

RESEARCH INTO PRACTICE



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Understanding and Using Open-Access, Global Digital Picturebook Platforms to Scaffold Cultural Connections

Children's Access to Literature during the Pandemic

The COVID-19 pandemic led to widespread closures, restricting children's access to print books in school and public libraries. Many young readers transitioned during this time to digital book platforms, categorized into two main types: subscription-based and open access. Subscription-based platforms such as iVOX, Overdrive, One More Story, Tumble Books, Capstone Interactive, and Get Epic! necessitate user logins and typically involve paid accounts affiliated with schools, classrooms, or public libraries. Open-access platforms, on the other hand, are free and available to all, with a range of options that include archival content as well as curated and downloadable books in a variety of different languages.

Potential of Digital Picture Book Platforms

Research highlights the profound influence that diverse representations in literature can have on young readers (Bishop; Botelho and Rudman; Dahlen; Johnson et al.; Roethler). Visual narratives such as picture books can serve as powerful tools for expanding children's understanding of the world and promoting inclusivity and respect for diverse perspectives. Recognized for their capacity to expose readers to diverse cultures, various online platforms hosting global collections of digital picture books have garnered praise (Cummins; Zaveri). Previous work has highlighted these platforms' ability to provide books in Indigenous and less commonly spoken languages that can be challenging to find in print (Cummins; Nambiar).

The presence of each title on an online platform signifies its cultural importance to the reader, as the digital creator has deemed it worthy of preservation and digital accessibility. Moreover, digital book platforms cater to various learning

styles and engage otherwise disinterested readers (Bus, et al.). By fostering 21st-century literacy skills and introducing topics related to social justice and diverse cultures, these platforms contribute to global citizenship and cross-cultural connections in innovative ways, attracting audiences that might not typically be reached.

Open-access platforms eliminate the need for a library card or subscription, giving readers unrestricted entry to its content. However, the digital picture books offered on online platforms exhibit a wide range of content. While some provide high-quality opportunities for children to form personal connections with characters who look like them or share similar experiences, others may unfortunately perpetuate stereotypes or contain subpar writing, particularly if they are self-published.

Despite research on international children's literature and diverse representation, there is a lack of studies analyzing multiple digital platforms' potential for inclusiveness and cultural competence. Our research study examines free open-access platforms for their portrayal of diverse cultural groups and their potential to foster responsible global citizenship in youth. Additionally, we explored how these platforms can support the United Nations' Agenda 2030 Sustainable Development Goals (UN SDGs) to preserve and provide access to the world's cultural heritage.

Study Design

RESEARCH QUESTIONS AND SAMPLING

Our research sought to answer the following questions:

- How are topics related to diverse cultures, social justice, global citizenship, and cross-cultural connections represented in open-access digital children's book platforms available during the height of the pandemic?
- How well do these open-access digital platforms represent the cultural diversity of global children?
- How effectively do these digital platforms demonstrate age-appropriate user design to allow users to locate digital books to meet the UN SDGs of preserving and providing access to the world's cultural heritage?
- What is the potential of these digital platforms to scaffold cultural connections and foster responsible global citizenship in youth?

Twenty books from four platforms were randomly sampled for analysis, focusing on human characters' representation and the messages conveyed. The selection of the platforms was driven by the range of languages available on their sites as well as the diversity of their origins (India, Singapore, South Africa, and the United States).

Methodology

We employed semiotics and visual content analysis to uncover the explicit and implicit messages in the books. Three pages from each digital picture book were analyzed using semiotics, noting the representation of characters' physical appearances, body language, and positioning on the page, as well as the use of any culturally significant colors, props, and symbols. Visual and textual content analyses were applied to conduct a comprehensive examination of the remaining sections of each book, allowing us to evaluate the overall portrayal of diversity and to identify potential messages conveyed through the representation of cultures and diverse characters in the visual narratives. Additionally, we assessed each platform's functionality and navigation, assessing each platform for age-appropriate design and inclusivity using the Diverse and Inclusive Growth (DIG) Checklist, and its ability to meet the UN's SDGs of preserving and providing access to the world's cultural heritage.

Results of Semiotic & Content Analyses

STORYWEAVER

StoryWeaver (SW) (<https://storyweaver.org.in/>), launched in 2015 by Pratham Books, hosts over 60,000 stories in 362 languages, featuring diverse, mostly Indian characters. Despite some gender stereotypes (women shown gardening and cooking, while men work office jobs and travel), the titles offer positive mirror and window opportunities. The illustrations feature characters with varying skin tones, genders, and ages, enhancing representation and inclusivity. The evaluated visual narratives provide a glimpse into everyday life, fostering cross-cultural understanding, and authentically depict Indian cultural symbols and clothing such as the bindi, saris, and laddoos, supporting the UN's goal of preserving culture. This award-winning platform also features the most languages of any of the platforms, lending support to the UN SDG of ensuring equitable quality education and learning opportunities for all.

BOOK DASH

Book Dash (BD) (<https://bookdash.org>), an award-winning South African initiative, offers digital picture books in 11 languages, created by volunteers and publicly available for translation, printing, and distribution. Illustrations vary in style, with some exhibiting kid-friendly comic-book aesthetics. The titles showcase cultural activities specific to South African culture, as well as depicting universal themes and activities. One examined book depicts Nelson Mandela, a significant figure in South African history; the presence of this figure could spark discussions and enhance cultural awareness. Children are represented positively as active members of society, fostering global

empathy. In alignment with the UN SDGs, BD offers the opportunity for non-South African readers to gain cultural insights, fostering better understanding of diverse backgrounds. Conversely, South African readers benefit from the preservation of their culture through the books available on this platform.

HOUSE OF MINI PICTURE BOOKS

House of Mini Picture Books (HMPB)(<https://www.minipicbooks.com>), launched in 2020 in Singapore, offers free, downloadable mini picture books for various age groups. Titles are available in three languages and feature diverse characters from Asian cultures. Illustrations employ a cartoon style with minimal facial features, fostering reader connections to read in their personal experiences. Characters represent various races and ethnicities, including Asian, Black, and White. Cultural symbols and customs, including hotpots, tea ceremonies, and cheongsams, are purposefully depicted and reflect the storyline, promoting cultural preservation. Despite some concerns about stereotypical depictions, the overall social messages emphasize cross-cultural harmony. In line with the UN's SDGs, HMPB contributes to cultural heritage preservation by showcasing Singaporean culture and promoting respect for diverse cultures.

THE INTERNATIONAL CHILDREN'S DIGITAL LIBRARY

Launched in the United States in 2002 with funding from the National Science Foundation and the Institute for Museum and Library Services, the International Children's Digital Library (ICDL)(<http://www.childrenslibrary.org>), initially offered thousands of books in over 100 languages. Despite its innovative approach, the site lost functionality in April 2021 during the pandemic, with partial restoration occurring in June 2021. The platform has potential to foster connections, offering books from many different cultures. For instance, two evaluated titles read right to left (versus Westernized left to right), preserving those countries' linguistic heritage per the UN SDGs. However, despite its wide variety of content, this platform may perpetuate historical biases. For example, one examined book depicts a circus performer in a feathered headdress, a discriminatory image of Indigenous American people. While ICDL serves as a historical archive, its lack of extension activities or user customization features make it less useful for children and/or educators. However, it remains valuable for cross-cultural exposure, albeit with stereotypical imagery.

Results of Age-Appropriate Design to Promote Cross-Cultural Connections

The kidmap DIG checklist emphasizes accessible, engaging children's media, free of stereotypes, and reflective of diverse cultures, languages, genders, and abilities. Among the four platforms, newer ones such as HMPB and SW offer richer engagement opportunities and updated cultural representations, although with occasionally lower-quality content. The ICDL, while historically rich, may be difficult for young users to navigate and contains dated imagery, necessitating discussions about stereotypes. HMPB offers visually appealing content with comprehensive extension activities, fostering cross-cultural connections. SW and BD depict diverse characters, allowing racially and ethnically diverse youth to see themselves reflected in digital books.

Connections: UN's 2030 Sustainable Development Goals

These open-access global digital picture book platforms support the UN SDGs by preserving and providing access to cultural heritage. The examined platforms offer diverse international titles, fostering cross-cultural understanding and global citizenship. There are titles in hundreds of languages, preserving the unique linguistic heritage of countries around the globe. Educators can facilitate discussions on themes and symbols, encouraging awareness of different cultures. Classroom teachers and librarians can use these platforms as a means to promote global citizenship. Using resources such as the Sustainable Development Goals Book Club Catalogue from the United Nations, educators can combine international books from online platforms with print books for discussions centered around each Sustainable Development Goal. Alternatively, educators can facilitate cross-cultural book discussions in classrooms worldwide, utilizing both print and digital titles.

Implications for Practice

Project results indicate that most digital picture books in the sample needed an educator or other adult to spark conversation and help learners make real-world connections to foster intercultural connections. In instances like the isolation and remote learning of the pandemic shutdown, writing or activity prompts would benefit and assist learners to make some of those connections. Prompts or sentence starters would be similarly effective to support thoughtful reflections in classrooms and libraries.

Using digital picture books, educators can encourage exploration of responses to both text and illustrations, asking learners to identify inequalities or cultural differences depicted. Classroom teachers and librarians can scaffold critical conversations by guiding learners to predict

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the content of the digital book and tapping into their prior knowledge. They can then shift the focus onto the reader, encouraging them to relate to characters or themes in the story and explore how it connects to their own experiences, discussing universal themes such as cooking or spending time with friends. Subsequent discussions can explore reader reactions to similar situations and reflection on personal experiences relevant to the depicted themes.

Global digital picture book platforms can be used to explore how books relate to specific SDGs to deepen learners' understanding of global issues. These platforms and their visual narratives can inspire them to take action in their community to address social justice issues, inequalities, and cultural preservation. Educators can support this transition from discussion to action by suggesting hands-on activities and fostering community collaborations, including guest speakers and online resources.

While user-contributed content may vary in quality, it also expands access to underrepresented languages. These platforms offer multiple languages and translation options, enhancing linguistic access. For a deeper examination of the specific titles analyzed on the platforms, see Naidoo and Nixon.

Overall, the platforms offer valuable opportunities for learners to engage with diverse visual narratives and languages, promoting cultural understanding and literacy. Digital picture books can serve as bridges across languages, celebrating diverse cultures, which is particularly crucial during global crises like the pandemic. Young readers, librarians, and educators can utilize these platforms to create cross-cultural connections, build global citizenship skills, and contribute to the preservation of cultural heritage in alignment with the UN SDGs.

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