

NURTURING MEANINGFUL STUDENT AGENCY: A Kindergarten Teacher Supports Beginning Readers Using Wordless and Postmodern Picturebooks



Amanda Deliman and Janet Breitenstein

Ally, a student in the audience: “Hey, mouse! Why are you running?”

Mrs. Brown, the classroom teacher: “Wow, that is a very good question! Excellent job. You were really helping Adam think like the character. What’s your answer, Adam? Remember to answer like the character.”

Adam, a student playing in role: “Because the owl is trying to grab me.”

Mrs. Brown: “Who has another question?”

Melissa: “Hey, mouse! What’s that behind you?”

Mrs. Brown: “I like that question, Melissa.”

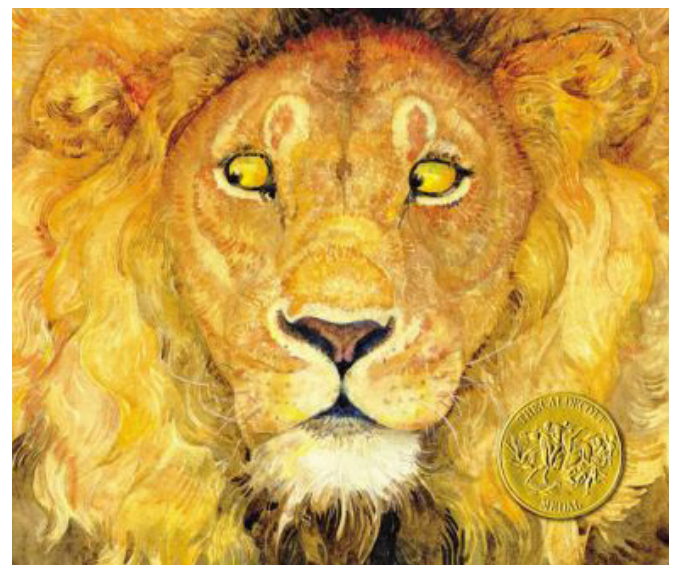
Adam¹: “I’m on top of the lion.”

(laughter and “aw”s from the class of kindergarten students)

THIS EXCERPT WAS RECORDED in one kindergarten classroom where the teacher was supporting beginning readers’ comprehension practices using dramatic inquiry while reading a wordless picturebook, *The Lion and the Mouse* (Pinkney, 2009). Wordless picturebooks are defined as books with few

or no words. Postmodern picturebooks, another type of book used in this study, are stories often told in nonlinear forms and can have few words, which differs from a traditional picturebook. By intentionally selecting these types of books for picturebook read-alouds, there is a greater opening for students to make sense of the story using their own thoughts and words. When students are given spaces to show agency (Ellsworth, 1989), where they can be both producers and consumers of knowledge, then it is also possible for motivation and interest-driven learning to reach high levels.

Cover of *The Lion and the Mouse* (Pinkney, 2009)



¹ All names are pseudonyms.

The purpose of this qualitative case study was to examine how early elementary children created meaning together using wordless and postmodern picturebooks as read-alouds. One kindergarten teacher supported the beginning readers' emergent literacy practices while facilitating collaborative conversations about the picturebooks. Additionally, the students were introduced to drama-based strategies as a form of inquiry and were provided rich writing experiences to share their interpretations of the stories through pictures.

Beyond answering the research questions guiding this work, this study aimed to support and extend research that offers explanations for developmental learning through storying and picturebooks (Jalongo et al., 2002), explores how picturebooks can support English learners in their own analytical responses to and with the text (Louie & Sierschynski, 2015; Martinez-Roldan & Newcomer, 2011), and describes ways to provide openings for young readers to effectively use multiple semiotic resources to enhance meaning-making (Kachorsky et al., 2017). This investigation focuses on components of multimodality (Kress, 2010) and reader response, where readers fill in gaps to make meaning (Iser, 1978), and discusses implications regarding collective agency when transactions are forged between reader(s) and text (Rosenblatt, 1978). Studying classroom practices that shed light on nuanced understandings of how students personally make meaning and collectively expand the perspectives of one another can inform teacher-education programs and novice and veteran teachers alike. The next sections of this article define key theoretical underpinnings that help situate this work and are later connected to themes that emerged as a result of this investigation in one kindergarten classroom.

Agency in Young Children

"Agency" is a term used globally and abundantly across many disciplines. However, through research, it is evident that the definition is varied and can be contradictory in many fields (Ahearn, 2001; Emirbayer & Mische, 1998). For this article, the definition provided by Ahearn (2001), "the socioculturally mediated capacity to act" (p. 112), best supports how beginning readers demonstrate collective and individual agency when interpreting picturebooks. Considering language as a social action and the co-construction of knowledge as a collaborative process, nurturing these acts can help support and foster increased agency among our youngest readers (Ahearn, 2001). Young readers recontextualize their "experiences and re-

lational histories" as they imagine the meaning of the story and comprehend; "they listen, respond, and participate in vicarious social worlds where they can feel joy, comfort, tension, or conflict" (Lysaker, 2019, p. 7). As educators supporting beginning readers, building from this sense-making is advantageous and fosters creative and collaborative decision-making.

Young children provide an excellent example of using agency in language and the use of social imagination (Lysaker, 2019). When children read picturebooks, more specifically wordless picturebooks, they use illustrations to comprehend and interpret the text. Wordless picturebooks invite social imagination to the forefront of the conversation when making meaning as a class community.

Literacy as Inquiry

When observing our youngest readers' meaning-making abilities, we often observe the use of images to make sense of the story or the use of words. Other times, emergent readers use a combination of text, images, and building background knowledge. Reading is "a constructive act done in conjunction with mediating texts and the cultural-historical context in which reading takes place" (Smagorinsky, 2001, p. 137). Inquiry supports this act of reading.

Inquiry-based learning focuses on students becoming researchers. Opportunities to investigate topics and issues stemming from their interests can lead to undetermined paths, expunging the concept that there is only one conclusion (Monson & Monson, 1994). As students use inquiry, they ask their questions, take ownership of their learning, and cultivate their understanding of topics (Chu & Chow, 2011). With these thoughts in mind, we need "to appreciate the kinds of relationships and experiences that students bring to their reading and the constructive ways in which their life narratives can help produce new texts in the transaction with literary texts" (Smagorinsky, 2001, p. 158).

A 2011 research study focused on primary students' literacy and technology skills development, using inquiry as the learning approach. The findings showed increased student outcomes in areas that promote deeper thinking, applying knowledge, and reasoning skills.

Inquiry learning supports students in taking charge of their learning, thus reinforcing the concept that "students are active constructors of knowledge" (Chu et al., 2011, p. 133).

Cleovoulou's (2018) study explored how combining critical literacy practices and inquiry-based pedagogies in the ele-

mentary classroom led to increased engagement and validation of ideas. Cleovoulou (2018) articulated, “The teacher’s role is to listen, question, affirm, and provide resources that offer more information so as to move [students] forward in their ideas and thinking” (p. 326). These acts nurture student agency and promote empowerment, strengthening the collective meaning-making across the learning environment.

Additional studies support inquiry as an essential component of student achievement (Abdi, 2014), advanced reasoning, deeper critical thinking, application of knowledge (Chu et al., 2011; Duran & Dökme, 2016; Wu & Hsieh, 2006), and creating an awareness of others (Cleovoulou, 2018). As encouraging as these studies are, however, a study on elementary teachers’ conceptions of inquiry teaching revealed that there are erroneous beliefs about the implementation of learning through inquiry (Ireland et al., 2012). In addition to the misconceptions, the practice of teaching by inquiry was underutilized. “Pedagogical practices that hope to achieve the greatest outcomes for students through inquiry teaching should look beyond motivating students through interesting experiences, and beyond challenging them with teacher-generated problems, to actually scaffolding students in the asking and answering their own questions” (Ireland et al., 2012, p. 175). Literacy as inquiry, developed through students’ curiosity while allowing them to ask and answer higher-level questions and challenge their understanding, is vital for students’ success.

Playing With Picturebooks

Literacy as inquiry and student agency help transport picturebooks into play within the classroom. Implementing picturebooks in the classroom allows students to gather new information from the text and combine it with existing information and playful pedagogies, affording more opportunities to expand their understanding (Serafini, 2011). “Wordless picturebooks may stimulate interest as well as conversation among readers,” providing “an invitation to explore and make sense of the world they inhabit” (Ciecierski et al., 2017, p. 126). “In successful reading, the reader also demonstrates the capacity to enter into the next world and to make sense of text through a personal, relational experience” (Rosenblatt, 1994, as cited in Lysaker, 2006, p. 34). In this exploration of playing with picturebooks, we examine how opportunities for students to play with the storytelling (Lysaker, 2006) using dramatic inquiry helps produce more opportunities for emergent literacy practices to advance for the readers. Smagorinsky (2001) suggested

that if “schools can provide more opportunities for imaginative responses to reading, [it could] enable the richest transactions possible for the broadest range of students” (p. 162).

Additional research studies, including several studies by Callow (2017, 2018), looked at the implementation and benefits of playing with picturebooks within the classroom. One study “examined how students interpreted image and text, with particular emphasis on how the visual resources were used in picturebooks” (Callow, 2017, p. 233). Data gathered through student interviews proved encouraging, and it was determined that the students used pictures and words to recognize the story’s messages and connected the images and text. In 2018, Callow continued this study, discussing strategies for assessing how students interpret a multimodal text, concluding that authentic literature should underpin every classroom. Students need to be involved with reflective discovery and thoughtful discussions to extrapolate the multiple meanings of picturebooks. Callow (2018) also suggested utilizing well-developed questions that allow students to interpret meanings through connecting words and images. Drawing pictures is a valuable assessment for younger students.

Pantaleo (2015), using Rosenblatt’s (1978) fundamental tenets of the transactional theory, studied “the dynamic and synergistic roles of the reader, the text, and the context” (p. 116). In addition, “in the research classrooms, the students were expected to approach the literature from an aesthetic stance (Rosenblatt, 1978) and to explore multiple interpretations of the texts” (Pantaleo, 2015, p. 116). Numerous opportunities were provided for students to share their interpretations and gain insight from their peers, understanding that constructing meaning takes place while collaborating with others.

Conclusions from multiple research studies indicate that “it is fundamental to develop students’ visual literacy competencies, [and] learning about the architecture of a diverse array of texts will develop students’ appreciation of a designer’s use of semiotic resources and agency in the meaning-making process” (Pantaleo, 2015, p. 126). Building on these theoretical underpinnings, this study examines how wordless and postmodern picturebooks aid in sense-making, boost agency, and enhance inquiry experiences for beginning readers.

Context and Study Design

The investigation was conducted in one kindergarten classroom in a K–6 school located in a small Midwestern town. This study specifically focuses on the teacher’s perspective of

the students' comprehension and meaning-making practices using children's picturebook read-alouds as the stepping stone for nurturing agency and building meaning-making through collaborative engagement. This exploration took place over the course of six months during the global pandemic, which impacted student attendance in person and online, with some absences due to quarantine. Therefore, the research process became highly reflective by nature and the needs of the teacher and students were made a top priority. One principal investigator and classroom teacher worked collaboratively to answer the questions guiding the study. A graduate research assistant supported the creative endeavor by reviewing and synthesizing relevant studies pertinent to the work.

As the principal investigator, I started with a suggested list of books to use for the study, and the classroom teacher, Mrs. Brown, added titles that she regularly used in her class. Several selected titles for this study are listed in Table 1. Additionally, I suggested strategies for dramatic inquiry and worked with Mrs. Brown to determine which writing practices were already being used and would be most meaningful and appropriate for the beginning readers participating in this study. Mrs. Brown selected appropriate times to conduct the read-alouds with her students and chose a title from the list to review before facilitating discussions with the students before, during, and after each read-aloud. Subsequent drama and writing activities were included after conducting some of the picturebook read-alouds.

Qualitative inquiry requires the researcher to make decisions about large amounts of raw data, to reduce data into manageable and useable parts, and to pull apart significant findings to deconstruct and report on the findings using a particular conceptual framework. Throughout this study, multiple forms of qualitative data were collected, including Mrs. Brown's descriptions and interpretations of the observations and audiovisual recordings of students' participation in the discussions, dramatic engagements, and subsequent writing activities. The read-alouds and discussions were also audio recorded and transcribed. The interviews between the principal investigator and the classroom teacher were conducted via email, through phone calls, and on Zoom. During these member check-in conversations, children's interpretations of books were discussed, as well as strategies for incorporating writing and drama activities. These conversations were recorded and transcribed for further analysis.

Two questions guided the study:

1. What strategic openings support comprehension and meaning-making when using wordless and postmodern picturebooks?
2. How do children specifically respond to wordless and postmodern picturebooks through read-alouds, discussions, writing, and drama?

The descriptive and exploratory nature of this work provided insights into how children responded to wordless and postmodern picturebooks through these various forms of collected data.

Table 1

CHILDREN'S WORDLESS AND POSTMODERN PICTUREBOOKS

Briggs, R. (1978). <i>The Snowman</i> . Random House.	A wordless book that shares the adventure of a little boy and a snowman
Pinkney, J. (2009). <i>The Lion and the Mouse</i> . Little Brown Company.	A wordless adaptation of one of Aesop's fables
Thompson, B. (2010). <i>Chalk</i> . Two Lions Publishing.	A wordless book about the power of imagination as a group of young children have adventures with magic chalk
Whamond, D. (2018). <i>Rosie's Glasses</i> . Kids Can Press.	A wordless book about a girl who appears to be living in a monochrome world until she finds magic glasses
Wiesner, D. (2011). <i>Tuesday</i> . Clarion Books.	A near-wordless postmodern book about frogs who suddenly start to float

Thematic analysis (Fereday & Muir-Cochrane, 2006) was used for interpreting and analyzing the data. Analysis of the data was ongoing and iterative as the findings were analyzed within and across the data sets and again in comparison to other studies. Interpreting the findings became a recursive practice of continuous reflection as data were synthesized, deconstructed, and then reconstructed again (Hancock & Algozzine, 2017; Yin, 2009). In the next sections, we will discuss the findings in terms of several of the themes that emerged after careful analysis of the collected data.

Individual and Collective Agency Revealed

The first major theme that emerged from analysis of the large data pool involved the agency revealed by the students, both as individuals and as a collective group. Here, we will provide some examples that show how the students' collective agency became one driving force for meaning-making as they worked collaboratively in sharing interpretations of the wordless and postmodern picturebooks. Additionally, we will share some student artifacts to further explain how the meaningful writing practices nurtured agency as the readers made meaning of a selected text.

Challenges associated with teaching comprehension to beginning readers can include getting the students interested in books, teaching them how to self-monitor their own learning, and helping them learn to be comfortable with making mistakes. In accordance with these challenges, Mrs. Brown carefully adjusted her questioning techniques to meet the unique needs of the students during each picturebook read-aloud. Additionally, Mrs. Brown created a safe space for the students to respond in ways that were personally meaningful, without bringing attention to "right" or "wrong" answers. During one of our interviews together, Mrs. Brown described how it was necessary for her to initiate some prompting questions to get the conversation going. All ideas were valued and welcomed in the learning space.

Mrs. Brown shared that the postmodern books were slightly more challenging to have conversations about due to some of the fantastical elements. However, she noted that having conversations about the books helped the students expand their comprehension and meaning-making abilities. Her prompting aided in these processes. Mrs. Brown also mentioned that references to familiar topics or ideas, where the students had more background knowledge, also provoked more dialogue between the students. For this reason, Mrs. Brown intentionally point-

ed things out that were unfamiliar to the students in order to initiate further discussion. This strategy can be used to support self-resilience and self-monitoring in beginning readers. For example, in the wordless book *The Snowman* (Briggs, 1978), there is a scene where a punching bag comes back and hits the snowman after the snowman punches it. The students were not familiar with what a punching bag is or its movement after being punched. Mrs. Brown noticed in these moments of exploring unfamiliar topics that collective agency and collaborative meaning-making helped the students make sense of what was being shared in the sequenced images, especially when the content was unfamiliar. The students were using background knowledge, attending to visual elements, and listening to their peers' observations. These types of deeper conversations do not always happen in traditional read-alouds where the words help tell part of the story. Supporting visual literacy skills is another key literacy practice that was reinforced when reading aloud this picturebook since there are multiple frames and images on each individual page. Readers assign meaning to images based

Cover of *The Snowman* (Briggs, 1978)

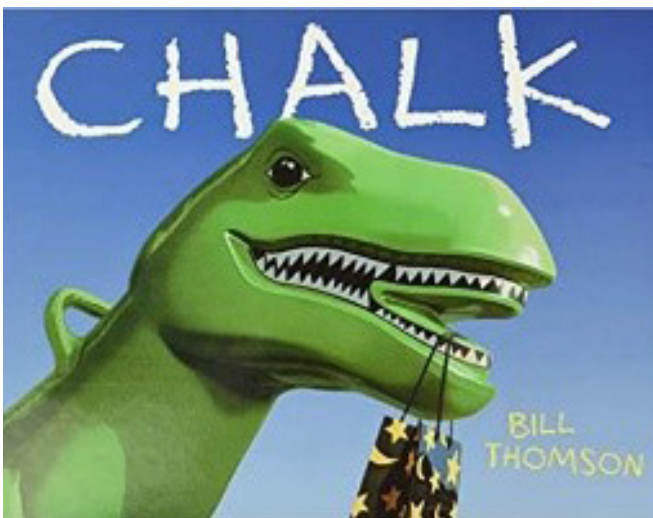


on background knowledge and intertextual cues. Collaborative conversations further enhance meaning for the emergent readers as they process the dialogic interactions along with messages shared in the text.

When reading *Chalk* (Thompson, 2010), the students displayed more collective agency when interpreting the text together. This story is about the main characters' playful imaginations, which in turn inspires young readers to use their own imaginations while reading and interpreting the story. As the class was reading and discussing the text, Mrs. Brown noticed that the students were connecting to some of the emotional life skills lessons that they had had in previous class sessions. Various facial expressions of the characters throughout the story prompted the children to think about and identify emotions and how those impacted the story line. Mrs. Brown observed that the collective conversation promoted more dialogue about what was happening in the story. The familiar (social-emotional learning and life skills) and the unfamiliar (the plot of this never-heard story) became entangled as the students worked together to make sense of what was happening in the story.

While building upon and nurturing the collective agency, it was also evident that individual students were displaying their own agency through freedom of expression and knowledge-sharing as they made sense of the images with their peers. Mrs. Brown's practices of honoring diverse voices and unique interpretations helped create a welcoming and safe space where the children felt validated for sharing their ideas. These practices were continuously nurtured with frequent read-aloud experiences that promoted dialogic engagement, idea sharing,

Cover of *Chalk* (Thompson, 2010)



and opportunities for the students to question the messages imparted in the texts.

Next, we will show more data that represent individual contributions where agency was further cultivated. In order for the students to add to the conversations, they first had to make sense of the text on their own. Mrs. Brown encouraged everyone to share their ideas and called on different students often to give everyone a chance to share their thinking. Another way to capture individual meaning-making came in the form of writing engagements. After reading *The Snowman* (Briggs, 1978) together, Mrs. Brown asked the students to respond to this prompt: "What would you show the snowman and why?" The writing samples demonstrate how the children were creatively interpreting the text through writing. These data indicated that the students utilized emergent literacy practices of strong readers and writers. After the students responded to the prompts, Mrs. Brown asked the students to describe their writing and recorded each transcription. The description for each writing sample, as narrated by the children, is portrayed in each figure title. In Figure 1, the emergent writer drew on background knowledge about her understanding of seasons.

In a second example, shown in Figure 2, the writer infused meaning about understanding how the snowman may have felt in the story and what might help the snowman feel better. When students are provided opportunities to visualize, make predictions, and make inferences about a text, it strengthens their awareness about how to use these strategies in future reading encounters.

Figure 1

I would show the snowman flowers with bees because they are pretty and he doesn't see them in the winter.

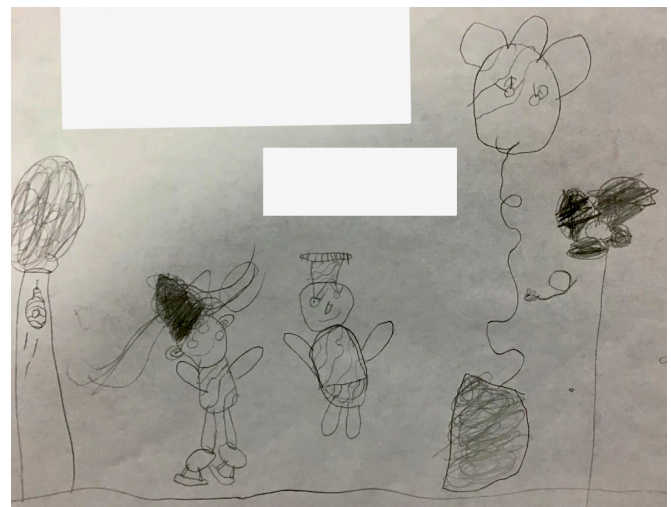
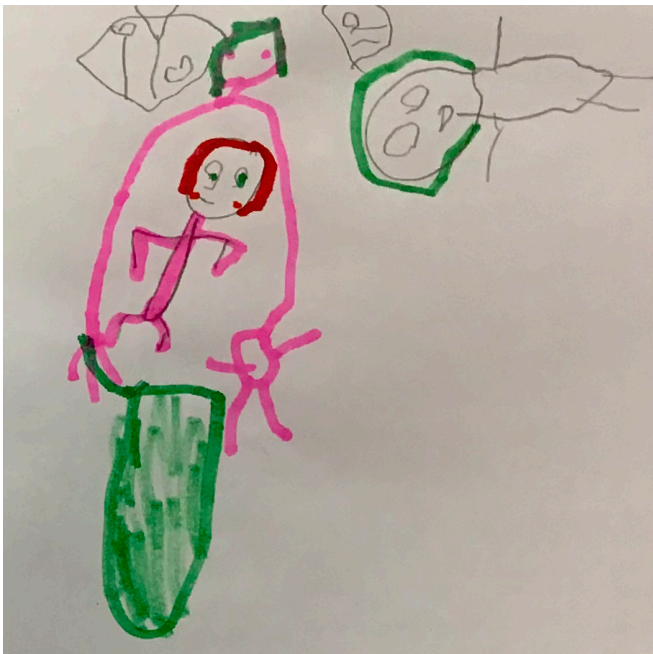


Figure 2

Take the snowman to the store to teach him how to buy something. He will buy a stuffed animal to cuddle with so he won't be lonely.

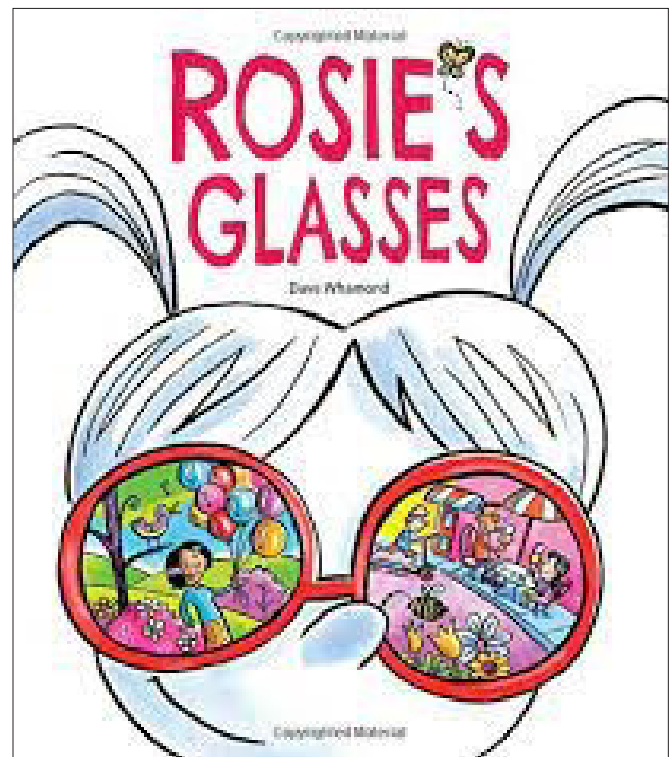


Across multiple read-alouds throughout the study, collective agency was revealed as the children acknowledged one another's ideas, which in turn helped empower their own perceptions (Mathis, 2016) about the messages shared in the text. Additionally, Mrs. Brown was able to differentiate questioning and provide openings for the children to demonstrate understanding through discussions, drama, and writing engagements, further revealing meaningful student agency.

Playing With Meaning

A second major theme that emerged repeatedly was how the students were playing with meaning using background knowledge and collaborative decision-making. *Rosie's Glasses* (Whamond, 2018) is a wordless picturebook about a girl named Rosie who wakes up in a monochrome world that seems to impact her mood and experiences until she finds glasses that transform her world and bring everything into color. The second theme, playing with meaning, emerged most significantly when the students began to pay more careful attention to the images. Mrs. Brown prompted the students to ask and answer questions about why things were happening the way they were for Rosie. Now that the students had had more exposure to reading wordless books together, Mrs. Brown said she noticed the children were really getting involved in making sense of the

Cover of *Rosie's Glasses* (Whamond, 2018)



story while bouncing ideas off of one another. It's interesting to note that a good part of the story is written without color and that the pictures with color in this story prompted more discussion with the students. The students also paid particular attention to motion lines and color schemes while making sense of this story. As they played with meaning during the telling and collective retelling of the story, the students first made sense of what was happening on their own, and then they would work together to collectively expand the perspectives of one another.

The subsequent writing activity prompted more rich interpretations. At the end of this story, Rosie loses the glasses and the scene ends with a boy looking at the glasses. In the image, the only thing that appears in color are the glasses. Mrs. Brown gave the students a writing prompt and asked them to write about what they think might happen next. She did not guide them. Instead, they were able to represent their own unique interpretations through drawing.

In the writing sample shown in Figure 3, the student drew a sequenced image, which can be noted by the intentional changing color schemes. Mrs. Brown was encouraged by this representation because earlier in the day, this particular student was not able to complete a sequencing activity of a fairy tale. One can infer that the collective agency and opportunities to

play with meaning influenced this student's ability to make a reasonable prediction using the skills he practiced during the read-aloud and discussions.

In a second example, shown in Figure 4, the student wrote about the rain cloud that followed Rosie and suggested in his prediction that the cloud would follow someone else.

Figure 3

The boy will put on the glasses and everything will be colorful again.

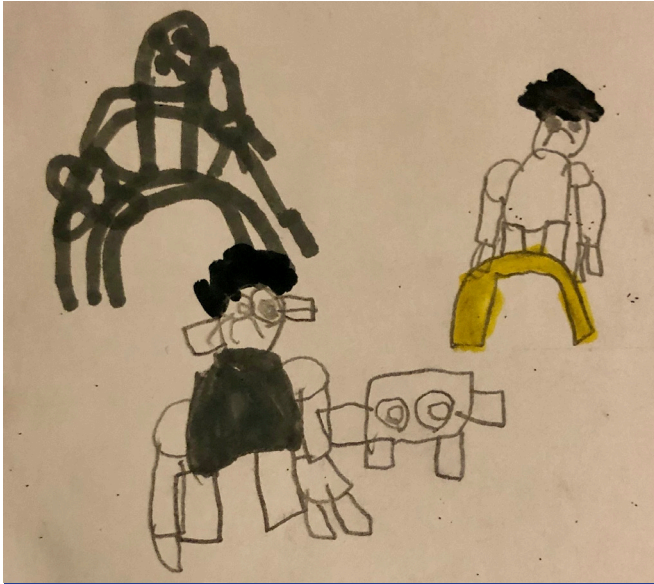


Figure 4

I think the rain cloud will go to someone else.



This interpretation exhibits recall of major events in the story and shows how the student played with meaning in a way that was personally meaningful. Throughout this read-aloud and subsequent writing engagement, Mrs. Brown fostered agency and meaning-making among the students. This is an integral component to nurturing children's emergent literacy development. In these instances, writing also became a means for the children to personally express their ideas and to communicate meaning and their own interpretations of the text. Providing openings for children to emphasize expression through writing, while linking it back to picturebook read-alouds, can build a vital bridge toward strengthening emergent literacy practices.

Constructing, Deconstructing, and Reconstructing Oral Language

The third theme we will discuss demonstrates how oral language skills were developed while reading and interpreting the postmodern and wordless picturebooks through discussions and dramatic inquiry. During one session of the study, Mrs. Brown read the award-winning picturebook *The Lion and the Mouse* (Pinkney, 2009) to the students. This artfully illustrated picturebook is a wordless adapted version of one of Aesop's fables. As depicted in the anecdote opening this article, Mrs. Brown facilitated an engaging discussion about the picturebook using the drama strategy called hotseating. Hotseating is a drama activity where a person, playing in role, sits in the "hotseat," which is some type of seat or designated space that can be placed in front of the class. Then, others in the audience ask questions of the character in the hotseat. In this scenario, the student in the hotseat was playing in role as the mouse. This was the first time Mrs. Brown used this strategy with the students.

The drama engagements not only strengthened the oral language development of the students as individuals but also influenced meaning-making and the students' uses of various comprehension strategies as they worked together to understand the story. They collaboratively constructed and deconstructed meaning and learned how to ask insightful questions. This also served as a formative assessment for Mrs. Brown since she could assess the students by the types of questions they were asking, while determining who was showing evidence of understanding the story. In the next data excerpt, we will share the exchange that happened when the students first used the new drama strategy.

Mrs. Brown explained the hotseating to the students by saying their job was “to jump into the story and figure out what is happening in the story.” Beginning by showing the students page 1, Mrs. Brown asked Adam, who was sitting in the hotseat, a question so the students could understand the drama strategy.

Mrs. Brown: “Okay, I’ll ask the first question. Adam, what are you thinking?”

Adam: “I’m thinking of what I should do.”

Mrs. Brown: “Okay, great! Now will someone ask our main character another question?”

A student was called on and made a statement.

Mollie: “The little thing right there.”

Mrs. Brown prompted the student by asking some questions directed toward using this particular drama strategy.

Mrs. Brown: “How can you ask a question to the main character about that? What would you say?”

Mrs. Brown offered to ask another question as the students learned how to use the hotseating strategy.

Mrs. Brown: “Hey, mouse! Where are you?”

Adam: “I’m outside on rocks looking at something.”

Before turning the page, Mrs. Brown read the words on the page.

Mrs. Brown: “Woo, woo, woo!”

A student’s hand shot up to ask a question.

Mary: “Hey, mouse! What are you doing?”

Adam: “I’m hiding because it’s scary.”

Kaitlyn: “Is a bird trying to get you?”

This short transcript demonstrates how the drama technique hotseating served as a strategic opening to support comprehension and meaning-making when using wordless picturebooks. Mrs. Brown carefully crafted prompts, supported engagement, and met the learners at their individual levels of understanding. Using this type of drama technique caters to the abilities of all

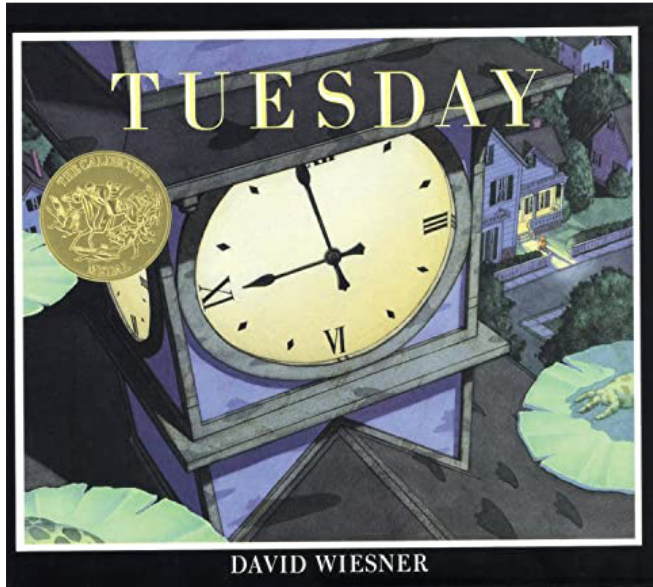
the learners since the teacher, as facilitator, can give guidance when needed. Individual contributions of oral language lead to the enhancement of meaning-making among emerging readers. The students worked together to construct, deconstruct, and reconstruct the meaning of the story through oral language and visual literacy.

Through careful analysis of the data, including reflection on Mrs. Brown’s interview responses, it is evident that hotseating encouraged the students to consider more complex questions as the reading of the story continued. In this instance, the student who sat in the hotseat was able to take on the persona of the mouse as his peers began to ask him more questions. Mrs. Brown also asked a second person to safely socially distance and sit in a second hotseat to take on the persona of the lion in the story. Mrs. Brown described how the conversations about the stories helped nurture meaningful student agency and the drama “leveled everything up.” It is important to note that hotseating also supported equitable sharing time for the students. Mrs. Brown specifically chose the more vocal students to sit in the hotseat. The role-playing and individualized prompts provided an opportunity for more equity in the sharing of ideas. This served as an effective assessment strategy for Mrs. Brown to determine who was understanding the story using effective questioning during the hotseating engagement.

During another picturebook read-aloud, Mrs. Brown noted that there was a mix of balancing background knowledge and introducing new knowledge, which helped the students think more deeply about what they were reading. *Tuesday* (Wiesner, 2011) is a postmodern picturebook that is not entirely wordless. When introducing this book, Mrs. Brown told the students that on certain pages they would be learning information using words, while on most of the other pages, they would make sense of the images together, just as they had been doing when reading some of the other wordless picturebooks. Since this postmodern picturebook takes on more fantastical and nonlinear elements, there were more prompts for discussion. As a result, the need for students to construct and deconstruct meaning using oral language added a layer of engagement and purpose to the emergent readers’ literacy practices. The vivid imagery and elaborate explanations shared by the students prompted more agency and provided openings for the students to take apart the story and reconstruct its meaning as a collective group. In these instances, the postmodern picturebook helped encour-

age freedom of expression and openings to build meaning together. Both wordless and postmodern picturebooks improve oral language development, increase vocabulary usage, and expand comprehension as the readers tell the story in their own words.

Cover of *Tuesday* (Wiesner, 2011)



Implications

The findings suggest that strategic openings, coupled with the wordless and postmodern picturebooks, helped the young children comprehend complex ideas while grappling with their own perceptions of the meaning conveyed in the text. Furthermore, the students were able to show collective agency as they interrogated multiple viewpoints while drawing on their own personal and cultural resources (Leland et al., 2013). This research illustrates a range of ways that young people can engage with literacy using picturebooks in the early childhood setting.

An implication for practitioners interested in fostering agency, developing oral language experiences, and providing rich openings for young readers to play with meaning includes knowing how to share wordless and postmodern picturebooks in the form of a read-aloud. Interpretations of these types of picturebooks require the reader to put the story into their own words. The organic conversations that unfold infuse background knowledge and new knowledge together as the readers make sense of the messages shared in the text. Allowing proper time to read the story in its entirety, encouraging multiple readers to share ideas, and enlisting enough wait time for students

to process the information so that they can contribute to the conversation are key factors when reading wordless books to emergent readers. Considerations for teachers using these strategies should include various depth-of-knowledge questions to promote higher-level thinking and scaffolding instruction. The prompts and guidance can be differentiated to meet individual student needs while encouraging creative thinking and openings for students to formulate their own effective questions. A second implication is to consider how the use of drama techniques helps to foster meaningful and engaging collaborative conversations with readers. When using a wordless or postmodern picturebook for interactive read-alouds, the teacher facilitates conversations while the readers listen and convey understanding in ways that are personally meaningful. It is essential for all students to be able to see the images in the text. It can be particularly helpful to read the story through at least once before attempting to enhance meaning-making using a drama technique such as hotseating.

Additional benefits for using wordless and postmodern picturebooks as read-alouds include the importance of strengthening key literacy skills to help readers understand elements of a story. Deepening inferencing skills, further developing visual literacy skills, and learning how to self-monitor during reading are key comprehension strategies used by highly effective readers. Implementing the strategies outlined in this article will positively influence literacy development in young readers while also helping them to better understand how background knowledge supports understanding and how illustrations carry meaning.

Nurturing Meaning-Making and Agency

Reading as a relational experience (Lysaker, 2006) and student empowerment are crucially interdependent components of learning that can motivate children to share ideas while simultaneously helping them feel validated for their efforts. These semiotic practices can serve as openings for young readers to boost comprehension and develop meaning-making abilities through collaboration and collective agency. Acknowledging the positive impact that wordless books can have on emergent literacy practices could benefit those in teacher education programs and novice and veteran teachers who are looking for ways to expand comprehension abilities in young learners with diverse learning needs.

Furthermore, when considering the comparison of wordless picturebooks and traditional read-alouds, Mrs. Brown not-

ed that it was helpful to have the added dramatic engagement to increase comprehension and meaning-making practices for the students. Building on these inquiry-based and artful pedagogical practices helped provide the readers the support they needed to make sense of the story.

Linked to Kress's (2010) work on multimodality, the read-alouds, collective discussions, and dramatic engagements added complexity to overall understanding and helped reinforce the importance of using multiple modes of expression, such as language and gesture, while making sense of the text. Another focal point, using multimodality in this investigation, describes how the images and texts played off one another while simultaneously working alone to convey meaning (Serafini, 2014).

This investigation demonstrates how the readers developed their capacities to self-monitor and question messages shared in the texts, which extends research that offers explanations for supporting developmental learning through storying. For students who may be demonstrating emergent oral language abilities, the strategies suggested in this study can help initiate more opportunities to play with language and sense-making.

The intentional selection of wordless and postmodern picturebooks proved to be the opening needed to nurture meaningful student agency. Supporting readers to become resilient and inquisitive should be a top priority, specifically with our beginning readers. Integrating high-quality children's literature into early literacy classrooms, while providing openings for children to engage in deeper meaning-making through shared dialogue, can enhance the reading engagement and experiences of young children (Serafini & Tompkins, 2015). Moreover, engaging children using these narrative genres of books can help foster a sense of curiosity while building key literacy skills that can help create a thriving and compassionate learning community. •

Amanda Deliman is an assistant professor at Utah State University–Salt Lake. She currently teaches courses connected to the elementary and early childhood education programs and reading specialist endorsement. Her research interests focus on using picturebooks for curriculum integration and fostering diversity, empathy, and inclusion in early childhood classrooms.

Janet Breitenstein holds an EdS in curriculum and instruction with an emphasis in literacy from Utah State University. She has taught language arts for 20 years. Most recently, she has completed multiple research projects and taught several courses for the School of Teacher Education and Leadership at Utah State University.

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