

EXTENDING THE MEASURES OF TEXT COMPLEXITY FOR LITERARY TEXTS



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MUCH OF THE WORK of English language arts teachers centers around engaging students in explorations of literature with a particular emphasis on fiction. While works of fiction can be described in terms of common literary elements such as characterization and plot, authors arrange these elements in markedly different ways. These differences may well mean that what makes a literary text complex can vary greatly from one work to another. Such variations in complexity can impact student engagement with particular texts. While we frequently ask students to reread short texts or text excerpts more closely, especially those that are complex (Wolsey & Lapp, 2017), our focus is on full-length texts (i.e., chapter books). We believe that to support student engagement, teachers must closely reread individual texts to understand the complexities that may challenge student engagement. In this article, we share the discoveries we made as we reread three high-quality chapter books, looking closely at their features. What we discovered were both complexities and possibilities. We believe that such discoveries position teachers to create the necessary scaffolds to help students navigate through texts to reach for a deeper understanding.

Background

To understand the uniqueness of literary text complexity, it is helpful to first consider the concept of text complexity within a broader perspective. Text complexity has long been a topic of interest to researchers. However, in more recent years, the Common Core State Standards (CCSS) has broadened the

perspectives on the topic. The CCSS has drawn attention to the need for students to read increasingly more difficult and complex texts.

The CCSS defines text complexity as “the inherent difficulty of reading and comprehending a text combined with consideration of reader and task variables” (National Governors Association Center for Best Practices & Council of Chief State School Officers, 2010, p. 43). To determine text complexity, the standards rely on a three-pronged model emphasizing quantitative measures, qualitative values, and reader/task features.

The quantitative measures provide numerical information for classifying books, such as readability formulas and the Lexile Framework (Fisher et al., 2016). These measures rely primarily on sentence length and multisyllabic words as indicators of complexity.

Hiebert (2014) noted that quantitative measures provide only an overview of text complexity. In contrast, qualitative measures give us greater insight. The CCSS describes the features of literary texts in terms of levels of meaning and purpose, structure, language conventionality and clarity, and knowledge demands. Yet, the CCSS’s descriptions of these qualitative factors are broad and, hence, offer only minimal guidance to teachers.

In this article, we focus on fictional literary texts. Alsup (2013) noted: “Reading and responding to fiction is a complex activity, and fictional texts are complex texts” (p. 184). The sources of complexity in literary texts may be intrinsically related to literary features, such as narrative structure and the multid-

mensionality of characters. In addition, text complexity may also be inherent in features of literary works that are specific to the individual text (Lee, 2011). Hence, teachers must look closely at each book they plan to use with students to better understand the features that may contribute to the book's complexity.

In addressing complexity, the CCSS also recognized the importance of task variables. While literature instruction is sometimes focused on only identifying literary elements, Hillocks (2016) argued for an “expanded treatment concerning how literature works [rather than what] is provided by traditional lists of the ‘elements of literature’” (p. 118). Instead, he observed that “at the core, literature is concerned not only with character, plot, and setting but with moral and philosophical issues” (p. 110). Attention to such issues means teachers need to engage students in complex tasks that require analysis and interpretation.

Many books used in upper elementary and middle school are highly complex. In light of this, our research question was the following: What is the nature of text complexity in high-quality chapter books for older readers? To address this question, we closely examined three chapter books to identify the features contributing to complexity.

Methodology

The research team was composed of three individuals, two of whom are university professors who engage in research in children's and young adult literature. The third is a doctoral student in literacy. All three have experience teaching English language arts and reading to older learners.

Text Selection

In selecting the books, we used three criteria. We wanted high-quality books, books that would likely pose challenges for readers, and books of the same genre. We selected three Newbery titles—all historical fiction—meeting these criteria: *The Wednesday Wars* (Schmidt, 2007), *Moon Over Manifest* (Vanderpool, 2010), and *Splendors and Glooms* (Schlitz, 2012).

Procedures

We sought to identify elements in the books that might challenge readers. For each book, we individually took detailed notes about elements that we believed contributed to the book's complexity. We came together to discuss and compare notes about the features that we noticed. Through these discussions, we realized that the best way to systematically compile our thinking was to create charts describing key literary elements

and devices. One chart focused on character and the other on narrative structure. In the character chart, we included for each main character key information, including character traits, relationships, changes, and conflicts. A second chart focused on narrative structure that identified major plot strands, the organization of plot strands (e.g., linear), and the inclusion of literary devices (e.g., symbols, elements of strangeness).

As we continued our discussions of the books, we realized that for *Moon Over Manifest*, a particular action sequence—trickery—appeared repeatedly in the book. This repeated action sequence formed a pattern contributing to the complexity of the structure. This led us to do a second reading to document the occurrences of this action sequence. Our discussions led us to wonder if the other books also contained this type of pattern. As a result, we conducted second readings of the other two books to identify possible occurrences of patterns. These multiple readings enabled us to describe the various facets of complexity for each book.

Findings

We present each book by initially providing an overview of the plot, followed by descriptions of particular elements that appear to create distinctive complexities for readers.

Analysis of *The Wednesday Wars*

At Holling Hoodhood's middle school, Catholic students are dismissed early on Wednesdays to attend Catechism and Jewish students are dismissed to attend Hebrew school. Holling—the only Presbyterian—stays at school with his seventh-grade English teacher, Mrs. Baker, who decides he will spend Wednesday afternoons studying Shakespearean plays. Holling is convinced that Mrs. Baker must hate him; why else would she make him read Shakespeare?

But it soon becomes evident that Mrs. Baker is not the problem. Readers discover the other issues Holling faces—dealing with eighth-grade bullies, living with a sister who says he has no guts, and having to wear yellow tights bedecked with feathers in a Shakespearean play. Yet, Holling's most significant problem is a dominating father who controls his son's life while simultaneously neglecting him. And all this unfolds in the midst of the Vietnam War.

Levels of Meaning

The CCSS identified “levels of meaning” as one measure of complexity. While authors can create depth of meaning using

different literary devices, for this book, we found that depth of meaning was conveyed through three patterns woven throughout the book.

Pattern of Bullying. The bullying pattern is introduced early on when readers gain insight into the relationship between Holling and his father, who is determined to have the perfect house, the perfect family, and the perfect architectural firm. As the book develops, readers learn that he also attempts to dictate the future of his children, expecting Holling to eventually take over his firm and Holling's sister, Heather, to become a secretary in the firm.

This pattern is amplified throughout the book. Holling is repeatedly bullied by eighth graders who post throughout the school photographs of Holling dressed as the fairy Ariel in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. Other characters are also the victims of bullies. Holling's father attempts to destroy the architectural firm of a competitor. Mai Thi, a young Vietnamese refugee, is bullied by both eighth graders and Mrs. Bigio, the cafeteria lady, whose husband was killed in Vietnam. Even Mickey Mantle briefly appears as a bully. When Holling goes directly to Mantle's autograph session from his performance, still dressed as Ariel the fairy, Mantle refuses to autograph his baseball. These and other examples of bullying woven throughout the story underscore the structural complexity of the book.

Pattern of Alliance. In tandem with the episodes of bullying, a second pattern emerges, one in which characters step forward to support the bullied. This pattern is most evident in Holling's relationship with Mrs. Baker. Early on, Mrs. Baker resents having to devote Wednesday afternoons to one student. Yet, as she comes to know Holling, she becomes his ally and begins to use the plays to help Holling gain insight into his life, in particular the pressure placed upon him by his father. Mrs. Baker also steps forward to help Holling when his parents fail to provide support. For example, she attends his performance in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* and even helps him train for an upcoming track meet, ultimately enabling him to beat his eighth-grade tormentors.

Similar to the bullying strand, the alliance strand is also amplified in repeated episodes throughout the book. It is not just Mrs. Baker who serves as an ally for Holling. His friends also step into this role. When Mickey Mantle refuses to autograph the baseball, Danny Hupfer gives his signed baseball back to Mickey Mantle, saying, "I guess I don't need this after all" (p. 92).

Other characters also need allies. For example, Danny becomes Mai Thi's ally when an eighth grader taunts her in the cafeteria. Even Mrs. Bigio, the cafeteria lady, who initially bullied Mai Thi, has a change of heart and invites Mai Thi to live with her. Of particular note is Holling's transformation from victim to ally. At the end of the story, he defies his father to support his sister, Heather, who ran away from home and now needs help coming back.

Pattern of Interactions Around Shakespearean Plays. *The Wednesday Wars* becomes even more complex through the repeated inclusion of a third pattern, conversations between Holling and Mrs. Baker about the different plays Holling reads each month. Given the intended audience, readers will have little familiarity with the plays of Shakespeare. The author includes minimal information about the plot of each play, nor is this information necessary. Rather, the author uses Holling's responses to the plays, as well as his conversations with Mrs. Baker, to provide insights into Holling's character growth. Such subtle clues demand thoughtful attention.

Initially, Holling is drawn to the language and action scenes in the plays. For example, he becomes enamored with Shakespearean insults and curses, such as "pied ninny" (p. 57) and "Toads, beetles, bats, light on you!" (p. 51). Yet, as the year moves on, readers see a gradual deepening of Holling's responses as he begins to use the plays as a window into the lives of the people around him. Then, gradually, Holling begins to apply the works of Shakespeare to think about issues he is facing in school. In reference to *Macbeth*, Mrs. Baker observes that "compared to love, malice is a small and petty thing" (p. 109). Thinking about the photos of him in the fairy costume that the eighth graders posted, Holling counters with, "Malice is not always small and petty. Have you seen what Doug Swietek's brother put up in the halls?" (p. 109). Only toward the second half of the school year does Holling begin to use Shakespeare to understand his own family dynamics. Initially, his readings of *The Merchant of Venice* and *Romeo and Juliet* give him insights that help him try to understand the person his father has become:

I suddenly wondered if my father was really like Shylock...I wondered if he had ever had a choice, or if he had ever felt trapped...I wondered if it was what he wanted—or if there was a time when he might have wanted something else. Or if I wanted something else. Or if we were both only Fortune's fools—like Romeo. (p. 154)

At the end of the school year, when reading *Hamlet*, Holling uses Shakespeare to understand the ways in which his father's expectations for his future would constrain his own life choices:

"But you want to decide for yourself," said Mrs. Baker.

I nodded. I wanted to decide for myself.

"And you're afraid," said Mrs. Baker, "that you won't get the chance."

"That I won't get the chance to see what I can do with the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune," I said. (p. 220)

It is this insight that gives Holling the courage to defy his father and extend a helping hand to his sister who ran away from home.

Analysis of *Moon Over Manifest*

Moon Over Manifest has two interwoven strands, one set in 1936 and the other in 1918. The 1936 strand centers around Abilene, a young girl whose father, Gideon, has sent her to live in Manifest, the town of his youth, while he seeks work during the Depression. Abilene is perplexed: Why has her father sent her to Manifest? Why can she no longer travel with him? Why can she find no clues that he actually lived in Manifest?

The 1918 story strand unfolds through the stories told to Abilene by Miss Sadie, a strange "diviner" who lives in Manifest. The stories initially seem to center around Jinx, a young drifter and inveterate trickster, who has come to live in the town. Soon, though, Miss Sadie's stories expand to encompass the broader community of immigrant mine workers who are deliberately segregated in work shifts by the wealthy mine owner. By intentionally organizing shifts based upon nationality, the owner maintains control over the mine workers. Miss Sadie's stories also include the role that Jinx plays in addressing the inequities imposed on this immigrant community. Ultimately, Abilene, like the reader, weaves together the story of the town's history to discover that young Jinx is actually Gideon, her father.

In *Moon Over Manifest*, we found three facets of text complexity aligned with the features identified by the CCSS: the historical background demands, various elements of narrative structure, and the inclusion of patterns that deepen levels of meaning.

Background Demands on the Reader

As noted earlier, the book is set in two eras. To fully grasp Abilene's situation, readers need to understand that in 1936, many families lost their homes and were forced to travel across the country looking for work. Yet, the author provides no explanation of this broader context. Rather, the kind of information she offers about the Depression focuses only on details related to daily life.

The 1918 story strand requires even more background knowledge. Miss Sadie's stories are filled with characters whose lives are affected by broader societal issues, including the Ku Klux Klan, the orphan trains, and World War I. Central to her stories, though, is the exploitation faced by the immigrant population. Understanding this strand also requires historical background knowledge about racism existing in this era, prohibition regulations in Kansas, and the Spanish flu. The issues characters face are integrally related to this historical information. While these demands add to the complexity of the text, the author provides no background knowledge related to these facets of history.

Narrative Structure

The book's structure is complicated. The two story strands are woven together in such a way that readers are continuously moving back and forth across time periods. To further complicate the structure, the author uses three different formats: traditional chapters written in a straight narrative format, letters, and newspaper articles. A majority of the traditional chapters, set in 1936, are told from the first-person point of view of Abilene. However, the other chapters, set in 1918, relay Miss Sadie's stories about the past that are linked to letters found by Abilene. The letters were written in 1918 to Jinx by his friend Ned, who was fighting in World War I. The letters offer Abilene tantalizing clues about the past that is unfolding through Miss Sadie's stories. The newspaper articles, largely from 1918, offer further clues the reader must weave together. So, the complexity of the narrative structure emerges, in part, from the shifting between time periods, the changes in perspectives, and the use of different formats.

The author provides some support for dealing with these complexities. Chapter headings identify the time period in which events are occurring. In addition, the 1918 chapters are written in a different font. Further, the newspaper articles are presented in narrow columns, mirroring a newspaper format, while the letters are italicized. The author is intentional in the

use of these textual clues; however, readers must be attuned to them to benefit from these supports.

Number of Characters and Their Connections Across Eras

The sheer number of characters adds to the complexity, with some appearing in both time periods. At the beginning of the book, the author offers a character list based upon time period and countries of origin. Despite what first appears to be a lengthy list of characters, it is incomplete. There are still other characters who play important roles in the story who are not on the list. So, readers must hold on to a broad array of characters while moving across both time periods as they read the text.

Levels of Meaning

The book becomes even more complex with the addition of two major patterns—a pattern of trickery and a pattern of storytelling.

Pattern of Trickery. Trickery serves as an important link braiding together the plot strands and characters. We identified more than 20 tricks, most in the 1918 strand, with Jinx being the major trickster (though eventually others follow Jinx's lead in using trickery). Early on, Jinx's tricks are either for personal gain or for retribution. For example, when Jinx first comes to Manifest, hungry and on the lam, he tricks Ned out of the fish he has just caught. Soon, though, Jinx finds himself allied with Ned when Klansmen steal their clothes from the banks of the creek. To retaliate, Jinx steals two Klansmen's robes, and he and Ned infiltrate the Klan's rally, replacing newspapers in the outhouse with poison ivy leaves.

When the townspeople see an opportunity to free themselves from the mine owner's control, the nature of trickery takes a more serious turn. As the townspeople and the mine owner simultaneously learn that the property adjacent to the mine likely contains valuable coal, both are determined to purchase the land. So, Jinx devises a scheme to engage the mine workers in an effort to trick the mine owner into believing that the Spanish flu is running rampant in the town. Fearing the worst, the elite of Manifest leave town, freeing the townspeople to launch a successful bootlegging business to raise the money needed to purchase the land. Hence, trickery becomes a tool for uniting a disparate immigrant community against the injustices they are experiencing at the hands of the wealthy.

Pattern of Storytelling. The importance of the storytelling pattern is evident from the beginning of *Moon Over Manifest*. On Abilene's first day in Manifest, she is sent to school—even though it is the last day before summer vacation. The teacher, Sister Redempta, gives Abilene an assignment to complete over the summer: writing a story. Unbeknownst to Abilene, this is the beginning of her own story as she seeks to learn about her father and his place in Manifest—thus launching what can be described as a web of storytelling.

When Abilene accidentally breaks Miss Sadie's flowerpot, she is obligated to work off her debt. During her time with Miss Sadie, the diviner begins to tell stories of Manifest in 1918. Ultimately, it is through these stories that the power of storytelling is revealed: Storytelling unifies the disconnected miners of 1918 to fight injustice. Storytelling gives Abilene pieces of the puzzle she needs to understand the reasons her father sent her to live in Manifest. Storytelling also serves as a vehicle for healing Miss Sadie, who has suffered unfathomable losses of her own. And ultimately, the patterns of trickery and storytelling come together. Through the stories told by Miss Sadie, Abilene learns the craft of trickery that, in turn, she uses to devise her own trick to bring her father back home to Manifest.

Analysis of *Splendors and Glooms*

Set in Victorian England, *Splendors and Glooms* is the story of three children whose lives intersect with those of two dark-hearted magicians, Grisini and Cassandra, who share a disreputable past. Grisini, a cruel puppeteer, manipulates not only puppets but also two orphans, Lizzie Rose and Parsefall, who assist him with the puppet shows. Grisini and his orphans are invited to perform in the home of a wealthy London doctor. The daughter, Clara, welcomes them as a relief from the depressing, guilt-ridden life she leads. Grisini seizes this opportunity to increase his financial state by kidnapping Clara and then using his magic to turn her into a puppet.

To save Clara, Lizzie Rose and Parsefall find themselves tangled in a devious plan contrived by Grisini to gain possession of the phoenix-stone, a stone that gives Cassandra immense magical powers. Ironically, the stone is also slowly destroying Cassandra, yet her only release can come by someone *stealing* the stone. Seeking the power and wealth of the phoenix-stone, Grisini is determined to take possession of it. To do so, he and Cassandra conceive of a plan to involve the children in stealing the stone. Even while confronting the machinations of both

magicians, Lizzie Rose and Parsefall continue their pursuit to save Clara and free themselves from the clutches of Cassandra and Grisini.

We identified three factors that add to the complexity of *Splendors and Glooms*. The first is the structure. Elements of strangeness is the second factor, and the third is a pattern of puppetry.

Narrative Structure

While the plot is linear, with a few key flashbacks, this description is somewhat deceptive. The way in which the five major characters are introduced adds to the book's complexity. In the prologue, Cassandra figures prominently. She is introduced as a witch possessing the phoenix-stone. Through her dream, readers are also introduced to Grisini, described as Cassandra's fellow magician. The brief description of the dream also alludes to two or three shadowy figures that are perhaps children, but at this point, we learn nothing about these shadowy figures. So, the prologue introduces us to two major characters, hints of characters to come, and plants a seed by introducing the phoenix-stone, all of which leave readers wondering how this seed will develop.

Yet, there is no apparent connection between the prologue and the story that unfolds in Part 1—other than the appearance of Grisini. Five of the six chapters that follow have titles that each name a different character. Further, these chapters make no mention of Cassandra. This shifting from character to character in the initial chapters challenges readers in knowing which of the characters might be considered a main character, or if all should be.

As Part 1 develops, it soon becomes evident that much of this section does not center around Cassandra at all. Rather, the focus shifts to the experiences of these other characters, and the key plot strands associated with them begin to unfold. We find out how the lives of Grisini, Parsefall, Clara, and Lizzie Rose intersect. Yet, it is only well into Part 1 before the reader understands how Cassandra's story is connected to their lives. Through much of Part 1, readers must put together the pieces of this puzzle. It is not until approximately a third of the way through the book that readers begin to see how the lives of *all* the characters intertwine.

Elements of Strangeness

Another element adding to the book's complexity is the inclusion of elements of "strangeness" (Rainey, 2016). These ele-

ments are clues, yet the author drops them into the story seemingly out of nowhere, and hence they seem strange and out of place. The author repeatedly references objects that seemingly have no apparent connection to immediate events. For example, readers may be puzzled by repeated references to Grisini's automaton watch with a gold wolf stalking a silver swan that can never escape. Only as the story unfolds do readers come to realize the symbolic value of this object.

There are also examples of strangeness directly related to characters. For example, we learn early on that Parsefall has only nine fingers:

Parsefall didn't know what had become of it [his finger]. He was almost certain that he had once had ten fingers, and it tormented him that he couldn't remember what had become of the one he lost. (p. 26)

At this point in the story, there is no further mention of the missing finger until the end. Another example occurs when Lizzie Rose and Parsefall speculate about Grisini's possible involvement in past kidnappings. Then, in the final paragraph of this chapter, a disconnect with earlier chapter events abruptly occurs:

Clara slept. Never in her life had she known so dense a sleep: a sleep without dreaming, without the slightest twitch of finger or eyelid. She was as lifeless as a pressed flower. (p. 66)

This reference appears before readers learn that Clara has been transformed into a puppet. So, readers are left wondering why Clara is introduced here and why her sleep is so deep.

Levels of Meaning

For *Splendors and Glooms*, we again identified a pattern that added to the complexity of the book. This was the inclusion of a pattern of puppetry.

Pattern of Puppetry. Puppet shows appear early on when readers first meet Clara, who is excited about having a puppet performance at her birthday party. Soon, however, the concept of puppetry takes a dark turn. Just as puppets are controlled by puppeteers, readers begin to see that characters are being controlled by others. The use of puppetry then becomes a metaphor providing insights into character relationships. For example, Grisini uses his magic to turn Clara into an actual puppet. He also controls the lives of both Parsefall and Lizzie

Rose, who are totally dependent upon him for all their needs. Of particular note is the seemingly inexplicable control Grisini wields over Parsefall. Parsefall cowers in the presence of Grisini, he steals for Grisini, and he practices endless hours to live up to Grisini's expectations to be the best puppeteer.

Throughout the book, there are other puppet/puppeteer relationships. For example, Grisini is Cassandra's puppet. Even before Clara was transformed into an actual puppet, she was her mother's "puppet" in real life. Readers learn that all four of Clara's siblings had died of cholera. As a result, the only focus in her mother's life is the children who had passed away. In turn, she repeatedly forces Clara to participate in ritual-like remembrances of her siblings.

Only at the end of the story does puppetry become a force for good, when Clara is transformed back into a child and is in danger of drowning in an icy lake. At this point, Parsefall uses a rope to save her:

Clara lay flat. She felt the tension of the rope as she began to move, the ridges in the ice scraping her skin. She heard her skirt tear. She thought, *Parsefall is pulling my strings*, and in spite of the danger in the piercing cold, she laughed. (p. 330)

Discussion

We identified three of the CCSS qualitative factors contributing to the complexity of the books we analyzed: knowledge demands, structure, and levels of meaning and purpose. However, these features played out in nuanced and varied ways in each book.

Knowledge Demands

Each of the three books was a work of historical fiction, a genre in which knowledge demands are often great. Yet, these demands varied across the books. *Splendors and Glooms* was set in Victorian England, a time and place far removed from the experiences of today's readers. Yet, rather than impacting major story events, this setting came into play largely in the characters' everyday lives. By contrast, the historical setting of the Vietnam War in *The Wednesday Wars* played a far more significant role in the development of the story. The author provides support for readers by infusing the needed background information about the war through his inclusion of evening newscasts viewed by the characters.

Only in *Moon Over Manifest* did the background knowledge demands appear to impact text complexity in

a significant way. In this book, multiple historical issues impacted the lives of characters and shaped the narrative. In this book, the author appeared to assume that readers had this information, hence increasing the book's complexity. In effect, our analysis suggests the need for a thoughtful look at the ways in which an author supports readers by infusing background information into the narrative.

Narrative Structure

Discussions about structural demands typically highlight plot linearity or nonlinearity as a key element contributing to complexity. Further, a common assumption is that flashbacks, flash-forwards, and manipulations of time and sequence also increase complexity. In *The Wednesday Wars*, the structure was linear and did not contribute to its complexity. However, in the other books, structural elements did contribute to complexity. *Moon Over Manifest* repeatedly shifted between two time periods. The author also included various text formats, requiring readers to shift between formats. In *Splendors and Glooms*, complexity was created by introducing a different character in each of the first five chapters, making it difficult for the reader to determine the book's major character(s).

Levels of Meaning and Purpose

The CCSS recognizes the impact of task on text complexity, and we believe that the task of reading quality literature involves seeking deeper levels of meaning. However, the CCSS provides only minimal information about "levels of meaning" for literary texts:

Literary texts with a single level of meaning tend to be easier to read than literary texts with multiple levels of meaning (such as satires, in which the author's literal message is intentionally at odds with his or her underlying message). (National Governors Association Center for Best Practices & Council of Chief State School Officers, 2010, p. 5)

The CCSS lacks any further mention of other features that may lead readers to deeper, interpretive levels of meaning. Yet, as we read and reread these books, we identified in each book one or more patterns with the potential to lead readers toward deeper levels of meaning.

The patterns functioned differently in each book. In *Splendors and Glooms*, we identified a single pattern. While

actual puppets and puppet shows are important to the plot, the pattern of puppetry goes beyond this to also define character relationships. Repeatedly, different characters controlled others or were themselves controlled, revealing the destructive nature of this type of relationship. In *Moon Over Manifest*, the two patterns of trickery and storytelling were not interrelated but each took the reader to a deeper level of thematic insight.

By contrast, in *The Wednesday Wars* we identified a web of patterns that led to deeper insights. The bullying pattern appeared repeatedly, with different characters, young and old, being bullied. This pattern worked in tandem with the pattern of alliance in which one character stepped in to support the person being bullied. These two patterns were deepened even further through the inclusion of a third pattern—the protagonist’s reflections on the Shakespearean plays, which led to a consideration of whether bullies might themselves be the victims of bullying.

As we noted in the introduction, rereading texts can reveal both complexities and possibilities. The patterns we discovered seem to hold particularly important possibilities for taking readers to deeper meaning. Literary readers attend to patterns (Rainey, 2016). However, there is rarely time in school for students to reread a book. So, instead, teachers must seek out patterns through rereading and scaffold students’ experiences so they too explore the patterns.

While scaffolding can take many forms, one tool well suited for this purpose is the language chart. A language chart is a large wall matrix where students’ reflections about a book can be recorded following discussion (Roser et al., 1992). Guiding questions at the top of the chart can direct attention to a given pattern, and after the class (or small group) discusses each segment of text (or the text in its entirety), their responses to the questions are recorded on the chart. The ideas gathered offer students fodder for making

Table 1
LANGUAGE CHART DESIGNED TO EXPLORE BULLYING AND ALLIANCE IN *THE WEDNESDAY WARS*

WHO IS THE VICTIM OF BULLYING?	BY WHOM ARE THEY BULLIED?	WHAT IS THE NATURE OF THE BULLYING?	WHO STEPS IN AS AN ALLY?
Holling	Father	Father dictates Holling’s future path.	Ms. Baker
Heather	Father	Father dictates Heather’s future path.	Holling
Holling	Eighth graders	They post throughout the school photos of Holling dressed for his role as a fairy in <i>A Midsummer Night’s Dream</i> .	Ms. Baker
Holling	Mickey Mantle	He refuses to autograph Holling’s baseball because he is dressed as a fairy.	Danny Hupfer
Mr. Kowalski	Father	Father attempts to destroy Mr. Kowalski’s architectural firm.	Ms. Baker
Mai Thi, a Vietnamese refugee in Holling’s class	Eighth graders	The eighth graders taunt Mai Thi in the cafeteria.	Danny Hupfer
Mai Thi, a Vietnamese refugee in Holling’s class	Ms. Bigio, the cafeteria lady whose husband was killed in Vietnam	Ms. Bigio refuses to give Mai Thi a treat.	Ms. Bigio

inferences related to the pattern (Wilburn et al., 2021). A sample chart for *The Wednesday Wars* appears in Table 1. This language chart is designed to explore the related patterns of bullying and alliance.

A Final Thought

We believe our work extends the contribution of the CCSS by identifying patterns as a particular feature that may lead readers to deeper levels of meaning. Yet, because students typically read books only once in the classroom, it may be unlikely that they would discover any embedded patterns. Therefore, teachers need to be prepared to step into the role of curator, helping students see a work of literature “in ways they may not have discovered if left on their own” (Eeds & Peterson, 1991, p. 118). It is with this kind of scaffolding that students may be more likely to follow patterns that can lead to deeper levels of meaning. •

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