

Escaping the Text: The Journey to Literacy Equity through Wordless Narratives

Pairs of teens lean over the cover of a picture book called Journey by Aaron Becker (Figure 1). Students discuss what the girl in the boat might be thinking. “She is excited, going to discover a new city” – “She is frightened with no way to control the boat”. In a transitional high school for multilingual newcomers to the U.S. from 28 countries, speaking 34

languages, students interact at their own level of language acquisition informed by their background, experience, and culture. Journey, as a wordless book, invites the elements of equity in instruction articulated by the International Literacy Association. These include content that mirrors the experiences of readers, communicating what is learned, using literacy beyond reading, and participation in a supportive reading environment (Franks, 2020).

By 2025 it is estimated that 1 in 4 students in U.S. classrooms will speak a language other than English at home with that number expected to grow to 40% by 2030. For emergent multilingual students, an emphasis on acquiring skills in the mechanics of the dominant language often deprive them of language rich opportunities to communicate ideas, share their experiences and culture and fully participate in a learning community (Herrera & de Jong, 2023). Wordless books can be an entry to

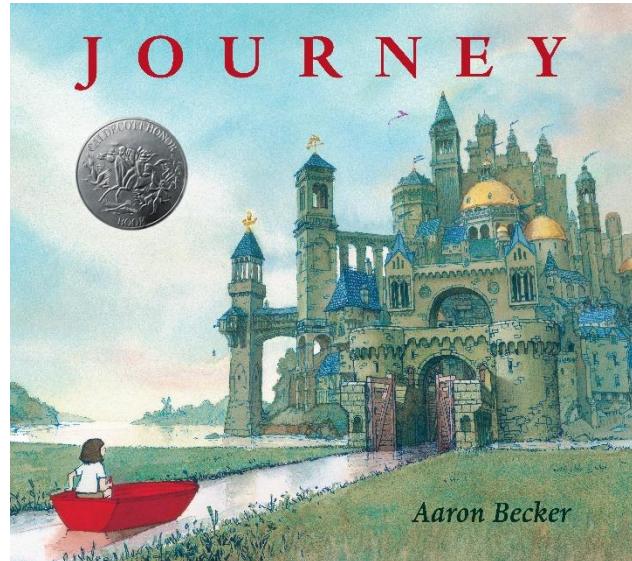


Figure 1: Journey book cover illustration

reforming inequities which multilingual students of all ages encounter in literacy instruction, to create more just learning environments across all disciplines.

1 - Wordless books add cultural relevance, accessibility, and rigor to literacy instruction in ways that promote equity and ensure all students can thrive collectively.

Text-based literature limits student interaction with a story to their ability to decode written language. Acquisition of basic literacy skills becomes the divide that separates culturally and linguistically diverse students from equitable trajectories in education as they are denied pathways to rigorous disciplinary learning (Bell et al., 2017; Hammond, 2014). Wordless books are a vehicle for enriched understanding of storytelling for all students. In the absence of text, they invite all students to co-create meaning with the author (Serafini, 2012; Terrusi, 2018). This makes the literacy space more democratized and inclusive which enhances the collective contribution and well-being of all learners.

2 - Using wordless books disrupts deficit ideologies regarding culturally and linguistically diverse families and communities, ensuring they are respected and engaged as partners in literacy.

When a dominant language is used to promote power, culturally and linguistically diverse individuals often experience outcomes of educational inequity. Students are placed in linguistically oppressive “intervention” programs designed to erase heritage language use and assimilate them into the dominant language learning environment without families as partners (Franks, 2020; Meighan, 2023). These inequities are historically grounded in racial and ethnic bias associated with non-dominant language use.

In fact, the experience and practices of multilingual students and their families add to the academic rigor and social growth of learners when literacy instruction is culturally relevant and is designed to help them thrive. Culturally relevant teaching empowers these students as it challenges critical thinking skills while affirming students' cultural identity through heritage language use, collaboration, dialogic practices, and connections to home and community (Knight-Manuel & Marciano, 2019; McIntyre, 2015; Proctor et al., 2021; Will, 2022). Wordless books can be a meaningful way to center student voice for intellectual and linguistic thriving in text-free literacy spaces for youth, their families, and communities.

3 – Literacy instruction using wordless books allows students to learn and explore multiple ways of knowing which draw on the strengths students bring to learning from their language, culture, background and experiences.

In his classic article “The Importance of the Act of Reading”, Paolo Friere (1983) explains that all reading is contextual, and the experiences, culture, and actions of the whole person are as much a part of literacy as is text.

Language has been shown to be closely linked to identity, and advocates for multilingual students recognize the importance of students being able to “see” themselves in the literature they read (Clark et al., 2015; Morrell & Morrell, 2012). Wordless books with universal themes invite all students to contribute their experiences to the interpretation of a visual narrative, making wordless books perhaps the most consistent form of multicultural literature that can be used for reading instruction (Honaker & Miller, 2023).

Storytelling embodies cultural meaning and is practiced in visual, written, and oral traditions. For culturally and linguistically diverse students, comprehension happens not only through text and its meaning, but through reading interactional practices learned at home (Israel & Duffy, 2014; Maine & McCaughran, 2021; Mizrahi, 2019). Talk that happens during reading is as important to understanding as decoding text (Jiménez et al., 2006). Engagement outside the classroom is essential to literacy instruction (Zadra, 2017) and may be deepened by using semiotic tools in the form of removable stickers on illustrations to empower families to “Stop and Look” more closely as they choose how to interact with the book. (Figure 2).



Figure 2: Blue Rider page 10 with removable "Stop and Look" stickers

The research problem we propose is an examination of wordless narratives that goes beyond their utility, to interrogate how they can be intentionally employed as a

means of disrupting inequalities in participation and power that exist in literacy spaces. A synthesis of relevant literature on wordless books as tools for equity will be undertaken and grounded in systematic review to expand understanding not previously addressed on this important topic.

As an educational non-profit committed to sharing the best information available to educators outside of academia, our review of the literature will prioritize that which is available in open access spaces. Peer reviewed resources from government agencies, open access repositories and professional organizations invite collegial dialogue and further the efforts we make in our pursuit of innovative ways of building equity in education.

Disrupting power dynamics extends from the subject of our investigations regarding literacy to our processes as well. By employing a knowledge management framework in our information gathering, we seek to include the experiences of culturally and linguistically diverse thought partners sourced from marginalized voices often missing or relegated to roles as research subjects in scholarly literature. Migrant parents, international high school students, and refugee non-profits have contributed to what we know about using wordless books. We will supplement our systematic examination of peer reviewed research through the use of authentic contemporary content from grey literature such as blogs, podcasts, online magazine articles, surveys, and interviews.

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