MOVING STUDENTS DOWN PATHWAYS TO THEME

Rebecca Stortz & Miriam Martinez

TEACHERS ENGAGE their students in literature for myriad reasons, including teaching literacy strategies, addressing standards, motivating students to read, learning to identify literary elements, and offering students mentor texts for their own writing. Yet Hillocks (2016) has reminded us of what is perhaps the most important reason for engaging students in literature: "At the core, literature is concerned not only with character, plot, and setting but with moral and philosophical issues" (p. 110). Hillocks's observation points to the importance of helping students learn to explore themes in literature.

Defining ''Theme''

Educators explain theme in various ways. Tompkins (2003) viewed theme as "the underlying meaning of a story," which "embodies general truths about human nature" (p. 294). Morgan and DeFrancesco (2022) explained themes as "messages about the human experience that offer advice about how to live" (p. 357). According to Wolf (2004), "theme is the heart of a story—an idea or comment about life that often illuminates the emotional content of the human condition" (p. 54).

Knowing theme lies at the "heart of a story" means a critical part of literacy instruction is helping children learn to reach for theme. Yet this is a challenging goal. Authors rarely include explicit statements of theme in stories. So, readers must infer themes, and as Au (1992) noted, constructing a theme is challenging because the reader must "come up with an idea that encompasses the text as a whole" (p. 106). Smith and Wilhelm (2010) detailed the complexity of this kind of thematic thinking:

> Experienced readers attend directly to clues about character, setting, perspective, and event, and infer—using their own personal and world knowledge—to fill in gaps, and see and interpret implied relationships. Throughout their reading, experienced readers…work to develop an understanding that is consistent with the details of the text and that can be applied to other situations in our lived experience out in the world. (p. 159)

Smith and Wilhelm's (2010) description signals the complexity involved in making thematic inferences. Yet it is a task we expect even young children to do. For example, the English Language Arts Common Core Standard 2 calls for first graders to demonstrate an understanding of message, while second graders are expected to determine the message or lesson of a story (National Governors Association Center for Best Practices & Council of Chief State Officers, 2010). Common Core expectations related to theme become increasingly demanding across grade levels (Lord, 2014).

Given the importance of helping children learn to make inferences about theme, we present ways teachers can support students in this challenging task. We begin by looking at what research reveals about children's thematic understand-

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ing and theme instruction. We then discuss various *textual pathways* that can lead readers to thematic insights. Finally, we discuss characteristics of picturebooks for read-alouds focused on theme, as well as instructional ideas teachers can use to guide children toward thematic understandings.

What Research Tells Us

While research focused on theme is limited, researchers have conducted some investigations focused on children's thematic understanding. In addition, research also offers some insight into theme instruction.

Children and Thematic Understanding

Research reveals that children, even young ones, can engage in thematic thinking. Lehr (1988) looked at the responses of kindergartners, second graders, and fourth graders to two different tasks: identifying stories with related themes and articulating themes for stories. In selecting stories with the same themes, the second- and fourth-grade students made the same selections as adults more often than kindergartners did. Further, the older children were more successful in making their own thematic statements for the stories than were younger ones. Yet, Lehr found that even the youngest children were able to make thematic statements about stories. While their statements differed from those made by adults, the themes were, nonetheless, congruent with the stories.

Lehr's findings align with those of Hickman (1981), who investigated the naturally occurring literary responses of children in multigrade classrooms—K/1, 2/3, and 4/5. Hickman found that even her youngest participants reached for theme. However, the thematic statements of kindergartners and first graders were typically expressed in the context of the story. By contrast, the fourth and fifth graders talked about theme using more abstract thematic statements not tied directly to story content.

Theme Instruction

While researchers have found that children can make inferences about theme, this type of thinking may not be the way children typically respond to stories. Rather, children initially become engaged in the story world instead of responding to themes that emerge from stories (Martinez & Roser, 1994). The propensity of children to focus on the story world points to a need for more structured instruction related to theme. While Morgan et al. (2021) noted the "limited research and professional materials to guide teachers' instruction about theme" (p. 429), educators who do write about theme instruction repeatedly emphasize the importance of discussion in helping students reach for theme.

Au (1992) looked at the features of teacher-guided discussions that led middle-grade students to thematic inferences. She found that opportunities to participate in discussion of theme facilitated children's ability to infer theme. However, she noted that such discussions must be carefully orchestrated by teachers. Successful discussions require teachers to be cognizant that more than one theme can emerge from a story and to adjust their questioning to build on students' thinking. Au also noted the importance of offering students repeated opportunities to discuss theme in stories.

Morgan et al. (2021) offered guidelines related to theme instruction based on their own work in classrooms. Like Au, they emphasized the role of discussion and provided specific recommendations for scaffolding students' discussions:

- Consistently use the word "theme" in talking with students.
- Work toward having students construct multiple themes in stories.
- Support students in moving beyond one-word articulations of a topic related to theme or simple clichés.
- Invite students to make connections between the themes they construct and their own lives (p. 434).

Pathways to Theme

Included in all the recommendations related to theme instruction that we have found is the recommendation that students be invited to provide textual evidence for the themes they put forth. However, students need to learn the kinds of textual evidence that can lead to themes. Smith and Wilhelm (2010) argued that noticing is an important interpretive skill for students. They observed that students "need to understand the kind of cues authors provide for them to notice" (p. 29). Stories offer various cues or *pathways to theme*, and teachers must help students become aware of these pathways and learn to follow them in making inferences about literary themes. In the following section, we discuss two types of pathways, those offered by literary elements and devices and those offered by signposts.

Table 1
PATHWAYS TO THEME IN SELECTED PICTUREBOOKS

TITLE	OVERVIEW	POSSIBLE THEME
CHARACTER CHANGE		
Watercress by Andrea Wang (2021)	A young girl gains insight into the hardships her immigrant parents endured before leaving China.	It is important to be mindful of the experiences of others and seek to understand those experiences.
Milo Imagines the World by Matt de la Peña (2021)	Milo imagines the lives of people on the subway, only to realize that all he imagines may be wrong.	Judgments about others based on appearances are often faulty.
Last Stop on Market Street by Matt de la Peña (2015)	As CJ travels through the city with his grandmother, each of his complaints is countered by his grandmother, who sees the world in a different light.	Finding the beauty in the world means looking beneath the surface.
Hello! Hello! by Matthew Cordell (2012)	Members of a family find joys in the world when they set aside their technology and go out into nature.	Nature offers delights not found through technology.
After the Fall by Dan Santat (2017)	After falling from the wall, Humpty Dumpty is transformed when he faces his fears and climbs up on the wall again.	Facing one's fear means conquering one's fear.
Leonardo the Terrible Monster by Mo Willems (2005)	A little monster who is determined to scare someone comes to the realization that it is better to be a friend than a terrible monster.	It is better to extend one's hand in friendship than to bully another.
CHARACTER INTERACTIONS/RELATIONSHIPS		
Bear Has a Story to Tell by Philip Stead (2012)	His too-busy friends do not have time to listen to Bear's story, so instead, Bear helps each one prepare for the coming winter. In the spring, Bear's friends reciprocate.	Friendship means giving—not just receiving.
Bully by Laura Vaccaro Seeger (2013)	Only when a little goat calls out a bull for his bullying does the bully understand how others see him.	Stopping bullying may mean standing up to bullies.
SETTING		
Maybe Something Beautiful: *How Art Transformed a Neighborhood* by F. Isabel Campoy (2016)	An inner-city neighborhood is transformed when a little girl and an artist inspire everyone to help paint murals throughout the neighborhood.	We can each take action to make our community more beautiful.
Harlem Grown by Tony Hillery (2020)	A classroom of children join with a man working to transform a vacant lot into a community garden.	By working together, people can transform the communities in which they live.
Mr. Tiger Goes Wild by Peter Brown (2013)	After Mr. Tiger returns home from the wilderness, changes are apparent in his uptight town, with animals beginning to interact with one another, walk on all fours, and even go without their clothes.	It is important to be oneself rather than having one's life defined by rigid social rules.
The Night Gardener by Terry Fan & Eric Fan (2016)	A dull, gray town is transformed into a lively, colorful place through the creative topiaries created by a gardener who is passing through.	One way to enrich our lives is by making the world a more beautiful place.
AHA MOMENTS		
Last Stop on Market Street by Matt de la Peña (2015)	As CJ travels through the city with his grandmother, each of his complaints is countered by his grandmother, who sees the world in a different light. This leads CJ to a new insight: "He wondered how his nana always found beautiful where he never even thought to look."	Finding the beauty in the world means looking beneath the surface.
Saturday by Oge Mora (2019)	After looking forward to spending a special Saturday with her mother, the day is filled with one disappointment after another, until the little girl has a realization: "'Don't worry, Mommy,' Ava reassured her, 'Today *was* special. Today *was* splendid. Saturdays are wonderful…because I spend them with you.'"	Special times are really about spending time with someone you love.
Milo Imagines the World by Matt de la Peña (2021)	Milo imagines the lives of people on the subway, only to realize that all he imagines may be wrong. This leads him to conclude: "Maybe you can't really know anyone just by looking at their face."	Do not make judgments about others based on appearances.

Table 1 cont.

PATHWAYS TO THEME IN SELECTED PICTUREBOOKS

TITLE	OVERVIEW	POSSIBLE THEME
WORDS OF THE WISER		
Jabari Jumps by Gaia Cornwall (2017)	Jabari has learned to swim and really wants to jump off the high board. However, he is a little too afraid, until his father shares some words of wisdom: "Sometimes, if I feel a little scared, I take a deep breath and tell myself I am ready. And you know what? Sometimes it stops feeling scary and feels a little like a surprise."	We can overcome fear by believing in ourselves.
Amazing Grace by Mary Hoffman (1991)	Grace is discouraged when a classmate tells her she can't be Peter Pan in the class play because she is Black. It is through the support of her nana that Grace realizes that possibilities are endless, leading her nana to observe: "If Grace put her mind to it, she can do anything she want."	Realizing dreams requires determination and hard work.
Alma and How She Got Her Name by Juana Martinez-Neal (2018)	When Alma expresses concern about her very long name, her father tells her about all the family members after whom she is named. Most important, though, is the name "Alma," because, as her father explains, "You are the first and the only Alma. You will make your own story."	We are each part of a family, while simultaneously being our own selves.
The Bee Tree by Patricia Polacco (1998)	After a rollicking adventure seeking a bee tree, a grandfather tells his granddaughter: "There is such sweetness inside of the book too!" He continues, "Such things…adventure, knowledge and wisdom. But these things do not come easily. You have to pursue them. Just like we ran after the bees to find their tree, so you must also chase these things through the pages of a book!"	Reading offers rich rewards for those who pursue them.
Each Kindness by Jacqueline Woodson (2012)	A new girl is ostracized by her classmates, who recognize the error of their judgment after it is too late to reach out to the girl. "*This is what kindness does*, Ms. Albert said. *Each little thing we do goes out, like a ripple, into the world*." The teacher tells the students, "*Each kindness…makes the whole world a little bit better.*"	Kindness makes the world a better place.
AGAIN AND AGAIN		
The Bell Rang by James Ransome (2019)	In this story about the brutality of slavery, flying birds appear repeatedly in illustrations and emphasize the importance of flights to freedom.	Freedom is for all people.
Thank You, Omu! by Oge Mora (2018)	Omu repeatedly shares her stew until none remains. Her neighbors share their food with her.	The world is a better place when we share with others.
Daniel Finds a Poem by Micha Archer (2016)	Daniel repeatedly asks each animal he meets in the park what poetry is.	We find poetry by looking closely at the world around us.
SYMBOL AND EXTENDED METAPHOR		
The Uncorker of Ocean Bottles by Michelle Cuevas (2016)	The "uncorker" leads a lonely life, delivering messages found in ocean bottles but never receiving any message himself. When he retrieves an invitation to a party without an address, he tries repeatedly (and unsuccessfully) to deliver the message. So, he goes to the party himself where he finds something new—friends. The narrator states: "The Uncorker's heart was a glass vessel filled to the brim."	There is nothing as fulfilling as connections with others.
Extra Yarn by Mac Barnett (2012)	A little girl finds a magical box filled with yarn that is never depleted. So, the little girl begins to transform her drab and dreary town by making colorful coats for everyone (and everything) in the town.	We can change the world with a giving spirit.

Literary Elements and Literary Devices as Pathways to Theme

The literary element of character often serves as an important pathway to theme. In fact, Golden and Guthrie (1986) argued that understanding characters and their motivations may be the key to interpreting themes in literature. In a similar fashion, Wolf (2004) noted that "more complex stories develop themes on an implicit level through the affect and actions of their characters" (p. 55). Lehr's (1991) research supports the contention that attending to character may offer an important pathway to theme. She found that children who understood the inner workings of characters were able to take that information and "generate an overarching construct for the story" (p. 52).

Literary elements work in tandem, of course, with character and plot being integrally linked. As plots unfold, we learn of characters' experiences and their interactions with others, and we often see characters changing as a consequence of those experiences and interactions. Reflection on how (and why) a character has changed can often lead readers to thematic insights. For example, in *Leonardo the Terrible Monster* (Willems, 2005), a little monster is determined to "scare the tuna salad" out of someone. Leonardo believes he has finally succeeded when he sneaks up on Sam, who bursts into tears as Leonardo endeavors to scare the little boy. Leonardo's feeling of accomplishment changes when Sam shares a litany of hurts that reveals the true reasons for his tears. It is at this point that Leonardo makes a "big decision," to be a wonderful friend instead of a terrible monster. Given the change in Leonardo's perspective, young readers can be guided to infer a message about reaching out a hand in friendship that emerges in this story.

In some picturebooks, setting can be the literary element that offers a pathway to theme, particularly in stories in which shifts in setting occur. In *Mr. Tiger Goes Wild* (Brown, 2013), Mr. Tiger becomes frustrated by the rigid rules governing his town, and little wonder. Illustrations reveal a town in which every house is identical. Animal inhabitants of the town walk on two legs, wear only the most proper of clothing, and behave in the stuffiest fashion imaginable. Frustrated, Mr. Tiger discards his clothing and runs off to the wilderness. Illustrations of the wilderness reveal colors and shapes that are in dramatic contrast to those seen in the town, and the wilderness appears to offer Mr. Tiger freedom to be himself. But he soon becomes lonely, so he decides to return to town—a town that is changing: Animals are now smiling, some walk on all four legs, and others have even discarded their clothing. Readers can infer that a place that allows one to be oneself provides opportunities for happiness.

Literary devices can also lead readers to theme. Eeds and Peterson (1991) have highlighted the potential of symbols and extended metaphors, noting that these literary devices can suggest meanings not directly stated and point to what a story is really about. They explained that through symbols and extended metaphors, authors can abstract "some of the components of life and order them in such a way that they are illuminated" (p. 121). As such, these literary devices can provide pathways to theme. For example, in *Bear Came Along* (Morris, 2019), a river serves as a metaphor for community building when a motley crew of animals—all living separate lives at the beginning of the story—find themselves united on the adventure of a lifetime as they come together on a runaway tree barreling down the river.

Signposts as Pathways to Theme

Beers and Probst (2012) have identified features of stories found repeatedly in longer texts that hold the potential of helping students read more deeply—if they attend to the features. Beers and Probst called these features "signposts." While these scholars explored the signposts in chapter books, these same signposts can be found in some picturebooks for younger children. Like Morgan and DeFrancesco (2022), we believe that three of these signposts can serve as pathways to theme: aha moments, words of the wiser, and again and again.

Aha moments are "moments when a character's sudden insight or understanding helps us understand the plot's movement, the development of the character, or the internal conflict he faces" (Beers & Probst, 2012, p. 71). For example, in *Milo Imagines the World* (de la Peña, 2021), a little boy traveling by subway to visit his mother in prison makes quick judgments about his fellow travelers—including a little boy he has pegged as rich and privileged. It is only when Milo sees the boy entering the prison to visit his own mother that he has an aha moment: "Maybe you can't really know anyone just by looking at their face." Milo's new insight can lead readers to recognize the fallacy of making judgments about others based on outward appearances.

Words of the wiser is the second signpost that can lead readers to theme. Beers and Probst (2012) explained the signpost this way: "This is the scene in which a wiser

Table 2
SAMPLE EXPLANATIONS OF SELECTED PATHWAYS TO THEME

PATHWAY	EXPLANATION OF PATHWAY	GUIDING QUESTIONS TO HELP STUDENTS EXPLORE PATHWAY IN A STORY
Character Change	Characters in stories can have all kinds of experiences, and they often meet different kinds of people. And just like us, they can learn from new experiences or from the people they meet. The author rarely tells us what the character has learned, but we can usually figure out the character's "life lesson." That life lesson points to the theme of the story.	• What important thing happens to [main character] in the story? • What do you think the character learned from this experience? • What can *we* learn from the character's experience? That is, what message or theme does the story have for *us*?
Again and Again	Sometimes in a story we see something that is repeated again and again. Maybe a character does something again and again or says something again and again. There may even be something that appears in illustrations again and again. When we see something appearing repeatedly in a story, it is usually important. So, we need to ask ourselves, "Why has the author included this again and again? What does the author want us to think about?" This will often lead us to the theme of the story.	• Did we see something in the story that happened again and again? (Or did a character say something again and again?) • Why do you think this happened again and again? • What do you think the author may want us to learn from this again and again? • What message or theme does the story have for *us*?
Words of the Wiser	In some stories, there is a character who is older than the other characters, and sometimes this character shares something important that really teaches the younger character something they hadn't thought about before. We call these "words of the wiser." And the words of the wiser can help readers understand the big idea or theme of the story.	• Who is the older and wiser person in this story? • What wise words did this person share? • How did this help the character? • What can *we* learn from the story?
Aha Moment	Sometimes characters in stories have an experience that makes them realize something they have never known before. This usually happens after the character has an important experience of some kind. When this happens in a story, we say the character had an "aha moment." And this aha moment can often help readers understand the big idea or theme of the story.	• Do you remember a time in the story when the main character suddenly understood something important? This is an aha moment. • What words in the story tell us what the character actually understood? • What happened in the story that made the main character realize this? • How did it change the main character? • What can *we* learn from the story?

and often older character offers a life lesson of some sort to the protagonist. This lesson often emerges as a theme" (p. 72). We see this signpost in *Each Kindness* (Woodson, 2012), a story in which a new girl is repeatedly ostracized by her classmates. After the new girl moves away, the teacher talks with the children about kindness: "*This is what kindness does*, Ms. Albert said. *Each little thing we do goes out, like a ripple, into the world*." The teacher tells the students that "*each kindness…makes the whole world a little bit better.*" These words of wisdom lead the main character to recognize the hurt she has likely caused by refusing to play with the new girl, and these same words can help readers infer the message of Woodson's story.

The final signpost is again and again, and Beers and Probst (2012) explained the signpost this way: "This is an image, word, or situation that is repeated, leading the reader to wonder about its significance. Repetition might provide information about a character, about the conflict, about the setting, or about the theme" (p. 72). *Thank You, Omu!* (Mora, 2018) features the again-and-again signpost. Enticed by the smell of Omu's stew, neighbors come knocking on Omu's door one by one. Each time, Omu generously shares her stew.

When she discovers there is no stew left for her own dinner, Omu hears another knock on her door—and discovers her neighbors have come to visit bringing all kinds of delectable treats. This pattern gives insight into the importance of sharing what we have with others. *The Bell Rang* (Ransome, 2019) also contains the again-and-again pattern, but the pattern is revealed through the illustrations rather than the verbal text. The story focuses on the suffering of an enslaved family whose son successfully escapes to freedom. Flying birds appear repeatedly in the book's illustrations, emphasizing the importance of flights to freedom.

While some of the pathways we have discussed may be found less frequently in picturebooks, we have been surprised to discover that quite a few picturebooks include one or more pathways to theme and hence provide opportunities for theme instruction. In Table 1, we offer a list of picturebooks that serve as exemplars of such pathways. While we do not intend this table to be a comprehensive list of picturebooks with these pathways, we included ones that we believe to contain clear examples that can be used for instruction.

By explicitly introducing pathways to theme, repeatedly guiding children down these pathways, and offering opportunities for students to explore on their own and with peers, the classroom can be a context for thinking deeply about stories and how they relate to our lives.

Supporting Students' Explorations of Theme

In this section, we conclude by focusing on ways in which teachers can support young children in learning to make inferences about theme. As referenced previously, Morgan et al. (2021) provided guidelines for theme instruction: consistently using the word "theme," being open toward students' construction of multiple themes, supporting students into moving beyond topics or clichés, providing opportunities to share textual evidence that supports their thinking, and inviting students to connect the themes to their own lives (p. 434). Classroom activities that incorporate these guidelines might include teacher-led read-alouds, small-group discussions, and opportunities to write about the stories.

Given that thinking about theme may not be the way children typically respond to stories, the role of the teacher is critical if children are to learn to make inferences about theme. The first consideration in introducing a new pathway to theme is book selection, to ensure that the book offers a clear example of the target pathway. Table 1 contains numerous examples of such picturebooks.

Teacher-led read-alouds are a promising context for introducing new pathways and providing explanations related to the pathway. As part of this introduction, teachers must clearly explain what the pathway is and guide the students into discovering how the pathway is constructed in the story and helps to develop the themes. The read-aloud provides opportunities for student questions, connections, and discussion. In Table 2, we offer sample explanations of selected pathways and prompts that teachers can use in guiding students down these pathways.

For the students to really begin to "own" each pathway, they need numerous opportunities to explore new picturebooks as well. For example, they can engage with their peers in small-group discussions or draft written responses that can then be shared with peers. And only after ample opportunities for the students to become comfortable with each pathway should the teacher introduce another.

Conclusion

Reaching for theme can be a challenging part of literary instruction, but we believe that thematic thinking is within the reach of young children. By explicitly introducing pathways to theme, repeatedly guiding children down these pathways, and offering opportunities for students to explore on their own and with peers, the classroom can be a context for thinking deeply about stories and how they relate to our lives. It is when we share the right picturebooks with children and offer supportive instruction that we will be helping children learn to reach for the moral and philosophical insights that Hillocks (2016) noted are central to understanding literature. •

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