



Play-ifying Shaun Tan's *Tales from the Inner City*

Facilitating Elementary-aged Children's Understanding of and Emotional Interaction with Tan's Stories

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Abstract

This article explores the use of play-based learning to foster children's emotional engagement with Shaun Tan's *Tales from the Inner City* to promote empathy toward animals and reflection on environmental issues. Building on research highlighting the cognitive and emotional benefits of interactive, multisensory activities for children, we propose two creative classroom activities connected to Tan's stories "Crocodiles" and "Butterflies." Both activities are designed to strengthen emotional intelligence, empathy, and discussion skills, while also providing sensory engagement particularly beneficial for neurodivergent learners. We argue that integrating literary discussions with arts and crafts provides a rich, inclusive learning environment that supports emotional and intellectual development.

Keywords

multisensory arts and crafts, ecological community, animal welfare, empathy

Play-based learning is a technique held in high regard by many experts in the field of education for its capability to create strong and lasting connections in the developing brains of children. When the activity is well-thought-out and fitted to the individual needs of the classroom and the topic being discussed, it can influence the way children interact with and perceive the subject at hand and encourage them to delve deeper into it. According to Havziu-Ismaili (2023), when children learn through play, different spheres of their lives, such as home, school and the world at large are brought together instead of standing in isolation from one another. For children, play is a natural way of learning and understanding the world, as well as developing creativity by engaging with different materials and objects. These objects shape the meaning, form and technique of the activity, and this is why it is so important to construct each activity with the materials that will best serve the intended learning goals. The author poses that for a game to serve its function, it “must fulfill a multitude of pedagogical requirements, must respond to the educational purpose with content and form, must be accessible to children, must stimulate children’s interest, influence the development of creativity, personality, etc.” (pp. 311-312).

We propose a way of cultivating children’s empathy and emotional intelligence by encouraging them to empathize with the experiences of animals and consider perspectives different from human-centered ones. By making choices and facing the consequences within an interactive narrative, children are encouraged to develop a deeper understanding of the impact of their actions. Through providing a series of interactive illustrations to the stories from Shaun Tan’s *Tales from the Inner City*, our method aims to enable children to experience the stories through multisensory engagement. Using interactive illustration to involve children in storytelling creates immersive experiences that transcend traditional narrative boundaries and may foster young readers’ active engagement, promote comprehension and creativity, and enhance empathy toward animal suffering.

“Crocodiles”

The narrative paints an image of crocodiles living in an urban setting: a floor in an office building. The animals live between the floors, with the office workers being blissfully unaware of their existence. Their floor has been adapted into a jungle-like environment in which the crocodiles seem to be fairly content.

The story highlights the intrusion of urban areas into natural habitats and its consequent impact on wildlife. The presence of crocodiles in a city setting serves as a stark reminder of how urban expansion can displace animals from their natural environments, forcing them to adapt to human-dominated landscapes. The narrative

touches on the consequences of environmental degradation. The theme of crocodiles in the city could be seen as a metaphor for the broader issues of habitat destruction and pollution, which highlights the urgency of conservation efforts to protect natural habitats and ensure the survival of various species. Because Tan's story "critically contests anthropocentrism and human exceptionalism" (Kern, 2021, p. 461), we propose an activity focused on creating the environment for the crocodiles as a way to prompt children to consider their responsibilities towards the environment and identify how human actions affect the natural world. Creating personalized crocodile cutouts aims to make children more emotionally invested in the activity and to encourage them to form a deeper connection with nature, which in turn might be helpful in bridging a divide between familiar urban life and the strangeness of the wildlife.

Crocodiles: Environment building exercise

Supplies

- strip magnets
- A4/letter size paper for printing and a color printer (or print at a printing shop)
- scissors
- (optional) laminating machine and pouches (will make the assets survive more sessions)
- (optional) blank crocodile cutouts (wooden ones can be bought online, or you can make your own out of posterboard)

Preparation before class

- Print out the printables attached.
- (optional) Laminate the materials.
- Cut them out.
- (optional) Cut up and glue the magnets on the back of the assets.
- Lay the background on the whiteboard/desk. Arrange the items around the background. If the group is larger than five to ten students, you might opt for the cardboard version instead of the magnetic one, make multiple copies of the pictures, and separate the students into smaller groups so that they have equal access to the items.

In class

1. Distribute copies of the text to the class and read the story aloud to the students (or ask them to take turns reading aloud if their reading level allows for it).
2. (optional) Distribute the crocodile cutouts and encourage the students to decorate them however they want to. This will create an emotional connection between the student and their crocodile and facilitate compassion. While the children are painting, talk about crocodiles. What do the students know about them?
3. Encourage the students to put their crocodiles in the middle of the background. Ask them what environment the crocodiles would want to live in. Is this room (point to the background) a good environment for a crocodile?
4. After a brief exchange of ideas, ask the students to work together and pick the best items for the environment. It is good if the students have debates over which items would be the best while doing this activity, as this encourages broader thinking and listening to feedback.
5. After the students are done, discuss their work. Questions you might want to ask are as follows:
 - a. Do you think your crocodiles are happy in the environment you created? Why/why not?
 - b. Is there something that's not in your inventory (of items) that you think would also fit in this environment?
 - c. How should we live/or change the way we live so that animals live better lives?
 - d. Optionally, if you find that some students in your class have trouble paying attention to stories being read aloud, you might want to read the story aloud to them while they are playing with the assets instead of before the activity. The sensory input from the assets might help them listen more attentively.

“Butterflies”

In this vignette-like narrative, a moment in time is captured when the day-to-day busy urban life is interrupted by a swarm of butterflies that seem to come out of nowhere and vanish into nothingness just as quickly as they showed up. The swarm fills the city with color just for a moment, sparking a sense of wonder in the passers-by.

“Butterflies” explores themes of creativity and childlike wonder through its depiction of a collective reaction to a natural phenomenon. The descent of

uncountable numbers of butterflies, described as “beyond even the concept of counting” (Tan, 2018, p. 17), transcends ordinary life and invokes a sense of infinite possibilities, reflecting the essence of creativity. The inexplicable nature and universal impact of this event—drawing everyone away from their routines—highlight a shared spontaneous joy reminiscent of a child’s reaction to magic. This contrasts starkly with the adult world’s need for rationality and quantification, allowing for a pure, uncalculating appreciation of the moment. Kari-Anne Jørgensen writes that “wonder and the development of environmental consciousness are mutually connected. The sense of ‘wonder’ as a driving force in children’s curiosity and emotional involvement requires an openness to the environment” (2015, p. 17). Children’s inherent curiosity, amplified by wonder at the animal world, directly fuels reflection on animal welfare. Observing animals’ behaviors and characteristics sparks questions about their needs and experiences. This inquisitive state fosters empathy, prompting children to consider animal perspectives. Consequently, this natural curiosity nurtured by wonder lays a crucial foundation for developing pro-animal welfare attitudes and ethical considerations. Introducing this story to children aged seven to nine might encourage them not to let go of their child-like wonder and enable them to think about other things in the world that they think are wondrous, thus resulting in a bigger awareness of the preciousness of the natural environment.

The activity we propose below meant to encourage children to explore their creativity and wonder through arts and crafts. Children’s inherent curiosity, amplified by wonder at the animal world, directly fuels reflection on animal welfare. Observing animal behaviors and characteristics sparks questions about their needs and experiences. This inquisitive state fosters empathy, prompting children to consider animal perspectives. Consequently, this natural curiosity, nurtured by wonder, lays a crucial foundation for developing pro-animal welfare attitudes and ethical considerations. Creating a personalized snow globe lets the child express their current fascinations with the world. The act of encapsulating the child’s wonder in a jar may prove to have a lasting impact on their confidence and fearlessness in freely expressing themselves, since the encouragement of creative expression makes the child feel seen and understood.

The proposed discussion following the activity aims to enable children to share their interests and thoughts with their peers. It is important to moderate this discussion and act if any child tries to put their peer’s ideas down. By witnessing mutual curiosity and respect, children are taught that even though they might not understand why someone might be interested in something, this does not mean that they can ridicule

it. This is, apart from exploring the concept of wonder, primarily an exercise in empathy and discussion skills as well as mutual respect.

Butterflies - snow globes

Supplies

- One jar of any size per student (you may ask the students to bring their own)
- butterfly-shaped glitter or sequins (biodegradable)
- kids' non-toxic glass paints and brushes
- water
- glycerin
- waterproof glue

In class

1. Distribute the paints and show the children how to paint a cityscape along the rim of the jar. Encourage them to be creative and paint whatever kind of landscape they want.
2. Help the children pour the butterfly glitter into their jars.
3. Fill up the jars with water and glycerin (3 tbsp of glycerin per 1 cup of water)
4. Seal the jars with glue. Do not let the children play with the snow globes until the glue is completely set.
5. While the children are playing with their snow globes, discuss their work. The questions you might want to ask are as follows:
 - a. What are some things in the natural world that you think are magical/wonderful/inspiring?
 - b. What can we do to invite more wonder into our lives?

Ending Thoughts

While we propose activities for only two of Shaun Tan's stories, we believe that it is possible and beneficial to construct age-appropriate activities to go along with any of the tales (or any story of any author, for that matter). We encourage educators working especially with children under the age of twelve to engage their students in frequent manual activities in conjunction with insightful discussion and mindfulness exercises, as they have been proven to be highly conducive to healthy development of motor skills and emotions. The discussion of literary works combined with arts and crafts projects may suit many classrooms, but we especially hope that neurodivergent children may

benefit immensely from the sensory input of the activities. Tan's works encourage compassion for and the mindfulness of the world around us. They can teach both children and adults that humankind is only a small part of this planet, and other non-human beings should also be considered in our daily lives.

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