions to the mechanisms of ‘performativity’ as discussed by Jean-Francoise Lyotard (1984) and Stephen Ball (2003) – the systematic erosion of teacher autonomy and the co-opting of teachers (and, to an extent, learners) into

risk-averse, standardised pedagogy. This can eclipse even the best of intentions to experiment with new approaches in literacy or confront issues of representation. This conflict between making value-based decisions for the children and professional demands can also be a destabilising and confusing factor for teachers. (Kucharczyk, 2020).

When it comes to teacher power, it is instructive to consider aspects of 'critical literacy' in the contexts of power relations and marginalised groups. Reynolds (2007) considers 'critical literacy' to be a recognition of the non-neutrality of education in general and literacy in particular, and therefore an approach to learning that deals with issues of power and inequality. Mayo (1995, p. 363) has described critical literacy as 'a process...which ties pedagogical practices in different spheres of social life to configurations of power.' Giroux (1993, p. 367) describes critical literacy as providing 'the conditions for subordinate groups to learn the knowledge and skills necessary for self and social empowerment.' Perhaps most influential in this arena is the work of educational philosopher Paulo Freire, whose name has been described as 'synonymous with the concept of critical literacy' (Mayo, 1995, p. 363; see also Luke, 2012). While much of Freire's writing explores adult education, it could be argued that his work embodies fundamental ideas of freedom in education that may equally be applied to children and young people.

Freire believed that readers brought to their understandings of texts their own situated understandings of the world; as he eloquently stated, 'every act of reading words implies a previous reading of the world' (Freire, 1985, p. 18; also Freire & Macedo, 1987). But this is not all; readers then bring those co-constructed understandings of the text to bear on their understandings of the world, leading to 'a subsequent rereading of the world.' Therefore, 'reading', in Freire's understanding, involves interpreting, reflecting on, interrogating, investigating, exploring, probing and questioning. But it also leads to 'writing' or 'rewriting': 'transforming [the world] by means of conscious practical action.' However, this process may be mediated by the teacher who, as a facilitator of education, may hold the potential to promote social justice through enabling the challenge of inequality and power (see North, 2006, on social justice approaches to education). As Jerome (2018) has written in his review of international literature on teachers and human rights education, teachers can often be caught between being 'heroes or hypocrites' when trying to balance a respect for children's rights with the constraints of conservative education systems. Similarly, here, there is a balance between the power of the teacher and the rights of the learners. Returning to the previous concepts of pictorial interpretation and representation, what further complicates matters for a practising teacher is having to balance the need to offer representation to under-represented children with the need to offer freedom of interpretation. This constant balancing act of multiple factors – pictorial interpretation, representation, teacher power and children's rights – will become more apparent in the autoethnographic account of the teacher-author later in this article.

The context of the practice: using *The Arrival* as a 'mirror' in the classroom

The findings we will discuss here are based on reflections on the practice of one of the authors (Stefan Kucharczyk) as a specialist literacy teacher in using the picturebook *The Arrival* in primary schools in England over the past five years (see also Hanna and Kucharczyk, 2016). The other author (Helen Hanna) has also used the book as a research tool with migrant learners in England and South Africa (Hanna,

2016b, 2018a, 2018b). Focusing on the broad question of the extent to, and ways in which, the book offered a ‘mirror’ for the learners, both authors then brought a lens to these reflections that was underpinned by ideas of children’s rights, critical literacy and power. The authors view their analysis as located within the social constructivist and interpretivist paradigms that value the subjective understandings and experiences of individuals (in this case, primary school learners in England), and which recognize the freedom of the individual to challenge long-held assumptions (see Guba & Lincoln, 1989). Stefan’s contribution to the analysis uses autoethnographic research methods, methods that draw on the data of the researcher’s recollections and experiences. This is an approach that crosses the boundary between the objective and the subjective to examine the researcher in context and foregrounds his/her personal narrative (Zemblyas, 2003). Leon Anderson’s framework for ‘analytic autoethnography’ (Anderson, 2006) offers guidance for ensuring criticality. While doubts over subjectivity and reliability have brought the validity of autoethnography into question (Delamont, 2007), Anderson argues that it is this personal voicing that gives autoethnography value. Indeed, when considering teacher power, the sharing of personal narratives can reveal ‘untold stories’ (Bridgens, 2007) and add further, perhaps marginalised, voices to critical debates. This is in line with the view of Agarwal et al. (2009) that social justice programmes for teachers should involve self-study and self-reflection.

Offering some more detail now of what the workshops actually looked like may help the reader visualise some of the scenarios considered later in this article. Over the last five years (2014-19) Stefan has used *The Arrival* as part of focused creative writing workshops with small groups of learners (normally 6-8 children, working together on a number of tasks relating to a specific book over six sessions of approximately two hours). This article is based on work across four primary schools in a large post-industrial city in northern England, a city with above-average levels of socio-economic deprivation. These schools, located in inner-city areas, were notable for the rich cultural and ethnic diversity of learners and their families and, to a lesser extent, the teaching staff. They were schools where families have experience of migration to, from and around the UK. All the children who took part in the creative writing workshops were aged 9-10 years old (Year 5). While this was not a formal research project, ethical guidelines for research were adhered to in the reporting of Stefan’s practice, notably with confidentiality in mind, and so no names or identifying features of learners or schools have been included in this article (see British Education Research Association [BERA]’s 2018 ethical guidelines).

The Arrival has been widely used in primary school practice as well as in a number of research projects in a number of countries (see, for example, Arizpe et al. 2014; Pantaleo and Bomphray, 2011; Rhoades, Dallacqua, Kersten, Merry & Miller, 2015). It tells the story of a family in the process of leaving their perilous homeland to build a new life in another country. We witness the family separation, the father’s journey – as he leaves to set up the new, safer life for his wife and daughter – and their eventual reunion sometime later. The story explores the emotional and cultural challenges facing a new arrival as well as the stories of other migrants who are seeking the same opportunities. Stefan’s decision to use *The Arrival* was very deliberate and motivated by a number of considerations which clearly reflected his ‘standpoint’ (Luke, 2000): he hoped to use the themes of the book as a means of exploring the emotional response of the children to the book in terms of their views on migration before writing their own fictional accounts of characters travelling to

new lands. Although Stefan did not specify to the children that they should include autobiographical details in their writing, he did anticipate that the discussions in the writing preparation phase would inspire them to create empathic characters that other children might identify with. For Stefan, Tan's theme of migration resonated with stories of his own family; these are explored later.

Much of *The Arrival* has been reproduced on Shaun Tan's website, and we recommend the reader to access it alongside reading this article, to bring visual understanding to our written descriptions of the scenes below, which, we admit, could not possibly do full justice to Tan's beautiful illustrations: <http://www.shauntan.net/books/the-arrival.html>

Reinterpreting the 'mirror': balancing children's rights and teacher's power

As explained earlier, Sims Bishop (1990) described the role of the children's book as a 'mirror' insofar as it can reflect children and their worlds back to them. This metaphor of a mirror was reflected in the classroom work with children in diverse and – to the author – sometimes unexpected ways.

It may well be argued that as 'migrating' is a strong theme in *The Arrival*, the book can provide a mirror for those readers who have also experienced migration. However, while recognising the importance of this mirroring aspect, particularly to children whose ethnic, racial or cultural identities are under-represented in literature, it also became clear in reflecting on Stefan's practice that the concept of a mirror can and should be problematised. The mirror may not always provide an exact reflection of the reader's identity or experience in a way that the teacher hopes, or in a way that the reader likes or can connect with.

Stefan's standpoint when choosing the *The Arrival* for use in literacy workshops was determined as much by his familial connection with the story's theme of migration and family separation as his view of the book's potential to act as an intriguing starting point to aid the children's development of literacy. In the 1940s, his grandfather, Ryszard, had migrated from Poland to England under the shadow of conflict, upheaval and family separation. Arriving in a new country, adapting to a new way of life, learning a new language: these were all parts of him assuming a new identity in the same way that the man – the protagonist – experiences in the story. Stefan felt that the connection between family and fiction was a powerful one and this was part of his motivation to explore this theme with children through creative writing. In other words, *The Arrival* had served Stefan as a mirror and he expected that by gazing into the same mirror, the children would respond in a similar way. As discussed previously, choosing a book to act as a mirror in this way was partly driven by the desire to make literature more representative for the children, to address the paucity of literature that represents the diversity of children's lives. Although the man in *The Arrival* is of indeterminate ethnicity, his experiences of migration are not. For Stefan, it was a conscious decision to present the learners with the metaphorical mirror that they might not have seen before. He fully expected them to look into it.

In many cases, that expectation was fulfilled. The emotional anguish of the man's daughter and her mother (his wife/partner) in the moving scene when they bid farewell to him at the train station was easily understood by all. The children found it easy to relate to the daughter's and mother's distress: 'they will miss the father', 'they don't want him to leave', 'I would miss my dad if he left for a long time.'

In the story, the man travels alone to make preparations for his family before they travel to join him. For many of the children Stefan worked with, the role played

by the dad was a familiar one. Indeed, on reading the story, when prompted, the children could see the link between the character and an experience of someone in their family. A male relative – sometimes a dad, other times a brother, an uncle or a cousin – had travelled to another country, alone, for work or study. Many of the children were recent arrivals at the school and for some of them this was recent history, their fathers having travelled to the UK just a few years previously. For others, they had to reach back into more distant family history, with some making surprising, spontaneous connections in reaction to the story: ‘*Ah! My nanna came from Jamaica a long time ago.*’ Some gave examples of how their dad would travel to Sudan, to Pakistan, to Eritrea for months at a time. The children could identify with the man writing letters to his distant family, with Skype, WhatsApp video calls and emails being the modern equivalent in helping families keep in touch. In most cases, children admitted they missed their dad while he was away.

We might imagine that their fathers equally missed their children and recognised the significance of leaving the family behind: often the children were given presents before their dad left (and, of course, on return), similarly to how the protagonist comforts his daughter with origami creatures and, later, a pet. The children’s enthusiasm here suggested that if this was intended to soften the blow, then it worked. From the standpoint of a teacher, Stefan was pleased that his aim of offering *The Arrival* as a mirror on the children’s lives appeared to have been met. The children had seen something of themselves represented in story in a way that they had not experienced before. It was even more satisfying to see how it had surprised them, as if they had been expecting to look through a window but in fact had seen their own reflection. Returning to children’s rights frameworks, it could be argued here that Stefan had enabled their right to identity to be supported through such representation in the story and recognition by their teacher, as part of a non-discriminatory education.

There were also, however, differences in the children’s interpretations and understandings of the circumstances of the central family, in particular the main protagonist – the man. Their reactions offer an insight into how children might use a book like this as a particular type of mirror, reflecting their world back to them in unforeseen ways, and this is a challenge to the power of the teacher in directing their learning. Stefan shared with the children the experiences of his grandfather who, as a young soldier following the upheavals of the Second World War, left his home in southern Poland and arrived in England: a country where customs and language were strange, suspicion of foreigners high, and the food and weather terrible. By making this connection, the children’s response of recognition initially suggested to Stefan that the experience of the protagonist reflected back to them the story of their families as migrants, just as it had done for him. But this was not the case for everyone. The responses of some children – whatever their racial or ethnic backgrounds, their home language, or their migration experiences might suggest – indicated that they didn’t feel the same connection. Some didn’t see themselves as migrants and only thought of themselves as English, or as having a more localised identity, as simply being from the city where they now lived. This is interesting, given the educational policy drive for unified identities shown in the introduction of the subject area of ‘British values’ in schools, and the highly politicised migration context of the UK in the late 2010s. This was particularly relevant in light of anti-immigrant sentiment in the media in the context of the UK’s plans to leave the European Union – ‘Brexit’ – in 2020, at the time when Stefan was running these workshops (see Ross, 2016; Hanna,

2018a, for more detail on the migration context in England and its education system). One girl suggested that she didn't enjoy the topic Stefan had chosen for the writing workshop because the story was too gloomy. Indeed, it is easy to empathise with her perspective: if you don't feel the powerful connection with the man and his family in the darkly coloured images, *The Arrival* could be said to lack the pop and energy of more brightly illustrated, upbeat picturebooks that are often favoured by teachers. For these children, the story was just that: a story, or at best, a window onto another, more 'gloomy' world that they didn't particularly wish to look through. They saw nothing in the mirror.

One of the most interesting and curious scenes in the story is the parallel between the first page which illustrates the objects in the home, inviting us to make insights into their family life, and the near identical scene towards the end of the story. In the later scene, the objects are similar – a cooking pot, a child's drawing, an origami model – but they are now changed to reflect the new world and the journey the family have taken together. In some cases, the children appeared to engage with this aspect of the story, but perhaps found the experience to be too abstract – the mirror was frosted or distorted and the parallels drawn between the old life and the new one were simply ones that led to the classic storybook happy ending. One child preferred to present the journey to the new world as a fun adventure. Despite her verbal responses suggesting she had made a link between the difficult journey of the man and the migrant experiences of her grandparents from the Caribbean to England in the 1950s, her written composition reflected a different response that reflected her dreams of travel and holidays. These examples of children not appearing to view the book as a mirror created a dilemma for Stefan. His standpoint was one of critical literacy and his aim was to offer the opportunity to the children to both mirror and critically reflect on their identities. However, when his use of the book didn't appear to lead to these outcomes, to what extent should he direct the children's understanding? Would it be right to use his power as a teacher to 'impose' an interpretation – that is to 'correct' the children's misunderstandings or explain why it might be significant to them? Or would this approach work against the essential freedom of the picturebook as a genre and children's right to make up their own minds about it – their right to freedom of thought?

Again, this brings the dilemma of teachers into sharp relief. Although they may wish to allow children creative or interpretive freedom, this is balanced by the need – perceived or real - to ensure high educational outcomes, reflecting Stephen Ball's fears of how performativity is reshaping how teachers work (Ball, 2003, Kucharczyk, 2020). In cases like this, the losers are both the teacher who fears professional consequences and the learners, who are denied agency to enter the conversation if they wish to (Nias, 1996; Zembylas, 2003). Accountability then, or fear of it, is a factor in determining the choices made by a teacher rather than the unique circumstances and needs of the learners. These authors feel that this is a sad indictment of a narrow and perhaps unhelpful view of attainment.

Discussion: Power, freedom and children's rights when using literature

It was suggested earlier that a picturebook such as *The Arrival* might be regarded as a pedagogical tool both to enhance representation and to address the power differential between pupil and teacher in terms of freeing up interpretation, an aspect of critical literacy, particularly among marginalised groups. In terms of representation, it can offer a 'mirror' for learners from diverse cultural backgrounds

and fulfil their cultural rights through education: they might see themselves in the protagonist's experiences and, in being represented, realise that they are not alone. Its author, Shaun Tan, has said of his book that he has received many letters 'from migrant and refugee leaders who see their own experiences accurately reflected in its strange imagery' (Tan, 2010a, p. 6), and this seemed to be the case for some of the children mentioned above. But equally, it was also suggested that it might be used to develop critical literacy insofar as it can empower learners to make their own interpretations of the book's story, due to its focus on images rather than words. Learners may even reject the mirror; in this understanding, it is 'critical' because it allows a challenge to the power of the teacher. Certainly, as the responses of some of the other children suggest, the so-called mirror may not always offer a clear reflection of their identities, but rather represent a frosted glass mirror or even an obscured or distorted view. As we have seen, even some recent migrants mainly thought of themselves as 'English' people, settled rather than migrating, and so reading about migrants was just like reading any other story. This may hint at the book offering more of a 'window' than a 'mirror', which is also part of Sims Bishop's (1992) three-part analogy of a book as mirror-window-sliding glass door. It may then offer a window onto the experience of another person who has a life different from that of the reader. Perhaps slightly more problematically (for a teacher), some children seemed to make an initial connection with the characters as migrants, but later appeared to distance themselves from what might be termed the 'deeper' meaning of the story, writing about *The Arrival* as if it were a light-hearted adventure holiday. It may be that the latter situation illustrated that the experience was too close (rather than too far) from their own experience for them to fully engage with it in the way their teacher (Stefan) had hoped. Sipe and McGuire (2006) have described resistance as one of six possible responses made by a reader to a story; to use their terminology, the situation above may represent 'exclusionary' resistance where the child cannot identify with the story or characters, or 'engaged' or 'kinetic' resistance due to the evocation or representation of a 'painful reality' (p. 8). Other researchers (some of whom are also teachers) have also written about meeting such resistance, particularly when using *The Arrival* (see for example, Pantaleo & Bomphray, 2011; Rhoades, Dallacqua, Kersten, Merry & Miller, 2015). Such examples created an uncomfortable dilemma for Stefan as the teacher, and discomfort even when reflecting on it when writing this article at several years remove from the workshops. He had deliberately chosen the book as it connected strongly with his own family's experience of migration two generations ago, and he expected it to connect with the experiences, stories and emotions of the children from diverse cultural backgrounds he was working with. In other words, he had aimed for representation. And yet, when children appeared to be understanding the book in a range of different ways, he was unsure to what extent he should intervene and redirect their attention and understanding. Should he compel them to look in the mirror, thereby wielding his power as the director of learning? Or would that reflect an insensitive approach that disrespected children's education rights and took from them the freedom to think and express themselves and develop their imaginations. It was only on reflection, at some remove from daily classroom life after leaving full-time teaching to focus on leading such bespoke literacy workshops as described in this article, and after further study, that he came to realise just how much power he had wielded as a teacher at such times: the pressures of accountability, performativity and narrowly-understood notions of attainment weighing heavily, with seemingly less space to allow the

children to make their own interpretations. In Jerome's (2018) binary terminology, this may have led to Stefan, at such times, being more of a 'hypocrite' than a 'hero' in enabling children's rights.

Returning to Freire, we are reminded of his wider thinking on critical literacy that goes beyond issues of teacher power: his belief that readers bring to their reading (or 'understanding') of texts their own situated readings (or 'understandings') of the world, and so a kind of mirroring happens, but not a static one (Freire, 1985; Freire & Macedo, 1987). This understanding of reading implies a constant to-ing and fro-ing between text and the world, and constant reflection, interpretation and reinterpretation, processes that should lead to writing and rewriting in a metaphorical sense, in acting upon and transforming the social world. Therefore, in this case of culturally diverse primary schools in England, allowing the learners to come to their own understandings of *The Arrival* and, potentially, taking those interpretations and understandings forward with them into their lives outside the classroom, perhaps offers a liberating approach to critical literacy. This freedom is recognisant of Giroux's words earlier (1993, p. 367) on the potential of literacy to lead to empowerment. It perhaps reflects an image of dialogic pedagogy (Mercer and Dawes, 2011) where the construction of meaning is shared between teachers and learners. In this way, then, the criticality of critical literacy does not always need to come from teachers, who have with their own value-laden approaches, cultural biases and 'standpoints' (Luke, 2000). Education becomes more of a partnership, where teachers step out of their traditional role as power-wielders, directors of learning and controllers of the classroom environment (all aspects common to education systems steeped in accountability and performativity), and go beyond their comfort zones to allow the co-construction of knowledge with children as the 'experts' on certain topics (Hanna, 2018a; 2019). Education systems are often regarded as highly conservative institutions, and we would argue that this has led to a persistent understanding of children as 'human becomings' who are under development, rather than full and complete 'human beings' (Prout & James, 1997). We need to move more towards the understanding that '[b]oth children and adults are simultaneously "human beings" and "human becomings"' (Invernizzi & Williams, 2007, p. 6). This may help to avoid limiting the agency of children to understand and act when they are engaging with literature that feels relevant to them. Lee and Zermatten have written (in Lansdowne, 2011, p. iv), that 'experience shows that children...given the time and opportunity, demonstrate not only that they have views, experiences and perspectives to express, but that their expression can contribute positively to decisions that affect the realisation of their rights and wellbeing.' We would argue that the practice in multicultural primary school classrooms shared in this article reflects this experience.

However, if this upsetting of the traditional teacher-pupil power dynamic is not already challenging enough to achieve, teachers are still left with the responsibility of offering representation to children, particularly to those from marginalised groups who are underrepresented in children's literature. It remains that at least for some children in Stefan's practice, they really did use *The Arrival* as a mirror, visibly relating to and empathising with the characters as they worked out what life in a new country might mean for them. Perhaps, then, it is a case of considering more carefully children's 'multiple identities', as Kymlicka (1995) has described it, rather than assuming that their migrant or cultural minority identity is at the forefront of their mind or something they might wish to share with others

during literacy activities. Returning to Sims Bishop (1990, p. ix) one last time, to not do this would be to neglect to give young readers the chance to see how they are part of ‘the larger human experience’ and in so doing find ‘self-affirmation’ of these multiple identities.

Concluding thoughts

This article has presented autoethnographic reflections from a primary school teacher’s practice on the ways children interpret the picturebook *The Arrival* (by Shaun Tan) in culturally diverse primary schools in England. These reflections have been made within a framework of children’s rights, and have considered a number of concepts: representation of minority groups, pictorial interpretation, critical literacy and teacher power.

The article has sought to bring out nuanced and alternative interpretations of the book as a ‘mirror’ made by the learners during creative literacy workshops, focusing on how the mirror may be a clear reflection of children’s experiences as well as how it may offer a frosted, distorted or blank view. It is argued that, in such cases, children should not be coerced into a particular interpretation of a book but that their right to freedom of thought and expression should be respected, despite pressures on teachers in an education system focused on accountability, performativity and a distorted way of measuring attainment. It is further suggested that such an approach may allow the true co-construction of knowledge between teacher and learners through breaking down the power differential, in line with Freirean thinking on critical literacy and learning. However, there is also a reminder that there is still a responsibility to offer representation to children from backgrounds that are under-represented in literature, and it is argued that teachers should go beyond the immediately obvious identities of children from migrant histories and consider the multiple identities of children when choosing picturebooks to use in class.

In closing, we return to the author of *The Arrival*, and while one can never be entirely certain of an author’s intention, it is reassuring to observe that the interpretations of critical literacy and links with children’s rights to thought and expression highlighted in this article may even be in line with how Shaun Tan himself would view the task. Tan (2010b, n.p.) highlights that the kind of illustrations he used in the book ‘leave out much more than they reveal’, creating a visual experience that is ‘intrinsically partial and fragmentary’. Thus, it may be that, despite a teacher’s standpoint and intention in choosing a book such as *The Arrival* in order to connect with migrant learners’ lives – the standpoint that Stefan as a practitioner held – the experience may not provide as accurate or evocative a mirror as one might hope. And perhaps this is as it should be. Children’s experiences of any book cannot be controlled entirely. Ultimately, we must respect their right to choose to look into the mirror or simply read it for what it is: a book.

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There are no conflicts of interest.

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