

# MIRRORING ALICE:

## Using picture books to develop meta-cognitive skills

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### Introduction

Children live in a highly complex visual world and are bombed by visual stimuli. Although the image is now at least as powerful as the word, few teachers spend time in helping children recognize and understand the many forms of visual information they encounter. Learning how to look and developing visual skills help young learners to become more critical and discerning subjects (Roxburgh, 1983; Nodelman, 1988; Mitchell, 1994; Evans, 1998; Spitz, 1999; Nikolajeva and Scott, 2001; Kress and Van Leeuwen, 2006).

### Postmodern picture books

"Thinking directly in terms of colours, tones, images, is a different operation technically from thinking in words" (Dewey, 1978). Picture books are an extraordinary resource to approach the postmodern complexity because they lead young readers into a world of alternative meanings. The picture book "is thus not just a form of text, it is also a process" (Lewin, 2001): it arises questions which children have to deal with, it invites them to fill semantic gaps, it rouses their intellectual curiosity and aesthetic pleasure, it stimulates their imagination because of the appealing use of visual metaphors. The different possibilities of interpretation encourage children to play an active role: on the one hand they can give free play to their imagination, on the other they learn to discover how a pictorial symbolic system works. This achievement leads them to develop their own visual vocabulary too.

### Exploiting visual literacy to develop meta-cognitive skills

Children have no difficulty in analysing most of the visual metaphors depicted in picture books (Arizpe and Styles, 2003). Visual image is, in fact, more effective than spoken or written language in evoking an affective response from the reader (Gombrich, 1965). Adopting a Vygotskijan approach, a teacher can stimulate children to move their attention from a first level of response, more immediate and sensuous such as the emotional and aesthetic response, to a second one where the cognitive and symbolic meanings of the narrative are involved. Through the pictures, children can find a "fertile soil" to develop their meta-cognitive skills. External visual elements such as composition, line, form, dimension, pattern, color and texture are part of a visual syntax that helps children to find out and carefully reflect upon the different symbolic interpretations of a picture book. From the educational point of view, presenting many different picture books of the same story within the classroom and, then, starting a group discussion brings three meaningful advantages: the first one is the possibility for all children to have equal access to the discussion about pictures and the illustrator's intents, even for younger children, inexperienced readers or readers with learning difficulties, "pictures provide a landscape in which minds can meet for contemplation rather than competition" (Bromley in Arizpe and Styles, 2003). Secondly, while trying to unravel the intriguing visual sequences of a picture book, children reflect upon their past and learn to manipulate their memories. Past experience becomes a meaningful medium to search for similarity or to explore differences. Finally, encouraging young readers to talk about their "visual" ideas creates a good environment to work within each other's "zone of proximal development": children get pleasure in co-operating in the negotiation of the different meanings and become conscious of the process that leads them to elaborate their own personal interpretation of the narrative.

### Conclusions

The re-visitation of a text through many different pictorial narratives has a high educational value, particularly for the purpose of developing meta-cognitive skills: it provides a meaningful context to reflect not only on one's ability to decode visual narratives but most significantly on how to become articulate interpreters of the visual.