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Picture Books as Mentor Texts: Reading and Writing Outside the Pages

BY DEB L. MARCIANO

Abstract

Using picture books as mentor texts inspires engagement and motivation for enhancement of students' reading and writing connections. Invite students to innovate on these books to add their own perspectives! Make writing fun!

In these times of high stakes testing and pre-packaged reading and writing programs and prompts, children's development of how to choose books for pleasure reading rather than for earning points is often sacrificed. Rasinski (2012) reminds us of three "essentials" of developing reading fluency which may be missing in these types of materials: reading real literature, getting real-time word recognition support, and participating in assisted reading activities. Pantaleo (2005), Sipe (1998), and Nodleman (1988) impress upon us the power of picture books to stimulate thinking and metacognition and the possibilities of using real literature and engaging and

interesting writing activities that stem from reading enjoyable books. In authentic contexts, picture books can provide engagement that is fun and inventive.

Research supports that the pictures hold numerous opportunities to develop creative and critical thinking skills to lead readers to possibilities for extension (Walsh, 2003, Labbo, 1996, and Kiefer, 1995). Sims Bishop's (1990) seminal research examines the concept of viewing stories through doors and windows, to see who and what personal connections occur as a result of reading. Being able to choose reading materials provides students with occasions to read about characters like themselves or about those who are not, but also provides choice, which extends the transactions made between readers and texts. Research further indicates that picture books can serve as an extension to and creating innovative thinking. Daly and Blakeney-Williams (2015) cite a number of studies linking the use of picture books to development of math skills, artistic and abstract thinking and the development of critical thinking, "suggesting that picturebooks can be useful in many curriculum areas for many purposes" (p. 89). These authors hold that picture book art can spark children to create their own artworks, "because of their exposure to, and discussions about the art in the picturebooks" (p. 90).

The following text set offers picture book titles which can easily inspire children of all ages and abilities to consider and develop alternative perspectives, creative thinking and writing skills, and seeing how they, as authors, have the power to determine the outcomes of their own stories. These books can serve as mentor texts not only for reading discussion and writing extension, but as cross-curricular evidence of learning and synthesis of information. Ralph Fletcher (2015) states that mentor texts are, "...any texts that you can learn from, and every writer, no matter how skilled you are or how beginning you are, encounters and reads something that can lift and inform and infuse their own writing." Further, Dorfman and Capelli (2007) describe use of literature to inspire the reader to imitate through their own writing. Gallagher suggests that: "we must teach students to imitate model texts before they write, as they write, and as they revise" (2014, p.28).

The use of mentor texts can also serve to meet Common Core Standards, 4, 5, and 6:

Standard 4: Interpret words and phrases as they are used in a text, including determining technical, connotative, and figurative meanings, and analyze how specific word choices shape meaning or tone.
Standard 5: Analyze the structure of texts, including how specific sentences, paragraphs, and larger

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portions of the text ... relate to each other and the whole.

Standard 6: Assess how point of view or purpose shapes the content and style of a text (National Governors Association Center for Best Practices & Council of Chief State School Officers, 2010, np).

Writing that emanates from mentor texts lends itself to readers' theater, using technology to record oral storytelling, and creative art activities across curriculum areas. Thinking outside of typical writing assignments puts the writing before the mechanics. If children are free to creatively engage with reading/writing, the development of writing skills will occur more meaningfully. Choice is a powerful motivator. If required to write about someone else's topic, the reading/writing connection is only an assignment, and can become more of a chore than an enhancement of one's skills.

Recently, I sat in an audience of children and their families as part of our university's literacy celebration for children who had participated in a ten-week afterschool program. While the literacy center director read *The Book With No Pictures* (Novak, 2014), the audience roared with laughter, pointed, gasped, and laughed some more, as the reader perspective of the story turned upside down from what might normally be expected. The reader is "forced" to say silly things as the text is read aloud. While the reader looks buffoonish, the audience responds to the ironic antics created by the text, understanding that the book is clearly in charge of the reader, not the other way around. The irony of the story was not lost on these youngsters and more laughs ensued.

Use this book to inspire children to share other circumstances that children would love for adults to say something they shouldn't, to act in ways outside of grownup behavior, to combine ironic and unexpected events. Be sure to have children create their own words, as Novack did, innovating on: "BLAGGITY BLAGGITY and GLIBBITY GLOBBITY" (2014, n.p.). Be prepared for lots of laughter when children share their stories aloud. (Appropriate for 2nd - 5th grades).

This audience experience made me wonder what other recent books could serve as mentor texts for student expression of unusual perspectives ironic situations. The following are suggestions to innovate for fun and engaging writing experiences with children. Although the reading levels range from 1st to 3rd grades, I am sure that upper grade students would also welcome the opportunity for some unique writing opportunities stemming from these books, as well.

How to Babysit a Grandpa (Regan and Wilding,

2012) and its counterpart, *How to Babysit a Grandma* (2014) show adults not in control as readers would expect. Reflecting the concept of reverse psychology, these books cast children as being in charge of decision making, activities, and feeling important, as they "babysit" their grandparents. All children know grandparents babysit them, not the other way around, but this twist of roles is funny, creative, and gives children an opportunity to learn about irony. Children can connect to their own babysitting situations, or what they would do during an afternoon of caring for the person who usually babysits them. Have children think about other grandparent (or other significant adult) situations in which roles can be reversed. Brainstorm a list of such activities and allow students to choose one they would like to develop as the person in charge. Finish the project with a painting or collage creation to show everyone in his or her reversed roles. These could be shared at a Grandparents Day event. (Appropriate for 1st - 5th grades).

Share Open This Little Book (Klausmeier & Lee, 2013), which has a book within a book within a book... for another way to use an unusual artistic and textual format in which to tell a story. Make cutouts of a simple folded book shape (rectangles folded in landscape layout) in a variety of sizes from many different colored papers. Ask children to choose concentric book cutouts on which to copy their final drafts (Number in pencil to make sure the story is copied sequentially). Use a long reach stapler to attach all the "books" in the middle. After first drafts of 4 events are completed, copy the final onto the book pages. At the end of the smallest page (on the left of the fold), flip the entire set over to tell the story back to the front cover (still writing on the left side, but now it will be upside down from what was written on the other side). This activity demonstrates innovation using a book's physical format, making major details become less important, and then with the flip, building back to the major details, again. (Appropriate for 3rd - 5th grades).

In Mo Willems' pigeon stories, readers are entertained from the perspective of the pigeon holding a discussion with readers, as if they were in the same place. The quirkiness of the pigeon's outlandish requests also has readers laughing at the irony of his outlandish requests. In the newest of the series, *The Pigeon Needs a Bath* (2014), the pigeon's usual contrary actions ensue, with him eventually realizing he actually likes taking a bath! Children may recognize the alibi making, procrastination, and attempts to not do what is asked, using humor and predictability. How is the pigeon's behavior like their own? What tasks do they try to put off? How to they try to get something they really want, or procrastinate? Be sure to provide dozens of colorful cutouts of speech bubbles and

thought balloons for students to incorporate into their own writing. (Appropriate for 1st - 5th grades. Students in 3rd-5th grades might also incorporate use of various font styles to reinforce expression).

Miss Brooks Loves Books, (and I don't). (Bottner and Emberley, 2010), sparked joy for many teachers as Missy's total disinterest in books radically changed to enjoyment, as a result of Miss Brooks sharing a wide variety of books. Missy's idea of making and sharing ogre warts made *Shrek* her favorite new book. This transition came from her ability to choose, to make decisions about what she would like to do, stemming from her love of gross things! In the 2014, sequel, *Miss Brooks' Story Nook (Where Tales are Told and Ogres are Welcome)*, Missy ultimately takes control of a vexing situation in her life through her own storytelling, in an ironic twist. As the lights unexpectedly go out, Miss Brooks encourages her students to make up stories to tell in the dark, suggesting children start with a problem. Missy immediately connects to the neighborhood boy who has been bullying her, and as her story takes on more detail, she finds the power her words can have and she faces and conquers her problematic classmate. How can students deal with their own issues through oral storytelling? Since the oral story creation is what worked for Missy, rather than writing stories, teachers might provide an opportunity for students to voice stories into an iPad or other tablet, tape recorder, or computer. Creating the story orally might be just the change of pace students might welcome to jumpstart their skills of detail, sequencing, description, and other story telling skills. Use recording equipment, such as iPads or camcorders to capture the stories, demonstrating that oral story telling is indeed a way to record our thoughts. (Appropriate for 2nd - 5th grades).

All of the characters are swallowed up by the book binding throughout the story, *This Book Just Ate my Dog* (Byrne, 2014). Readers will enjoy the twist from blaming poor dogs, notorious for eating everything, as the book twists this traditional role. Readers are asked to "shake and shake and shake" the book until everyone reappears, which happens, of course, whether the reader shakes the book or not! This is similar to *Press Here* (Tullet, 2011), which was also very engaging. (Appropriate for 2nd - 3rd grades). For older children, (4th, and 5th grades) it might be fun to write versions of what might happen by using old wives tales, for instance, if you step on a crack, (break your mother's back), or other out-of-the-ordinary disasters (like swallowing a pumpkin seed) and then creating an antidote. This creates development of cause and effect.

Walrus once again escapes the zoo in the wordless picture book, *Where's Walrus? (and Pigeon?)* (Savage,

2015). The simple illustrations engage readers as they follow the antics of the zoo's most famous animal, in this sequel, now joined by his friend and zoo-mate, Penguin. With Walrus and Penguin hiding in plain sight, yet camouflaged to the zookeeper, children will enjoy finding these characters, while thinking of where the mischievous duo could hide within your own school or community. Extend this to include a variety of geographic locations for a social studies unit, as well. Use the cut paper collage of Savage's style for students to create their own inventive visual story. (Appropriate for 1st - 5th grades). For more cross curricular connections, incorporate science exploration, by adding informational books about camouflage. Offer more technologically oriented students a challenge of making a video similar to Savage's about Walrus' antics, or about a different book character, after viewing Walrus' escapades (www.youtube.com/watch?v=2dZSGen9cG0). (Appropriate for 3rd - 5th grades).

A suggested book to analyze personal perspectives, opinions, and using one's own voice for social justice is *The Day The Crayons Quilt* (Daywalt and Jeffers, 2014). Duncan gets a shock when he discovers a stack of letters in his school desk written by his crayons! Each color registers a complaint him, stating concerns of over or underusage, nakedness (the crayons whose paper Duncan has peeled off), and neatness. Perhaps the perceived problems the crayons try to present to Duncan are issues children may have "caused" for their own crayons! Ask children how the crayons in the story are taking action, are correct or incorrect in their accusations against Duncan, are how they are respectfully taking responsibility for voicing their concerns, etc. What other common objects might be feeling slighted, underappreciated, or needy? Look around the classroom and discuss what objects might have something to say to the students. These activities provide a simple introduction to equity, fairness, personal perceptions, consequences of actions, and personal rights. (Appropriate for 2nd - 5th grades).

When allowed to have some choice about what and how to write paired with the support of mentor texts, students may surprise you by displaying more motivation, interest, and enthusiasm to their reading/writing connections. These books provide a wide range of styles, providing many different ways to extend and connect the books across standards, curriculum, content area, and writing styles. Ask for other books students have read that are along similar story lines, or how a favorite book can be extended in an unusual style. Allow children to choose. Sit back, read, laugh and explore. Then Read. Write. And share. And most of all have fun!

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For many more children's book titles, literacy extension ideas, and book reviews visit: <http://abookor2.blogspot.com>. Marciano can be reached at: dmarciano@valdosta.edu.



Books You and Your Students Need To 'Check Out'!

BY CHRISTINE A. DRAPER

In 2012 the number of children's book titles published was 32,624 (Statista, 2015). This number is staggering for any teacher or media specialist to keep up with. Unfortunately, you can't always trust reviews you see posted online as well since these could have been written by the author's friends and family members (Bucher & Hinton, 2014). So, what is a teacher or media specialist to do? This new column is designed with the busy teacher and media center specialist in mind. In the spring and fall, I will highlight and review several high quality books that you may want to add to your reading list. Here are a few of my favorites:

For younger readers

Holub, J. (2013). *Little red writing*. (M. Sweet, illus.). San Francisco, CA: Chronicle Books, unpagged.

Once upon a time in pencil school, Ms. 2 tells her pencil class that it is time to write a story. The main character, Little Red, sets out on a story-telling journey with her basket of nouns and learns first-hand about the importance of different parts of speech, the value of punctuation, and the benefits of other ideas about writing. Hidden within the pages of this book are basic tips for the beginning writer. Holub presents a hilarious and engaging re-telling of Little Red Riding Hood that brings all key characters into play, including the Wolf 3000, a pencil sharpener on a rampage! Sweet's watercolor, pencil, and collage illustrations include many additional details that readers will not want to miss. Suggested grades: 3 and up!

Mack, J. (2013). *Ah ha!* San Francisco, CA: Chronicle Books, unpagged.

Can a person use only two letters to create an entire story? Jeff Mack proves that with creative punctuation and lively, engaging mixed-media illustrations, two letters (H and A) can be used to create a delightful story young readers will enjoy. Poor frog is trying to have a relaxing day in his pond, but through a series of both fortunate and unfortunate events, frog's day might not be as relaxing as anticipated. This clever and unique story will take readers of all ages on a rollicking grand adventure that highlights Frog's daring (and quite lucky) day. With its open-ended conclusion, this book begs to be read repeatedly and invites readers of all ages to speculate just what might happen next! Suggested grades: K-3.

For middle level readers

Balliett, B. (2013). *Hold fast*. New York, NY: Scholastic Press, 274 pages.

Early's father, Dasher Pearl, spoke about the power of words to his children from the day they were born. "They are for choosing, admiring, keeping, giving. They are treasures of inestimable value" (p. 6). But now, he is gone. Missing. Vanished. "Gone. Four miserable letters. What does the word mean?" (p. 2) and due to his disappearance, Early and her family are forced to move into the city shelter. Early must use all she learned about language and its rhythms from her father Dash to try and save her family and find her father. Throughout this novel, Balliett enchants the reader with the beauty and power of language and vocabulary. Suggested grades: 5-8.

Cervantes, A. (2013). *Gaby, lost and found*. New York, NY: Scholastic Press, 220 pages.

Sixth grader Gaby Ramirez Howard is counting the days until her mother can return from Honduras. After a raid on the place where she worked, she was deported there since she didn't have the proper papers. Despite her father's best intentions, he has no idea how to care for his daughter, and he often forgets to buy groceries or pick up food from the food pantry leaving Gaby to fend for herself. What saves her from emotional trauma is working at the local animal shelter as part of a school service project and writing profiles and adoption advertisements. This is the story of a girl who loves to care for animals in need but is also in need of a home herself. The book also addresses important controversial buissues such as illegal immigration, poverty, and child neglect. Suggested grades: 5-8.

Vanderpool, C. (2013). *Navigating early*. New York, NY: Delacorte Press, 306 pages.

A fabulous book that engages students in a multitude of stories and mysteries that intertwine beautifully. Thirteen-year-old Jack Baker's father is finally coming home at the end of WWII. Unfortunately, his return is marred by the death of Jack's mother, and Jack is forced to leave his home in Kansas abruptly to attend boarding school in Maine. There, Jack meets Early Auden, "the strangest of boys" (inside jacket flap). Early often skips classes and listens to records in the school