



Research Article



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Language and literacy: Features of style in the selected children's storybooks

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Abstract

This article examines the convergence of language and literacy in children's literature using selected children's storybooks. Underlying the main argument of this article is the contention that children's storybooks play an important role in nurturing and augmenting learners' literacy competencies in schools. By examining features of style in the selected text, the article sought to show how the language used by writers for children storybooks is pivotal in enhancing learners' reading and comprehension. Thus, it examined how stylistic features are used to bring out the subject matter in the selected storybooks for Grade 3 learners. Since the values skills and values that accrue from reading the storybooks are embedded in the styles used by the authors, understanding aspects of style was deemed important because it is through them that the message is effectively communicated but the skills and values are emphatically imparted to the learners. The article has shown how various features deployed in the storybooks such as the appropriation of the etiological narrative, use of animals, nature of characterization and point of view among others, which enhance the flow of the stories, increase believability and acceptance among children. It showed how the use of various stylistic features fosters skills such as perceptive, cognitive, inferential, imaginative and critical skills as well as values such as sympathy and respect integral for grade 3 learners as espoused in the competency-based curriculum.

Keywords: children's storybooks, language, literacy, style



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Public Interest Statement

There is an upward and a thriving literary out of Children's literature in Kenya today. Children's storybooks are used to ignite critical thought in people and to demonstrate what is of value in society. This research sought to explore and appraise selected children's literature with a view to identifying the lessons and morals which are immersed in them for the development of African children. This article shows that reading storybooks ignites the child's potential for lifelong adaptability, innovation and imparts values of responsible citizenship and respect for diversity. In this regard, utilizing children's storybooks is essential in promoting and improving learners' literacy proficiency in schools.

1.0 Introduction

Style is the way in which language is used in a given context, by a given person, for a given purpose. The style of writing serves as a medium of communication and has to be appropriate for the target audience. Style is crucial element in writing for children. Writing for children demands a normative and pure style that helps children grow up healthily both physically and psychologically, which, in turn, helps children a lot with their expressive ability. The language used of children's books should be vivid, and descriptive. The vivid language offers a chance for children to connect their own experience to the information provided. All these is in tandem with the competency based curriculum which vouches for cognitive development among learners with processes involving perception, memory, reasoning, reflection and insight being given prominence.

Children acquire their knowledge of language as they read. As children hear the variety of language used in books of different types their vocabulary is extended and enriched. They learn statement patterns that are useful for logical reasoning as well as for communication. They can learn new elements of vocabulary, usage and grammatical structures. Authors have many ways to use words to express their ideas. Some of these are the use of imagery, figurative language, allusion, irony, selection of vocabulary, grammatical structure, symbolism, and dialect as well as the devices of comparison, sound, and rhythm.

Style cannot be isolated from the words of the story. It is the manner in which a writer expresses his or her ideas in the story. It permeates every sentence of the work and sets the mood of the story. Thus, style has to do with the *writing* as opposed to the *content* of a book. It is *how* an author says something as opposed to *what* she or he says. Style is also considered to be the way an author organizes words to create plots, settings, and characterization.

2. Review of Related Literature and Theoretical Framework

2.1 Critical Studies on Children's Literature in Kenya

There has been a growing corpus of critical studies on children's literature in Kenya since Asenath Bole Odaga's seminal text, *Literature for Children and Young People in Kenya*, in 1985. In this formative publication, Odaga provides detailed and exhaustive insights on children's literature in Kenya from the 1960s to early 1980s. In her study, Odaga admits that there is still much to be done in relation to critical studies in Children's Literature in Kenya. In response to Odaga's clarion call, a number of critical studies, focusing on various aspects of children's Literature in Kenya such as themes, styles and characterization, have since emerged. While a number of critical studies such as Alembi (1991), Oiyoo (2006) and Wangari (2006) focus on style, others such as Muleka (2001), Atamba (2010), Muleka (2012), and Muriungi and Muraya (2014) focus on characterization in children's literature in Kenya. Other critical studies focus on various themes in children's literature such as meaning in children's literature (Wangari 2006), social significance of children's oral poetry (Alembi 1991; Oiyoo 2006), HIV/AIDS (Tonui 2010) and children's literature as an image forming force (Oyoo 2000).

Other critical studies focus on the functionalities of children's literature in Kenya. Mikhail Gromov (2009) focuses on how children's literature in Kenya can effectively be used as a tool for preservation of culture. Gromov argues that Children's Literature serves as a powerful tool not only to conserve culture

but also to foster the appreciation of literature and general enculturation. Edward Mooka (2018) shows how Children's Literature in Kenya can be used to educate and create environmental awareness among learners. Muguro (2018) shows how children's literature plays a central role in shaping the moral formation of children such as integrity.

This study, however, took a different trajectory from all these critical studies by focusing on how children's storybooks can be used effectively to improve learners' competencies in Early Years Education in Kenya. There is no denying the fact that literacy has an impact on almost every aspect of life of learners. Additionally, children who struggle with reading often find themselves struggling in other learning areas. By focusing on foundation literacy skills and values among Grade 3 learners in Machakos Town Sub-county, the study examined how children's storybooks can be used to improve literacy among learners and the strategies that teachers would employ to help the learners overcome difficulties with reading and bolster their self-esteem and educational success.

2.2 Theoretical Framework

The study was anchored on Reader-Response Theory. Proponents of the theory such as Stanley Fish and Greenblatt lay emphasis on the reader in the interpretation of a text. Iserin Thompson (1992) argues that reader-response theory "shifts the critical focus from the text to the reader" (pg.12). In the same way, Bressler (1999) explains that the reader-response theory diverts the emphasis away from the text as the "sole determiner of meaning to the significance of the reader as an essential participant in the reading process and the creation of meaning" (p. 67). As a result, both explanations above place a reader of a literary work as an active and essential participant along in the reading process and the creation of meaning of that literary work. Stanley Fish argues that,

Readers are active participants who create a work of literature in the process of reading it. According to him, the meaning of a text exists somewhere between the words on the page and the reader's mind. Basically, a reader is the one who reads and gives meaning to a literary work. Fish acknowledges that a reader brings to text an array of ideas and experiences amassed over time and apply such information or experience to the text. By doing so, the reader is no longer considered as the passive receiver of a text, but he/she is an active participant in the creation of a text's meaning. This is a key turning point from the belief of passive role of a reader to the active one in which he/she acts as the re-creator of the text he/she reads. In short, it is believed that the interpretation of a literary work is created by the reader of the literary work as a creative imagination. Thus, how a certain literary work tells and shows the reader its aim, still, the meaning or the interpretation of it depends on the creative imagination experienced by the reader.

While responding to a text, the reader shapes the interpretation of a literary work. The reader's responses are stated by the aid of response statements. The process of responding or giving comments is basically the main idea of shaping and analyzing the meaning or the interpretation of the literary work from the point of view of the reader-response theory. In other words, the reader response theory is the device to reach and to analyze the re-creator role of a reader in the production of the interpretation of a literary work. Based on the nature of reader-response theory, it is believed that readers are the ones that shape and become the core source of learning a particular literary text.

Reader-response theory presupposes that readers need to engage more with the text, mingle with other readers, and learn various opinions, responses, and insight from other readers instead of relying on single interpretation. Tompkins (1980, pg.ix) explains that the procedure involves the reader, the reading process and response to mark out an area for investigation of a literary work. It means placing readers as a focus of analysis must involve their responses to a literary work after they pass their reading process

on that literary work. It is because the responses given by readers are seen as a product of new creation upon the text they have read that later may become the interpretation of that single text. Rosenblatt in Bressler (1998, pg.66) defines that the reading process involves a reader and a text interaction. She elaborates that a text acts as a stimulus for eliciting various past experiences, thoughts and subjective motives from readers whereas a text shapes the reader's experiences, selects and limits those experiences that best comfort to that text. Continuing the reading process and giving responses, readers involved in the learning of a literary work have to engage and mingle with a community of readers.

A community of readers consists of readers who have similarities of concerns and common interest and later on they agreed on particular statement with one another. This community of readers will also trigger the readers/ learners communicative skills as they have to respond, give comment, and learn from each other. Eventually, the process of studying, learning, and shaping the meaning of literary work will be more interactive and collaborative by employing reader response theory and its procedure.

In this study, Grade 3 learners in the selected schools were the readers and active participants in the meaning making process of the selected storybooks while the researcher was the moderator, guide, and facilitator in shaping the meaning and responses to the selected storybooks. Allowing the learners to vocalize various responses, opinions, and interpretation, implies that the learners are presenting their varied interpretations of the same texts. Hence, the outcome was an active, interactive, and autonomous set of responses from the learners for analysis.

3.0 Aspects of Style in the Selected Children's Storybooks

3.1 Appropriation of the Etiological Narrative

Writers, children's writers included, have appropriated various genres and sub-genres of oral literature in their writing. Kebaya and Mbugua (2012) posit that modern African writers find treasure in the traditional African aesthetic. These writers draw from this rich repertoire as they embark on their writing. Within the context of Children's books, writers for children draw from oral narratives in their writing. Mugubi (2015) posits that children's books links to the other genres of oral literature at multiple levels. One of the ways, Mugubi notes, is that children's books appropriate oral narratives such as trickster and etiological narratives. *I stand Tall* (2011) is conceptualized an etiological narrative. In the story, Leopard and Giraffe are introduced as close friends. We are told that they were good friends and even worked together.

I stand Tall (2011) could be read as an etiological story in two ways. First it explains to us how both Leopard and Giraffe gained spots on their bodies. The story tells us that at the time when Leopard and Giraffe were friends, "their bodies had a dull brown colour. They did not look beautiful" (pg.1). Having realized that they were not beautiful they agreed to approach Tortoise on how to make their coats beautiful. Tortoise gave Leopard a nice coat which had the colour of gold with black spots while Giraffe was given a white coat with brown marks on it. They both looked beautiful. In essence, therefore, this explains how both Leopard and Giraffe gained their body coats and the spots on their bodies.

Secondly, *I stand Tall* (2011) explains why Leopard hides "in the forest, in the grass, in caves and rocks. Sometimes he climbs up the trees and hides in the branches" (pg.20). The story explains that in order to become more beautiful, Leopard and Giraffe agreed on a number of things to do. However, the initial reaction of the other animals towards their beauty made Leopard to hate Giraffe but never showed it. This internal hate made Leopard not to follow what their agreement with Giraffe on how to enhance their beauty. For instance, they agreed to change the shapes of their bodies to look bigger and taller. While Giraffe followed this, Leopard changed his mind claiming that "Giraffe must have made a mistake. We did not agree to have such big bodies. I want my body to be smaller and not so tall. I want shorter and stronger legs with claws. I want a shorter and fatter neck" (pg.7). As a consequence, the other animals continued to appreciate Giraffe's beauty while they did not like Leopard. Instead they

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feared him (pg.19). Realizing that he will never be as beautiful as Giraffe, Leopard started hiding himself away from the other animals while Giraffe continued to walk proudly in the open grasslands and eats branches that others cannot reach (pg.21).

At the end of the story, the children get to know why Leopard stays away from the other animals, comes out to hunt at night and “whenever he sees Gazelle, he runs after him and kills him” (pg.21). This makes the story an etiological one. The story warns children of the repercussions of being deceitful and thus contributes to his/her moral development. The children identified with Giraffe for the simple reason that he obeyed and followed through whatever they agreed and thus rejected deceit and selfishness, which is crystallized in the character of Leopard. Mugubi (2015) notes that “the child who throughout the story has been invited to identify with one of its protagonists is not only given hope, but is told that through developing his intelligence he can be victorious over even a much stronger opponent” (pg.43). This is an important aspect in cognitive development among children as espoused in the competency based curriculum.

3.2 Use of Animals

Most children’s storybooks are replete with animals. Animal stories appear in a variety of forms but all include one or more animals as the focus of the story. Muriungi (2015) argues that the use of animals give children a sense of stability and changelessness in a changing, confusing world, both because animals change far less rapidly in time than we do and because they are members of a natural order full of beauty and spirituality. Furthermore, animals in children’s books bring human ideals to children. Emotionally appealing, they also teach children about good values in life, an aspect that is encouraged in the competency based curriculum.

Both *Lazy Milo* (2010) and *I stand Tall* (2011) rely on animals in the development of their stories. Goats, baby hyenas and growling monkeys feature in *Lazy Milo* (2010) while Leopard, Giraffe, Tortoise, Gazelle and other animals feature in *I stand Tall* (2011). *I stand Tall* (2011) makes use of animal fantasy. Animal fantasy are stories in which animals behave as human beings in that they experience emotions, talk, and have the ability to reason. The animals in fantasies also retain many of their animal characteristics. As is evident in with Leopard and Giraffe, animal fantasy constitutes a form of literary symbolism, the animal characters symbolizing human counterparts, and these fantasies are often vehicles for exploring human emotions, values, and relationship.

The manner in which the story of Leopard and Giraffe is presented it spoke more directly to the children. As the children read the story in turns, the more the store touched on their emotional chord. As they reflected through the story, a number of them sympathized with the efforts that Leopard made in an attempt to stand out. As they reflected keenly, they noted that Leopard’s attempts to look different were not ill intentioned but the more he tried his best; the more it turned out to be worse. Consequently, he not only lost his friendship with Giraffe but also isolated himself from the rest of the animals. The story remained fresh in the children’s minds and they could easily relate it to various life experiences in their lives. The children we are able to recreate, in detail, their own experiences where they have always tried to undo their friends in various instances such as when playing, singing, and dancing among other activities with little or no success. Hence, they learnt the values of acceptance and embracing others as they are.

The use of animals in children’s story books has a bearing on children’s perceptive skills obtaining from the knowledge of world life in their surrounding through animals like Leopard, Giraffe and Gazelle among others, the use of animals are believed to provide children with a combination of delight and the neutrality and emotional distance considered necessary for navigating various socially charged issues. This in turn stirs and spurs children’s imagination as the link the various issues portrayed by animal characters in the stories to real life situations. For instance, the children were able to link Giraffe to the people in society who are committed to doing good and keeping to agreements with

others. The children further pointed out that Giraffe is a symbol of the understanding and trustworthy in society. The perception and imaginative skills as espoused in the competency based curriculum and are foundational in child development.

However, Giraffe's readiness to accept Leopard's explanation each time he flouted what they agreed was put into focus. The children questioned why Giraffe did not confirm the information given to him by Leopard from Tortoise. In this regard, children's critical thinking skills were at play as they cast aspersions on how Giraffe easily fall into Leopard's antics. The competency based curriculum posits that critical thinking skills are important in the 21st Century. Knowledge is no longer static but keeps changing. Therefore critical thinking skills evoked through reading children's storybooks such as *I Stand Tall* (2011) is important because this will enable them make judgment on what is right in the prevailing circumstances.

3.3 Characterisation

Characters are the beings that tell the story, who the story is about, and that the action in the story revolves around them (Kebaya et al 2020). Characters can be human beings, animals, or things performing traditionally human activities or functions in a work of art. Further, Kebaya et al (2020) concedes that the credibility of characters will depend upon the author's ability to show their true natures, their strengths and their weaknesses. The technique of creating credible characters is important in children's books in order to impart to the child a balanced view of people's personalities.

Brown and Stephens (2007) believe that "the effective development of the main character may be the single most important element of the work" (pg. 170). Characterisation in children's story books should be conceived of in such a way that it satisfies children's needs. Characters in children have specific traits that make them appealing to the child reader and that meet the demands of the subject matter. In both *Buka helps the Police* (2007) and *Lazy Milo* (2010), the central characters are children, Buka and Milo respectively. They are endowed with certain character traits central to the subject matter. For instance, Buka in *Buka helps the Police* (2007) is portrayed as innocent and naïve in order to bring out the intended subject matter while Milo in *Lazy Milo* (2010) is depicted as mischievous, deceitful and lazy in order to foreground laziness in the text. Consequently, the nature of characterisation in the two storybooks depicts situations and emotions immediately familiar and credible to the children.

Often children require heroes and heroines that they can identify with or easily relate with, hence the technique of characterization becomes crucial to the child's social and moral development. In *Buka helps the Police* (2007), Buka is presented as a child with familiar characteristics which children easily identified with. A number of children, especially those in schools located in the rural areas, identified with his struggles with education as they walk to school every day. They were also able to identify with economic challenges that Buka's family faced due to poverty. All these aspects are important in the process of learning because they are based on children's perception of their immediate environment, which is a key feature in the competency based curriculum. Perceptive skills are important for learners as they are able to understand their immediate surround based on their sense perceptions. Thus, Buka's innocence, desires, motives and traits are all common to children coming from economically disadvantaged backgrounds.

Muriungi (2015) notes that the main character(s) in children books must be lifelike and consistent throughout the story. This is because child readers learn of the main character's traits-their strengths as well as their weaknesses. It is essential that readers relate to them; and when an author has created a well-developed character, the reader can imagine what might happen to her or him if the book continued. The children not only identified with Buka in *Buka helps the Police* (2007) but were left wondering what happened to Buka the next day when he visited the bank since the story ends in suspense. The children developed a wide range of responses based on their own imaginative skills.

Ngugi (2012) notes that supporting characters in children's story books should be used to help

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the main character bring out the intended subject matter. In *Lazy Milo* (2010), Milo's mother is one such supporting character who helps Milo's weakness. She is patient with Milo as he keeps create one lie after another. However, when she got fed up, she orders Milo to go to plant maize in the shamba near the forest. However, Milo did not plant the maize as instructed by his mother. Instead, he wanders into the forest where he encounters the safari ants, baby hyenas and growling monkeys. His experience in the forest presents a major turning point in his behaviour. He changes his ways and starts lending a hand to his parents at home. This foundational behaviour change is important for children as they learn about behaviour change, which is an important aspect in cognitive development as envisioned in the competency based curriculum.

3.4 Point of View

Ngugi (2012) argues that the point of view from which a story is told particularly for children is very crucial. It enables the child to absorb the values in a book and identify effectively with his/her chosen protagonist. Thus, the form of narration must be one that takes into account the needs of the child. *Buka helps the Police* (2007), *Lazy Milo* (2010) and *I stand Tall* (2011) all have a single viewpoint. This is particularly important for children below the age of twelve (12) years. A single viewpoint is able to establish and sustain a sense of identity between the reader and the main character. This is important to the child who needs to identify with the main character and even internalize concepts and values propounded by the protagonist.

The three texts are written from the third person narration with a single viewpoint maintained throughout the story. This has ensured that narration is natural, realistic and plausible to children. All the children interviewed show a clear understanding of the stories. For example, through the use of third person narrator, Buka in *Buka helps the Police* (2007) is clearly developed and stand out as the hero. The single viewpoint used in the story helps to concentrate the story and focus on him. This further enhances the readers' identification with him as a hero.

3.5 Symbolism

Kebaya et al (2020) posit that symbolism is the use of certain items, objects or things to stand for something else in a work of art. A symbol works in two ways: It is something itself, and it also suggests something deeper. This implies that symbols associate two things, but their meaning is both literal and figurative. In *I stand Tall* (2011), Giraffe and Leopard, though close friends, are used as symbols to represent certain ideas and values in the text. Giraffe is used to represent forthrightness, steadfastness, and commitment to certain agreed course while Leopard portrays selfishness and failure to adhere to agreed practices and standards in society.

Kebaya et al (2020) argue that some symbols have widespread, commonly accepted values that most readers should recognize such as the use of animals to response certain human values, and foibles in society. For instance, Giraffe brings out strong human values in society such as truth, honesty and steadfastness while Leopard brings out human foibles in society such as deceit and lack of belief in the self. The use of children in *Buka Helps the Police* (2007) and *Lazy Milo* (2010) symbolizes innocence or homespun values in the texts. Therefore, as children read through the texts, the innocence of the child character helps to bring out the intended message which the children can easily related with. Through inferential skills, children were not only able to relate with but laugh at Milo's antics. When probed further as to why the laughed at the tricks, they indicated that those are some of the common pranks they use at home when they are not willing to perform a certain chore assigned to them.

3.6 Irony

As a figure of speech, irony refers to a difference between the way something appears and what is actually true (Kebaya et al 2020). There are various instances of irony in *Lazy Milo* (2010). In one

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instance, Milo claims that he hurt his back and therefore cannot accompany his mother to the shamba. As a result, his mother advised him to “go and rest” (pg.3). However, as soon as the mother left for the shamba, Milo went out to play football with his friends. Another day Milo is asked to help his mother to carry bananas to the market. Milo declined by saying that he had a headache. Later he is seen carrying a chair on his head to a neighbor’s house where there was a big party. In the final instance, Milo’s father asked him to look after the goats. Almost in tears, he declined by claiming a toothache. Later in the evening Milo was found “eating a piece of sugarcane. He was chewing it happily” (pg.8). All these are ironical instances in the text.

In *I stand Tall* (2011), both Giraffe and Leopard agreed that since their bodies were dull, there was need to change the color of their skin in order to look more beautiful. In order to do this, they approached Tortoise who agreed to help them. Each time they visited Tortoise, they agreed beforehand what they wanted done on their bodies. In his quest to look much better than his friend, Leopard chose to deviate with what they agreed. Ironically, the deviation turned out to be his undoing as Giraffe became more beautiful than him. As a result, he was forced to hide from the other animals in the forest while Giraffe walked tall in the grasslands.

The competency based curriculum encourages that learners should be taught respect as a value which involves respecting other people, agreements and property. Both Milo in *Lazy Milo* (2010) and Leopard in *I stand Tall* (2011) are portrayed as disrespectful. Milo does not respect his parents the more reason why he lies to them. Leopard does not respect the agreement with his friend Giraffe. He not only breaks the agreement but also goes ahead to lie to him by shifting blame to Tortoise. In both instances, the two characters face certain consequences of their actions. While Milo faces the wrath of his fed up mother, Leopard is rejected by the other animals in the forest. From these two stories, children learn the consequences of failure to respect one’s parents or what has been agreed prior.

1.7 Personification

Writers for children’s books often deploy personification in their works, especially for the very young (Reichard, 1998). Personification can brighten children’s books and make them more accessible to young readers, owing to its ability to give human traits to nonhuman beings or inanimate objects. *I stand Tall* (2011) heavily relies on personification. Giraffe, Leopard and Gazelle among other animals are imbued with human characteristics such as talking. The animals also show emotions and feelings like the humans. It is argued that personification appeals to children’s animistic view of the world, in which everything seems imbued with human attributes (Russell, 2005). Apparently, personification in children’s books is one of the chief elements that greatly facilitate children identifying with certain characters.

3.8 Use of Illustrations

Illustration is the presentation of words in pictures. Illustrations attempt to capture the mood of the text by providing expressive visual details. They therefore play an important role in books for young children by illuminating the text. Apart from making a book more attractive, illustrations help in highlighting the main ideas. The visual presentations in children’s books are important for they help readers of different abilities to understand the book. Alembi 2008 observes that illustrations are a great unifier in mixed ability classes - a point that indicates one of their main teaching virtues in that the combination of visual and narrative appeal allows children of different abilities to enter the stories in their own way and at their own level.

The three selected texts rely on pictorial illustrations to augment the story. The expressive illustrations not only help to enhance the aesthetics but also to capture the mood of the texts and thus attract the child reader. Although a single picture offers the child reader the aesthetic experience of color, line and shape, it is also part of a narrative sequence. The illustrations thus influence children’s

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responses. The books are therefore capable of giving the children an aesthetic experience while at the same time informing them.

4.0 Conclusion

This article has examined stylistic features in the three selected storybooks. Since the values skills and values that accrue from reading the storybooks are embedded in the styles used by the authors, understanding aspects of style was deemed important because it is through them that the message is effectively communicated but the skills and values are emphatically imparted to the learners. The article, therefore, has analysed various features deployed in the storybooks such as that the appropriation of the etiological narrative, use of animals, nature of characterization and point of view among others, which enhance the flow of the stories, increase believability and acceptance among children. The article also showed how the use of various stylistic features fosters skills such as cognitive, inferential critical and perceptive skills as well as values such as sympathy and respect espoused in the competency based curriculum.

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