BY JESSICA SANDERS

Picture books tell the stories of animals who talk and mice that love cookies, but they’re so much more than illustrations on a page. They play a critical role in learning, helping students develop self-awareness and teaching them how to make inferences, among other things.

Don’t join the masses who feel these books are no longer necessary. See why your students, young and old, need picture books.

THE BENEFITS OF PICTURE BOOKS

LANGUAGE

Though most picture books only have about 500 words, they’re effective tools for teaching language. “Picture book writers must distill language to its very essence. This is why the text in the picture book is often rich, evocative and engaging. Hearing this type of language will enrich a child’s language development,” says Terry Pierce, a children’s book author.

QUESTIONS

Without words, your students must decide for themselves what’s happening in the book, which leads to questions: What do you think? What does my friend think? Is the character happy or sad? This is especially true for books with abstract images that are harder to decipher or understand.

SELF-AWARENESS

Picture books help children develop a sense of self. “Long before they can read, children respond to images in an effort to place themselves and the others in their lives into the world around them,” according to Reading is Fundamental. This makes picture books critical for academic learning and mental development.

PARTICIPATION AND IMAGINATION

Without words, picture books beg for reader participation; they require that your students use their imagination to determine what’s happening on the page.

Story circle is a great time for picture books. Choose a different person to tell their version of the story on each page. “The goal is for everything to come together in such a way that the reader of the book becomes a star performer and their audience adores them. The read-aloud experience should be so extraordinary that practically as soon as the book is closed, everyone just wants to open it up and do it again,” says Allyn Johnston and Marla Frazee of The Horn Book.

ENGAGEMENT

The theatrical aspect of picture books helps to keep all your students engaged and interested—everyone wants to act out or tell their version of what’s happening. Use this as an opportunity to weave in a lesson that you think may be especially difficult to teach while they’re sitting at their desks.

More: Encourage More At-Home Reading With Whooo’s Reading

THEY’RE NOT JUST FOR LITTLE KIDS

Picture books may seem inappropriate for children in middle school, but that’s not necessarily the case. Especially when following the Common Core State Standards. The 7th Common Core reading anchor (which extends through 12th grade) is focused on integrating different mediums into reading, and image-heavy content is recommended.

Outside of the Common Core, picture books can teach older students to:

Watch for clues: Middle school students have a larger vocabulary and understanding of plot and characters than younger ones, so they can use these skills to learn about pulling context clues out of the few details that are provided.

Make inferences: Similar to following context clues, older students can be taught about how to make inferences based on the little information presented. Stop at various points in the story and ask students to make an inference based on what they’ve read so far.

Use a new perspective: If there’s more than one character, students can take turns discussing the story from the perspective of someone other than the main character. This helps them dissect the book and articulate certain aspects of the plot in a more complex way.

Picture books have made their way into the hearts of many young readers and become a critical piece of the learning puzzle. But remember, they aren’t just for little kids. Students young and old will benefit from these classic books.

Have you used picture books for lessons in your classroom? What are you favorite books to share with your students?