

Book Review:

Title: Suzie Goes to School

Author: Charlotte Olson

Reviewer: Declan Nigel Dowkes (Twitter: [@earlyyearsdec](https://twitter.com/earlyyearsdec))

Reviewer credentials: Postgraduate researcher in Early Childhood Studies

Overall rating: ★★★★★



Initial thoughts:

When I was initially approached by the author about conducting this review, I was first drawn to the title of the story in particular compared to other children's books written by the same author because the transition to school, although a common part of childhood, often triggers multiple different positive and negative emotions for children and families alike. Once I received the story, I was immediately struck by the seemingly deliberate choice of bold colours and fonts for both the front and back covers which along with the positive persona of the main character Suzie, in my view would no doubt appear an attractive read to any child.

Author and illustrator:

Although I was not familiar with either the author (Charlotte Olson) or illustrator (Nick Roberts) prior to being asked to write this review, it appears however that they both have a sound understanding of the daily routine of the school day which is reflected in the detailed illustrations and dialogue throughout the book. This level of description, is fundamental to preparing children for the transition to school. Especially for children who have yet to experience any formal early years provision prior to starting school. After taking time to familiarise myself with similar books by the author in the 'Sammy and Suzie Titles' series, it is refreshing to see that the author is not afraid to begin preparing children for big life experiences in an age and stage appropriate way. For example, 'Suzie Goes to a Funeral' and 'Suzie Goes on an Aeroplane'. Both topics of which, most children are likely to experience during childhood.

Genre:

From the author's background working in the early years sector, I would suggest she has written this story with the intention of using it as a tool for facilitating meaningful discussion between adults and children surrounding the planned transition of school. If this was her intention, I would agree with this thought process and perhaps go further by suggesting this story could be used as the basis for a series of meaningful

activities in preschool settings underpinned by the Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS) Development Matters guidance. I believe by doing this, it would provoke additional discussions and enable children to express their own thoughts and emotions on preparing for school. The author may wish to consider designing such activity plans in view of enhancing the learning experience, and indeed understanding, of the planned transition facing children. Allowing caregivers/parents to better understand the needs of individual children in an attempt to make their individual transitions to school as successful as possible.

Characters:

As is an expected feature with all of the stories in the 'Sammy and Suzie Titles' series, 'Suzie Goes to School' centres around the lived experiences of two four/five year olds trying to navigate through life's big challenges facing children for the first time. The characters' experiences in this particular story, where possible, aim to demonstrate to the reader the exciting and independent prospect of starting school and in my opinion, they effectively highlight to young children that a transition is a collective experience shared not only by themselves as individuals but, one experienced by peers as well. However in the spirit of constructive criticism, I would ideally have preferred to have seen a more intentional effort to strive towards diverse representation that all children can relate too throughout the book. I commend the illustrator for including a reference to the Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic (BAME) community (as seen on page 12 below) which is admittedly not always seen in other stories of a similar nature although, more visual consideration towards children with visible Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND) and children with same sex parents for example would be welcome and something which the author may wish to consider when writing/designing future stories fit to reflect modern childhoods.



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Writing style:

In my view, the writing style is clear and coherent with a familiar feature in a child's early childhood of the effective use of constant rhyme flowing throughout the story. This repetition of a familiar format makes the tale accessible to children in an age

and stage appropriate way. Particular words such as “Hooray Hooray” are highlighted in bold and used to reinforce positive dialogue. However, although the writing style used by the author is suitable for her intended demographic, I would kindly suggest she considers an easier to read font for future stories. This would be especially useful for children who are only just at the development stage where they are learning to read and write. Forming letters such as ‘a’ (see example from the story highlighted below), may become confusing to children. I would recommend a font such as ‘Comic Sands MS’ would perhaps be more appropriate.

at all

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Emotions:

It is apparent that the author constantly makes conscious attempts to reassure children through the positive use of language whilst, reminding children to embrace any anxious feelings they may have. This is particularly reflective in the dialogue below and teaches children the importance of discussing and embracing both positive and negative emotions:

“Mummy gives Suzie an extra big hug and a big wave goodbye, They are both feeling sad, but don’t worry, it’s ok to have a cry”.

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As the reader, the story made me smile from beginning to end in the belief that starting school for the first time is an exciting period in a child’s life full of new adventures and lots of fun. Through the use of language and countless nostalgic relatable experiences by the writer, I was able to picture myself in Suzie’s shoes and as an Early Years Practitioner, reinforce the value of play-based learning in my mind.

Concluding remarks:

In conclusion, I thoroughly enjoyed exploring the adventures that Sammy and Suzie have in this book. It is written in a way that reflects the realistic daily routine of the first day of school whilst, acknowledging it can be a scary time in a child’s life. The informed and easy to follow plot makes ‘Suzie Goes to School’ an age and stage appropriate story to use in a child’s home or in an early years setting. It is well illustrated and I particularly liked the constant attempts to remove gender stereotypes from the characters. For example, gender neutral colours and toys (see image below). Overall, it was a joy to read and one which I will be using to enhance the way I approach school readiness in early years settings in the near future.



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