## Abstract

The focus of this teacher research study is to examine the impact of teaching middle school students to critically analyze, evaluate and interpret postmodern picturebooks as multimodal ensembles. In particular, it describes students’ response to instruction that focuses on paratextual elements, the use of artistic and graphic format, and the relationship of text and images to critically examine author/illustrator choices of these multimodal texts. The narrative of this research provides a thick description of the unit and its implementation. Multiple sources of data were triangulated to reach conclusions based on the research questions. Findings include the benefits of the unit as implemented for a wide range of students including English Language Learners and readers functioning below and above grade level. It was noted that students made connections to other texts including their previous interactions with multimodal texts. Three factors that contributed to the success of the unit include the gradual release of responsibility, the use of visual modalities coupled with text to support comprehension, and collaborative online and face-to-face student discussions. (November 2017 issue of Language Arts)
Breaking the Fourth Wall: Using Postmodern Picturebooks

to Teach Visual Literacy in Middle School
Breaking the Fourth Wall: Using Postmodern Picturebooks as a Multimodal Ensemble in Middle School

It’s Monday morning, first period, in my sixth grade classroom. On Friday, students had an assessment to conclude the short story unit we have been covering for the last months. Of course, as any typical teenager would ask, *Now what?*

“Good morning, today we are starting a mini unit using postmodern picturebooks.”

“What?” asked one inquisitive student.

“What the heck is a post… picturebook?” another replied.

“My little sister is using picturebooks in her class. But she’s in first grade. YES! I bet this will be easy!” another said, turning to smile to a person next to her.

I then posted focus questions on the board. The students were immediately interested. Some students’ comments included:

“What is a critical stance?”

“What is postmodern? I’ve never heard that word before.”

“What does metalinguistic mean? Is that a power than comic book characters have?”

I could tell this was going to be a lot to tackle. But the students were already engaged, motivated and at least *talking* about the goals. I figured discussion was a great first start.

**Background**

This teacher research project, based on the professional literature and frameworks of Frank Serafini and Bette Goldstone, examines the impact of an instructional mini-unit focusing
on postmodern picturebooks as multimodal ensembles. Serafini, (2008; 2012) characterizes picture books as traditional print-based texts that contain visual images and design elements, and as one of the types of multimodal texts that students encounter in schools. He argues that studying the form and content of picturebooks can serve as an entre to other kinds of multimodal texts the children must negotiate in their everyday lives. After researching and studying Serafini’s research and methods, I decided to use picturebooks with my middle school classroom to help increase student engagement, comprehension and knowledge of visual literacy.

In the introduction to their edited book *Literacies, the Arts and Multiple Modalities*, Sanders and Albers (2010) make a cogent argument as to why it is necessary to address research and classroom practice focusing on the analysis and interpretation of multimodal texts. They enumerate the multiple ways in which a literate person in the 21st century negotiates multiple modalities and they contend that teachers and researchers must be proficient themselves as they “reconceptualize and re-envision what constitutes literacy” (p.2).

With the intense focus on *rigor* and *complexity* as derived from the Common Core State Standards (2010) professional development sessions bombard teachers with those words, only to leave them thinking, *What does this mean? Are my texts rigorous? Are they complex?* Unfortunately, as Serafini (2011) states that, “it seems more progress has been made in identifying strategies required to comprehend written text than in identifying strategies required to comprehend multimodal texts” (n.p). Interestingly, teachers, including myself, turn toward written texts to challenge students. However, we overlook the fact that students are used to being exposed to elaborate visual images, from narratives, to websites and video games, even to advertisements they encounter on a daily basis. Serafini also indicates, “…multimodal texts often dominate what middle and high school students read outside of school” (2011, n.p). Given the
that a literate person in the informational age must be able to critically negotiate multimodalities, the questions becomes, why are we not incorporating them more into our literacy curriculum? And why not use picturebooks as an entree into the comprehension of other multimodal ensembles on the Internet? This investigation answers Sanders and Albers (2010) call to research the implementation and classroom practice focusing on the analysis and interpretation of multimodal texts.

The unit developed for the study aimed to target interpretive strategies by using postmodern picturebooks. Goldstone (2004) characterizes postmodern picturebooks as having nonlinear stories that portray multiple perspectives. According to Goldstone (2004) postmodern books have the potential to increase awareness of visual and artistic aspects of texts and to convey to the viewer/reader that the book is actually a fictional work of art. These books encourage the viewer to take an active stance by “looking for discrepancies, additional story lines and unexpected elements” (p. 201). Serafini (2014) supports this view of postmodern books:

Postmodern picture books distance readers from text, often frustrating traditional reading expectations and practices, and position readers in more active, interpretive roles forcing them to utilize a variety of interpretive strategies in order to make sense of these complex texts (n.p.)

**Perspectives informing the research and design of the mini-unit**

Students in the study were encouraged to take a critical stance as they deconstructed the text and images and critically examined the choices and perspectives of authors and illustrators. Papola (2013) claims that “teachers who support their students in critical literacy are helping
them become open minded, actively engaged, analytical readers who go beyond the demands of the CCSS and become informed consumers of all texts” (p.46). An important aspect of critical literacy is the practice of questioning a text beyond the literal level (Papola, 2013). Throughout the mini-unit, students participated in book groups to talk about and discuss the postmodern picturebooks of their choice. The unit was intended to help students become critically aware that illustrators/authors make choices that serve to represent their perspectives.

Additionally, visual literacy is embedded into the design of the mini-unit instructional sequence. Visual literacy is an integral aspect of 21st century skills and is incorporated into a wide range of professional standards including The Common Core Standards and the National Council of Teachers of English Standards/ International Literacy Association Standards for the English Language Arts (2016). Tillmann (2012) asserts that “Visual literacy, in most cases, has come to include the capacity to understand, apply, analyze, evaluate and create visual material as essential parts of a whole” (p.8). This unit was designed to give students an opportunity to increase visual awareness and overall comprehension of postmodern picturebooks.

The purpose of this teacher research project is to research the impact of instructional methods that will encourage the development of visual literacy strategies and promote critical thinking for the middle school learner. Serafini (2011) elaborates what this entails:

There are three perspectives readers may use when navigating and comprehending the visual images presented in multimodal texts: (1) art theory and criticism, (2) grammar of visual design, and (3) media literacies. These perspectives provide teachers with diverse lenses through which to focus students’ attention to visual aspects of the multimodal texts they encounter (p. 343).

More specifically the research questions include:
1) What impact, if any, did the instructional unit have on the participating students’ ability to critically analyze and interpret selected postmodern books?

2) What impact, if any, did the instructional unit have on the participating students’ use of metalinguistic language to describe complex relationships between text and images, and use of artistic, graphic and format elements of traditional and postmodern books?

3) What impact, if any, did the instructional unit have on the participating students’ ability to critically analyze and interpret the choices of author/illustrator regarding form and content of selected books?

4) What impact, if any, did the instructional unit have on the participating students’ ability to identify the similarities and differences between traditional and selected postmodern literature?

Methodology

This is a descriptive teacher inquiry project made use of principles of action research (Creswell, 2008) where a problem is identified and possible solutions are implemented and then studied through systematic collection and analysis of data. The primary researcher, and first author, is a middle school teacher, the second author is a university professor of Literary. Both researchers intended to provide an instructional intervention that would heighten students’ ability to critically negotiate multimodal texts in postmodern picturebooks.

The participants in this teacher research project are four periods of grade 6 Language Arts classes. Each class has between 17 and 20 students, and students display a wide range of diversity. There are 2 students who are identified as English Language Learners, however six other students who speak languages other than English at home. In addition, 11 students are identified in special education. The instructional intervention for the participants in each section
spanned three weeks, once per day for 40 minutes per class. Data was collected and analyzed informally during the implementation of the project and then in a more formal process once all the data was collected.

Data sources included interactive journals, blogs, small group discussions with voice recordings, field notes, interviews, student work from a Close Reading Literature Cyberlesson (available upon request from the authors), an online instructional format (blinded references 2008; 2009; 2010), student final reflections and formative and summative assessment as part of the implementation of the unit. Categories were generated informally and refined by reviewing the data across several rounds of analysis in light of the objectives identified at the beginning of the unit and research questions. Findings were triangulated across data sources. All were analyzed with the objective to answer research questions and to describe identifiable patterns and subcategories organized into representational categories (Bogdan & Biklen, 2003; Guba & Lincoln, 1989). A thick description of the unit as implemented is described so that the reader can determine its applicability to their own setting.

Planning for Instruction

The co-author of this project and I worked to design a motivating unit and to align our objectives to the Common Core State Standards (2010) focusing particularly on the sixth grade standards. Three weeks of instructional time were allotted for this unit, and my goal was have students to not only meet the standards, but to exceed them.

The goals for this unit are that students will 1) use metalanguage with describing features of picturebooks, 2) describe the relationships between texts and images, 3) analyze and interpret author’s choices, 4) develop a critical stance, and 5) analyze artistic choices of an illustrator. The next step was choosing high-quality, postmodern picturebooks for students to use during this
unit. After referring to the word of Goldstone (2004) and Serafini (2011; 2014), we narrowed down our list to the following texts to use:

- *Black & White* by David McCauley
- *The Three Pigs* by David Wiesner
- *The Stinky Cheese Man* by Jon Scieszka
- *Warning: Do Not Open This Book!* by Adam Lehrhaupt
- *It’s a Book* by Lane Smith
- *Who’s Afraid of the Big, Bad Book?* by Lauren Child
- *Ernest, the Moose Who Doesn’t Fit* by Catherine Rayner

**Implementation**

A Gradual Release of Responsibility instructional framework was made use of in which lessons were scaffolded. According to Pearson and Gallagher (as cited in Arneson et. al., 2012) “The responsibility for task completion shifts gradually over time from the teacher to the student. The framework includes “demonstration, shared demonstration, guided practice and independent practice” (n.p).

A gradual release of responsibility was essential to student success during this unit. Through carefully planned modeling, students began to understand the expectations placed on them as they explored postmodern picturebooks. I started the unit with direct instruction and used mini-lessons throughout, but ultimately students worked independently and became instructors who led their own thinking, used discussion prompts to facilitate conversations, and applied the ideas from mini-lessons into their partner and group activities.

**Distinguishing postmodern picturebooks from traditional picturebooks**
To begin this mini-unit, students explored the features of postmodern picturebooks. To start the discussion on this genre, I introduced the question, *What makes this story different from traditional literacy?* With this in mind, I read aloud the book *Chester* (Watt, 2009) and students took notes and recorded their observations in their interactive double-entry journals. During the read-aloud I modeled the think-aloud process for students to observe as I read *Chester*. Ortlieb and Norris (2012) state, “Using think-alouds as a during-reading activity significantly increases a student’s comprehension” (p. 1). This model think-aloud gave the students information about what further lessons would look like as we continued the unit.

After reading *Chester* (Watt, 2009) as a class, we held a class discussion regarding the elements of a postmodern picturebook and students took the discussion to the blog that night. Figure 1 is an example of the kinds of comments that were made to this query. As demonstrated in all student work, students picked up on the nonlinear structure of postmodern books. During the three weeks, students were eager to recognize the elements of postmodern picturebooks.

**INSERT FIGURE 1 HERE**

**Breaking the surface plane**

The next day in class, groups of students chose a book that piqued their interest to study in a small book group format. Students were asked to take notes in a t-chart, with text observations on the left and illustration observations on the right. This was another method I used to scaffold the gradual release of responsibility; I modeled how to do this with *Chester* and now students could choose their own book with a partner and complete the task independently.

One student receiving special education services read “The Three Pigs” by David Wiesner and recorded his observations.
The pigs are flying away, and they are turning the book pages into actual paper airplanes. There are random intrusions. You never know who will pop up! They broke the wall, the pics are outside of the story.

By modeling this process with students before with Chester, students were able to accurately use the metalanguage that we used as a whole class. Interestingly, students were never directly taught these terms within this unit, but picked them up through small group, class and blog discussions. That night, students were asked to join a classroom blog group based on a book they read in class. For the first reading, students were told that they could skim the book, looking for postmodern elements.

INSERT FIGURE 2 HERE

Figure 2 demonstrates what Goldstone describes as “breaking the surface plane and as moving into the reader's space” (2004, p. 2) in postmodern picture books. Interestingly, based on their experiences with video games, students connected the surface break in postmodern books to video games where characters “break the fourth wall”. Breaking the fourth wall in a video game means that a character within a game acknowledges they are in a video game or when the game makes a direct reference to the player.

One student even decided to post a video, How Chowder Breaks the 4th Wall, (Phoneixpen, 2015) to explain to others about how authors of a popular TV show “break the fourth wall.” This helped many students learn about the term and connect it to their own prior knowledge about television shows and video games. As seen from Figure 1 and 2, students are building their ability to differentiate postmodern books from traditional ones, relying on their background knowledge, and actively using metalinguistic terms such as “nonlinear,” “intrusion,” and “breaking the fourth wall” to describe features of postmodern books.
Exploration Days

During the rest of the two weeks, the gradual release of responsibility instructional model was continued as students were asked to choose another postmodern book that piqued their interest to work with for a series of four exploratory lessons. Figure 3 provides a detailed outline of what those lessons entailed. Students chose their books from the original selection of postmodern books.

The focus on Exploration 1 and 2 were on the role of paratextual visual elements and design elements which are conscious choices made by the author, designer and publisher and which impact the reader’s interpretation of the story (Genette, 1997). Exploration 3 focused on the visual/ artistic elements of a picture book and Exploration 4 encouraged students to consider the role of the relationship between images and text.

To help students with this process of book selection, I did a small book talk on each postmodern picturebook and what it was about. Students were given 10 minutes to pass around the books and do a small picture-walk to note anything they found interesting. After, students put their top three choices on a sticky note, put the notes in a bin, and I randomly assigned books until book groups got to 4 members. Almost every student (out of 75 in five periods) were placed in either of their first or second book pick group.

In keeping with the gradual release of responsibility instructional framework, each class period had a mini lesson that set the stage and reviewed key vocabulary terms that students would need to know for the exploration that day. Students recorded each day’s explorations in their interactive journals so they were able to reflect on the information written the day before. Also, they used their interactive journals as a reference at night when writing their blog posts.
While students were participating in daily explorations, I was able to walk around and interact with groups encouraging the use of vocabulary, and sometimes questioning or asking for further explanations. The information in Table 1 outlines learning objectives and activities for each day of the lesson.

**INSERT TABLE 1 HERE**

**Exploration 1: Paratextual features**

The goal of this exploration was to focus on the outside elements of a picturebook that serve an important role in influencing the reader’s interpretation of a given text. It is important for readers to consider whether or not the author’s message is supported by these outside elements.

Too often, novice readers pick up a picturebook and skip through the paratextual information, including the dedication, title pages, cover art, author’s notes, jacket information, and end pages, heading straight for the opening lines of the story. “Extra-textual” or “paratextual” resources (Genette, 1997), are those included within the book, but not directly part of the story, as well as those elements outside of the book, such as advertisements, author websites, book trailers, interviews, and critical analyses, can influence the viewer’s interpretation of a picturebook.

Genette (1997) advises teachers to demonstrate the role and importance of these elements by attending to them during read alouds and literature discussions, and by helping students attend to these resources during independent reading.

Below are samples of student speculations during group discussion about the paratext and its impact on the key ideas in the book.

“The book doesn't have flaps. Maybe it's because the story is pretty simple. It doesn't need all the jazz.”
“There is para text, all the characters are include as spot art. So before reading you know that the characters like the moose and squirrel. They pasted in a...a... What do you call that thing in the front?”

“Oh, you mean a dedication?”

“Yea! The animals made the dedication, so it seems like they are active creatures in the creation of the book.”

The last discussion point was made by an English Language Learner (ELL) student. He often does not get involved in many lessons, but during the small group discussions he was an active participant in his group. Students did not push him to participate, but instead he participated on his own. Illustrations in the books acted as a universal language to both students who were ELL and to students who sometimes struggle with reading. Illustrations can be interpreted many ways, so students did not feel ashamed or embarrassed to share their ideas.

**Critical stance**

An important objective of this unit was to help students develop a critical stance to enhance understanding. Students had to “cite textual evidence to support analysis of what the text says explicitly as well as inferences drawn from the text” as well as “analyze how a particular sentence, chapter, scene, or stanza fits into the overall structure of a text and contributes to the development of the theme, setting, or plot” (English Language Arts Standards, 2016). Students cited textual evidence in all of their responses and used accountable talk during discussions to help defend their stance.
“On the back, there is a picture. Maybe this is something that happens in the text so it is allowing to make us predictions.”

“It looks like it is stink waves.”

“What’s a stink wave?”

“You know, like the thin lines that authors makes to show something smells.”

“Oh! Like pigpen in Charlie Brown.”

“Yes! Exactly.”

“And the text doesn’t even tell us he stinks, we can just infer that from the pictures on the outside.” (Black and White)

In this example and throughout the unit, students were encouraged to use the information in the book and connect it with their schema to form conclusions based on the text. The students use the implied information in the text, seen from both the pictures and text to infer what is happening and increase their own understanding. Giving the students this time to discuss in small groups during class was extremely beneficial. Students shared textual evidence, but challenged each other to defend their opinions and at times collaboratively solved problems. This information was gathered by voice recorded group discussions during small group conversations, students often used their background knowledge to create conclusions. Students took a critical stance and determined author’s purpose even before reading the written words.

**Exploration 2: Typography and Text**

Exploration two focused on typography, font, typesize, type placement, size and color. Serafini, Clausen and Fulton (2012) mention that studying typography helps students uncover the
meaning in picturebooks and “it serves as a visual element and semiotic resource with its own meaning potentials” (n.p).

During this exploration, students met in their book groups to discuss the typography of the specific book they chose. As seen in Figure 4, students were encouraged to use the vocabulary in their notes. Students also were asked to write one thing they learned on an exit slip to hand in at the end of class.

“I think the author purposely uses text placement to guide your eye. Like he wants you to read something first, then maybe see an illustration and then read something after.” (It’s a Book)

“This is an announcement, so it is much smaller than other words in the book. For each story in the book, the typesize is different. I am thinking smaller than 16. It’s like bold.”

“Why do you think it’s bold?”

“Obviously they want you to understand that part better- it helps to emphasize the words.”

“Wait, is the typography just the text on the bottom?”

“No, it’s any text, text at the bottom. Look at the font, style, arrangement.”

“Why would the author do that though?”

“It looks like sickness.”

“Is it meant to imply sickness though? Look at the pictures, too.”

“It looks like silliness, like he is fooling around.”

INSERT FIGURE 4

Students were successful at building their use of metalanguage throughout the unit. In the beginning, this was led by modeling and explanation by the teacher, however students started
to use the language in their own blogs, journals and discussions. When walking around to ask
questions and take field notes, it was clear that students were comfortable using the terms that
were discussed in class.

“Why would it be big though? I think that’s called the type size.”

“Probably because he’s a moose, so the text is just setting the tone and mood in the story.
Ernest takes up a lot of space in the illustrations, so the text should too.”

Students actively discussed the text and illustrations using metalanguage, and they were able to
draw conclusions from the meaningful conversations that took place.

**Exploration 3- Visual Elements**

Exploration three focused on examining the features of illustrations such as intensity,
line, color and mood, perspective, value, shape and medium. In his guide to analyzing visual
design elements of a picturebook, Serafini (2011) mentions the importance of analyzing visual
images:

…recognizing color, shapes and determining how it makes the reader feel, noticing the
medium used to create the illustrations, analyzing the use of thin and thick lines. Readers
need the visual sign systems to help them comprehend the meaning of a text and allow
them to recognize how “images represent and construct meaning” (Serafini, 2011, p.
342).

Students were encouraged to use the vocabulary from the mini lesson, as derived from
Serafini’s article, to aid them in taking notes and observing illustrations. Figure 5 is an example
of one student’s exploration in response to a PowerPoint Presentation (available upon request
from authors). Serafini (2011) maintains that teachers need to help students identify these compositional elements in a visual image as well as use a common vocabulary during discussions.

Other interactions that took place in a face-to-face small group discussions on the Macauley’s (2005) *Black and White*. These comments capture the intensity with which students questioned the text by examining the visual information provided.

“I think there are a lot of geometric shapes.”

“There are nature shapes in Utter Chaos.”

“Why though?”

“Well the author could want us to think that the events happened naturally, or maybe that they happened without anyone notices. There are a lot of geometric shapes in nature. Like you know how it looks like camo? Camo is found in nature, but people don’t notice it. I am guessing the author maybe wanted us to miss something. Let’s look for what we could have missed.”

(*Black and White*)

**Exploration 4**

Exploration four concentrated on the relationship between illustrations and text. Students referred the vocabulary provided in a PowerPoint presentation developed to help guide their thinking. Students met for the last time in their book groups to discuss what they found.

Wu (2014) conducted a research study that showed picturebooks have “proved to be a fruitful field of study for inquiries into the image-text relations” (p. 1416). She also noted “language and image complement each other to create meaning in a multimodal text” (p.1419). That is, the reader uses both sources of information to construct one meaning. Although there are many schemes describing the relationship between texts and images, this study was informed
by the following text image relationships as defined by scholars Maria Nikolajeva and Carole Scott (as cited in Matluck, 2008) symmetrical, complementary, enhancing, counterpointing, and contradictory.

Matluck (2008 p.120) explains the meaning of each category. She indicates that in a symmetrical relationship both images and words tell the same story. When there is a complementary relationship between words and image complement each other and fill in missing information for each other. In a complementary relationship, one modality does not overpower the other. However, in the category referred to as enhancing, the images elaborate and expand on the verbal and they augment the text. In counterpointing, the images and text rely completely on each other; neither text nor images alone can tell the whole story. Finally in contradictory the visual and verbal contradict each often demonstrating a various viewpoint.

In this exploration, students were able to explore symmetrical, complementary and contradictory relationships to help increase understanding and create meaning. As seen in Figure 6, students used metalanguage to describe the relationship between illustrations and text within the picturebooks. For example, in working with a small group of students to model how Rosie’s Walk (Hutchins, 1971) a text which demonstrates a contradictory visual verbal relationship, the students were able to point out that the text told a different story than the picture, but had difficulty with the label. At times they grappled with the concepts and tried to collaboratively problem solve.

INSERT FIGURE 6 HERE

“Wait, do you see how the author made the illustrations and text different?”

“Yea, that’s called... hold on let me look in my notes... complementary. Meaning they go together well, but the illustrations can show something that the text doesn’t.”
“Ohhhh, like the story Rosie’s Walk? You have to see the pictures to understand that the fox is chasing her.”

“Yes! And think like ‘The Hungry Caterpillar’ for symmetrical. The words say what the pictures are telling you.”

“Got it!”

Matluck (2008) indicates that in most picturebooks the relationship usually represents symmetrical or complementary. I used Rosie’s Walk (Hutchins, 1971) to teach about the component of text-visual relationships. I read the book aloud with the class and we discuss how the images were telling a different story than the text. Then, I showed students other examples of books with different types of text-picture relationships. In hindsight, this exploration required more modeling for some students. If I were to do this again I would allot more time for read-alouds and discussion regarding the relationship between text and images in multimodal texts.

**Culminating project**

As a culminating project, each student participated in a Close Reading Literature Cyberlesson as an assessment of what was learned. This cyberlesson was structured based on a close reading format developed by the second author. Based on this instructional model my students were required to apply what they learned about text at increasing levels of difficulty. In the Close Reading Literature Cyberlesson, students explored how the text worked and speculated on the reason that authors and illustrators made the choices they made. For this summative assessment, students were grouped into groups of 4 and each given one “voice” from the story Voices in the Park (Browne, 2001). Students were asked to analyze each page for illustration features as well as text features (Appendix B). Voices in the Park is an example of book that
BREAKING THE FOURTH WALL

provides multiple perspectives and themes as they would be explored during the experience of a walk in the park.

Students used the information from all explorations and they referred back to their journals many times during the cyberlessons. Students were encouraged to use vocabulary in their responses. After analyzing the data collected through this cyberlesson, every student who is an English Language Learner and/or struggling reader used at least two terms correctly, while advanced readers used many more terms when analyzing the illustrations and texts.

The Close Reading Literature Cyberlesson provided an additional learning experience as well as a summative piece of evidence that every student reached success in this unit. Students took a critical stance when analyzing this postmodern picturebooks and used visual literacy terms to help increase comprehension and understanding.

Conclusions

The data collected and examined for this instructional unit included interactive journals, blogs, voice recordings for group discussions, field notes and cyberlesson assignments, teacher group conferences, and student final reflections. After analyzing these sources, commenting and conferencing with students about their ideas before, during and after this mini-unit, it is clear that students successfully met all objectives for this unit even for those who do not read at grade level and for those who are English Language Learners.

In analyzing the data, other categories emerged that were not an original part of the essential objectives for this unit but speak to the value of this unit. For example, although connections were not an original objective for this unit, it was easy for students to make connections to other texts and picturebooks that they already knew as well as to video games they have experienced. It was particularly striking when students connected the surface break in
postmodern books to video games where characters “break the fourth wall.” This finding is consonant with Serafini’s premise that postmodern books are a vehicle to multimodal texts that often dominate what middle and high school students read outside of school” (2011, n.p). This finding gives credence to Serafini’s assertion that postmodern books can be used as an entre to develop critical literacy strategies of other multimodal texts on the Internet.

Another finding that was not part of the original objectives was the degree of success that students experienced at all levels of reading and English Language development. Additionally, this unit not only helped all students develop visual literacy skills, but also served to motivate and involve English Language Learners and students who need additional reading support. Researched practices for English Language Learners show that students are most successful when teachers implement cooperative learning within the classroom (Office of Education Initiatives & Texas Education Agency, 2006). Also, the use of visual aids and illustrations are encouraged for English Language Learners to help increase comprehension. Both these practices were embedded into the unit.

At the end of the instructional unit, students were asked to reflect on the unit as a whole:

“One thing I found that is new for me is that postmodern picturebooks may have multiple narratives or stories and illustrations may or may not have a relationship with the text(s). Everything in this unit was easy to understand, and I felt comfortable sharing. I also liked listening to other groups on a voice recorder, it helped me to get new ideas.” - ELL learner

“I liked how I could participate in a group and choose a book that I like. Sometimes I don’t get a lot of some books, so I picked a book with a little text. I realized that there was a lot more than text though, and my partners helped me. I think I helped them, too! Since I like art, I could find
things that they didn’t. I loved working with other people to find the stuff that the author was hiding.” –Below grade level reader, 3rd grade instructional reading level

“for me is that postmodern picturebooks may have multiple narratives or stories and illustrations may or may not have a relationship with the text(s). Everything in this unit was easy to understand, and I felt comfortable sharing. I also liked listening to other groups on a voice recorder, it helped me to get new ideas.” - ELL learner

“I have learned in this unit that not all picturebooks are the same like some are normal picturebooks which the character is not talking/writing to the author or the character can be making the story. I noticed a lot more after reading it a second time, which I usually do not do with books. I learned so much more!” (below grade level reader and writer)

“There are a lot more to picturebooks than meets the eye. This lesson and these activities taught me that picturebooks not only tell stories to children and help them develop reading skills, but they can expand my perspective and lead me to see things in a different way. I particularly enjoyed being taught to find meaning in the pictures and small details, and I can understand why the illustration drew what he/she did in a certain way. While exploration 1 was difficult and I did not see the point of it, now I do see why spot art, spine features, paratexts and information on the side flaps can be important to the overall atmosphere of the book. My guess it that this draws in the reader to read the book. Anyway, I definitely agree that postmodern picturebooks should be used in all classrooms and teach future middle school students the important lessons of text and picture relationships.” (high-level reader)
As demonstrated by student comments students were able to learn about Serafini’s (2011) three perspectives of visual literacy and apply this knowledge to a picturebook of their choice in order to increase comprehension and critical literacy skills. By using the gradual release of responsibility model, as well as providing opportunities to collaboratively examine books in face-to-face and online settings, middle school students at a wide range levels successfully observed, evaluated, analyzed, and interpreted the illustrations and texts of a picturebook.

**Final Thoughts**

We concur with Serafini in that teaching picturebooks as a bimodal ensemble is a valuable learning experience not only for the middle schools but also for us as teacher researchers. We learned that students were engaged by examining postmodern picturebooks and motivated to come to class, eager to learn about the different text and design elements. All students, including struggling readers and English Language Learners, were able to participate and increase comprehension after learning about the different elements that exist in multimodal picturebooks. Students were highly engaged in their participation in Internet-based activities such as the online blogs and the cyberlesson.

At the end of the unit, I recorded group discussions on voice recorders. One group commented:

“Wow, I am going to miss this unit. Who would have thought that picturebooks had so much in them? I thought that Mario could only break the fourth wall, or Freddy in *Five Nights at Freddy’s.*”

“I love that game. I like how the characters talk to you. It’s like they know you’re there.”
“Yes! Me too. But now I realize that authors do it too. They know you’re there! And they do so much more than just write words and draw pictures. They actually think!”

Hopefully this study demonstrates that picturebooks are not just applicable to the primary grades. Moreover, when they are taught as a bimodal ensemble they can be complex and rigorous as well as engaging. During this unit, school was relevant because students could draw on their background knowledge in making inferences. Most importantly, the unit has relevance because it can serve as a stepping-stone to help students critically negotiate other multimodal texts. And who would have thought it would all start with a picturebook

Children’s Literature Cited


References


National Governors Association Center for Best Practices and the Council of Chief State School Officers. (2010c). *English, language arts standards,*
anchor standards, college and career readiness anchor standards for reading.


Serafini, F. (2012). Design elements of picturebooks: Interpreting visual images and design


Abstract

The focus of this teacher research study is to examine the impact of teaching middle school students to critically analyze, evaluate and interpret postmodern picturebooks as multimodal ensembles. In particular, it describes students’ response to instruction that focuses on paratextual elements, the use of artistic and graphic format, and the relationship of text and images to critically examine author/illustrator choices of these multimodal texts. The narrative of this research provides a thick description of the unit and its implementation. Multiple sources of data were triangulated to reach conclusions based on the research questions. Findings include the benefits of the unit as implemented for a wide range of students including English Language Learners and readers functioning below and above grade level. It was noted that students made connections to other texts including their previous interactions with multimodal texts. Three factors that contributed to the success of the unit include the gradual release of responsibility, the use of visual modalities coupled with text to support comprehension, and collaborative online and face-to-face student discussions. (November 2017 issue of Language Arts)
Appendix A - Original List of Postmodern Picturebooks

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Author</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><em>Owl Moon</em></td>
<td>Jane Yolen</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Chester's Masterpiece</em></td>
<td>Mélanie Watt</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Smoky Night</em></td>
<td>Bunting and Diaz</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Madlenka</em></td>
<td>Peter Sis</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>The Snowy Day</em></td>
<td>Keats</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Journey</em></td>
<td>Aaron Necker</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>The Widow's Broom</em></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>A Sweet Smell of Roses</em></td>
<td>Angela Johnson</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>The Invisible Boy</em></td>
<td>Trudy Ludwig</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Extra Yarn</em></td>
<td>Mac Barnett</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>A Sick Day for Amos McGee</em></td>
<td>Philip Stead &amp; Erin Stead</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Black and White</em></td>
<td>David Macauley</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Voices in the Park</em></td>
<td>Anthony Browne</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Gorilla</em></td>
<td>Anthony Browne</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>The Man Who Walked Between The Towers</em></td>
<td>Mordicai Gerstein</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>The Three Pigs</em></td>
<td>Weisner</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>The True Story of the Three Little Pigs</em></td>
<td>Jon Scieszka and Lang Smith</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>The Three Little Pigs</em></td>
<td>McNally</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Jumanji</em></td>
<td>Chris Vans Allsburg</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Voices in the Park</em></td>
<td>Anthony Browne</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Who's Afraid of the Big Bad Book?</em></td>
<td>Lauren Child</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Appendix B

Text Analysis:

Analyze the text of the page:

Discuss what it is saying? Find evidence in the text to support your hypothesis. The text is explaining how hard it is to get someone to listen to you even if it is for the better good. The text says “I ordered it to go away, but it took no notice of me whatsoever.” She is just protecting herself and her loved ones, but this person isn’t listening!

Discuss how the text works. Find evidence in the text to support your hypothesis. The page is set up in a formal placement with the pictures on top and the text only on the bottom. The typeface is New Times Roman and the type size is 12. This makes it easy to read and you can tell the author wants you to concentrate on the pictures.

What background knowledge did you use to make sense of the text? I know that sometimes it is annoying and frustrating when things don’t go your way so you can act out of anger and you just want to make things happen that you can control. I also know that text usually goes left to right, so that is how I read it. The text was placed very formally.

How does the printed text work artistically: i.e. imagery, simile, metaphor, rhythm/structure, symbolism etc. The text represents the picture and is contradicting the picture. It has different lines to really compliment the object.

What does this text mean? Find evidence to support your hypothesis.

This text means that the woman is annoyed by things that don’t follow her orders/way.

Discuss what you notice and tell where you noticed it.

- The trail of leaves following the woman and her dog all over the page.

What you think the images are saying?

- To leave the past in the past and to keep walking without looking back.

What has come to mind about what you already know?

- They are strong and won’t let a few obstacles get in their way. She looks determine as she is walking.

What do the images remind you of?

- Someone leaving a battlefield after winning a war.

How do the images work artistically: I.e. discuss color, perspective, size, line, text placement, style, media, mood, etc.- ANYTHING! Find evidence to support your hypothesis.

- The dark clouds and the “burning tree” represent the storm and torture of strange people they are leaving behind.

- Does the character know the tree is burning or is this only for the author? Maybe an elements of a postmodern picturebook?
Figure 1. Blog Entry that discusses the differences between traditional and postmodern books.

Chester is a postmodern picture book because it is nonlinear. For example, Chester does not go from event to event like a traditional picture book. Instead, we are reading the same event multiple times over and over again. Also, the story drifts off to multiple subplots like Chester trying to make the book better.

I agree you Tim, because the story skips around a lot. For example, Chester keeps interrupting and that causes the story to start over and over again. Also, there is “different stories” in the book, such as when Chester makes up his own story.

I agree with you Tim, because Chester wrecked the story by coloring it with his red marker trying to make his own story, and by him doing this the story starts over again and again. Which makes the story skip around, and that makes the story less interesting.

I agree with you all Tim, Julia, and Logan because the story doesn't go in a regular course that regular picture book does. For example, in the book the hungry caterpillar the story goes first, next, then, etc., but in this book as all of you said it skips around from one part to another. Another example is that in the book one story would end and then go into another story. As Tim said this book is a postmodern book because of one of the properties it has, a non-linear story line.
Figure 2. Blog Entries that illustrate students recognizing postmodern elements in Chester.

The book 'Black and White' was probably the strangest book I have ever read. It has humor, multiple depths, and a non linear story structure. For example, in the top right story, while the people are waiting for the train, the text talks about how the train company is very sorry about the delay (except much funnier). Also, on the back cover, there is a picture of a cow with the face of a person pointing at the udders and laughing. That is funny because the spot on the cow is a person's face and that person is laughing at the udders for no reason. It has multiple depths because on the last page, the copyright information is on pieces of newspaper that is falling in front of the train station that is being picked up. This is an example of multiple depths because the paper is falling in front but it is not in the original picture. Finally, the story has a non linear structure. It's non linear because in a regular book, there is only one story and not four going on at the same time. In conclusion, these are just some examples on how the book 'Black and White' is a postmodern picture book.

I think Who's Afraid Of The Big Bad Book is an example of a postmodern picture book because their was multiple plane. Also the book has non-linear structure and that is not in most traditional picture books. The book also had humor moments. For example when Herb was in Goldilocks story she said "hey who are you? And what are you doing in my story? Get out of her this is my story". There is some intrusions like when Herb goes to different story's and stops them. This is why I think Who's Afraid Of The Big Bad Book is a postmodern picture book. I also think this book is a great book to read to little children cause it is funny for little kids and a good nite story.

I agree with Khaya. The story, "Who's Afraid Of The Big Bad Book" is an example of a postmodern picture book because it has a non-linear story structure. This is because when Herb decides to ruin the book, the queen goes of topic to discuss this topic. This shows a postmodern picturebook because the queen goes off "script" or story line to yell at Herb for vandalizing the book.

Chester is an example of a postmodern picture book because Chester and the mouse are poping out of the page. He is literally talking to us/you as readers and he isn't just talking to other characters its only us. He is also breaking the fourth wall because he has a red marker and is drawing over everything and sometimes he will be off the page border or the box were all the pictures are and he will overlap the background. Here is an example of breaking the fourth wall.
Figure 3- Exploration sheets that outline student tasks

Name: ___________________________ Date: __________ P ___

Exploration 1
Take notes while examining the outside of the book only.
Use all of the following words in your journal notes (highlight when you use them!):
- side flaps
- spine
- shape
- size
- paratext

☐ In your journal, create a drawing with labels to show one of the following words. See Mrs. Lennon’s example for help!

___/6 points= if all words are used correctly & one illustration exists

Exploration 2
Take notes while reading the book through for the second time.

Use all of the following words in your journal notes (highlight when you use them!):
- typography
- font
- type size
- style
- placement (of the text on the page)
- type face
- color
- choose ONE: very informal, informal, very formal, formal, absent

☐ Homework tonight: Post a discussion about the above words. You do not have to include all of them, but you should ask questions, respond to others, challenge, agree, etc. (see reverse side of blog rubric for guiding questions if you are stuck!) 6-8 sentences, you can reply or start a new thread! Due: ______________________

___/13 points= if all words are used correctly and blog is thorough and uses vocabulary (5 pts)
Exploration 3
Skim the book again to refresh your memory.

Use all of the following words in your journal notes (highlight when you use them!):
  ○ intensity
  ○ color(s)
  ○ setting or theme or mood
  ○ value
  ○ line(s) (thick, thin, whole, broken)- you choose!
  ○ draw ONE picture in your journal that shows an example of the line type used
  ○ perspective
  ○ shape
  ○ medium

___/9 points = if all words are used correctly & one picture

Exploration 4

Read the book for the third time in its entirety.

In your journal notes, use the following words (highlight them, again!):
  ○ relationship
  ○ picture(s)
  ○ text(s)
  ○ symmetrical, complementary OR contradictory
  ○ narrative structure
    ○ point of view
    ○ round OR flat
    ○ dynamic OR static

___/8 points = if all words are used correctly

Total: _______/36
Figure 4. Example of exploration 2 in student notebook
Figure 5. Example of exploration 3 in student notebook.
**Figure 6.** Example of exploration 4 in student notebooks that illustrate text features.
Table 1. Lesson objectives by day

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>#</th>
<th>Objective</th>
<th>Activity</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Students will be able to make observations when reading a postmodern picturebook.</td>
<td>Read <em>Chester</em> aloud as a class, students discuss as a class and take notes on what is “different” than a traditional story</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Students will be able to identify the similarities and differences between traditional and postmodern picturebooks.</td>
<td>Record definition and key vocabulary in interactive journal.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Students will be able to identify the similarities and differences between traditional and postmodern picturebooks.</td>
<td>Excerpt from <em>The Stinky Cheeseman</em> “Red Hen”- students read and highlight examples that exhibit postmodern literature. Complete double entry journal response.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Students will be able to identify the similarities and differences between traditional and postmodern picturebooks.</td>
<td>Create Venn diagram in journal comparing and contrasting traditional literature to postmodern literature</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Students will make observations of a picturebook and identify what they notice in both text and illustrations.</td>
<td>Students do a “picture” and “text” walk through of a book of their choice. With a group, students take notes in their journal on a t-chart, noting text and illustration elements that they notice. Students note elements before, during and after reading.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Exploration 1 (2 days)</td>
<td>Introduce slides 1-2 “Art of PB” powerpoint, students meet in book groups and create notes in their journals using the metalinguistic vocabulary</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Outside of the Book</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>Exploration 2 (2 days)</td>
<td>Review slides 3-8 Students meet in groups to use metalinguistic vocabulary in their notes while reading through for a second time.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Text Elements</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>Exploration 3 (2 days)</td>
<td>Review slides 9-13, artistic elements</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Art Elements</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>Exploration 4 (2 days)</td>
<td>Review slides 15-19, text-picture relationships</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Text-Picture Relationships</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>Buffer Day</td>
<td>For groups that were done, students chose a different picturebook to read/examine, noting important elements in their journal</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>Cyberlesson “Voices in the Park”</td>
<td>Students are separated into groups of 4, students share google slides documents and</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>each analyze a “voice” using vocabulary they have learned throughout the unit to increase understanding</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>---</td>
<td>---</td>
<td>---</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11</td>
<td>Postmodern Reflections</td>
<td>Write reflections in their journals about the entire unit</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>