

It's Elementary! Supporting Literacy in the Primary Grades

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Kindergarten Through **Grade 2**

The Book Matters! Choosing Complex Narrative Texts to Support Literary Discussion

VIRTUALLY ALL TEACHERS IN THE early grades value reading aloud as an essential classroom literacy practice. Decades of research document that reading aloud to kindergartners through second-graders promotes development of early literacy skills and establishes a foundation for positive attitudes toward literacy (Van Kleeck, Stahl, & Bauer 2003; Trelease 2013).

Specifically, reading aloud builds oral language and vocabulary (e.g., Hargrave & Sénéchal 2000; Wasik & Bond 2001; Blewitt et al. 2009), listening comprehension—a precursor to reading comprehension (e.g., Brabham & Lynch-Brown 2002; Zucker et al. 2010)—content

knowledge (Pappas & Varelas 2004; Hoffman, Collins, & Schickedanz 2015), concepts of print (Piasta et al. 2012), and alphabet knowledge and phonological awareness (Aram 2006; Brabham, Murray, & Bowden 2006). Equally important, reading aloud is one way we enculturate young children into literacy—helping them acquire the language, values, practices, and dispositions of the literate world (Heath 1983).

Interacting with complex texts through read-aloud discussions

Not all read-alouds are created equal, however. Different approaches to reading aloud in early childhood classrooms have recently garnered increased attention in the United States because

of the Common Core State Standards (CCSS). The standards call for all students to engage with complex texts that offer opportunities for higher-level thinking (for a discussion of complex text, see CCSS for English Language Arts, Appendix A [NGA & CCSSO 2010]). Because most children kindergarten through second grade have not yet developed foundational reading skills well enough to independently read complex picture books, read-alouds offer the most robust opportunities for such interactions to occur (IRA 2012) (see “Literacy Instruction With Complex Literature Aligned With Common Core State Standards”).

Read-alouds that engage young children with complex texts rely on interactive discussions focused on interpretations of texts that may vary with the backgrounds, perspectives, and experiences of the children listening. In other words, discussing multiple interpretations of texts helps children realize that there are many possible responses to complex literature. Interactive read-aloud discussions focused on interpretations of complex texts promote basic comprehension and have the potential to extend from basic comprehension to analysis of text elements, integration of ideas to make connections, and critical evaluation of the texts themselves and the ideas in them.

Read-aloud discussions that include complex processing of texts by young children have been considered in terms of children’s literary understanding (Sipe 2000, 2007; Pantaleo 2007; Hoffman 2011), and in studies of children’s development of critical literacies (Vasquez 2010) and multiliteracies (Crafton, Brennan, & Silvers 2007).

Literacy Instruction With Complex Literature Aligned With Common Core State Standards

Below are two examples, using books discussed in this article, of ways teachers can incorporate strategies for choosing and sharing complex literature with young children in instruction, as specified in the K–5 College and Career Readiness anchor standards corresponding with CCSS (NGA & CCSSO 2010).

Reading Standards for Literature 6: Assess how point of view or purpose shapes the content and style of a text.

In Bob Graham’s *April and Esme, Tooth Fairies*, the story is conveyed in ways that clearly communicate the sense of awe felt by the young tooth fairies on their first assignment without their parents, and the anxiety felt by the parents when they allow their children to go out on their own for the first time. Teachers can help students consider these differing points of view. During the first read-aloud of the book, support basic comprehension of the language, visuals, and plot. Follow up a day or two later with a second reading in which students are asked at different places in the text to consider whose point of view is represented and how it impacts the story—for instance, “How do April and Esme’s parents feel about them collecting a tooth alone?,” “How do April and Esme feel about going out without their parents?” Students should also consider how the story might be different if it was told from only one point of view (the viewpoint of the girls or that of the parents). Teachers might even guide students to interactively rewrite part of the story from a single point of view to see how it differs from the original. Questions similar to these will guide students’ consideration of differences in points of view of characters. With continued experience, children will build toward interpretation of how point of view contributes to the content and style of texts.

Reading Standards for Literature 7: Integrate and evaluate content presented in diverse media and formats, including visually and quantitatively, as well as in words.

Maurice Sendak’s *Where the Wild Things Are* strongly demonstrates the way visuals and text work collaboratively to convey a story. To guide children’s interpretations of the relationship between visuals and text, teachers can ask children to first examine the illustrations without reading the text and tell the story as they see it. Encourage them to go beyond the plot to consider mood, setting, and theme. Then, read the text to children without showing them the illustrations. Discuss what roles the text and illustrations separately have in contributing to understanding the whole story. For example, consider instances where the text and image are conflicting, such as when the image of friendly-looking Wild Things is paired with the text “roared their terrible roars and gnashed their terrible teeth.” Examine how the illustration becomes increasingly prominent and dominates the pages as the story develops, but then quickly diminishes after the climax and words alone remain at the story’s resolution. Discussions like these will support children’s evaluation of text, a complex literacy skill.

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Why the Book Matters for Literary Discussion in the Early Grades

To illustrate how children and teachers might interact in literary read-alouds, we present a portion of a read-aloud discussion about *Jamela's Dress* that was observed in Ms. Maddox's kindergarten classroom. Anticipating that her students may not readily relate to the situations in the text, Ms. Maddox scaffolded the children's learning by linking an experience the children understand with the experience and emotions of Jamela's mother. The resulting connection to Jamela's mother was crucial to the children's ability to interpret the broader implications of Jamela's actions and thus supported their attempts to interpret the complex meanings throughout the reading.

A look at a read-aloud discussion of complex text

Ms. Maddox: The story opens with Jamela and her mother shopping for fabric. (Ms. Maddox reads.) "Mama was very pleased with the new material she'd found. She had worked hard to earn the money for it." (Ms. Maddox pauses.)

Ms. Maddox: Have any of you ever worked hard or done something around the house so you could earn something?

Hannah: I did it. I did it.

Ms. Maddox: What have you done, Hannah?

Hannah: I cleaned the refrigerator.

Ms. Maddox: So when you clean the refrigerator, do you earn something?

Hannah nods yes.

Ms. Maddox: What do you earn?

Hannah: A dollar.

Ms. Maddox: You earn a dollar. So, have you ever, when you clean the refrigerator and you earn all these dollars, do you ever go out and buy yourself anything special?

Hannah: Yes.

Ms. Maddox: What's something special that you bought before?

Hannah: Um, clothes for my toys.

Ms. Maddox: Clothes for her toys, which I'm guessing is probably one of your dolls. So, Hannah can relate to this. She said she worked really hard at home cleaning out the refrigerator, and she earns money for it, and when she earns money for it, she goes out and she buys herself something special which is clothes for her dolls.

Ms. Maddox continues reading the story. She and her class discuss other characters and events. Toward the climax of the story, just as Jamela's mother is about to discover that Jamela has ruined her material, Ms. Maddox pauses again to prompt students' connections to the character of Jamela's mother.

Ms. Maddox: Hannah, let's go back to you. Do you remember how you said you worked hard cleaning out the refrigerator to get dollars, and you take those dollars and you buy clothes for your doll? . . . How would you feel if [your sister] came in your room and took those doll clothes that you worked so hard for and destroyed them?

Hannah: I would be mad.

Ms. Maddox: You would be mad? (to the whole group) How do you think Jamela's mama's going to feel?

Children: Mad, happy, mean, sad (many talking at once).

Ms. Maddox: Mean. Sad. Happy.

James: I think she feel like this (pretends to faint).

Dion: Yeah, he's right. I agree.

Ms. Maddox: I think she's gonna be, not mean, but probably a little bit upset.

Through the discussion in this example, the teacher's questioning developed her students' connection to a character, prompting them to relate a student's experience to the character's emotions at significant points in the text where skilled readers make such connections.

These studies reveal how teachers and 5- to 8-year-old children can work collaboratively to construct multilayered interpretations of texts in read-alouds (see “Why the Book Matters for Literary Discussion in the Early Grades”).

Characteristics of literature that support complex processing in read-aloud discussions

Although *how* to read is a frequent topic of studies in the read-aloud literature, much less often researched is the issue of *what* to read—how the quality of literature impacts the quality of the read-aloud discussion (Teale, Yokota, & Martinez 2008). Essentially, some children’s books provide

more to think and talk about than others. To help children process complex texts in read-aloud discussions, it is important for teachers to first choose texts that can support complex interpretations. Although this article focuses on choosing high-quality narrative literature or stories, similar principles apply to selecting informational books. Appropriate narratives for young children contain accounts of connected events that typically surround a central problem and lead to a resolution.

The following sections outline characteristics of high-quality narrative children’s literature to guide teachers’ selections of texts. For each characteristic, we begin with a definition and explanation, followed by an exemplar text.

Resources for Locating Complex Children’s Literature

Associations and centers book lists	
American Library Association—Recommended Reading www.ala.org/tools/libfactsheets/alalibraryfactsheet23#children	American Library Association—Notable Books www.ala.org/alsc/awardsgrants/notalists/ncb
International Literary Association—Choice Books List www.reading.org/resources/tools/choices.html	Barahona Center for the Study of Books in Spanish for Children and Adolescents https://chicanolitbib.wordpress.com/2007/12/02/barahona-center/
Children’s literature review journals, best/notable lists, blogs, and reviews	
<i>HornBook</i> www.hbook.com/category/choosing-books/reviews/#_	<i>Kirkus Reviews</i> www.kirkusreviews.com/
<i>Booklist</i> www.booklistonline.com/book-reviews	<i>Publishers Weekly</i> www.publishersweekly.com/pw/reviews/
<i>School Library Journal</i> www.schoollibraryjournal.com/article/CA6703692.html	
Newspapers— children’s book reviews	
<i>The New York Times</i> www.nytimes.com/column/childrens-books	<i>The Washington Post</i> www.washingtonpost.com/entertainment/books/
Book enthusiast social media sites	
Goodreads www.goodreads.com	Shelfari www.shelfari.com
LibraryThing www.librarything.com	
School libraries’ collection development/selection tool	
Titlewave: Collection Development by Follett www.titlewave.com	
Children’s literature databases	
See public or school libraries for access information	
Children’s Literature Comprehensive Database www.clcd.com/#/welcome	NoveList www.ebscohost.com/novelist



The exemplar texts include all of the characteristics of quality narrative literature. In the interest of space, we use each book selection to illustrate a single characteristic. We also present online and print resources to help teachers find and select complex children’s literature (see “Resources for Locating Complex Children’s Literature”).

Thematically rich issues

Theme is a broad, overarching idea in a text that is usually communicated implicitly through multiple features of the narrative, including plot, character, character actions, dialogue, and setting. Theme is considered a central literary element of narrative, and thus discussion of theme is important in building young readers’ capacity to understand narratives as more than sequences of events. In some cases, the theme may be expressed as a moral, but many books appropriate for children kindergarten through second grade express themes in more subtle and multifaceted ways, much like literature for older children and adults. Because theme is abstract and implicit, readers must engage deeply with a book to consider theme and will often interpret different themes within the same text.

One book with rich thematic possibilities implied through character and plot is *The Empty Pot*, by Demi (1990). In this book, the aging emperor of China announces that the next emperor will be the child who grows a seed in a year’s time. Children from all over China come to receive their seed from the emperor. A year later, they return with their flowering plants—all except Ping, who, despite his best efforts, has been unable to grow anything at all. It turns out the emperor had cooked all the seeds before distributing them. Ping, the only honest child to come before the emperor, is rewarded with an appointment as the next emperor.

The following are examples of themes in this story:

- **Sense of self.** Ping experiences both shame and pride when he goes before the emperor.
- **Doing one’s best.** Though Ping appears to be unsuccessful at fulfilling the emperor’s task, he does not give up.
- **Honesty.** Despite feeling incompetent, Ping brings his empty pot before the emperor amidst a sea of children with beautiful flowering plants.

Round characters

High-quality narratives include round characters—characters who are dynamic, changing, and malleable. In contrast, flat (stock) characters are stable, fixed, and unresponsive to differences in particular events or characters. In other words, round characters are like real people—they act, think, and speak differently depending on the immediate context.

Discussion of theme is important in building young readers’ capacity to understand narratives as more than sequences of events.

Kevin Henkes is a master of character development in children’s books. In his book *Lilly’s Purple Plastic Purse* (1996), readers are introduced to a girl-mouse character with a new purse who is quite self-absorbed. Lilly cannot wait to show the other children at school the purple purse, but when she shares it with them at an inopportune time, her teacher takes the purse away and says he will keep it until the end of the day. Lilly grows despondent at having her prized possession confiscated and then becomes increasingly enraged at being put in time-out. By the end of the day she is furious with her teacher, even drawing a picture depicting him as a monstrous figure. However, when her teacher hands her the purse as she leaves for the day, Lilly finds a note and treats from the teacher inside it and suddenly realizes how “small” she feels. Thus, Lilly is depicted as a round character who exhibits a range of emotions and also grows through her experience. As she becomes less self-centered, she learns to temper her emotions and behavior more appropriately for the social situation.

Engaging, complex illustrations

Narrative picture books are a unique form of narrative literature in that they construct meaning through the interaction between text and illustrations. High-quality narrative picture books involve an artful, synergistic blending of text and illustration in which the meaning from the text and the illustrations are interconnected so that the

whole is greater than the sum of its parts. This complex relationship between text and illustration is known as transmediation, and it demands constant construction and reconstruction of meaning from text to image and back (Sipe 1998). Research on children's use of illustrations to construct meaning in picture books during teacher read-alouds has demonstrated that even young children are quite capable of transmediating text and image, especially when supported by the teacher (Sipe & Bauer 2001; Sipe 2007).

High-quality narrative literature includes rich and mature language—words and phrases that develop complex meaning and imagery for the reader.

The book *April and Esme, Tooth Fairies*, by Bob Graham (2010), is a sophisticated example of how an author artfully combines words and illustrations to create a rich, sophisticated narrative. This fantasy book depicts the first time two young tooth fairies exchange a lost tooth for a coin. Graham's story begins before the title page, as 7-year-old tooth fairy April is shown on her cell phone. The text, which provides her side of the conversation, indicates

a request to pay a tooth fairy visit to the caller's grandson, Daniel. April, thrilled beyond belief to be asked, convinces her (ponytailed) father and her (tattooed) mother that she and her younger sister Esme are up to the task. After a number of tense moments on the mission to collect Daniel's tooth and deliver the coin, the sisters prevail and return home, travelling across a dangerous highway, to excited and proud parents.

Throughout the book Graham creates a subtle interplay between text and illustration. Good examples of this are the three double-page spreads in the book depicting the formidable highway, with its constant string of huge, fast-moving 18-wheelers, contrasted with the tiny tooth fairy cottage and the almost minuscule tooth fairies. In one illustration the parents are shown in the lower left corner of the page while April and Esme hover in the upper right corner, framed by the white moon, "lift(ing) off into the night." Large trucks loom between these two images. The visual contrast effectively conveys the scale and danger of April and Esme's mission.

Rich language

High-quality narrative literature includes rich and mature language—words and phrases that develop complex meaning and imagery for the reader. Such text introduces

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young readers to words that may be new or somewhat unknown as well as to familiar words used in new ways (e.g., figurative language). Rich language is not flowery or longwinded; rather, it is carefully crafted by the author, who chooses each word and structures each sentence to create an original, artistic, and tightly constructed text.

Jamela's Dress, by Niki Daly (1999), is the story of a young girl in South Africa who unintentionally destroys fabric that her mother was going to use to make a new dress, when she gets wrapped up (literally) in her own desire to dress up. Daly carefully constructs his language to create imagery for the reader through word meanings and sound quality. For example, in a close reading of the sentence, "Dreamily, Jamela swayed between the folds of material as they flapped and wrapped around her into a dress," readers feel the breeze blowing through the material, long and slow at first, "swayed between the folds of material," followed by two short, quick snaps of wind that "flapped and wrapped" the material around Jamela, seemingly through no fault of her own. In other places, Daly fluidly infuses imagery through simile—"Down the road went Jamela, proud as a peacock." At other times, it is the simplicity of language that contributes to the meaning, such as the dawning dread readers experience when Jamela's mother calls to check on her but "there was no answer." Words and language are Daly's artistic tools to create rich images for his readers.

Engaging, complex plot

Plot is the series of events in a story and the relationships among the events, particularly how they relate to the narrative's problem and resolution. An engaging, complex plot interests readers and drives their desire to know what happens next, especially in relation to a story's resolution. Although older, more sophisticated readers can engage with problems far removed from their life experiences, younger children typically engage best with plots that relate to their more limited experiences and perspectives (Schickedanz & Collins 2012).

In Maurice Sendak's classic *Where the Wild Things Are* (1963), Max misbehaves and is sent to bed without his supper. His room transforms into a forest, and soon he sails into the land of the Wild Things, who name him King and honor him with a Wild Rumpus.

But Max becomes homesick and returns to his house to find his supper waiting for him, still hot.

This plot essentially revolves around disobedience, frustration with parents, thoughts and dreams, and perhaps even real instances of running away—all issues that resonate in young children's lives. Sendak's text and illustrations work together in a seamless exploration of plot paralleled with character—Max's journey is both a dream of a physical journey (the plot) and an instance of an emotional journey (character). Sendak's plot prompts children to consider issues central to childhood.

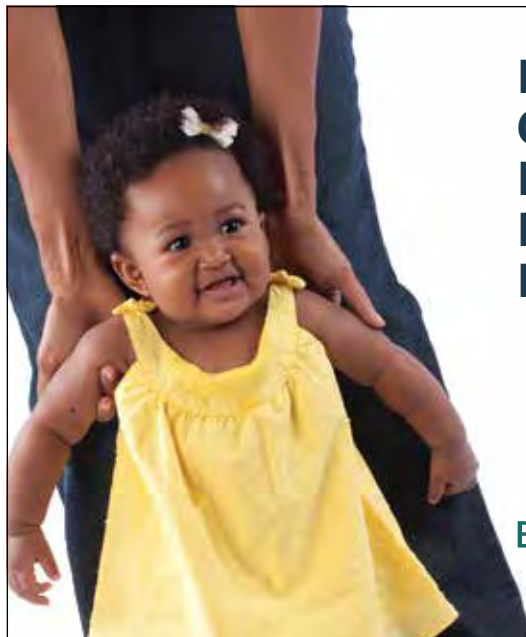
Conclusion

In this article, we have provided examples of features of high-quality narrative literature that can support complex processing of texts in read-aloud discussions. The texts are not meant to be used as a short reading list for teachers, but rather as exemplars of the wide body of high quality children's literature available. Children's literature that is carefully crafted with the characteristics we discussed can support read-aloud experiences through which teachers apprentice children into complex processing of texts. Frequent opportunities to collaboratively process complex texts in the early grades help children learn how to approach such texts both as emergent readers and, later, as independent ones, thus contributing to their lifelong development as skilled readers.

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