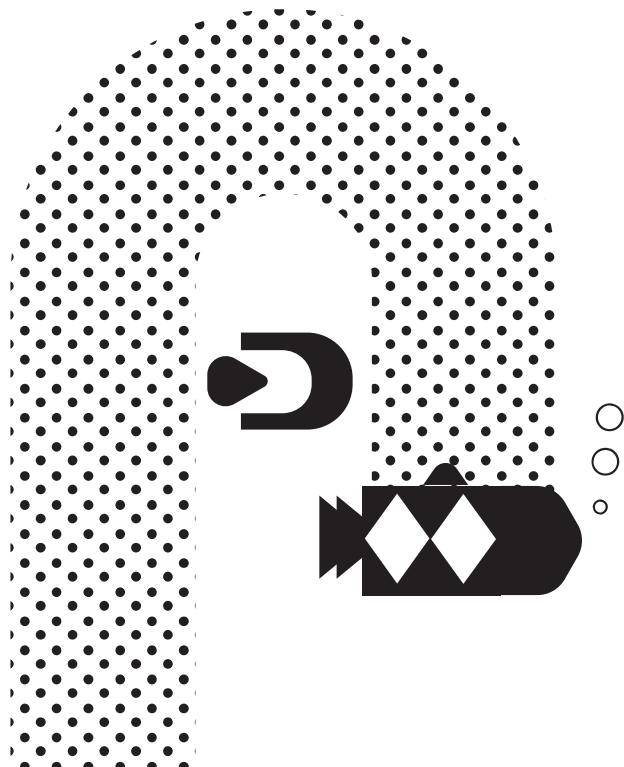
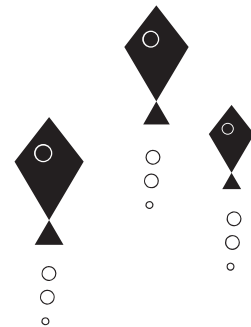




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Welcoming Linguistic Diversity in What Makes as Human



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Abstract

This paper aims to explore *What makes us human*, by Victor Santos, with illustrations by Anna Forlati, addressing the importance of languages as cultural treasures in permanent metamorphosis through text/image synergies. The theoretical framework of the research is based on studies on the current challenges of linguistic diversity in educational contexts and on the role of “new nonfiction picturebooks” regarding the understanding of multiple facets of Education for Global Citizenship in primary school, as well as Education for Peace. The following research objectives were defined: i) to investigate the role of text/image interactions regarding the development of comprehension skills to foster respect for linguistic diversity and their didactic potential; ii) to examine the multidimensional ways in which text/image synergies promote a culture of peace, aligned with Global Citizenship Education. Methodologically, synergies text/image were analyzed, and thematic nuclei were identified in line with the aims set for the research. Two categories emerged *a posteriori*: i) welcoming linguistic diversity and cultural heritage; ii) socio-emotional aspects related to using languages, illustrating peace. The articulation of the categories showed that the picturebook analyzed has generous didactic potential, encouraging respect for all languages as strong links to build bridges for peace and well-being. The paper has also shed light on the fundamental role of illustrations in shared reading practices to fulfil this goal.

Introduction

The challenges of linguistic diversity call for citizenship exercises that embrace contemporary movements of human resilience, flowing in increasingly polymorphic contexts. This paper aims to explore *What makes us human*, by Victor Santos [1], with illustrations by Anna Forlati, addressing the importance of languages as cultural treasures in permanent metamorphosis through text/image synergies. The following research objectives were defined: i) to investigate the role of text/image interactions regarding the development of comprehension skills to foster respect for linguistic diversity and their didactic potential; ii) to examine the multidimensional ways in which text/image synergies promote a culture of peace, aligned with Global Citizenship Education.

Firstly, the theoretical framework of the research is presented, focusing on studies on the current challenges of linguistic diversity in educational contexts and on the role of “new nonfiction picturebooks”,

Keywords

Picturebook; Illustration;
Linguistic diversity; Global
Citizenship education;
Education for peace

regarding the understanding of multiple facets of Education for Global Citizenship in primary school, as well as Education for Peace. Secondly, the methodological procedures that guided the research are described, based on the research questions posed. The following sections of the paper present the results of the analysis carried out, in close relation to the theoretical framework. The conclusion sheds light on the contribution of the book analyzed to the reception of cultural diversity through languages, as well as its role in educational contexts to strengthen Education for Peace. Other avenues for future research are also pointed out.

Theoretical Framework

What Makes Us Human, by Victor Santos, illustrated by Anna Forlati, released in partnership with UNESCO in honor of the International Decade of Indigenous Languages (2022-2032), was selected for the 2023 Bologna Children's Book Fair exhibition "Beauty and the World: The New Nonfiction Picture Book." Nonfiction picturebooks are a powerful didactic resource for encouraging reading motivation and fostering critical thinking. Recent years have been prolific in editorial projects that address a rich variety of topics and show a deep concern for global contemporary challenges, such as sustainability, peace and cultural diversity [2] [3]. As Goga, Iversen and Teigland put it, "(...) central to the investigation of nonfiction picture books is the construction and validation of knowledge and the acknowledgment that the dissemination of knowledge in nonfiction picture books varies according to the context (time, place, function) in which the text was created" [4].

However, research on "new nonfiction picturebooks" has highlighted the hybridity of the genre, instigating readers: i) to develop competencies that build their commitment to engage in dialogue with others; ii) to strengthen their connection to Art, for the visual and verbal elements thoughtfully combined, increasing fruition [5]

The most recent number of *Bookbird: A Journal of International Children's Literature* (2025) attests the renewed interest associated with the diversity nonfiction picturebooks bear (challenging traditional premises) and brings together studies that highlight the importance of the historical evolution of the genre and how it might contribute to raise environmental awareness (among other topics of interest) [6].

The hybridity mentioned above has led to research identifying, for example, a "symphony of poems and pictures" in nonfiction picturebooks [7], as well as proposing the term "artistic nonfiction picturebook" [8], also bringing new ways of rethinking the metamorphoses of the genre. Grilli defines the artistic nonfiction picturebook as a hybrid form of literature, calling for readers "(...) to question common knowledge, opening it up to doubt, dialogue and revision" [9]. The blending of information with poetry in nonfiction picturebooks has been considered to impact on readers' aesthetic experience, paving the way for increased fruition [10].

These characteristics favor the use of this type of picturebooks in educational contexts, fostering critical thinking; depending on themes addressed, they could be important tools to redesign the purposes of

global citizenship education, as well as education for peace. In Portugal, the citizenship domain “Security, defence and peace” is part of the set of domains included in the National Strategy for Citizenship Education [11]. The parameters that guide this domain are defined in the *Referential for education for security, defense and peace*, which stresses that “Peace, a corollary of security, is a condition for prosperity and development and, to that extent, is the basis of human activities for living in society” [12]. The UNESCO *recommendation on education for peace and human rights, international understanding, cooperation, fundamental freedoms, global citizenship and sustainable development* [13] corroborates the importance of strengthening attitudes and values that can be the basis for consolidating citizenship practices that build the common good, fostering peace.

Empathy is at the core of the goals set to embrace the challenges embedded in the increasingly complex communicational contexts that citizenship education aims to address, playing a major role in the development of a feeling of belonging to the community. Welcoming linguistic diversity deepens this feeling, and the importance of the attitudes and capacities attached to it are widely recognized [14]. The next section of this study aims to shed some light on the role of the picturebook selected for analysis to unite theoretical threads discussed.

Methodology

Two research questions guided this study:

RQ1 – How the synergies text/images shed light on the importance of linguistic diversity and nurture the co-construction of knowledge on the subject?

RQ2 – In what ways visual and textual strategies embodied in the picturebook call for an active engagement of the readers, fostering critical thinking and aesthetic sensibility?

Firstly, attention was set on the main peritextual features of the picturebook, following Genette [15], to assess their role and importance to the understanding of the topics encompassed in the research questions. Secondly, the synergies text/image were analyzed to identify thematic nuclei, in line with the objectives set for the research. Two main categories emerged *a posteriori*: i) welcoming linguistic diversity and cultural heritage; ii) socio-emotional aspects related to using languages, illustrating peace. The results are explained in subsections 4.1. and 4.2.

What Makes Us Human

UNESCO co-publishes several language editions of “What Makes Us Human”, celebrating indigenous languages and drawing attention to the richness encompassed in respecting and caring for them, as means of safeguarding linguistic patrimony worldwide. Furthermore, it was included in The White Ravens 2023 selection as one of the 200 best publications for children released worldwide that year. In 2025, the book appears in US-BBY Outstanding International Books List, a selection of books published

or distributed in the United States that originated or were first published in a country other than the U.S.

In Portugal, *What Makes Us Human* (*O que nos torna humanos*) was published by Fábula in September 2024. The publishing house also makes available a reading guide with suggestions of activities to explore the picturebook after being read, including a section dedicated to Portuguese sign language.

Having as a starting point a riddle about language, this picturebook holds a pronounced poetic dimension that captivates readers as the narrative progresses, raising their curiosity. The title, which poses a question that can foster imagination, is a powerful incitement to stimulate critical thinking. Throughout the picturebook, when words and images come together, readers are also invited to uncover an invaluable resource that redefines conceptions of languages and, consequently, ways of seeing and listening to the world.

Victor Santos acknowledges in an interview that he tends to write his books “(...) on universal topics that can be shared and understood by people across a wide range of cultural and linguistic backgrounds (...) available into as many different languages as possible, as this cultural sensibility is something I consider when developing my books” [16].

In the book’s afterword, Victor Santos and Anna Forlati give readers precise information about the consequences associated with the extinction of languages, as well as the diversity of writing systems in the world, emphasizing that “All languages are important. All cultures are important. The more languages, writing systems and cultures we have in the world, the richer we will all be as humans”. The choice to insert this afterword, entitled “The theme of this book” reinforces the relevance of the information conveyed throughout the book, which is multimodal in nature. In addition, the “Message from UNESCO” that follows the afterword draws attention to the meanings of some words in perhaps lesser-known languages, calling for a commitment to joint action to preserve them.

The following sections seek to shed light on the ways in which text/image synergies have the potential to uncover new meanings associated with the polymorphic nature of languages, as well as on the importance of their understanding for the construction of the common good that instigates peace.

Welcoming Linguistic Diversity and Cultural Heritage

Embracing linguistic diversity and understanding the current risk of language extinction appears as a double invitation, united in text/image synergies throughout the book. Its multi-layered structure is hinted at on the front and back covers.

The set of images juxtaposed on the cover combines four different portraits into one, which strengthens the diversity of the features highlighted - hair, eyes, mouth and hands – fostering the association with different age groups and races, emphasizing their richness. Readers are invited to understand the mosaic of differences in which they live, and to rethink the symbolic and cultural relevance of hair, eyes, mouth and



Fig. 1. *What Makes Us Human*



Fig. 2. *What Makes Us Human*

hands in terms of communication through the languages shared in the world, conveying multiple meanings.

On the back cover, the following sentences are highlighted in italics: “I have existed for a long time. Longer than toys or dogs or anyone you know”.

These sentences extend the

process of enquiry begun in the book’s title, nurturing readers’ curiosity. The image that precedes the sentences, showing a man and a baby holding two balls of wool of different colors that are intertwined (and whose threads are spread across the back cover of the book) is also a powerful incitement to questioning, in shared reading practices.

In addition to the peritextual elements mentioned above, the option for double-page spreads increases the range of meanings associated with the text/image synergy. This strategy appeals to readers’ more active participation and involves them in appreciating the details to be retained. Welcoming linguistic diversity and drawing attention to the extinction of languages comes through explicit textual references to languages, such as: “Some are disappearing fast. When you grow up, many may not exist”; “And when one of me disappears, a culture may also disappear. A unique way of to view and understand the world. Gone forever” [17].

In the first example (Fig. 1), the brevity of the text takes on new perspectives in the illustration that gives it shelter. Birds of various species and colors, flying freely, carry various linguistic characters in their beaks – like guardians of their preservation. The subsequent text (example 2, figure 2) highlights the major role languages play in people’s lives, in a vivid dialogue with an illustration that strengthens the relevance of mul-

tifaceted layers of cultures, enabling readers to combine new information with existing prior knowledge about ways of interacting language/culture and fostering critical thinking.

In both cases, the generous dimensions of the illustrations bring together realities that may be distant to the readers, increasing their knowledge of global issues and the interdependence of population groups, as well as the need to respect different cultures.

The relevance of multilingualism is emphasized by the centrality given to its multiple dimensions, displayed in the following excerpt: “Some people only use one. Others two. And others, even more. The more forms I gain, the more colorful and diverse the world becomes. A world with more doors from whom you can ask for help to open those doors” [18] As stated in UNESCO’s recent report on global guidance on multilingual education (2025), “Multilingualism offers significant benefits to both individuals and societies. It enhances cognitive abilities, including memory, problem-solving skills and mental flexibility” [19]. By explicitly focusing on the advantages of using more than one language and welcoming diversity, the text reinforces the benefits to all involved, instigating readers understanding of the significance of their commitment towards building more equitable societies.

The option to include an illustration that highlights a set of symbolic elements interconnecting the way in which languages embrace proves to be an added value for their understanding and calls for an exercise in aesthetic sensibility. On the double page, a rainbow celebrates the diversity of shades of light that also reverberates in the group of houses, in close-up, which are home to people of different races and age groups. The windows of each house reflect the cultural heritage of its inhabitants, and the festive tone of the celebration is reinforced by the inclusion of balloons of various colors, on which each person’s greeting – “Hello!” (Fig. 3) – is inscribed in their own language, including sign language.

Fig. 3. *What Makes Us Human*



Insofar as it establishes the connection between the inside and the outside, the window acquires a reinforced symbolic character, enabling readers to infer the importance of its role in terms of openness to all languages and cultures. The houses depicted reinforce the need to give shelter to languages and the illustration deepens its multiple meanings. In his book on “The houses of things”, Mésseder emphasizes that: “The house of your house is the world, but the world is also your house. But it is also the home of all other human and non-human beings. Take good care of these houses: And don’t forget to take care of the inhabitants” [20].

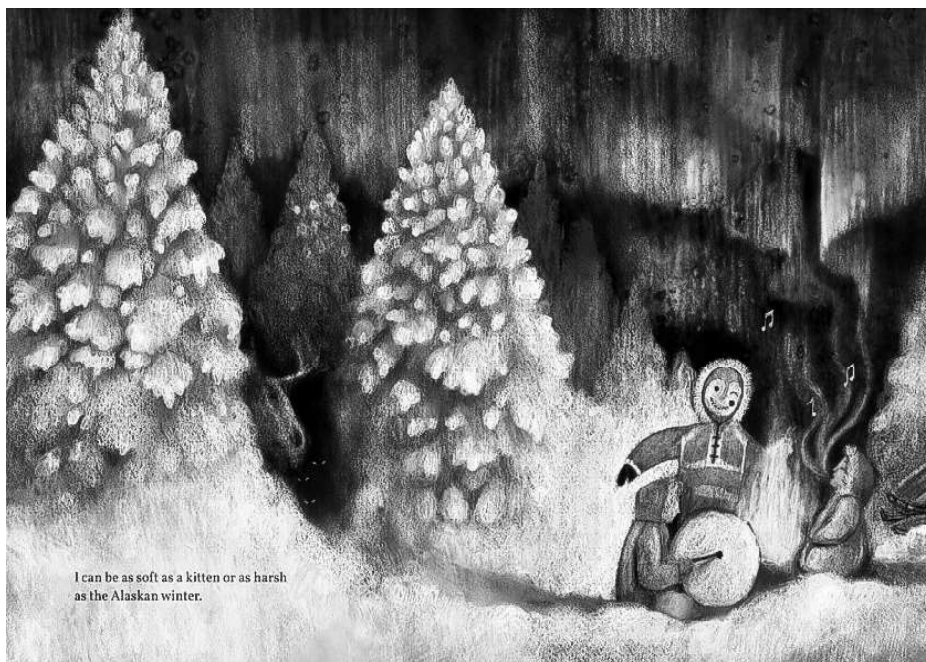


Fig. 4. *What Makes Us Human*

Illustrating Education for Peace

As Matz and Römhild put it, “language learners should not only be able to perceive themselves as rights holders, who can engage with members of the larger imagined community using their shared languages but also should also be encouraged to understand human and children’s rights as a common language that they share” [21]. By celebrating languages and drawing attention to the need to welcome them and actively contribute to preventing their extinction, *What Makes Us Human* [22] contributes to promoting peace education in its many dimensions.

Socio-emotional aspects related to the development of attitudes and respect for diversity, aligning education for global citizenship with education for peace, are emphasized in this picturebook, given the contrast between short verbal sequences and illustrations that highlight and amplify the information they provide. Thus, the verbal sequence “I can be as delicate as a kitten or as harsh as an Alaskan winter” launches readers in search of luminous details that emerge on the double page, allowing them to appreciate: i) an aurora borealis; ii) a family of Eskimos gathered around a campfire, singing (Fig. 4); iii) a moose peering through snow-covered fir trees. Peace emanates softly from the setting that the readers

inhabit, feeling welcomed and realizing the importance of being able to play a similar role, respecting the characteristics of each language and culture.

The inferential process initiated by the appreciation of the details that blend identity and cultures is continued on the page following the example mentioned, a strategy that reinforces the delicacy/hardness contrast that the use of language embodies in different contexts. In this sense, the textual reinforcement “I can show you affection. But I can also hurt you” [23] is accompanied by an explicit and implicit invitation to understand the effects of war and the importance of cultivating peace, both portrayed in the illustration. On the top of the page, readers find elements associated with war, such as a tank, people and animals fleeing and others holding a placard with the words “NO WAR” in capital letters.

The semantics of color also play an important role, given the deep contrast between the dark tones that paint war and the delicacy of the blue that, in the bottom corner of the double page, sheds light on an old lady caressing a cat. The inclusion of a thought balloon portraying the old lady’s memories (as she leans towards the cat) fosters peace and well-being mirrored in a set of images that reflect the lady’s gesture of affection, disclosing memories of bike rides, country flowers, starry nights and a white dove crossing the sky. This visual strategy nurtures inferential processes that invite readers to rewrite the potential of languages, using a variety of codes.

Factual aspects related to everyday experiences are repeatedly combined in a metaphorical and poetic way, perhaps bringing together the characteristics of the new non-fiction picturebook generation, summarized by Grilli as follows: “They seem aware that they are always inevitably re-presenting an idea of the world, and that the world, with any new reading and any new book about it, can constantly be revised, re-thought, redefined, much more than it can be definitively or objectively explained or learned” [24].

The redefinition of the concept of language, continuously reconstructed throughout the book – in an unusually beautiful way – opens pathways to peace that the development of aesthetic sensibility welcomes and whose synthesis can also be appreciated through the following “interpellation” to readers: “I am the greatest invention of all. Without me, most other inventions would not exist. Including the books you love so much” [25]. On the double-page spread, the reader’s hands, welcoming the book, are joined by depicted hands holding another book with blank pages, making the illustration a broad incentive to understand how to read the world and to commit to this mission. Each page reopens possibilities for building futures. As Mésseder and Caiano put it, “The home of the book is language” [26].

Conclusions

This paper shed some light on the relevance of *What Makes Us Human* as means of welcoming linguistic diversity fostered by synergetic relations between images and texts. The option for stimulating readers’ curios-

ity by presenting the narrative as a riddle, instigates imagination and illustrations play a major role for conveying multifaceted dimensions of languages as a valuable part of what makes us human.

Additionally, the analysis uncovered the picturebook's potential to foster peace education, because of how it welcomes the development of critical thinking. The poetic nature of words and images catch the readers' eyes, inciting the development of inferential reading comprehension skills, building up the understanding of the role of languages to shape the world.

Shared reading practices integrating didactic sequences that encourage the exploration of different linguistic landscapes through the enjoyment of the details of the illustrations can also help readers understand how vast and rich the cultural heritage that unites them is. The co-construction of meanings built throughout readers' careful exploration of the trails designed on the double page spreads strengthens the importance of each one's role to maintain harmony and peace, by respecting linguistic diversity.

By focusing on verbal and visual strategies put forward to capture the reader's interest, the paper also offered some insights on how this picturebook has the potential to increase aesthetic sensibility. The analysis carried out showed that *What Makes Us Human* holds a strong poetic dimension, challenging definitions of the genre and offering endless possibilities of fruition.

Future avenues of research might include empirical studies that address children's responses to nonfiction picturebooks and the role played by reading strategies used regarding multimodal works. Further studies focusing on teachers' conceptions of this type of book may provide tools to reshape their training, providing detailed information on the aspects they value most when it comes to motivation for reading and its enjoyment.

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