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Critiquing school: The impact of picture books and materials on student writing

We sometimes experience young students' writing as repetitive and uninspiring. It doesn't need to be. This study examines the work of third-grade students engaged in design projects based on examining the art of favorite picture books. This led to creating covers for their social narrative picture books: fictional texts about critical issues that were important to students. These books represent activist literacies, written to effect change. We asked: What happens when children intra-act with a series of design projects related to their social narrative books? How do multiple encounters with materials impact students' socio-political intentions for their books? By analysing the students' cover art and writing through the lens of new materialism (Barad, 2007; Leander & Boldt, 2013; Lenz Taguchi, 2011), we explicate the ways in which students gained competence and pleasure as designers; their attribution of materials as performative agents; and the complexity of artistic representations that enhanced the political intentions of their books. Integrating activist writing with design explorations led students to represent their ideas in ways that brought deeper meanings to their books in unexpected ways.