

Ab-Seuss-Lutely: The Benefits of Dr. Seuss Books

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Despite children's literature only recently being accepted as a legitimate genre of literature, it seems that there are children's authors who have already managed to leave their lasting mark on the world. It can be argued that one of the most iconic figures in children's literature today is Theodor Seuss Geisel, more famously known as Dr. Seuss. With more than sixty books published, his work has remained influential long after their publication dates and his passing. Dr. Seuss's works are unique, with a cartoon style and bright, vivid illustrations. In addition, he used interesting vocabulary and rhyme within his work. Although children may love Dr. Seuss's books due to their illustrations and interesting text, many may not realize that these books provide numerous benefits for children in different areas.

First, it is no secret that Dr. Seuss has some unordinary and unusual words in his vocabulary, with many of them being made-up. However, what is lesser known to readers and perhaps even education officials, is that Dr. Seuss's books may actually be beneficial to children from a linguistic standpoint. In order to understand this, one must first break down languages and how they are taught. Kenneth Goodman discussed this in his parent/teacher guide to children's learning, *What's Whole in a Whole Language?* To open his book, Goodman first wrote about how schools are turning what is supposed to be a seamlessly simple task (learning a language) into a frustrating, abstract process. Goodman stated, "We [teachers] took apart the language and turned it into words, syllables, and isolated sounds. Unfortunately, we also postponed its natural purpose - the communication of meaning - and turned it into a set of abstractions, unrelated to the needs and experiences of the children we sought to help" (7). Therefore, perhaps children need to be reading books that do not focus on teaching them the smallest parts of a language, but bigger parts, such as whole sentences. This is what Dr. Seuss books have done. Although Dr. Seuss did keep his sentences simple, he did not let the simplicity stand in the way of communicating the dialogue and plot of the story to the reader. When children read his books, they are not reading them with the goal of learning about and developing their understanding of pragmatics and syntax; they are simply reading stories that they are able to relate to, while unknowingly learning by practicing to read and understand whole sentences.

Apart from the linguistics perspective, dialect, and vocabulary that Seuss implemented into his works, there is also the illustrative side to consider. Unfortunately, many individuals tend to disregard illustrated books. This is examined in Shelby Wolf's *Interpreting Literature with Children*. She wrote,

Still, this [illustrative books] meaning is often untouched in K-8 classrooms today. Intermediate and middle school classrooms avoid picture books with the misguided perception that children have probably outgrown them. And in primary classrooms, where picture books continue to hold a prominent position, they are often seen as more amusing than a goldmine for analysis. (226)

As previously mentioned by Wolf, illustrated books are closely scrutinized as having less educational value. It is imperative that this ideology does not remain at the forefront on the topic of illustrative books in schools. Tools that can be used to improve student education should not be disregarded due to a preconceived notion that illustrative books are meant for not much more than entertainment. Wolf continued to argue that,

Children's interest in one kind of symbol making, writing, is best viewed within the context of children's artistic and social lives, as that writing is couched within their drawing, talking, and playing. . . Stories, pictures, dramas- these are children's ways of giving shape to their experiences, of figuring out who they are in relationship to the world and to each other. These are other children's ways of making their own tools that will serve them throughout their lives. Humble and great, we doodle and sketch, share stories, and play out possibilities in our minds, enriching our adult lives with the child still within us. (56)

If children use drawing and pictures as one form of developing and growing as individuals, then they are capable of learning from that same medium. In addition, many children like stories that they can relate to, and a great deal of Seuss's plots consist of characters that children can identify with. Illustrated books are crucial to children's learning, not only in the academic sense but also on a personal level of understanding both themselves and the world. Dr. Seuss's books pave the way for children to learn about these things, but in an age-appropriate way; children still remain children through his bright, "wacky" cartoon-style illustrations.

In addition, it is interesting that while Dr. Seuss's books impact readers through their text and illustrations separately, the influence that they have as whole works of literature is astounding. For example, there are many issues concerning the world's environment. In the year 1969, novelist and environmentalist Wallace Stegner published a paper entitled "Conservation Equals Survival". The paper was largely forgotten until Dr. Seuss's *The Lorax* came along. Matthew Teorey, in his article "*The Lorax and Wallace Stegner: Inspiring Children's Environmental Activism*", he argued that Seuss's book popularized the message being sent to readers in Stegner's article. Teorey wrote,

Both Seuss and Stegner wanted to raise the common readers' ecological literacy by alerting them to the dangers posed by modern industrial

society and their role in achieving solutions. However, Stegner's essay quickly disappeared from the public consciousness, while Seuss's story remains relevant more than 40 years later, and his character, the Lorax, has become an important part of the environmentalist vernacular. (1)

While "Conversation Equals Survival" made valid points, the article was directed towards adults. Perhaps this was the reason behind the paper rapidly falling out of the public eye. Seuss's *The Lorax* does just the opposite of Stegner's paper: it is an illustrated book whose intended audience was children. Is it possible that adults tend to forget that children, albeit younger and less understanding of the world, are also capable of changing it? For instance, as Teorey discussed after reading *The Lorax*, one child was inspired to pick up trash around her neighborhood. Stegner wrote, "This small personal action by a concerned child illustrates the significance of composing a text that creates a compelling narrative and reaches the common reader on a personal level. Seuss's work compelled everyday people to love nature and act on its behalf by making it both the hero and the victim of *The Lorax*" (3). It is no secret that Seuss has a huge audience; if that one child was inspired to clean up their neighborhood, then one can imagine how many were inspired in total, particularly after this story became a huge blockbuster film. Children can make a huge difference in the world, and are capable of more than expected; the impact of Dr. Seuss's *The Lorax* is proof of that.

In addition to environmental issues, Seuss books have been used to connect children and their families to science, math, and literacy. In an article entitled, "Oh, What Seuss Can Induce: Using Intentionality to Connect Families with Classrooms through Science and Children's Literature", students took home activity kits to complete with their family. These kits were comprised of a Dr. Seuss book and an activity sheet. As stated in the article, "Dr. Seuss books have been in circulation long enough that several generations have grown up reading them. This shared history offers classroom teachers an opportunity to connect to the familiarity and comfort level of students and their family members" (Thomas et. al 2). The students were to read different Seuss books, depending upon which subject they were learning, and fill out the activity sheet with their family. For instance, one of Dr. Seuss's books, *The Foot Book*, was used in an activity kit that had children measure various items, such as their own and members of their household's feet. The study went on to describe how to construct activity kits for various ages and levels. Additionally, it also detailed how to alter the kits, who could use them, and why they are beneficial.

Apart from connecting students to environmental issues and various subjects, Dr. Seuss's books have also been used to stimulate the development of their social skills. It is important that children have developed social skills appropriate for their age because it leads to future

success in both school and society. In this case, the study focused on children beginning to start school; at their age, the appropriate social skills include: raising one's hands, taking turns with their peers, and actively listening to other students without interrupting them (Wolf and Baker 172). However, every student is different, and some may not attain social skills at the same pace or as efficiently as other students. In order to help students develop social skills more effectively, teachers began to use literature. As stated in "Another Use For Dr. Seuss: Reading For Social Skills,"

Although this approach can be used in any number of classroom settings, literature lessons already represent a variety of social experiences that are just waiting to be discussed. Integrating social skills instruction into a literature lesson allows the teacher to help students interpret story events, empathize with characters' feelings, and propose alternate outcomes. (qtd. in Wolf and Baker 173)

Regardless of their "wacky" vocabulary and cartoonish illustrations, the plot of many Dr. Seuss books deal with relevant issues. For example, as previously discussed, *The Lorax* teaches children about environmental issues. There are numerous Dr. Seuss books that were used in the study. Among these was *Yertle the Turtle*, as the theme involves Yertle bullying the other turtles. In addition, the theme of the following two books, *Horton Hatches the Egg*, and *The 500 Hats of Bartholomew Cubbins*, are perseverance. Surely, children who might not be as developed in certain subjects or areas as some of their other classmates could also relate to both bullying or being bullied and perseverance. These three books were not the only ones used. For example, if the teacher wanted to work on developing the student's sense of responsibility, the teacher would read the student(s) *Horton Hears a Who!* or *The Butter Battle Book*. Afterward, the teacher would lead the class in a discussion about what that particular skill looked like and what it meant, which in this case was responsibility. After reading *Horton Hears a Who!*, whose main character, Horton, had to take care of a speck on which a "Who" had inhabited, the teacher would give the students an egg or a grape sealed in small plastic bags (depending on the age), and would assign them to take care of it for a certain amount of time. If the students succeeded, they would be rewarded with tokens or classroom activities such as computer time (Wolf and Baker 177). This is another example of how Seuss books can be used to teach children social skills by applying the book's theme and plot to real-life situations.

In conclusion, even through all the success, Seuss books have not always been well received. In fact, it took quite a while for teachers, librarians, and adults alike to accept them, with some of Dr. Seuss's books remaining banned today. Many did not like his illustrations, did not prefer his American slang, or a combination of both (Nel 9). As stated by children's librarian Roth, "Dr. Seuss? Oh, we hide Dr. Seuss. . . well, not really. We keep him over

there on a *special* shelf. . .We'd really rather they read something better - something more like A. A. Milne" (Fensch). Children are at different developmental stages in their lives, and what benefits them will not necessarily be the same types of things that benefit adults; therefore, their books should not be held to the same criteria to which adult literature is held. Seuss books are more than just unusual pictures with silly words that hold children's attention for a few minutes before bedtime. From the first Seuss book, *And To Think That I Saw It On Mulberry Street*, published in 1937, to the very last Seuss book, *Oh! The Places You'll Go*, published in 1990, Seuss wrote children's literature for a span of over fifty years. Within that time span, Seuss certainly left his mark not only upon the world of children's literature but on the world itself. He created words that are frequently used today, such as the word "nerd" and "Grinch" (Korbeck 4), which is not an easy task to accomplish. In addition to Dr. Seuss's books inspiring children to take action regarding environmental issues, to engaging children in learning different subjects in an unconventional and enjoyable way, and to teaching children social skills, his books also teach children that it is okay to be different, and that they do not need to follow the status quo. After all, "Today you are you. That is truer than true. There is no one alive who is you-er than you" (Seuss)!

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