

NAVIGATING IDENTITY AND DIVERSITY: CHILDREN'S LITERATURE AS A MIRROR OF CULTURAL CHANGE IN EDUCATION

Milan Mašát

Department of Czech Language and Literature, Faculty of Education
Palacký University Olomouc

Žižkovo náměstí 5, 77900 Olomouc, Czech Republic

E-mail address: milan.masat01@upol.cz

ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-8602-3059>

ABSTRACT

Aim. This paper investigates how selected contemporary picture books address critical sociocultural themes - migration, multiculturalism, gender identity, environmental anxiety, and postcolonial memory - and evaluates their pedagogical potential in primary and higher education. It examines how multimodal storytelling supports ethical, emotional, and intercultural literacy.

Methods. The study employs a qualitative, interdisciplinary design combining literary analysis, critical discourse analysis, multimodal interpretation, and ethical hermeneutics. Four award-winning picture books - *The Journey* (Francesca Sanna), *Julian Is a Mermaid* (Jessica Love), *Greta and the Giants* (Zoë Tucker & Zoe Persico), and *Islandborn* (Junot Díaz) - were analysed with attention to thematic focus, visual strategies, and educational relevance.

Results. Each book articulates complex issues through distinct narrative and visual approaches: migration as trauma and resilience (*The Journey*), gender identity and affirmation (*Julian Is a Mermaid*), environmental activism and eco-anxiety (*Greta and the Giants*), and diasporic memory shaped by postcolonial histories (*Islandborn*). Across the corpus, multimodality intensifies emotional engagement and invites ethical reflection. The texts encourage empathy, critical thinking, and inclusive values, with relevance for teacher education.

Conclusions. Contemporary children's literature can function as a transdisciplinary educational resource that fosters ethical literacy and intercultural understanding through imagination, reflection, and dialogue. Limitations include a focus on English-language works and the absence of empirical classroom research. Future studies should incorporate global and indigenous perspectives and examine classroom implementation.

Keywords: children's literature, ethical literacy, multimodality, cultural diversity, education and identity

INTRODUCTION

Contemporary children's literature increasingly engages with sociocultural themes that are also highly relevant in educational contexts, including migration, multiculturalism, gender identity, and environmental anxiety. As a result, children's books can function not only as literary artefacts but also as pedagogical resources that support emotional understanding, ethical reflection, and intercultural sensitivity in both primary education and teacher education.

The main aim of this paper is to show how selected works of contemporary children's literature address these themes and how such narratives can be used as pedagogical tools in educational practice. By linking literary analysis with educational reflection, the paper seeks to contribute to a transdisciplinary dialogue at the intersection of education, culture, and literature and to reaffirm the importance of children's literature as a meaningful component of modern educational discourse.

To meet this aim, the study addresses the following research questions:

- How do contemporary children's books thematise migration, multiculturalism, gender identity, and environmental anxiety, including postcolonial and intercultural perspectives related to alterity and cultural hegemony?
- What roles do linguistic diversity, cultural plurality, and multimodal narrative strategies play in shaping the educational potential of children's literature, particularly with regard to empathy, ethical literacy, and reflection on social justice?
- How do narrative and visual devices mediate experiences of uncertainty and psychological vulnerability (e.g., in the context of migration and war), and how do these strategies shape reader engagement and reception?

The paper is organised as follows. After the introduction, the theoretical background and literature review briefly situate children's literature within educational, multicultural, and postcolonial debates. The methodology section outlines the qualitative research design and analytical procedures. The results present four case studies, followed by a discussion that synthesises the findings and clarifies their educational implications. The conclusion summarises the contribution and indicates limitations and directions for further research.

THEORETICAL BACKGROUNDS

Children's literature has long been discussed as a pedagogical medium capable of addressing complex social and cultural issues in ways that are accessible to young

readers while also opening space for interpretation, dialogue, and emotional engagement. Kerry Mallan (2017) underlines that contemporary children's literature functions as a powerful educational tool precisely because it brings challenging themes - such as migration, multiculturalism, gender identity, and environmental anxiety - into the classroom and supports transdisciplinary exchange between education, culture, and literary studies.

In the context of migration narratives, children's books can articulate aesthetic, ethical, and political dimensions of displacement while offering young readers opportunities to encounter alterity and reflect on experiences that exceed their own immediate reality. Caroline Couto and Betina Hillesheim (2021) emphasise the value of migration themes for understanding the experience of migrants and engaging with alterity through literature. From a broader intercultural perspective, Mirzana Pašić Kodrić (2019) underscores the importance of multiculturalism and interculturality in children's literature as factors shaping young readers' understanding of diversity and inclusivity. Dalila Forni's (2019) work on picture books further highlights how image-text relations can position readers affectively and ethically and thus foster empathy and tolerance.

Multicultural and postcolonial approaches also stress that children's literature can challenge cultural hegemony by expanding the curriculum to include diverse cultural narratives. Patricia Ai Lay Ong (2022), as well as Priscila Montañez Alvarado and Nicole Walker (2015), discuss multicultural literature as a space in which dominant discourses can be questioned and educational environments can become more inclusive. Baker Mohammad Bani-Khair, Ziyad Khalifah Alkhalifah and Abdullah Jaradat (2022) likewise foreground language diversity and cultural pluralism as important elements of children's literature in educational contexts. Within postcolonial frames, Ebtihal Elshaikh (2017) points to the representation of psychological trauma related to conflict, immigration, and war, while Ana Margarida Ramos (2014) discusses migration narratives in Portuguese children's literature as reflections of historical and contemporary movements and cultural exchanges.

Taken together, this scholarship supports the central premise of the present study: that contemporary children's books - especially multimodal picture books - can operate as both mirrors of sociocultural change and pedagogical instruments for ethical and intercultural learning.

METHODOLOGY OF THE RESEARCH

This study adopts a qualitative, interdisciplinary approach that combines literary analysis, multimodal interpretation, and critical discourse analysis to explore how selected picture books engage with contemporary sociocultural issues. The research focuses on four representative titles - *The Journey* (Sanna, 2016), *Julian is a Mermaid* (Love, 2019), *Greta and the Giants* (Tucker & Persico, 2019), and *Islandborn* (Diaz, 2018)

- selected for their thematic relevance, aesthetic sophistication, and pedagogical potential. The methodological design is guided by the research questions stated in the Introduction and aims to connect textual and visual analysis with educational interpretation.

Multimodal Analysis

Multimodal analysis is used to examine how meaning is constructed through the interaction of verbal and visual elements in picture books. The analysis focuses on the relationship between text and image, including visual metaphors, composition, symbolic motifs, and the ways in which image–text dynamics support reader engagement. Attention is paid to how multimodal strategies shape affective response and contribute to the development of ethical and intercultural understanding.

Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA)

Critical Discourse Analysis is applied to explore how narrative structures, linguistic economy, and representational choices reproduce or challenge dominant ideologies, especially in relation to identity and social inclusion. Following CDA as a critical lens (Hart, 2010), the analysis attends to how texts position characters, normalise or disrupt social categories, and offer interpretive frameworks that can be pedagogically productive. This is especially relevant where children’s literature intersects with broader discourses of gender identity, diversity, and educational equity.

Thematic and Ethical Analysis

Thematic and ethical analysis is used to identify and interpret recurring thematic domains (migration, multiculturalism, gender identity, environmental anxiety, and postcolonial memory) and to examine how narrative and visual strategies open ethical questions rather than prescribing fixed moral conclusions. This component of the methodology focuses on how texts create interpretive space for empathy, moral imagination, and reflection on social justice, which are central to the paper’s interest in ethical literacy.

Postcolonial and Transcultural Hermeneutics

Postcolonial and transcultural hermeneutics provide a framework for analysing how children’s literature represents cultural plurality, hybrid identities, diasporic consciousness, and the negotiation of belonging. This approach is used to interpret

how selected texts decentre Eurocentric paradigms and how they narrativise memory, identity, and cultural reconstruction, thereby connecting literary representation with educational perspectives on alterity and intercultural learning.

Motivation for Book Selection

Each book was selected because it foregrounds one of the study's key thematic axes - migration, gender identity, environmental anxiety, and postcolonial memory - while also providing a distinct configuration of narrative voice, aesthetic mode, and multimodal technique. This combination of thematic focus and formal diversity allows the analysis to address the research questions through comparable yet differentiated cases and to examine how complex sociocultural phenomena are mediated in age-appropriate, emotionally engaging, and educationally relevant ways.

The corpus intentionally spans different narrative and visual strategies. Some texts rely on direct, intimate modes of reader engagement and affirmation (e.g., *Julian Is a Mermaid*), whereas others construct meaning through metaphor, allegory, intergenerational storytelling, or representations of collective agency (e.g., *Islandborn*; *Greta and the Giants*). Such variation provides a productive basis for cross-case comparison, enabling the study to trace how image-text relations, symbolic motifs, and narrative focalisation shape empathy, ethical reflection, and interpretive participation.

In addition, the selected titles are widely circulated and frequently discussed in educational and scholarly contexts, which makes them suitable for examining the interface between literary form and pedagogical use. Where relevant, their reception and classroom applicability support the present study's focus on children's literature not only as a reflection of contemporary concerns but also as a medium that can actively facilitate dialogue about inclusion, belonging, responsibility, and social justice.

Overall, the selection aligns with the paper's overarching aim to explore children's literature as a transdisciplinary resource at the intersection of cultural discourse and educational practice. By mobilising imagination, affect, and critical interpretation, these books offer concrete opportunities to cultivate ethical literacy and intercultural competence - capacities that are increasingly central to contemporary schooling and teacher education.

RESULTS

The Journey

Sanna's (2016) *The Journey* stands as a compelling example of how contemporary children's literature employs multimodal strategies - particularly the interplay between image and text - to address complex themes such as forced migration, psychological

trauma, and ethical responsibility. Through its stylised illustrations, symbolic imagery, and child-centred narrative voice, the book offers a powerful educational and emotional experience for readers of all ages. It not only communicates the physical displacement of a refugee family but also invites critical reflection on multiculturalism, justice, and alterity.

The book thematises migration in a way that abstracts from geopolitical specificity, allowing for a universal reading experience. This allegorical structure enables the story to transcend conflicts or locations and instead focuses on the human dimensions of displacement: fear, hope, loss, and resilience. Migration is depicted not as a distant phenomenon, but as an emotional and ethical journey shared by people everywhere. Gender identity is also subtly addressed, as the story is narrated by a young girl who assumes a central, active role in the family's survival. By amplifying the child's perspective, *The Journey* challenges traditional gendered narratives and asserts the agency of young girls in the face of crisis. While environmental anxiety is not directly discussed, it is implied through the recurring motifs of hostile natural forces (waves, forests, darkness), evoking a broader sense of instability and threat.

In educational contexts, *The Journey* functions as a powerful pedagogical tool for cultivating empathy, cultural sensitivity, and critical thinking. The integration of images and minimalistic language invites readers to interpret meaning through inference and emotional engagement. The metaphor of "wolves" representing danger, and the visual representation of borders as dark, oppressive barriers, stimulate discussion about justice, inclusion, and exclusion. In classrooms - whether in primary or higher education - the book can be used across disciplines: in literature classes to analyse metaphor and narrative voice, in social studies to address human rights, and in ethics courses to explore moral responsibility and social justice.

Linguistic and cultural plurality are crucial elements of the book's accessibility and educational potential. Its narrative simplicity and visual storytelling make it highly translatable and culturally adaptable. By avoiding culturally marked language or imagery, it invites readers from diverse backgrounds to project their own experiences onto the narrative, fostering identification and intercultural dialogue. In multilingual classrooms, this flexibility supports comparative readings, translation exercises, and discussions around the cultural contexts of storytelling.

From a transdisciplinary perspective, *The Journey* bridges literature, pedagogy, and cultural studies. Its themes resonate with contemporary debates on migration policy, childhood agency, and trauma-informed education. It lends itself to interdisciplinary projects that integrate visual literacy, ethical reasoning, and intercultural awareness. In this way, children's literature becomes a vehicle not only for storytelling but also for complex societal reflection.

Postcolonial and intercultural perspectives are reflected in the way the book destabilises hegemonic narratives about migration. Rather than presenting refugees as passive victims or as statistical abstractions, *The Journey* rehumanises them by presenting

their experience from the inside - through the eyes of a child. It critiques the structural violence of border regimes and systemic exclusion, while offering moments of compassion and solidarity. In doing so, it opens space for readers to challenge dominant cultural narratives and to consider marginalized voices.

Multimodal storytelling in *The Journey* is especially effective in communicating psychological trauma and emotional uncertainty. The interplay of dark and light colours, distorted shapes, and fragmented page layouts mirrors the instability and fear experienced by the characters. The use of abstract visual metaphors - such as enormous waves symbolising chaos or featureless figures representing state agents - allows readers to feel the emotional weight of the journey without being overwhelmed by graphic realism. This balance makes the narrative accessible even to young readers, while still engaging them deeply on an emotional level.

Crucially, the book fosters ethical literacy by encouraging dialogical engagement with themes of justice, care, and responsibility. It does not prescribe moral judgments but instead leaves space for reflection and interpretation. The child reader is invited to imagine what it feels like to be excluded, to be in danger, and to depend on the kindness of strangers. This imaginative engagement supports the development of empathy and moral reasoning - skills essential for becoming ethically aware citizens.

In conclusion, *The Journey* exemplifies the power of multimodal picture books to convey complex emotional and ethical narratives. By blending visual and textual storytelling, it speaks to young readers in ways that are both cognitively accessible and emotionally resonant. As a pedagogical resource, it enables transdisciplinary exploration and supports the cultivation of inclusive, critically minded, and empathetic individuals. Through its narrative of forced migration and resilience, it transforms children's literature into a platform for ethical engagement, cultural dialogue, and social justice.

Julian Is a Mermaid

Jessica Love's (2019) *Julian is a Mermaid* is a transformative work of contemporary children's literature that challenges dominant ideologies surrounding gender, identity, and representation. Through the lens of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), the book's visual narrative and linguistic minimalism reveal a complex interplay between self-expression, cultural affirmation, and social power. CDA enables us to critically assess how narratives either reproduce or subvert hegemonic discourses, and in the case of *Julian Is a Mermaid*, the text clearly aligns with the latter. The story gently but firmly contests binary understandings of gender by affirming a child's non-normative identity through both image and narrative structure.

Though the book does not directly address themes of migration or environmental anxiety, it plays a vital role in exploring gender identity and multicultural experience.

The protagonist, Julian - a young Afro-Caribbean child - fantasises about becoming a mermaid, a symbol often associated with fluidity, transformation, and feminine grace. His identity is portrayed not as something to be repressed or corrected, but as something to be embraced and celebrated. The narrative unfolds without judgment, giving visual and emotional space to Julian's self-exploration. This creates a discursive environment in which alternative gender identities can be positively represented and normalized for young readers. The cultural setting - suggestive of a vibrant, diverse urban community - further supports this representation by rooting Julian's story in a pluralistic world that values difference.

From a pedagogical perspective, *Julian is a Mermaid* is a highly effective tool for developing empathy, cultural sensitivity, and critical thinking in educational settings. The economy of words invites close reading and interpretation, while the lush, expressive illustrations demand visual literacy and encourage students to analyse how meaning is conveyed without language. Educators can use this book in primary and higher education to initiate discussions about gender diversity, self-acceptance, and the importance of supportive relationships. It fosters a safe space for children to see themselves or others represented with dignity, while also challenging readers to reconsider their assumptions about gender norms. The narrative arc - from imagination to fear to joyful affirmation - mirrors many real-life journeys of identity negotiation and acceptance.

The linguistic and cultural plurality of the book is particularly important in shaping its educational impact. The sparse, accessible text allows for easy translation and adaptation into multilingual classrooms, while the illustrations carry universal emotional resonance. At the same time, the cultural specificity of the characters and setting - rooted in Afro-Caribbean visual codes and matriarchal family dynamics - provides a rich counter-narrative to dominant white, Eurocentric children's literature. This duality allows readers from various backgrounds to both identify with and learn from the narrative, enhancing intercultural understanding and affirming the value of diverse identities.

As a work of literature, *Julian is a Mermaid* fosters transdisciplinary dialogue between literature, pedagogy, and culture. It can be explored in literary studies through the lens of visual storytelling and narrative structure, in cultural studies through its representation of queerness and race, and in education through its capacity to promote inclusive classroom practices. The synergy between Queer Linguistics and CDA is particularly evident in the book's subtle deconstruction of heteronormativity. It rejects binary logic not through confrontation, but through a celebration of beauty, joy, and acceptance - an approach that encourages educators and students alike to rethink normative frameworks and embrace a broader spectrum of human identity.

From a postcolonial and intercultural perspective, the book is radical in its centring of a queer child of colour. In doing so, it resists the marginalisation of such identities within both literature and society. Julian is not an outsider or victim; he is a subject of desire, creativity, and familial love. The representation of his grandmother, who

initially appears as a gatekeeper of tradition but ultimately becomes a figure of support, challenges stereotypical narratives of generational conflict and reinforces the possibility of intergenerational allyship. This narrative resolution contributes to a larger discourse on inclusion and challenges cultural hegemony by offering models of affirmation rather than correction.

Although the book does not address war or forced displacement, it nevertheless engages deeply with experiences of psychological vulnerability and resilience. Julian's inner conflict - his fear of rejection and longing for expression - is visually encoded through surreal, dreamlike imagery and shifting colour palettes. These visual strategies externalise emotional uncertainty in ways that resonate with readers, particularly children navigating their own identities. The resolution, marked by his grandmother's gesture of approval and the joyous participation in a mermaid parade, transforms this uncertainty into celebration. Such affective storytelling has a powerful impact on readers' reception, offering not only validation but also hope.

Finally, *Julian Is a Mermaid* plays a crucial role in cultivating ethical literacy. It refrains from didacticism, instead encouraging readers to engage in moral reflection through character empathy and narrative inference. Julian's journey is framed by care, not conflict, and the ethical lessons emerge through acts of kindness, recognition, and freedom of expression. In this way, the book models a relational ethics grounded in emotional understanding and social justice. Readers are invited to reflect on inclusion, acceptance, and the right to self-define - values that are increasingly central to global education in the 21st century.

In conclusion, *Julian is a Mermaid* exemplifies the transformative potential of children's literature when analysed through the lens of Critical Discourse Analysis. It uses minimal text and rich visual storytelling to affirm non-binary identities, challenge heteronormative ideologies, and promote a culture of inclusivity and empathy. By centring a queer child of colour in a narrative of joy and affirmation, the book invites young readers to imagine a world where difference is not just tolerated but celebrated. As such, it becomes not only a literary text but also a cultural and pedagogical tool for ethical reflection, critical engagement, and social change.

Greta and the Giants

Greta and the Giants, written by Zoë Tucker (2019) and illustrated by Zoe Persico, offers a timely and emotionally resonant narrative that harnesses the power of children's literature to confront the climate crisis and foster ecological consciousness. Inspired by the activism of Greta Thunberg, the picture book utilises a thematic and ethical framework to introduce young readers to the emotional, political, and communal dimensions of environmental stewardship. Through vibrant visuals, an allegorical storyline, and an ethically engaged narrative structure, the book encourages reflec-

tion on the collective responsibility of individuals and communities in facing environmental degradation and climate anxiety.

Thematically, the book directly addresses environmental anxiety, which has become increasingly relevant in the lives of children and adolescents amid accelerating climate change. The fictionalised representation of Greta as a child who bravely confronts the destructive “Giants” - symbolising industry, greed, and environmental exploitation - serves to validate children’s emotional responses to ecological crises. The narrative connects personal grief with planetary grief and illustrates how emotional discomfort can become a source of activism and moral agency. The setting - a once-peaceful forest being destroyed by the giants - establishes a clear ecological dichotomy between preservation and exploitation, while also emphasising the urgency of taking action before the damage becomes irreversible.

In terms of pedagogical value, the book functions as an accessible and emotionally powerful entry point for discussions on climate justice, civic responsibility, and collective ethics. By portraying a young protagonist who refuses to remain silent and instead mobilises others to join her cause, the story emphasises interdependence and the power of community action. This representation moves beyond the trope of the isolated “eco-hero” and aligns with recent shifts in children’s literature toward more networked and relational forms of activism. For educators, *Greta and the Giants* provides a means of developing not only ecological literacy but also ethical reasoning and critical thinking, encouraging students to grapple with questions such as: *What is fair? Who is responsible? What kind of future do we want to shape?*

The linguistic and visual simplicity of the book supports its translatability and relevance across diverse cultural and linguistic contexts. Though the narrative is inspired by a European activist, its universal themes and easily recognisable allegorical structure ensure that the book resonates globally. The visual palette - contrasting bright, lush greens with dark, destructive greys - helps convey emotional tone and moral urgency. The diverse representation of the forest community also reflects a pluralistic vision of environmental justice, in which all beings - human and non-human - have a stake in the health of the planet.

Transdisciplinary, the book integrates ecocriticism, moral philosophy, social studies, and visual literacy, making it an ideal text for cross-curricular teaching. It supports explorations into topics such as biodiversity, sustainable development, intergenerational ethics, and global citizenship. The fictional world of the Giants, though metaphorical, invites real-world parallels to political, industrial, and systemic forces that shape environmental outcomes. In this way, the book nurtures a dialogue between literature and social reality, creating space for students to articulate their hopes, fears, and visions for the future.

From a postcolonial and intercultural standpoint, *Greta and the Giants* implicitly critiques systems of exploitation that mirror colonial histories of resource extraction and environmental violence. Although the book does not explicitly engage with is-

sues of global North/South inequalities, its allegorical representation of systemic power and environmental injustice opens a path for such interpretations in more advanced educational settings. The story models a non-violent form of resistance - Greta speaks, stands firm, and builds coalitions - thereby offering a counter-narrative to dominant paradigms that valorise control, consumption, and competition.

In exploring the psychological dimension of climate awareness, the book acknowledges the emotional toll of ecological awareness while offering a narrative of empowerment. Rather than dismissing children's fears as irrational, it affirms their ethical instincts and supports the transformation of anxiety into constructive action. The emphasis on dialogue and listening - Greta speaking to the Giants, the Giants eventually hearing her message - reflects a restorative ethical framework, where justice is achieved not through punishment but through understanding and change. This resonates strongly with current approaches to eco-pedagogy, which emphasise empathy, agency, and ethical reflection.

Finally, the book makes a significant contribution to the development of ethical literacy in young readers. It prompts questions about the moral responsibilities of individuals and institutions, the meaning of justice across generations, and the role of voice and agency in shaping social outcomes. It also challenges reductive solutions such as individual recycling, offering instead a vision of systemic change rooted in collective action. This shift is crucial for fostering deep ecological thinking, where readers are encouraged to understand environmental issues as intertwined with social, political, and economic systems.

In conclusion, *Greta and the Giants* stands as a compelling example of how children's literature can blend thematic richness with ethical urgency. By presenting a narrative rooted in real-world activism and extending it through imaginative allegory, the book becomes more than a story - it becomes a call to reflection, dialogue, and action. It nurtures a generation of readers who are not only informed about ecological crises but also empowered to imagine and build a more just, inclusive, and sustainable world. In doing so, it affirms the power of storytelling as a moral and pedagogical force in the age of climate crisis.

Islandborn

Díaz's (2018) *Islandborn*, illustrated by Leo Espinosa, is a powerful narrative of diasporic identity, transcultural imagination, and postcolonial recovery, told through the eyes of a young girl navigating the fragmented memories of her ancestral homeland. Rooted in the lived experience of the Dominican diaspora, the book offers a child-friendly yet politically resonant depiction of cultural displacement, historical trauma, and collective memory. Through the lens of postcolonial and transcultural hermeneutics, *Islandborn* emerges as a crucial work in contemporary children's literature

- one that challenges monolithic constructions of identity and national belonging by embracing multiplicity, hybridity, and diasporic consciousness.

Thematically, the book directly engages with migration, multiculturalism, and diasporic memory. Lola, the protagonist, lives in a multicultural neighbourhood in the United States but was born on “the Island,” a place she cannot remember. Her quest to understand her roots through others’ recollections reflects a politicised process of memory reconstruction, echoing bell hooks’ notion of memory as a site of resistance and agency. The story presents postcolonial trauma - specifically the legacy of Rafael Trujillo’s dictatorship and systemic violence - in a form accessible to young readers, emphasising both the right to remember and the responsibility to know. This positions *Islandborn* within a growing body of children’s literature that refuses to sanitize history but instead empowers children to engage critically with their cultural past.

Pedagogically, *Islandborn* offers a multidimensional tool for cultivating empathy, cultural sensitivity, and critical awareness. Through its narrative structure - composed of voices, memories, and images - it invites readers to piece together a story that is deliberately incomplete, mirroring the diasporic condition itself. Rather than providing a singular, authoritative account of the Island, the book foregrounds the plurality of experience and the importance of storytelling in the formation of identity. In educational settings, it can prompt discussions about race, colonialism, intergenerational trauma, and cultural pride, while also encouraging young readers to interrogate the ways history is constructed and remembered.

Linguistically, *Islandborn* embodies transcultural hybridity. Although it does not employ extensive code-switching, it carries the tonal and rhythmic influence of bilingualism, reflecting the lived linguistic diversity of the Dominican-American community. The names, cultural references, and narrative cadence resonate with a Spanish-English linguistic landscape, subtly reinforcing the idea that identity is shaped by linguistic as well as cultural negotiation. This plurality of language and voice is central to the book’s educational potential, particularly in multilingual classrooms, where it affirms students’ diverse linguistic heritages and fosters pride in cultural hybridity.

As a transdisciplinary text, *Islandborn* invites engagement across literature, history, sociology, and pedagogy. It functions not only as a literary work but also as a site of decolonial knowledge production, challenging dominant narratives that erase or flatten diasporic experiences. The book speaks to contemporary concerns about identity formation in transnational contexts, aligning with theoretical discussions on “postidentities” that question the adequacy of fixed ethnic or national categories. In this way, the book becomes a pedagogical instrument for exploring intersectionality, memory politics, and diaspora studies, offering a child-appropriate entry point into otherwise complex academic discourses.

In reflecting postcolonial and intercultural perspectives, *Islandborn* makes visible the scars of colonialism and authoritarianism, not through graphic representation but through metaphor and intergenerational dialogue. The “monster” that once haunted

the Island is never fully named, allowing readers to grasp its symbolic weight as both a political and psychological presence. This narrative strategy aligns with what scholars identify as Caribbean mythopoesis - a mode of storytelling that integrates myth, history, and collective trauma to resist colonial amnesia. Díaz's (2018) concept of "*fukú americanus*," though not explicitly mentioned in *Islandborn*, resonates thematically: the sense of an inherited curse, of history's weight pressing on the present, lingers in the background. Yet the book also emphasises resilience, beauty, and community, providing a counter-narrative to despair by highlighting the possibility of healing and connection.

While *Islandborn* does not depict war or forced displacement in the conventional sense, it mediates psychological and cultural trauma through its fragmented storytelling and visual symbolism. Lola's imaginative reconstructions - jungles filled with flying people, cities teeming with music and light - reveal a tension between nostalgia and pain, memory and forgetting. These images offer young readers a means to empathise with the complexities of loss and longing, while also celebrating cultural continuity. The illustrations by Leo Espinosa reinforce this by presenting a multi-cultural, vibrant community that reflects the richness and diversity of diasporic life. In this way, the book fosters reader engagement with historical trauma through the ethics of imagination and emotional resonance.

At its core, *Islandborn* is a work of ethical literacy. It teaches that identity is not inherited intact but constructed through questioning, listening, and remembering. It encourages readers to consider their own connections to place, language, and community, and to reflect on how systems of power shape what is remembered and what is forgotten. The book's insistence on collective memory as a source of empowerment rather than burden reframes cultural heritage as a shared ethical responsibility. For young readers, it offers not only a mirror of their own fragmented experiences but also a window into the moral imperative of bearing witness and honouring the voices of the past.

In conclusion, *Islandborn* is a deeply layered picture book that exemplifies the potential of postcolonial and transcultural hermeneutics in children's literature. By interweaving diasporic narrative, cultural memory, and visual imagination, Díaz (2018) creates a story that both challenges and expands traditional literary and educational paradigms. It speaks powerfully to themes of migration, alterity, language, and belonging, offering children a model for navigating complex identities in a globalised world. Through its ethical and thematic depth, the book becomes not only a story of one child's search for her homeland but also a collective journey toward understanding, healing, and cultural affirmation.

Taken together, the four case studies demonstrate that contemporary picture books address complex sociocultural questions through distinct yet convergent multimodal strategies. While *The Journey* and *Islandborn* foreground displacement, memory, and belonging through symbolic visual design and fragmented narration, *Julian Is a Mermaid* constructs an affirming space for identity through minimal verbal text

and relational visual storytelling, and *Greta and the Giants* translates environmental anxiety into an allegory of collective agency. Across the corpus, meaning is consistently produced through the interplay of verbal and visual modes, and the texts invite readers to interpret uncertainty, vulnerability, and responsibility rather than consume fixed moral lessons. In the following *Discussion*, these findings are synthesised across themes and methods, situated more explicitly within recent scholarship, and translated into educational implications for classroom practice and teacher education.

DISCUSSION

The analysis confirms that contemporary children's literature provides a rich trans-disciplinary terrain for exploring social, ethical, and cultural challenges in education. The selected works - *The Journey* (Sanna, 2016), *Julian is a Mermaid* (Love, 2019), *Greta and the Giants* (Tucker & Persico, 2019), and *Islandborn* (Díaz, 2018) - demonstrate distinct yet complementary strategies in representing themes of migration, gender identity, environmental anxiety, and postcolonial memory, aligning with the study's aim to investigate children's literature as a medium that fosters emotional, ethical, and intercultural literacy.

Across the four books, multimodal storytelling plays a critical role in constructing meaning. In *The Journey*, visual metaphors such as shadows, wolves, and shifting landscapes convey fear, disorientation, and resilience, offering affective access to experiences marked by uncertainty and displacement. This supports the idea that picture books enable reader positioning through image–text interaction (Forni, 2019). *Julian Is a Mermaid* relies almost entirely on visual narrative and linguistic minimalism to affirm identity through relational care and recognition, inviting readers to co-construct meaning and reflect on normative gender scripts. *Islandborn* integrates memory and identity through fragmented storytelling and symbolic imagery (e.g., the monster; the island's ruins), modelling cultural reconstruction as a dialogic process. *Greta and the Giants* adopts an allegorical narrative structure that translates environmental anxiety into a story of collective responsibility and agency, highlighting literature's potential to support eco-conscious citizenship.

Each book addresses a distinct domain of ethical and social concern. Migration, as examined in *The Journey* and *Islandborn*, is framed not only as geopolitical displacement but also as a condition of ontological and emotional liminality. These texts resist reductive victimhood by portraying refugee and diasporic children as active meaning-makers. Gender identity in *Julian Is a Mermaid* is presented with affirmation and dignity, inviting readers to explore fluid identity within safe and validating relational contexts (Alvarado & Walker, 2015; Mallan, 2017). In addition, recent scholarship on representation and public conceptions of non-binary identity further supports

the relevance of visibility and inclusive narratives for educational reflection on gender diversity (Blanco-Fernández et al., 2024).

The ecological discourse of *Greta and the Giants* aligns with current interest in children's literature that engages climate-related affect and eco-activist imaginaries. Its pedagogical utility is evident in its capacity to generate classroom discussions around agency, protest, and global justice. This relevance is reinforced by recent work addressing climate anxiety and eco-activism in relation to children and young people and to children's literature, which underscores the timeliness of linking environmental narratives with educational practice (Murphy, 2024; Romano, 2024; Sweeney, 2024; Tsapiv & Andrieieva, 2024).

The study's emphasis on cultural plurality and postcolonial critique is reflected in the way *Islandborn* and *The Journey* disrupt Eurocentric paradigms of belonging. By decentring dominant narratives, these texts enable the representation of hybrid identities and diasporic consciousness. In this sense, children's literature emerges as a decolonial site of resistance, memory, and imagination, offering young readers frameworks for understanding alterity not as a threat, but as a shared human experience (Elshaikh, 2017; Ong, 2022). Recent interpretive work focusing on *Islandborn* also points to the productive tension between memory, identity, and imaginative reconstruction that can be pedagogically activated in educational contexts (Myers, 2023).

All selected books support the development of ethical literacy through emotional focalisation, reflective narration, and symbolic design. Rather than prescribing moral truths, they create interpretive spaces that nurture moral imagination and relational thinking. In teacher education contexts, these texts can serve as springboards for critical reflection on inclusion, social justice, and narrative authority, particularly in heterogeneous classrooms. This consolidates the central thesis of the paper that children's literature can operate as both a mirror and a map for navigating cultural transformation in educational settings.

CONCLUSIONS

This study has demonstrated that contemporary children's literature - particularly multimodal picture books - can serve as a powerful pedagogical and cultural tool for addressing complex social issues such as migration, gender identity, environmental anxiety, and postcolonial memory. Drawing on a transdisciplinary methodology that integrates literary analysis with pedagogical and sociocultural perspectives, the paper has shown how selected books (*The Journey*, *Julian is a Mermaid*, *Greta and the Giants*, and *Islandborn*) construct ethically and emotionally resonant narratives that support critical reflection, intercultural understanding, and inclusive education.

Each of the analysed texts embodies a distinct thematic and aesthetic approach to the representation of childhood in conditions of cultural transition and social trans-

formation. *The Journey* presents a visual allegory of forced migration that foregrounds trauma, fear, and resilience without specifying cultural or geopolitical coordinates, thus enabling universal access to the refugee experience. *Julian is a Mermaid* addresses gender identity through an intimate, affirming narrative that challenges heteronormative assumptions and reclaims childhood self-expression as a site of creative freedom. *Greta and the Giants* combines narrative fiction with real-world ecological activism, inviting child readers to consider their role as moral agents in environmental protection. *Islandborn* reclaims diasporic memory and cultural hybridity by depicting a child's journey to understanding her origins through communal storytelling and visual imagination.

These texts collectively support what the study identifies as "ethical literacy" - the development of a child's ability to reflect on justice, empathy, and responsibility through literary engagement. By using multimodal strategies, including symbolic imagery, varied focalisation, and open-ended narrative structures, the books invite young readers not only to witness but to emotionally and cognitively inhabit diverse perspectives. They thus offer pedagogical affordances for both primary education and teacher training, especially in the context of increasingly diverse and heterogeneous classrooms.

Nonetheless, this study also acknowledges its limitations. The selection of four English-language picture books, while thematically diverse, does not fully represent the global spectrum of children's literature or the plurality of cultural voices emerging from non-Western contexts. In addition, the findings are based on interpretive textual analysis and lack empirical validation through classroom observation or reader-response research. Consequently, claims about educational impact remain theoretical and would benefit from further field-based inquiry.

Future research could expand this approach in several directions. First, by including children's literature from the Global South, indigenous communities, or refugee authors, scholars could better address postcolonial and decolonial dimensions. Second, incorporating qualitative methods - such as interviews with teachers and students, or ethnographic studies in school environments - would help assess how such texts function in real pedagogical practice. Third, longitudinal research in teacher education programmes could investigate how sustained exposure to ethically complex children's literature influences pre-service teachers' attitudes, professional values, and classroom behaviour. Finally, studies could focus more closely on specific educational competencies - such as visual literacy, social imagination, or critical thinking - and explore how children's books scaffold their development.

In conclusion, this article reaffirms the centrality of children's literature not only as a mirror of cultural change but as a transformative force in the educational process. As schools confront growing cultural complexity, the texts analysed here exemplify how literature can serve as a space for reimagining childhood, promoting inclusive values, and fostering pedagogical innovation grounded in empathy, diversity, and global citizenship.

AI USE STATEMENT

The author confirms that no generative artificial intelligence (AI) was used for data collection, interpretation, or content generation in this article. AI-based tools were employed solely for minor language editing (grammar and style checking).

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