Voices in the Park, Voices in the Classroom: Readers Responding to Postmodern Picture Books

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Abstract

As the publication of picture books that contain meta-fictive or postmodern elements increases, research concerning how intermediate grade readers respond and construct meaning in transaction with these texts is important. This study explores readers' responses and discussions focusing on the picture book *Voices in the Park* by Anthony Browne. Utilizing discussion transcripts and response journal entries, this article focuses on how readers deal with the non-linear aspects of the picture book, the interplay between written text and illustrations, and how these readers construct symbolic connections to their own world and experiences.

Trying to understand how readers respond to the texts they read, in particular children's literature, has an extensive history in literacy education and research (Marshall, 2000). For several decades, reading researchers and literary theorists have used readers' written and oral responses to literature as a window into the reading process, the construction of meaning in transaction with texts, and the socio-cultural factors affecting interpretation and understanding (Beach, 1993; Tompkins, 1980). Because the processes of reading and comprehension are not directly accessible, researchers have relied on the oral, written and artistic responses to texts that are generated during and after the reading experience to understand how readers respond to, and comprehend, texts.

Within the umbrella label of "reader response" there are numerous differences and nuances that become apparent when one reviews the literature on the subject. As a reaction to the New Criticism's focus on the text and the intentional disregard for the author and the reader, reader response theories and research focus on the role of the reader and the social context of the reading event in constructing meaning in transaction with a piece of literature (McKormick, 1994). Research on reader response has focused on variations among readers (Bleich, 1978; Holland, 1975), variations across time (Applebee, 1978; Galda, 1982), variations across texts (Squire, 1964), and variations across reading contexts (Hickman, 1981; Kiefer, 1983). Each of these studies has
investigated both commonalities and idiosyncrasies in regards to the types of responses generated by readers. McKormick (1994) suggests that readers’ responses fall on a continuum between autonomous, where readers construct meaning for themselves, and socially determined, where the socio-cultural and historical influences on the reader play a significant role in the meanings generated.

Two of the primary methodologies used to generate and analyze readers’ responses to literature and other texts are: a) verbal protocol analysis (Afflerbach & Johnston, 1984; Ericsson, 1988; Pressley & Afflerbach, 2000), sometimes referred to as think alouds, and b) analysis of transcripts constructed from literature study group discussions (Dias, 1992; Eeds & Wells, 1989). These research approaches have been used to understand the ways readers generate, share and negotiate meaning in transaction with literature. There are inherent challenges with any mode of representing readers’ understandings or responses to a text, because the reading process and construction of meanings are essentially invisible processes (Smagorinsky, 2001). Because of the inherent challenges accessing readers’ thinking processes and the complexities of the reading process, most research on readers’ responses to literature has focused on oral, written, artistic, and dramatic modalities as a window into readers’ responses and thinking.

**Children’s Literature in the Elementary Reading Curriculum**

Selecting children’s literature to read to children and include in a literature-based reading framework is not a disinterested process, nor can it be accomplished by direct referral to universally objective criteria. Teachers select what they will read aloud to children based on their constructions of childhood and the versions of reality they want to present to their students (Nodelman & Reimer, 2003). Commercial reading programs also use selections of authentic children’s literature in their anthologies as part of the instructional scope and sequence of skills and strategies to be taught (Shannon & Goodman, 1994). However, the inclusion of literature in the reading curriculum does not signify the theoretical perspectives nor the instructional approaches used in conjunction with children’s literature (Serafini, 2003). As the resources used in reading instructional frameworks shift to include authentic children’s literature, a parallel shift in theoretical understandings, from reliance on the text as container of meaning to a view of the reader as active participant in the construction of meaning, is necessary.

As classroom teachers receive more and more pressure to “sanitize” the reading curriculum, the texts they choose to read and include in their reading instructional approaches tend to be linear, modernist examples of literature, that contains little overt controversial material (Taxel, 1999). Because of this trend,
educators should be concerned about the reduction of reading materials used for independent reading and reading instruction to examples of linear, modernist texts. This limiting of reading materials and instructional approaches does a disservice to the young readers being taught in today’s elementary classrooms, and in effect, limits the meanings they are able to construct and negotiate with other readers and the comprehension strategies and processes they draw upon to make sense of what they are reading (Hammerberg, 2004).

Postmodern Influences on Children’s Picture Books

Children's literature has undergone tremendous changes since the early part of the twentieth century. Evolving from texts that were designed to impart morals and traditional values to multicultural literature intended to expose readers to the variety of cultures and ideas throughout the world, the inclusion of children's literature in the elementary classroom has expanded exponentially (Harris, 1992). One documented trend in children's literature, in particular children's picture books, has been a shift from linear, modernist texts to non-linear, meta-fictive, postmodern texts (Goldstone, 1999; Paley, 1992; Seelinger Trites, 1994).

Postmodern picture books contain various meta-fictive elements, including non-linear plots, self-referential writing and illustrations, narrators that directly address the reader, polyphonic narrators, numerous inter-textual references, blending of genres, and indeterminate plot, characters and settings (McCallum, 1996). Although Lewis (2001) makes a distinction between meta-fictive devices as an “a-historical notion” and postmodernism as an “historical phenomenon,” for the purpose of this article I consider picture books that employ meta-fictive devices as being postmodern picture books.

While content analysis of children's picture books with postmodern influences has been ongoing, research on readers' responses to these types of picture books has not been as readily available. Pantaleo (2004) suggests that the dearth in research focusing on readers’ responses to postmodern literature, in particular postmodern picture books, is problematic due to the expanding amount of these books being published and included in elementary classrooms. Pantaleo (2004) writes, “although researchers and theorists have written about meta-fiction [postmodern texts], there is a lack of research that has actually explored students’ literary understandings of and responses to books with meta-fictive characteristics” (p.2).

There has been a call for understanding how readers make meaning while reading and the responses they construct in transaction with children’s literature for many years (Meek, 1988). Rosenblatt (1978) suggests, “a better understanding of how children ‘learn to mean’ in specific contexts should yield signals for those involved in all aspects of reading, especially research on
response to literature and the teaching of literature” (p. 41). Some researchers and theorists (Beach, 1993; Lewis, 2000) would extend this concern to include the limited perspective of reader response theories that focus primarily on the reader as an autonomous constructor of meaning and minimizes the importance of the socio-cultural and historical aspects of the construction of meanings in response to literature.

The Study

This qualitative study, conducted in an intermediate grade classroom in a small rural town in the western United States, focused on the types of responses that readers constructed to picture books with postmodern or meta-fictive elements. Utilizing transcripts from audio-taped classroom discussions, students’ literature response journals and classroom field notes as data collection sources, this study investigated the types of students’ responses to postmodern literature that were generated and how these responses were shared and negotiated during classroom discussions.

A larger study is presently being conducted analyzing students’ responses to a series of postmodern picture books using verbal protocols for collecting data. While this larger study focuses on 18 different postmodern picture books, this article focuses on the discussions and response journals that centered on one book in particular, *Voices in the Park* by Anthony Browne (2001).

*Voices in the Park*

*Voices in the Park* by Anthony Browne (2001) is a picture book depicting the story of an outing in the park from four individual perspectives. Browne tells this story through four distinct voices: a) a mother (First Voice), b) a father (Second Voice), c) the mother’s son (Third Voice), and d) the father’s daughter (Fourth Voice). The voices are constructed separately, yet each voice is intricately connected to tell the story of how class, prejudice, control, hope and friendship determine the perspectives of the four characters. This story is a continuation of an earlier book, *A Walk in the Park* (Browne, 1977).

Browne relies on surrealistic imagery in many of his picture books. His detailed illustrations are used to convey characters’ emotions and the imagination of the children in his stories (Browne, 1994). In describing his work on *A Walk in the Park*, Browne states, “when I put jokes or details of surrealistic stuff in the background I try to make it have a point, I try to give it relevance” (Browne, 1994, pg. 179). Throughout *Voices in the Park*, the reader encounters Santa Claus, the Mona Lisa, the Queen of England and other unexpected images. These images add to the mood and emotions expressed by the four separate characters. Although the text is rather linear within each of the four voic-
es, considered together, the voices represent a polyphonic narrative where no one perspective is privileged over the others.

Research questions that drove this inquiry were: (1) What were students’ initial responses to picture books that contained meta-fictive or postmodern elements? (2) What challenges did these picture books present for readers? and (3) How did discussion help readers work through their challenges?

**Context of the Study**

The study explores the types of responses to picture books that contain postmodern and meta-fictive elements constructed by readers in an intermediate multiage classroom. Twenty children, ages eight through twelve, had been in a multiage classroom setting for one, two or three years. A workshop approach to reading instruction had been utilized by this teacher for several years (Atwell, 1998). Students were read aloud to every day, children’s literature was discussed as a whole class and in literature study groups, and the reading curriculum was organized into units of study, where books and experiences were selected and created based on an organizing theme or topic.

**Voices in the Park** was used as a cornerstone text (Serafini, 2001) for the unit of study, meaning this book was read and discussed in depth over several days before introducing any of the other books in the unit of study. The first reading of **Voices in the Park** introduced readers to the story and provided opportunities for initial responses and discussion. The second reading of the story was done the next day and involved whole class and small group discussions. Classroom wall charts were used to preserve and represent readers’ interpretations of the text and illustrations. These charts were transcribed and later used as a potential data source. The third reading focused on a teacher designed version of the book, where the teacher typed the text of **Voices in the Park** on several sheets of paper, keeping the line breaks consistent with the original text, but leaving out the illustrations. The final reading focused on the illustrations alone. The teacher made color copies of the entire book and displayed the book in storyboard fashion on a wall in the classroom. Discussions took place after each reading and transcripts were constructed from the audiotapes recorded during each discussion.

Students wrote each day in their individual literature response logs and in a community literature response log called their “walking journal”. A walking journal is a reader response journal that is shared among students in the class. As each student responded to a particular picture book, he/she walked the journal to another student, who then has the option of responding to any of the entries already included in the journal or create a new strand of response. These entries were used as data sources, in addition to the discussion transcripts and field notes to interpret the discussions and meanings constructed in connection with **Voices in the Park**.
Throughout this research study, transcriptions were generated from classroom discussions. Each discussion was transcribed by the researcher's graduate assistant and were checked for accuracy and consistency in coding by the researcher. The response journals were analyzed and used to support or contest assertions generated through the analysis of the literature discussions.

Results

The data analysis procedures used in this study drew upon Erickson's interpretive model of qualitative research (Erickson, 1986). According to Erickson (1986) "the basic task of data analysis is to generate assertions that vary in scope and level of inference, largely through induction, and to establish an evidentiary warrant for the assertions one wishes to make." (p. 146). The researcher looked for "key linkages" among various pieces of data, which can be described as patterns of generalizations within the data collected.

Theoretical and research memos, written during the data collection period, provided an impetus for the data analysis. Utilizing a constant comparative analysis of the data being collected (Strauss & Corbin, 1998), transcripts were read as they were generated and again at the end of the data collection period. Theoretical memos were used as a resource for theorizing about what was observed and the data being collected. These memos were used to provide an initial foundation for the data analysis as it proceeded.

After three readings of the entire data set, particular assertions were generated and the data set was analyzed, searching for confirming and discrepant evidence concerning the assertions put forth. The discussion transcripts served as the primary data source, while students' response journal entries and teacher reflective entries, emailed to the researcher each week by the classroom teacher, served as a secondary data source, and more importantly as a member check focusing on the assertions the researcher was constructing.

Data suggested that students were attending to three aspects of postmodern picture books in their discussion of Voices in the Park to a greater degree than other aspects. Students discussed the non-linear structure of Voices in the Park, the images included in the illustrations and their possible symbolic meanings, and the relationship or interplay between the illustrations and the written text contained in the picture book. Each of the assertions suggested by the discussion transcripts were discussed with the classroom teacher and confirmed through member checks and the students' response journal entries. Disconfirming data was minimal and the three key assertions remained robust throughout the data analysis procedures.
Responding to Postmodern Picture Books

In creating *Voices in the Park*, Anthony Browne utilized several meta-fictional devices or postmodern elements that students attended to during the reading and discussions of this book. Data analysis led to three assertions being generated: First, how readers considered the non-linear arrangement of the four separate narratives presented in the book, in particular the disruption of the time sequence of each ensuing narrative; Second, how students developed their understandings of the interplay between the visual and textual elements of book; Third, how students constructed various symbolic representations offered in the text and illustrations. I will provide examples from the discussions and commentary for each assertion generated. Throughout the article, all student names are pseudonyms.

**Disrupting the linear sequence of the narrative**

A prominent meta-fictional device used in many postmodern picture books is the distortion or disruption of the time sequence and the relationship among events within the narrative of the text (Pantaleo, 2004). In *Voices in the Park*, each individual voice is presented sequentially in the text, yet each voice actually describes an event that took place simultaneously. In other words, the narrative repeats the same event, namely a trip to the park, through each of the four voices presented in the book. Browne uses four different voices or characters to present four individual perspectives focusing on their trip to the park. Each voice provides the reader with a different focus and story line, and the illustrations help develop the mood and unique perspective of each voice. In order to make sense of the book as a whole, students had to come to terms with the non-linear characteristics of the four narratives presented. The following selection from the class discussion took place after the initial reading of the book:

Teacher: Did you notice anything strange about the way the book was organized?
Cathy: Like how there were four stories, and not just one?
Adam: I liked how one person told their story, and time went by. And then, the time would go back for the next voice to say what they wanted to say.
Carson: That was weird, and I didn’t get it at first.
Teacher: Even though the voices were in order, First-Second-Third-Fourth Voice, they were all taking place at the same time.
Cathy: All the voices were happening at the same time, but just in different places.
Shannon: It was like a circular story for each voice. They always came
to the park and they always left the park.
Eric: It's kind of a weird book because it just suddenly ended. It just ended and didn't have a usual ending, a happy ending. Well, I mean it had a happy ending, but it just ended weirdly.
Teacher: Okay, it ended weirdly. I told you some of them [the books in the study] were going to be kind of weird.
Aaron: It's kind of weird because each perspective was just like, 'you go to the park and you go home.' I think they [Browne] should have put more in the story.

Students' expectations about how the narrative text in a picture book is constructed and organized, and how to approach reading this particular picture book, was challenged during the initial reading of *Voices in the Park*. Students were challenged by the non-linear structure and what they considered an abrupt ending to the story. Unlike traditional narrative structures that contain an introduction or orientation, rising tension and climax, followed by a denouement and closing of the narrative, *Voices in the Park* had four separate narratives, each with its own narrative structure to make sense of during reading. Students had to recognize this unique structure and realize what was happening throughout the book.

In several response journal entries, students wrote that these books were stupid, or that they didn't “get it.” One student wrote, “I really thought that there was no point in the book because it just had people or gorillas just go to the park... it's pretty much the same story again.” Another student wrote, “I don't like the book because it's hard to understand.” Some students seemed to enjoy the unique structures and reading demands that these postmodern books presented books throughout the unit of study, while others simply stated the books were weird and were reticent to go back and read through them more than once.

**The Interplay of Written Text and Illustrations**

Another important element students had to address while reading these postmodern picture books was the interplay between textual and visual components of the book. Describing the interplay as either symmetrical, enhancing or contradictory, Nikolajeva and Scott, (2000) explain in detail how the written text and visual elements, in particular the illustrations and design elements, work in concert to create a meaningful story. Each element of a picture book—the written text, the design features, the peritext or front and back matter, and the illustrations—is a separate meaning system used by authors and illustrators to construct a story. Readers of postmodern picture books often encounter enhancing and contradictory relationships between text and illustrations, where the written text and the illustrations present different meanings and must be considered in conjunction with each other to understand the various levels of the story.
After the initial reading of the book, the teacher read the book a second time and the following selection was part of the second day’s discussion:

Andrew: I wonder why he [Anthony Browne] even put text to it?
Teacher: Why what?
Andrew: Why the author even put text to it. Because it’s like a person went to the park and had a good time, a person went to the park trying to find a job, a person went to the park and had to yell at her kid and dog. Why even put text to it?
Teacher: So you think the pictures told the story?
Andrew: Better than the text did.
Carson: It would have been better as just a picture book with no words.
Brittney: Just thinking about it... the pictures don’t tell what the text is doing. It just shows, like the background could be gloomy. That’s only the mood, it’s not like what is going on. Like when the Mom yells at the little boy and tells the dog, nicely, to come back. You wouldn’t have known that without the text.
Teacher: So the text is supporting the pictures?
Shannon: The text is sort of like a caption.
Susan: This book is so simple that it’s hard to understand.
Teacher: If it’s so simple, why is it hard to understand?
Susan: Because we’re used to reading more complex stories, with more in the text. Then, this text is so much simpler, it’s hard for us to understand it.
Brittney: Like I was saying before, it’s like the voices without the text, it wouldn’t explain the characters. The fourth voice, how she said that her Dad had been fed up, I can picture her perfectly because reading each voice, I can picture the characters because of the font and the voice.

The next day, the teacher began the discussion by taking up from where they had left off the previous day. The teacher asked if there were any ideas about the book that anyone might like to share to begin the discussion. Brittney began the third day’s discussion with the following comment:

I went back and looked through the book again, and then I noticed in the pictures, they show the mood and the character development and all that kind of stuff. Just in the pictures, I noticed the text didn’t have that but the pictures, when the boy was sad it showed gray behind him and when he was happy all the colors are bright. It just kind of depended on the mood they were in.
Brittney indicated that she had spent time with the book outside of the
class discussion investigating its structures and elements. The class discussions suggest that students felt the text was used to represent the actual events taking place in the story, or literal level of meaning, while the illustrations were used to represent the emotions, moods and feelings of the characters. Students were interested in whether the text was a necessary component and whether the text supported the illustrations or the illustrations enhanced the text. Although these two systems of meaning are used in concert to construct meaning from a picture book, each element presents different possible meanings and helps readers to understand the book as a whole.

As I have described earlier, *Voices in the Park* was presented in three different formats during this unit of study. First, the book was read as a book in its entirety and was presented as a picture book. Second, the text was typed up for students containing no visual elements of the book and read by itself. Third, the illustrations were presented in storyboard fashion on the wall of the classroom so students could attend to the illustrations simultaneously. By “disrupting” the traditional format of this picture book, students were invited to attend to the different systems of meaning used to create the book. This disruption of the book forced readers to attend to the textual and visual elements of the story individually, which eventually helped them to attend to the interplay and relationships between textual and visual systems.

When the students were presented with the written text of the picture book typed onto sheets of paper by the teacher so that they could focus on the written text without the illustrations, the students noticed elements of the story that they did not focus on when reading the story as a complete picture book. As part of one of the discussions, the students made particular comments about the way the story was written without regard to the illustrations:

Kelsey: I noticed, in like all of the voices, that the sentences don’t have a lot of detail. They’re just kind of chopped up, really short sentences. Like when he [Charles] said, I’m good at climbing trees, so I showed her how to do it. He didn’t really explain in any detail.

Adam: They’re just plain.

Kelsey: It sounds like it’s from, like, a kid’s perspective. It really does.

Teacher: The whole thing?

Kelsey: Yeah.

Teacher: You don’t find it to be sophisticated writing.

Kelsey: Yeah. It’s just kind of short sentences. It’s like how a little kid would talk.

Julia: I found the First Voice, the mom, she’s so strict and mean, that she has made Charles not really be able to see that life is really good.

Teacher: So she couldn’t even help him see that?

Julia: Yeah. She’s so mean to him. She was discouraging Charles, but
then the Second Voice, even though he was like low on money, he didn’t have much, he still had hope. So that was kind of the opposite.

Teacher: Okay. Let’s go back to what Kelsey was saying that it is not sophisticated writing. Does anybody agree with that? What would have been your ideas without any illustrations?

Brian: I think it made completely no sense because he didn’t really explain much in the text. The pictures I think kind of explained it.

Eric: The First Voice, well the Second Voice, I got a lot out of that font. It was big and bold, and the dad is just a quiet, depressed guy, but he’s kind of nice.

Teacher: So the font is symbolic of... [asking for response]

Eric: That person [in the story]. Like the Third Voice, Charles, the font is small, and he is kind of wimpy.

Teacher: Would you have gotten that from just looking at the text without any pictures?

Jeff: Like Eric said, I wouldn’t have known that he [Charles] was kind of a wimp until I went to the Third Voice section. So kind of the fonts describe what the people [characters] really are.

Each system presented different information, and the combination of the two created yet, another layer of meaning. This “synergistic” characteristic of the relationship between text and illustrations, suggests that what is available by considering the text and the illustrations in concert is more important than considering them as separate entities (Sipe, 1998).

Students were trying to make sense of the story and were using both illustrations, design elements, for example the font used for each voice, and written text to do so. Some attended more to the written text, while others relied more on the illustrations. Because of their experiences with numerous picture books, students expected the illustrations to bring a great deal to the story. This may be due to the extensive reading and discussion of picture books that occurred in this classroom throughout the school year. During interviews with the teacher, and by observing the extensive collection of picture books in this intermediate grade classroom, students in this class had numerous opportunities to read and discuss picture books.

During discussions of the postmodern picture books selected for this unit of study, the classroom teacher attempted to create an “interpretive community” (Fish, 1980) that focused on the illustrations as well as the text, where community members were comfortable generating, sharing and negotiating meaning with each other during discussions, and were accepting of diverse perspectives and interpretations. Observations and interview data suggested that one of the primary goals of this particular unit of study was to help readers approach these books as active participants, using a variety of reading strategies.
and practices to construct meaning in transaction with the postmodern picture books. Klinker (1999) suggests, "this manner of active reading has exceptional educational benefits in that it forces readers to think about the meaning of a text, empowers them to make their own judgments regarding interpretation, and refuses to simply feed them a moral or precept" (p.257).

**Symbolic Representations in the Illustrations**

In constructing children's picture books, nothing is accidental. Illustrators go to great lengths to include information that will challenge readers to consider new possibilities and all of the details of their illustrations. It is important for readers to consider the concept that images and text contained in a picture book may represent meaning beyond the literal sense offered in the text. As readers become more sophisticated, they begin to make connections from their own experiences and world view to the texts they are reading.

As students began to read and discuss *Voices in the Park*, they realized that Browne used his illustrations to refer to things in the world beyond the text. They made numerous comments concerning the illustrations, often suggesting that the images presented in the book represented meanings that were beyond the scope of the literal story. For example, Browne's inclusion of classic icons (e.g., Santa Claus and the Mona Lisa) throughout the illustrations forced the students to consider why he was including them and how they related to the meaning of the book.

After disrupting the text, in this case presenting the illustrations in story board fashion, students attended to the illustrations without access to the written text. The following discussion took place after the illustrations had been posted on their classroom wall:

Angela: I noticed that all of the pictures have something weird going on.
Teacher: Okay, there are some weird things, some things that seem out of place.
Carson: I thought the flame on the tree might represent the mother being mad at her son.
Cathy: I noticed that in the back [background of the illustrations] the trees were really colorful. When everyone was happy, he [Browne] lightened up the colors of the pictures. When it got a little sadder, the pictures got dark.
Sally: Then, when you look at the pictures you see the different things going on. When I saw the trees blowing, it's kind of like mocking or making fun of her. Just joking around. Like leaves falling off.
Allison: I notice that for every separate voice, the trees and the season is different. The mom's point of view, she's kind of gloomy, so the trees
are just boring. The dad’s point of view, he’s sad so the trees are dead. Then you go to the boy and the trees are dead and on everything with him, the trees are dead except for when they’re together because I think the season shows what they feel like. Then you go over to her [the little girl] point of view, it’s happy, it’s spring, there’s flowers. When he [the boy] gets happy, the trees are blooming. But then when he’s feeling okay, this is what it really looks like all along.

Adam: In the picture where the trees are on fire, I think that symbolizes her being mad. And part of the gate. She walked by that tree, and her madness spread and then the same thing happened with the gate.

Teacher: Good ideas.

Alex: On the second page, where there’s that queen walking down the sidewalk, and since Anthony Browne is from England, I thought that’s maybe why he put that there. The Queen of England.

Teacher: Eric, share with us what you’re thinking about the dogs.

Eric: The whole story revolves around the dogs, because you have for every voice, it shows them walking the dogs to the park. They wouldn’t be able to have all those voices, if they didn’t have the dogs, they would—n’t have gone to the park.

Teacher: I agree. I hadn’t put it into words. But, I agree that the story really revolves around the dogs.

Brittney: It’s like they [the dogs], in the picture I noticed, there’s always something dividing them except for the dogs, so it kind of symbolizes them kind of being one and showing them it doesn’t really matter about if he’s rich and she’s poor.

Throughout the discussions, students talked about how the images and the written text represented more than just a literal level of meaning. Students brought to this text their understandings of the world and their experiences, and discussed the symbolic representations of many of Browne’s objects and artistic techniques. Recognizing and understanding symbols is an important part of being a reader. If readers are not allowed to experience and discuss symbolic representations while in elementary school, they will have difficulty analyzing the symbols represented in the poetry and novels they will encounter in secondary education.

**Readers’ Transactions with Postmodern Picture Books**

Throughout this study, students were challenged by the meta-fictive elements of the postmodern picture books and commonly referred to these books as “weird books.” While some students looked for a happy ending or a single main idea or lesson, others seemed to shut down and were unwilling or unable
to deal with the ambiguity of the texts being read. In order to make sense of *Voices in the Park*, readers were required to navigate through the picture book using the visual and textual components Browne created, their previous experiences with picture books, their understandings of this type of literature, their understandings of the world and their purposes for reading. Because of the non-linear structure that many postmodern picture books present, further research is needed to understand what readers attend to, how they navigate through these books and what decisions they make as they try to construct meaning in transaction with postmodern picture books.

Meek (1988) has suggested that readers need to learn how to “tolerate uncertainty” (p.31). She describes this tolerance as the ability suspend closure in order to see what occurs as the story unfolds. Meek (1988) continues, “those who know that authors help them make sense of the story are more patient with the beginnings of books than those who expect to recognize straightaway what they have to understand” (p.31). Some of the readers in this study were better able than others to tolerate uncertainty. After discussing *Voices in the Park* with the class, some readers immediately went back to the book to further investigate what was involved with the story. Others, however, dismissed the book as “weird” and chose not to transact with many of the books included in the unit of study. I would suggest that those readers with a higher level of tolerance of ambiguity and uncertainty were more capable of making sense of meta-fictive elements than their peers who immediately shut down.

In order to help readers construct meaning in transaction with these postmodern picture books, we need to take the concept of tolerating ambiguity further and support readers’ ability to “entertain ambiguity.” In other words, readers need to not only tolerate the disruptions to the linear structures and traditional forms of narratives, they need to learn to recognize and understand the meta-fictive elements that are used, and enjoy the challenges reading these texts may present. Goldstone (2004) explains that postmodern picture books unsettle the reader’s expectations, shows the quixotic nature of the world, and then reassures the reader that this sense of uncertainty, or ambiguity, can be overcome and that the world is a surprising and wondrous place (p.203). As readers become more tolerant of the ambiguities presented in contemporary and postmodern literature and learn to suspend closure in order to consider multiple perspectives and meanings, their interpretive skills and abilities to construct meaning in transaction with texts improve. Pantaleo (2004) explains, “texts with meta-fictive devices can provide the kinds of reading experiences that develop readers’ abilities to critically analyze, construct and deconstruct an array of texts and representational forms that incorporate a range of linguistic, discursive, and semiotic systems” (p.17).

Throughout the discussions of *Voices in the Park*, students attended to the illustrations and the written text with equal intensity. The illustrations
included in this picture book are complex, containing symbols and references that may allude many novice readers. Because of this complexity, teachers need to become more aware of illustrative techniques and media. As teachers become more critical readers of picture books, in particular the illustrations and design elements, they are better positioned to help children construct meaning in transaction with the picture books they encounter.

Numerous contemporary picture books no longer contain simple relationships between images and written text. Some illustrations are closely aligned with the written text, providing symmetrical information, while others enhance or contradict the meaning of the written text (Nikolajeva & Scott, 2000). As the interplay between written text and illustrations become more complex, teachers need to call students’ attention to this concept in order to support their readings of these picture books. Teachers need to become more discerning readers and investigators of the picture books they choose to read in their classrooms. Being able to lead sophisticated discussions with their students requires teachers to become more sophisticated readers themselves.

As children get older and the literature they encounter becomes more complex, readers who see reading as an investigative process, understand that particular books will present challenges, and that even proficient readers may have to spend extra time with some books to understand them. These types of readers will have an advantage over those who are reticent to attend to the complexities of literature. Readers in contemporary society are presented with texts that are not linear, for example web pages, multi-media advertisements, music videos, and informational texts. In order to be successful, readers need to learn to navigate these texts and critically evaluate the information presented.

The search for the main idea of a text reduces reading to a “literary scavenger hunt” rather than supporting the necessary “textual power” readers need to be successful in contemporary society (Scholes, 1985). Utilizing more complex examples of picture books, for example postmodern picture books, requires readers and teachers alike to navigate the non-linear structures of these texts, generate and negotiate interpretations, and investigate the relationships between images and written text, in order to make sense of these stories.

The publication of picture books containing meta-fictive elements and postmodern structures continues to expand. As readers begin to explore these books, they must learn to approach them in different ways and utilize a variety of reading strategies and interpretive practices in order to construct meaning in transaction with these texts. Due to the pressures associated with standardized tests, where readers are required to identify the main idea of a text, readers learn to read things once, answer questions and move on. These tests, and many of the commercial instructional materials designed to raise test scores, reduce reading to an identification process, rather than an investigative process, where readers are expected to generate, share and negotiate meaning in interactions with other readers.
Basic literacy skills are not enough to be successful in today's society. Classroom teachers need to support students to read critically and be able to make sense of the non-linear texts and images they encounter in their lives outside of school. This study implies that many readers are either unfamiliar with non-linear, post-modern structures, or are unwilling to spend the time and energy to investigate the possible meanings in these complicated texts. Schools need to better prepare readers to accept the challenges of reading in and out of school as they encounter the elements and structures of non-traditional texts.

Reading in school has to be connected to the reading that students are doing outside of school. If the texts that are read with children in school are limited to traditional linear texts, students will find it more difficult to make connections and construct meanings with the non-linear, hyper-texts they find in their lives outside of schools. Postmodern picture books present new challenges for the reader and in turn require teachers to become more sophisticated readers of picture books themselves in order to demonstrate and support the types of interpretive and reading practices necessary for dealing with these meta-fictive and postmodern elements and structures.

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