"WHOSE LINE IS IT ANYWAY?"

HOW STUDENTS MAKE SENSE OF POSTMODERN PICTURE BOOKS WITH METAFACTIVE DEVICES

By

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Abstract

"Literacy in the 21st Century means thinking critically, making sense of a bombardment of media sources, negotiating multiple digital literacies, and making choices about what to read and how to go about reading it.” (Anstey, 2002, p.447)

Postmodern picture books can be classified as a sub-genre of picture books in which the reader is not simply reading an author’s recount of the story but by using metafictive devices such as: non-linearity, multiple narratives, indeterminacy, symbolic representation, interesting illustrative techniques and create design and layout, the reader is invited to co-create the text with the author. The interplay between text and image is very important and the reader is required to fill in the gaps in order to make sense of the story. These books encourage students to think critically, require students to be active creators of the story rather than passive observers.

This study explores the responses of a group of grade 6 students to the postmodern picture book Voices in the Park by Anthony Browne, and the meaning-making strategies the readers employed to understand this story. I looked first, at the student’s reactions to the metafictive devices present in this book, and then I looked at how they employed meaning-making strategies to comprehend the story.
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SECTION 1: Introduction

Purpose

The purpose of my study is to gain an understanding of how strong readers navigate postmodern picture books that employ metafictive devices. Specifically, my goal is to understand how these students respond when they encounter metafictive devices, and consequently how they engage in meaning-making strategies. This information will then allow me to plan meaningful instructional activities for all students.

Question

I worked with a small group of grade six students to find out: first, how they react to the metafictive devices in the picture book Voices in the Park by Anthony Browne and second, how they employed meaning-making strategies to comprehend the story.

Rationale

I am interested in this topic and question for several reasons. There is much research on reader response and comprehension strategies in traditional genres but very little in the area of postmodern picture books. This sub-genre has gained much popularity in the past 20 years and merits investigation. I am very interested in how children make sense of text and, as a classroom teacher, I am always looking for ways to open doors to comprehension and critical thinking for my students. As our students engage in more sophisticated texts, it is our responsibility to provide them with the strategies necessary to access texts that demand critical thinking. Lastly, I love children’s literature. I became familiar with the sub-genre of postmodern picture books as I trained to be a teacher librarian and I was looking to find a research project that could combine my interest in comprehension strategies and my love of picture books.
SECTION 2: Literature Review

How do you feel when you leave what is familiar to you and head into the unknown? Sometimes these experiences are welcomed; sometimes they are intimidating, frustrating or unwelcome. Leaving behind all that we know and heading into uncharted territory is exactly what the reader is forced to do as they enter the genre of the postmodern picture book. Children are often immersed in a type of familiar, linear narrative that allows the reader to create a schema for the structure of stories. Ask anyone who has graduated from high school and they will use terms such as: introduction, plot, rising action, denouement, solution and conclusion.

Throughout our lives, for the most part, we have left the storytelling up to the author. We enjoyed picture books that had lovely images that helped to support our understanding of the text. We had much loved characters whose adventures kept us entertained and we were satisfied in the end when they ‘lived happily ever after.’ Those days are over! Today’s young people are products of the digital era. They need their entertainment to be interactive and engaging. I am not claiming that they don’t like to curl up with a good book and be “swept away,” but postmodern picture books offer the reader the opportunity to engage and interact with stories like never before.

My purpose is not to dissuade the reader from choosing from the incredibly rich and diverse selection of traditional narrative picture books available today, but instead to consider also choosing from a sub-genre of picture books that offers the reader the opportunity to “co-create” the story along with the author. This sub-genre of picture books has become increasingly more popular in the past 20 years. In fact, there has been a postmodern picture book represented as either a winner or honor book in the list of Caldecott winners for the past two decades, and not only in North America. As noted by Nikolajeva and Scott (2002), the prevalence of this sub-
genre among book winners has been represented by the awarding of the Kate Greenaway Award in Great Britain as well as other awards throughout the world.

I will start my review by explaining the genre of the postmodern picture book and how it is unique. I will then discuss how students react when they encounter these metafictive devices, and lastly I will address the kinds of strategies students use to make meaning.

**Postmodern picture books**

As I began my research I knew I was delving into unfamiliar territory. I was developing an entirely new vocabulary and a new way of thinking about picture books. I, like many others of my generation grew up with a clear understanding of typical narrative structure. I can clearly visualize the diagram denoting the beginning, middle and end of the story, the rising action and the neat and tidy solution. The postmodern picture book does not fit this image. I first needed to know what the term “postmodern” meant. According to Bette Goldstone (2002), *Postmodernism* is a term that describes theoretical and fundamental changes in attitudes, styles, and academic disciplines that emerged in Western culture after World War II. It rejects canons and universal truths of earlier 20th century movements, philosophies, and artistic traditions, and in their place inserts anarchy, fragmentation, chance, play, and anti-authoritarianism.

The key characteristics of postmodern picture books, according to Driggs, Wolfenbarger and Sipe (2007) include non-linearity, self-referential text, a sarcastic or self-mocking tone, and an anti-authoritarian stance. Goldstone (2004) argues that non-linearity is the most common characteristic found in postmodern picture books. According to Driggs, Wolfenbarger and Sipe (2007), “Non-linearity suggests that the reader moves backward and forward through the text and that there may be multiple stories being told.” (p.275) For example, in David Wiesner’s *The Three Pigs*, the story begins in the traditional fashion, “Once upon a time,” but very soon
thereafter loses its linearity as the pigs step out of the story into a Mother Goose rhyme, into a fantasy tale about dragons, eventually ending up back in the story of the three little pigs. *Voices in the Park*, by Anthony Browne, is a brilliant example of both non-linearity and multiple narratives. In Browne’s story a single event, a visit to the park, is being described from four different perspectives or points of view. The use of different fonts to represent the tone and mood of each of the characters is very effective in allowing the reader to make inferences about the type of people describing the same event. David Macaulay’s Caldecott winning book, *Black and White*, brilliantly traces four seemingly very different events, which the reader slowly begins to realize, may be related after all. The story is told using four distinct rectangular panels, two per page. There is a continuity of story in each panel but they do not seem to be interrelated. The reader is confused at first, not knowing even how to tackle the reading of the book: Should it be read as four different stories which requires the reader to start at the beginning and follow a single panel until the end of the book? Should you read each page from left to right, from beginning to end? Should you follow all four panels on each page from beginning to end and try and connect all of the stories? Is there a right or a wrong way to read this book?

Postmodern picture books, contends Goldstone (2004), may display an unusual degree of playfulness, bordering on the absurd with unusual twists and turns. Irony slips into the books in both tone and contradictory story lines. These books can be self-referential, exposing the artistic act of the book’s creation. These picture books also invite coauthoring—the power of telling the story is shared between the author and the young reader.

**Metafiction and picturebooks**

While reviewing the literature, I noticed another term was frequently used and it is important to define this term and distinguish it from postmodern. Metafiction and metafictive
devices were frequently referred to. Waugh, as cited in Pantaleo (2004), defines metafiction as fictional writing which self-consciously and systematically draws attention to its status as an artefact in order to pose questions about the relationship between fiction and reality. One element common to the discussions of metafiction is its self-reflexiveness and self-consciousness; metafictive texts draw attention to their status as fiction and text through the use of a number of devices or techniques (Pantaleo, 2004).

In picture books, metafictive devices can be used with both verbal and visual text. Sometimes the pictures serve to support the text and other times the illustrations even contradict the text, forcing the reader to construct the story themselves. I noticed in the Library of Congress cataloging information at the back of David Macaulay’s Black and White, the summary reads, “Four brief “stories” about parents, trains, and cows, or is it really all one story?” Macaulay recommends careful inspection of words and picture to both minimize and enhance confusion. “Metafictive devices distance the readers from the texts, draw their attention to the artifice of fiction, and position them in a more interactive and interpretive role as readers.” (Meeks cited in Pantaleo, 2004, p.212). “Black and White demonstrates this again with its’ warning on the title page that reads, “This book appears to contain a number of stories that do not necessarily occur at the same time. Then again, it may contain only one story. In any event, careful inspection of both words and pictures is recommended.” Trites suggests, “The text, in Black and White, couches its voice very carefully in the passive so as not to intrude on the reader’s agency: Neither the author nor the text but the reader must construct the narrative” (p.233).

In summary, postmodern picture books are a sub-genre of picture books (Goldstone, 2004), which employ metafictive devices. These books force the reader to interact actively with the story and to co-create the narrative. No single reader will create the same story, nor will the
reader necessarily create the same story with each reading. Sipe, as cited in Goldstone (2004) sums it up nicely when he says,

“There are two fundamental ways to gain pleasure from the reading experience. In traditional stories, the text offers opportunities to explore and comprehend our world, either by carefully examining the world we know or offering vicarious experiences of unknown places, people, and events. This helps to order and stabilize the chaotic human condition. “A second pleasure of reading occurs when the story upsets, unsettles, or disturbs one’s expectations” (p.203).

This is what the postmodern picture book does. “Rather than providing order, these books show the quixotic nature of the world. Then they reassure the young reader that this uncertainty can be overcome and that the world is a wondrous and surprising place” (Goldstone, 2004, p.203).

Classroom implications

Children’s literature has changed significantly since the early part of the twentieth century. Early texts were designed to be didactic in nature and to teach children moral lessons. Serafini (2005) points out that “…texts were designed to impart morals and traditional values to multicultural literature intended to expose readers to the variety of cultures and ideas throughout the world, this inclusion of children’s literature in the elementary classroom has expanded exponentially.” (p.49) The literature found in many classrooms today has evolved from books that are predictable and repetitive to authentic literature aimed at instilling a love of reading. With the expansion of the publishing world and the growth of picture book popularity there is no excuse not to have a vast and varied collection in all classrooms. Non-fiction books using attractive and user-friendly text features have become a fixture in classrooms as well. These books, as well as the wonderful narrative stories of past and present have taken books for
children to a whole new level of excitement. But there is a new kid in town. Over the past 15-20 years a new sub-genre has emerged. The postmodern picture book is here and this sub-genre has opened up a whole world of new ideas in the field of children's literature. No longer is the reader a passive observer, but now the reader is an active creator of the story. This type of story has gained enormous popularity, in part, because it has made reading fun. The reader is given permission to make meaning and create storylines that may even vary with each subsequent reading.

The authors and illustrators of these books are very purposeful in their execution of a story that creates opportunities for interaction with the text and illustration. The illustrations, however, can help but sometimes hinder the meaning. The main objective is to make the reader think and wonder and, most importantly, to engage and co-create the story. It is no coincidence, I would think, that the majority of these books are written and illustrated by the same person. The author/illustrator cannot be separated any more than the text/illustrations can be separated. These books are meant to be read, re-read and savoured like a smorgasbord of ideas, images and imagination. That being said, what place do these books have in our classrooms and how can they make our students better, more proficient readers?

Like anything new, the learning curve can be steep. Children who are introduced to a new type of literary form need the appropriate vocabulary and foundational understanding of story to be able to discuss what they are reading. Most of our students come to us with a range of understanding of the fictional narrative. They are generally able to predict what will happen based on the title and the cover, they are able to identify characters, the problems they encounter, the solutions they employ and the ultimate ending of the story. More recently, with the infusion of more non-fiction reading material embedded in the language arts program, students have had
to learn a new set of rules and structures. They have had to learn strategies for reading a new kind of text and a new lexicon to discuss this type of text.

The postmodern picture book asks the reader to navigate a new sea of understanding in order to be able to understand and discuss what is being read. Teachers should be aware of the structural changes found in postmodern picture books and then alert students to the new codes and signals (Goldstone, 2002). As Pantaleo (2004) asserts, “Postmodern texts with metafictive devices can provide the kinds of reading experiences that develop readers’ abilities to critically analyze, construct, and deconstruct an array of texts and representational forms that incorporate a range of linguistic, discursive, and semiotic systems” (p.17).

In today’s ever-growing media world, students are expected to process ideas and images simultaneously. They are inundated with visual images, websites, logos, billboards, and video clips. Today’s reader needs to be able to process images and construct meaning in a more sophisticated manner than ever before. They need to make choices about what to read and particularly how to go about reading it. Anstey (2002) maintains that postmodern picture books are an excellent way to focus on many of the skills needed for new literacies, as these books are characterized by non-linearity and interactivity and children are drawn to the interactive nature of this genre. Labbo (2004) claims, “Making sense of digital content is a postmodern endeavor requiring readers to strategically navigate through the multiple, dynamic, nonlinear, and hypertextual pathways available on the Internet” (p.202). Anstey (2002) confirms this theory stating, “Literacy in the 21st century means thinking critically, making sense of a bombardment of media sources, negotiating multiple digital literacies, and making choices about what to read and how to go about reading it” (p.447).
How students respond to postmodern picture books

Much research has been conducted on reading strategies, particularly what strategies proficient readers employ in order to comprehend what they are reading. P. David Pearson, amongst other researchers, has made a significant contribution to this field of research; however these strategies do not help the reader of the postmodern picture book, as this genre requires an additional set of strategies. Pantaleo (2004) points out that there is a dearth of research focusing on readers’ response to postmodern literature, in particular postmodern picture books. She highlights that although researchers have written about postmodern texts and metafiction, that there is a lack of research that has actually looked at students’ understandings of and responses to these books.

One such study, however, conducted by Dr. Frank Serafini (2005), explored three aspects of reader response that included: students’ initial response to picture books that contained metafictive devices or postmodern elements, the challenges these picture books presented for readers, and how discussion helped readers work through their challenges. The study was conducted in an intermediate multi-age classroom using the book, Voices in the Park by Anthony Browne. Although other texts were introduced later in the unit of study, Browne’s book was used as the “cornerstone” of the unit. In his study Serafini worked with a group of twenty 8-12 year olds who had been in a multiage classroom setting for one, two, or three years. They were comfortable with the workshop approach to reading instruction, which the teacher has been using for several years. Students were read aloud to every day and literature was discussed as a whole class and in small groups. The teacher has worked hard to create an environment that was safe and respectful to her students. Serafini’s data suggested that students were attending to three
aspects of postmodern picture books in their discussion of *Voices in the Park* to a greater degree than other aspects: the non-linear structure, the images included in the illustrations and their possible symbolic meaning, and the relationship or interplay between the illustrations and the written text.

One of the most prevalent metafictive devices used in postmodern picture books is the distortion or disruption of time (Pantaleo, 2004). *Voices in the Park* is told sequentially in four different voices, but these voices are describing an event that took place simultaneously. A different font represents each voice and the images, illustrations and story line work in harmony to create the mood and tone, helping the reader to gain an understanding, or moreover create an understanding of a particular character.

Student reaction to this first reading was noted when the teacher asked the group if they noticed anything particular about the story. Many of the students in Serafini's study thought it was "weird" and that there wasn't much going on. Another concern was that it took a while to figure out the sequence and to realize that they went back to the beginning with each retelling. The abrupt ending disturbed several students. They couldn't understand why it didn't have the "usual" ending. It is clear that this structure and sequence left many readers feeling unsatisfied.

Serafini (2005) noted that students talked about how the text and the images represented more than just the literal text. He concludes that recognizing and understanding symbols is an important part of being a reader and states that "if readers are not allowed to experience and discuss symbolic representations while in elementary school, they will have difficulty analyzing the symbols represented in the poetry and novels they will encounter in secondary education." (p.59)
Summary

As educators, is it not our responsibility to prepare our students to be successful negotiators of meaning through print and images? Reading in school has to be connected to the kinds of reading that students are doing outside of school. New literacies require a different set of skills from readers that are outside the boundaries of traditional linear text. Preparing students to deal with the new texts they will encounter in their daily lives today requires teachers to present their students with new and challenging material. Postmodern picture books are an excellent resource for today’s changing and evolving reader, and by gaining an understanding of how strong readers react to these texts and how they engage in meaning-making strategies, this will help me plan instruction that will make these sophisticated texts accessible to all readers. Therefore, I decided to plan a research study to explore how intermediate students respond to postmodern picture books with metafictive devices and how they use meaning-making strategies to comprehend these texts.

SECTION 3: Methods

Research design

The goal of this study was to observe how strong readers reacted to metafictive devices they encountered when reading Voices in the Park by Anthony Browne, and to identify the meaning-making strategies they employed to comprehend this text. My goal was to gain insight on these strategies, in order to plan instruction for all of my students, to enable them to read this genre of literature with greater skill and confidence. My research questions were, “How do students respond to postmodern picture books with metafictive devices?” and “What meaning-making strategies do good readers use in order to comprehend books which contain metafictive devices?”
In order to answer this question, I chose to do a qualitative study. I used, Serafini’s (2005) *Voices in the Park, Voices in the Classroom: Readers Responding to Postmodern Picture books*, and Pantaleo’s (2004) *Young children interpret the metafictive in Anthony Browne’s Voices in the Park* and Swaggerty’s (2009), “That just really knocks me out”: *Fourth grade students navigate postmodern picture books* to help me form the framework for my analysis and my research methods design.

**Framework for Analysis**

I chose to use the think-aloud strategy in the individual sessions, also known as the verbal protocol analysis (Afflerbach & Johnston, 1984) and I based my choice on the research findings of Pearson and Dole (1987) who suggest that “careful observation of expert readers can produce insight about specific strategies that they draw upon as they read, which can inform teachers about how to support other students” (as cited in Swaggerty, 2009).

I also relied on work in reader-response theory. The theoretical work of Louise Rosenblatt (1978) describes reading as a “transaction” between text, image, and reader. Rosenblatt (cited in Serafini, 2005) suggests, “a better understanding of how children learn to mean in specific contexts should yield signals for those involved in all aspects of reading, especially research on response to literature and the teaching of literature” (p.41). Pantaleo (2004) posits that picture books have always required readers to fill in gaps and generate predictions and connections on multiple levels as they move back and forth between text and illustrations.

In structuring the group discussion sessions, I drew on the research of Vygotsky’s (1978) theory of social constructivism, which implies that learning is social in nature and that learning
takes place through the interaction with others. Social constructivists see children as possessing an active role (in meaning-making) rather than being passive receivers of knowledge.

**Selection procedures**

I worked with a group of grade 6 students French Immersion students who were selected based on their reading ability, their willingness to tolerate ambiguity and persevere with books that were challenging to understand, and their enthusiasm for discussing their ideas about books and stories and whose teachers felt they would benefit from an extra challenge outside of the regular classroom program. I knew all of these students personally as I am a teacher in this school and had taught 3 of the five students in Grade two. I made it clear that participation in this study was completely voluntary and that refusal to participate would in no way penalize the student’s standing in their classroom or have any other adverse effects. I did not exclude any participants who granted permission and I chose French Immersion students, as that was the program in which I was teaching, and I had familiarity with these students and a good working relationship with their classroom teachers. My purpose was not to compare French Immersion students to students enrolled in the regular English program, as I am certain that many of the English program students would have met the selection criteria.

**Procedure**

Each student was asked to read two books, *Voices in the Park* by Anthony Browne and *Black and White* by David Macaulay. For the purposes of this paper I am focusing on one book, *Voices in the Park*. I also asked each participant to keep notes in a small journal notebook and to participate in a blog set up specifically for this study. I met with the whole group initially for a 45-minute group session. My goal for this first session was twofold. Firstly, I wanted the students to fully understand the procedure we would follow and for them to have the opportunity
to ask any questions they may have had. Secondly, I modeled the "think-aloud" strategy that I would be using with the students, when we met individually and as a group so they were clear on my expectations. Each participant was given a journal for note keeping, the blog address and instructions (glued in the front cover of the journal) and a schedule of meeting times. I made arrangements to meet with each student individually, in order to conduct the think aloud session.

The meetings took place during the regular class silent reading period. At the initial information meeting I explained the project and distributed consent and assent forms and explained to the participants that it was his/her responsibility to complete any work he/she missed in class during the sessions. Each individual session lasted approximately 30 minutes. During each individual session, the student read the book to me and using the think-aloud strategy, explained their thinking. No prompts were provided, I simply asked the participant to tell me what they perceived was going on in the story. After completing the reading, we discussed his/her understanding of the story. Each child was provided with a copy of the book to take away after the session so they were able to write a written reflection in the journal provided for them, if they chose. All sessions were audio taped. I followed this same procedure for all students. After completing an individual session with all participants, we met as a group to discuss our reflections. This group session took place after school and lasted approximately 40-45 minutes. This session was also audio taped.

Total contact time per student for this part of the study was 90 minutes of after school time (2x45 minute sessions) and one 30 minute in school session (one-on-one with the researcher), for a total of 2 hours of contact time per participant for this part of the study.
Table 1

**Student Contact Hours**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type of session</th>
<th>Time of session</th>
<th>Duration of session</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Initial group meeting</td>
<td>After school</td>
<td>45 minutes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Individual session to discuss Voices in the Park</td>
<td>During reading period</td>
<td>30 minutes (per student)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Group session to discuss Voices in the Park</td>
<td>After school</td>
<td>45 minutes</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Research site**

The research was conducted at a dual track (English and French Immersion) elementary school (K-7) located in suburban Vancouver. I worked with five grade 6 French Immersion students from two different classes. I am a teacher at this school, however these students were not currently enrolled in my class.

The school is located in a suburb of Vancouver of approximately 100,000 residents. The community is divided into three distinct geographical areas, two in the south end and one in the north end. The north end would be considered to be the most ethnically and economically diverse, however this school would be considered to be located in the most affluent (middle to upper middle class) part of this suburb.

**Study Participants**

The participants were all enrolled in Grade 6, and were 11 or 12 years of age. All of the students were competent English speakers. One child was tri-lingual, speaking Japanese, English, and French. Another student spoke Mandarin at home, and English and French at school. The other three participants spoke English at home and English and French at school.
Of the five students, three were female and two were male. All students came from homes where both parents were present and all parents held a minimum of high school completion. Students were selected based on their reading ability, their willingness to tolerate ambiguity and persevere with books that were challenging to understand, and their enthusiasm for discussing their ideas about books and stories. All students chose their own pseudonyms.

Data sources and collection

As researcher, I kept field notes, and a reflective journal. I audio-taped both the individual think aloud sessions, as well as the group discussions. Finally, I collected student journal entries and blog entries.

Field Notes

Most of the data I collected came from the transcribed audio-taped think aloud sessions. The field notes were generally observations that I made about the kinds of questions I asked during these sessions, ideas for expanding student responses and ideas for things to ask in the whole group sessions.

Reflective journal

I used this journal to keep track of quotes and big ideas from articles I read. I would refer to these notes after meeting with each student to ensure I was focusing on the important ideas and issues.

Audio taped transcripts

The content of the audiotape was transcribed verbatim after the first individual and group session. As I was using the think-aloud strategy, I was very cognizant of the fact that during these sessions my role was as observer. I would ask some questions if necessary or I would ask
for clarification to obtain clearer responses, but my purpose was to allow the students to do the talking, therefore I tried to interfere as little as possible.

**Student journals and blog entries**

Students also responded to their reading in a notebook that I supplied for the project and on a blog that was set up for the duration of the project. It is important to note that the written components of the project yielded little insight for me for two reasons. First, the notebook was optional and only two of the five participants keep any notes. Those notes kept were a list of things that they had noticed when rereading the book, but those observations were shared with the group during the collective discussion. Second, the blog, which I still believe to be an excellent tool for giving children a voice and vehicle to discuss their reading, did have a few comments on it, but I did not allow the students enough turnaround time to get parental consent, for some to obtain an email account to blog responses. This was a weakness in the study design but, as the blog and student notebooks were not my primary sources of data, the results were not affected too greatly.

**Data analysis**

After listening to and transcribing the individual and group sessions for *Voices in the Park*, I could see a number of trends emerging. I began by identifying several categories of metafictive devices that were present in *Voices in the Park*, and then I noted the references that the students made to each of these devices as they read the book. I then analyzed the way in which students worked to comprehend the text when they encountered these devices. The devices I have identified are multiple narratives, symbolic representation, illustrative technique, design and layout, indeterminacy and non-linearity. Although the literature refers to others the above-mentioned devices were the ones that came up most frequently.
**Figure 2**

*Metafictive Devices and Frequency of Responses*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Metafictive devices</th>
<th>Number of references made by students by device</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Multiple Narratives</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Symbolic Representation</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Illustrative Technique</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Design and Layout</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Indeterminacy</td>
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**SECTION 4: FINDINGS**

In this section I begin with a description of the picture book *Voices in the Park* by Anthony Browne, I then describe the students’ responses to the book, followed by an analysis of the meaning-making strategies they employed when they encountered metafictive devices. In order to recreate the student’s experience of the think-aloud as much as possible for the reader, I will present the findings starting at the beginning of the book and progressing in order through the story.

**Student Responses to *Voices in the Park***

* A Walk in the Park, written in 1977, introduces the characters of Mrs. Smythe, her son Charles, their dog Victoria, Mr. Smith, his daughter Smudge, and their dog Albert as their visit to the park. This prequel to *Voices in the Park* tells the same story of adults divided by class, children putting prejudice aside and forging a friendship and their dogs that play with reckless abandon. Twenty years later Browne decided to revisit these rich and multi-dimensional
characters in Browne’s 1998 book *Voices in the Park* he adds a polyphonic narrative allowing
the reader to experience the trip to the park from each character’s perspective.

*Voices in the Park* offers four different characters’ views of a single event, a visit to the
park with the family dog. A bossy gorilla mother, her cautious and oppressed son, a depressed
gorilla father and his hopeful, optimistic daughter, each offer up their account of the visit to the
park. The illustrations are reflective of each characters outlook on life through changes in
perspective, colour, and light. Each character tells their version of the same event depicted by a
different season to reflect the character’s mood. The type font also changes to capture each
character’s personality and outlook. Browne fills his pages with such cultural icons as, the Mona
Lisa, Mary Poppins, King Kong, Santa Claus, Magritte’s hat, Munch’s Scream as well as many
famous sculptures.

**Cover**

The cover of *Voices in the Park* is simple, bright and appealing. The cover image fills
the entire 9x10 inch paperback. The title is written in white letters with the word “Voices”
displayed in a large and varied font, while “in the park” appears in smaller block letters
underneath. This white title is superimposed onto a grove of trees, arranged in a linear form to
draw the reader into the image. At the end of the corridor of trees we see two “monkey” children
facing one another. The boy giving the girl a red flower and two dogs are playing on the grass
on the right hand side of the page. Browne’s use of greens and yellows create a beautiful and
inviting warmth to draw the reader in but the dark canopy of leaves, packed tightly together,
keep the light out and foreshadow the dark cloud that covers some of the characters we will
meet.

I began by asking them to look at the cover and to predict what the book might be about.
Luna: I'm wondering why there are monkeys and dogs? It says, Voices in the Park, so I see why there is a bench on the back.

Heidi: Looks like leaves but could be something else. Looks like a normal book but they are monkeys.

Antonio: These people are freaky. They look like monkeys.

Shayla: Those look like monkeys to me and dogs playing and the leaves look a bit purple which is weird and the background is green and yellow, maybe it is just the sun coming through.

Bob: Weird Monkeys.

Clearly each participant has focused in on the fact that the characters are chimpanzees, although they go back and forth between chimpanzees and gorillas as they move through the book. Only one student looked at the back of the book to notice the bench.

**First voice**

First voice begins with a close up image of a house and in the bottom right hand corner there is a female gorilla, a boy gorilla (obscured by the female), and a dog on a leash, being walked by the female and the boy. What is interesting is that if you were to only focus on the image here, you would think that the house should feature prominently in the story and the characters could simply be incidental, however this is not the case. Perhaps this is intentional to show the orderly and sterile home environment of these characters, or perhaps this is Browne’s attempt to illustrate the female’s misplaced priorities, or both or neither. This is the beauty of Browne’s work. The correct interpretation is not what is necessarily important but rather the reader’s process in drawing these conclusions.

On the first two-page spread the image alone does not provide much insight into to mother’s personality. She is taking the leash off of Victoria, there appears to be a bank robber and a person wearing a crown in the background, which do not help to clarify the meaning. The
reader does see the face of Albert (sniffing near pedigree Victoria's bottom) but there is no particular look of censure on the part of the mother. When you read the two sentences, which accompanies this text, however, you get a very different impression. The mother uses words such as, "scruffy mongrel" and "horrible thing" to describe Albert, the mongrel.

The next page shows Charles and his mother on the park bench. You immediately get a feel for the tense relationship that exists between these two characters from their body language. The mother is scowling, sitting very upright, hands intertwined, and her body turned slightly to the left. Charles is sitting near his mother but not too close, he has his arms crossed and is looking in the opposite direction. At first glance you think they may be arguing or ignoring each other but on the far left you see a glimpse of someone else sitting on the bench, who you later discover is Smudge and her father. The text here is disturbing as you begin to feel that the relationship between mother and son is so untenable that she is treating Charles with less love and respect than she shows for Victoria as she says to her son, "Sit," I said to Charles. "Here."

On the next two pages, the mother realizes that her son is no longer sitting next to her on the bench, as she is lost in her reverie of dinnertime meal planning. What is interesting here is the image now shows the whole bench. We see that Smudge's father is sitting on the opposite end of the bench reading a newspaper. This image is a very powerful one as it clearly illustrates the theme of class distinction. There is a lamppost that serves as a very clear divider, separating the image into thirds where the wealthy mother commands two thirds of the neatly pristine image, while the father is left with the remaining third. His third is shared with the trash bin, debris on the ground, and mud footprints left by his boots. The mother's shadow is projected on the ground and her hat cast a wolf shaped shadow onto the father's side of the bench. With careful inspection the reader can see the open mouth of Munch's Scream is superimposed on the
trees. This image is duplicated on the right hand page as a close-up of the mother calling for her son.

Shayla: "She is shouting so loud the trees are moving."

Bob: "You see her shouting an it's so loud you wonder is she is shouting so loud that it moves the trees.

Turning the page the reader discovers the two children in the same image that is on the cover of the book, without the flower and the scrub at the end. The mother yells, "Charles, come here. At once!" "And come here please, Victoria." This text, illustrates again the difficult relationship that exists between Charles and his mother. The right hand page is a full-page image that leaves the reader asking many questions. Why is the tree on fire? Why is there a trail of leaves following them? The reader is left to ponder many things, but the way that Charles is obscured by his mother, yet the dog is so prominent leaves no doubt about the difficult mother-son relationship that exists.

Most of the comments made by the students in the "first voice" section centered on the zoomorphic characters. They all tried to figure out why gorillas would be taking a dog for a walk. Luna, Heidi, Shayla and Bob began to question the text and the images together, albeit in different ways, while Antonio stayed mainly focused on the images.

Luna: It's different than a normal book. I think it is kind of weird that the woman is treating her child like a dog. "Sit."

Luna commented on the difference between this book and a "normal book" but does not elaborate on the difference at this point. She does, however, begin to notice the tenuous relationship between the mother and son. She continues to read first voice but goes back to explaining what she sees in the images.
Heidi, on the other hand, comments on the narrative as she tries to figure out who is speaking to whom.

*Heidi:* I think it would be an adult talking because she says, “and Charles, our son.” Maybe she is talking to someone else, like the story.

This is interesting as Heidi is not sure if the mother is speaking to the reader, or to another character. She does not question the narrative any more at this point but continues on to describe what she sees in the images. When she gets to the image of the mother yelling for Charles, she notices as she yells the leaves are being blown off the trees.

*Heidi:* It looks like the trees are screaming or something. It seems like when she is getting distressful and things, the weather seems to get darker and darker and the trees are blowing.

Others go through the first voice section and for the most part are caught up in the naming of things that they see in the images. Shayla, however, begins to question what is happening by trying to figure out what kind of reality exists in the story.

*Shayla:* Maybe it’s like an internal animal world? That’s strange. The picture is going off the page (referring to the first full panel image). So that is the mongrel dog and the other dog and the monkey kids.

By the end of the first voice section, other than in the instances mentioned, most of the student attention appears to be focused on the images. Although some have begun to use the text to support the visual information, most are intrigued with the “strange” and “weird” details they see and are not necessarily focused on trying to figure out what is going on.

**Second voice**

This section is from the point of view of the unemployed and depressed father of Smudge (the happy optimistic girl). It begins with him in an armchair, wearing grubby overalls and looking dejected.
The next full-page image is where he and Smudge take their dog, Albert for a walk. They walk along a dirty, depressing street where they see two paintings, whose characters, the Mona Lisa and a prince are seemingly crying onto the street and a gorilla dressed in a Santa suit begging for money with a sign that reads, “Wife and millions of kids to support.” None of the students pick up on the irony here. The sky is Heidi coloured and blends into the wall colour, the barbed wire fence on top of the wall shades the two bleak apartment buildings in the background and the broken glass on the top of the wall add to the ominous tone of the full panel.

The next two pages show the father letting Albert off of his leash. Browne uses only greens, blues and black to create a foreboding feel. Although it is daytime, one gets the impression that there is a storm brewing and that the clouds will soon open up. The trees all look dead, there is a person walking with an umbrella and a Mary Poppins character is flying in the background. On the full panel image, where the two dogs are chasing each other, Browne uses a white streak to illustrate speed and playfulness but here he begins to trick the reader as on closer inspection you can see that the tree trunks are morphing into elephant legs and trunks.

On the last two-page spread of second voice, you see the father reading a newspaper called the “Ad Scene,” presumably looking for work. There is a reproduction of Munch’s Scream on the front page posing as a newspaper photo and the background still appears bleak and colourless, other than the dogs chasing each other. The right hand page of the spread was a favorite among the students. It is the same full-page panel of the street scene only this time as the father, Smudge and Albert head home, and life has done a complete 180-degree turn. The colours are bright, vibrant and hopeful. Santa, Mona Lisa and the prince are dancing, the street is clean, and the apartments are lit up with multi-coloured windows of different shapes. King Kong is flexing his muscles on top of the buildings, the once dead looking and bleak trees are
now twinkling with lights, the barbed wire and broken glass have disappeared and in place of the regular lamp post is a crocus shaped light which has burst through the ground. One can infer from the reverse in direction, the evening sky and the use of colour to convey mood that the father has found some cheer in his sullen day by spending time with his happy, upbeat daughter Smudge.

When the students started to read second voice they were still focused on the zoomorphism but now they were beginning to question the narrative a little more.

*Luna:* Oh, I guess it is different perspectives.

*Antonio:* Oh, I think it is like the other view because I saw this gorilla with the hat and reading the newspaper, sitting beside the mom on the bench in the other story and that’s his dog and that’s their dog.

*Shayla:* Hey, isn’t that the girl that was on the other page with the boy and the half man/half gorilla? It’s strange. It’s like they’re linked. Oh, I get it now. This is his story, the gorilla man, and he went there.

Some confusion still exists however as Shayla notices that the lady on the bench is the same lady that was on the bench when he sat down but then she adds that the other lady (not sure who she means) is yelling at her dog. Clearly some of the students are beginning to see that the sections are connected but there is still some confusion as to how the parts are related and what some of the more “random” images mean.

**Third voice**

This section is told from the point of view of Charles, the oppressed and timid son. The illustrative style, although similar to Smudge’s father’s dark tones, is different in that Browne uses cross-hatching and more shadowing perhaps to give the impression of powerlessness. The shadows overpower the boy and the cross-hatching creates a type of dark, heavy tone that
implies he is trapped. The first image shows the boy with his hands in his pockets, looking out the window as Victoria, the dog, looks on. He appears to be looking out the window, longingly, while appearing to be almost imprisoned within the cell-like rooms of his home. As the section progresses and Charles becomes less timid we see a change from a dark tone to lighter, more colourful one. Charles never looks directly at the reader until he begins to gain some confidence.

The right hand page shows the boy from the back with a large shadow looming over him (his mother presumably). The hat worn by the shadow matches the shape of the trees, the clouds, and the lamps on the lamppost. This image is very telling, as it seems to convey the boy’s sense of oppression, in that his mother overpowers him and he sees her shadow or image in everything around him.

On the next two-page spread we see the two child characters interacting. The left hand side shows the same image of the park bench mentioned above, with the lamppost as a divider but we see it from behind, looking out into the park. This time we just see the parents on the edge of the image while the focus is on the children. There is still a division, with the boy’s side being bleak and dark and the girl’s third bright and sunny, but the distribution on the page is moving closer to equality. The large panel on the right hand page shows the two children playing on a slide. Smudge appears to be trying to convince a more reluctant Charles to go down the slide. The slide is centered on the page to show a more equal distribution of power. The dogs playing in the background illustrate that animals do not discriminate. The children coming together to play shows their willingness to play together even though they come from different worlds. The prejudice between the adults, however, still exists.

The next three images show the kids playing together happily, as Charles loosens up and even shows Smudge that he can climb a tree. What is so interesting about this image is that
Charles finally gazes at the reader. The text, however, contradicts the image as Charles states, “I am good at climbing trees and I show her how to do it.” What the reader sees, however, is Smudge high up in the tree and Charles peeking around a branch lower down. It is as if he is asking the reader to believe what he is saying. The last image is a full-page view of Charles and his mother leaving the park after the mother discovers Charles’ whereabouts. The mother is not impressed with the “frightful types” that one can find at the park. As they leave Charles looks back longingly and says, “Maybe Smudge will be there next time?” They leave a trail of leaves behind them again, but this time they are pink, signifying renewal and hope.

The student observations and comments about this section were sparser. They did not all agree on the mood of the boy at first glance. Luna felt that the boy looked sad (not mentioned in the text), while Heidi suggested that he was bored (mentioned in the text). On the second page all of the students noticed the hat-shaped trees and lampposts but the origin of the shadow confused some.

*Luna:* ...it looks like humans in the background and the tree is shaped like a hat and a shadow of a man behind him.
*Heidi:* He (Charles) is not wearing a hat, but the shadow is.

Neither student makes the connection yet that the hat-wearing shadow over Charles is his mother. Luna assumes the shadow belongs to a man and Heidi thinks it is Charles’ shadow except that he is not wearing a hat.

*Antonio:* Oh a hat-shaped tree, clouds, lights, this is a weird world. Shadow is like a dog.

*Shayla:* So that is the same dog again and for some reason the clouds and lampposts are shaped like hats, and that (points to the mother’s shadow).
*Bob:* Somebody’s shadow.
Antonio, Shayla and Bob all make reference to the shadow and the hat-shaped objects but offer little speculation at this point. The image of the two children on the bench was only mentioned by two of the students where Heidi observed, “it’s half happy, half sad.” Antonio, who stated that “it was weird how on his side it is really dark and on her side it is really happy.” On the next three pages where most of the images show the two children playing together, the comments were focused mainly on the information gained from looking at the images, with very little reference made to the text. The images on these pages, and on all of the pages are visually rich and fun to look and try and figure out. I do feel, however, that they sometimes distract the reader from the text and from experiencing the story at a deeper level.

Fourth voice

This last section is told from Smudge’s point of view. It begins with Smudge, her father and their dog entering the park. The trees are brightly coloured and reflective of Smudge’s mood and attitude. In contrast to the peaceful first page, the second page depicts Charles’ mother looking extremely angry and hostile. She is almost unrecognizable save the hat and the scarf. Even her brass buttons look angry. In fact, Luna was so deceived by the image that she said, “It is a picture of a woman that looks like the other woman only madder.” Smudge’s view of their initial encounter show the park bench again but this time we are looking down the bench at Charles and his mother. Smudge says, “I got to talking to this boy,” although we do not see this initial conversation we are left to infer that perhaps the parents are not focused on the children but rather their own thoughts and do not notice the conversation. We know from the first voice that Charles’ mother is unaware that he is no longer on the bench and that is why she screams out his name. The children begin to forge a tentative friendship and are bound by the universality of childhood pleasures, such as: laughing at the dogs, playing in the bandstand, swinging and
climbing trees. The bandstand image did however, pose some difficulties for the reader in that in
the interior of the bandstand it appears to be daytime and outside of the bandstand it appears to
be evening. None of the students even mentioned this until we discussed the book as a group.
My impression was that the word “bandstand” was unfamiliar to them so they simply skimmed
over it on initial reading. When I explained to the group what a bandstand was they made
reference to the differing interior and exterior colours but nothing about the disruption of time.
Luna asserted that perhaps “they are so happy that they want the day to continue.”

The first page of the last two-page spread shows the same image that is on the cover for
the third time. Each time this image is shown it is slightly different. Here Charles is giving
Smudge the red flower but instead of the trees being orange like on the front cover they are blue
and purple, that coupled with the direction of the shadows shows the passage of time from day to
evening. The students did not remark on this. The strange part of this image is that all is dark
except for the ball of sunshine engulfing the two friends.

The right hand side of the last two-page spread incited much discussion. What is
interesting is that the image apparently takes us full circle back to Charles’ home. The reader
gets the sense of the story being over. Charles is looking back longingly as he is about to enter
his home. A home which does not resemble the white, pristine Victorian home depicted on the
first page but rather a dark, foreboding prison-like structure, surrounded by a moat, pillars,
topped with the shape of the mother’s hat and an iron gate. I began to ask the students questions
about the house and how Charles may be feeling. They are not really reacting to the image
negatively or even questioning the differences between the two houses. Suddenly Shayla
reminds us that we are still looking at things from Smudge’s perspective and so maybe this is
just how Smudge imagines Charles’ house to be. The others are not sure but some are willing to
entertain the notion. The last image of the book is simple, a mug containing the red flower that Charles gave to Smudge. Before even reading the text we know that this is at Smudge’s house and in Smudge’s voice which give credence to Shayla’s theory about the image of Charles’ house.

*Voices in the Park* is a powerful book about the human condition that allows children to share in the experience of these characters at whatever level they are ready to accept. Some younger children may simply enjoy the repetitive nature of the same story told four times over and enjoy the gorillas with human like qualities. The multiple narratives may intrigue slightly older children with some knowledge of fictional narrative. Others may be drawn to the use of different fonts, colours, tones and illustrative styles to convey mood and feeling. While more sophisticated readers may be able to relate to the themes of prejudice, oppression, depression and optimism it really does not matter the level at which this book is interpreted there really is something for everyone, art appreciation, humour, problem-solving or opening up the more serious topics of discussion, this book has a place in all elementary collections.

**Student Responses to the Metafictive Devices Encountered**

**Special features and organization**

Postmodern picture books are unique in that by definition they contain certain features, which make them special. Each scholar has his/her own way of describing these characteristics, or metafictive devices. Goldstone (2002) uses four large categories: Nonlinearity, self-referential text, the sarcastic or mocking tone and antiauthoritarian text. Anstey (2002) further defines these categories using characteristics, such as: nontraditional ways of using plot, character and setting which challenge readers expectations and require different ways of reading and viewing, unusual use of author’s voice to position the reader to read the book in particular
ways and through a particular character's eyes using written or visual text, indeterminacy in written or illustrative text, requiring the reader to construct some of the text and meanings, a pastiche of illustrative styles, which require the reader to employ a range of knowledge and grammars to read, new and unusual design and layout, which challenge the reader's perception of how to read a book, contesting discourses between written and illustrative text, which require the reader to consider alternate readings and meaning, intertextuality, which requires the reader to use background knowledge in order to access available meanings, and the availability of multiple readings and meanings for a variety of audiences.

For the purposes of my project, I sought to understand how my subjects responded when they encountered metafictive devices and consequently how they engaged in meaning-making strategies. As I listened to the transcribed think-aloud sessions of my subjects I was able to create four different categories of metafictive devices used. These categories were:

1) multiple narratives/perspectives
2) symbolic representation, illustrative technique, design and layout
3) indeterminacy
4) nonlinearity

After determining the above-mentioned metafictive devices, I analyzed student responses by device. I hoped that by gaining insight on how students coped with these devices that I would be able to offer teaching suggestions to make these texts more accessible to all students.

**Multiple narratives/perspectives**

Most of the students we teach are familiar with or becoming familiar with the narrative structure of fiction. They may even be able to articulate whether a story is told in the first person of third person. When we read *Voices in the Park*, however, the students were presented with a
narrative structure that changes throughout the story. Each of the four ‘retellings’ of the story is from the perspective of each of the four characters. This did take some getting used to, but in general by the end of the second character’s section each of the students had realized that there was something different happening with the narration and by the end of the third section all could predict that Smudge’s perspective would be the last one. During the think-aloud session references were made to the narrative structure and how each section was somewhat different than the last due to a change in narration. Heidi noted, “I think it would be an adult talking because it says “Charles, our son.” Maybe she is talking to someone else like the story.” Here it is clear that Heidi knows there is something different about the narration. The “someone else like the story” could refer to her belief that Browne is using third person narration. Luna suggested, “that it was written from different people’s perspectives and she liked how it had different “voices” in it.” She felt “it was roughly the same story, it was just how each person interpreted it. What their character was thinking at the time.” There was still some confusion over character and narrator as is shown by Shayla’s comment, “there is a different part for each character, well narrator and they each had a different font.” Although the students were familiar with both third person and first person narration, the change in narration was less familiar and took some time to understand. Browne’s use of changing fonts for each character provided some bridging to make the transition easier.

**Symbolic representation, illustrative technique, design and layout**

This was certainly the area that produced the majority of the comments and discussion from the students. They made reference to many of the iconic symbols that Browne used in his illustrations and symbols and there was some attempt to analyze the meaning of these symbols but this is where a skilled teacher could really help to facilitate a discussion. The symbols and
references in this book are complex and Serafini (2005) suggests that, “teachers need to become more aware of illustrative techniques and media, ...in order to be better positioned to help children construct meaning in transaction with the picture books they encounter (p.61). The students' comments with reference to symbolic representation, illustrative technique and design layout centered around Browne’s use of colour to represent mood and emotion, the zoomorphic style, the position of the characters on the page, the different fonts used for each character and some of the symbolic images used in the background of the images. They also commented on how these techniques were something that they did not usually see in the picture books they were used to reading.

**Colour**

All of the students commented on how Browne used colour to convey the mood and emotions of each character. They also commented on how a character’s mood changed the colours changed to reflect their mood.

Bob: *With the boy it starts to get a little brighter and with the girl it is extremely bright. And the Dad when he is going to the park the colours are dull, but on the way back he is happier because he is talking to her (Smudge) and the people are dancing and everything is nice, bright colours now.*

Shayla: *When the dad is narrating the story it is dull and grumpy looking. The boy is boring so his pictures are dull and sad looking. The girl is so happy that her section is all bright and colourful.*

**Style**

*Voices in the Park* is a book that I have used in my classroom for a few years and I would definitely say that the use of zoomorphic characters has been a huge stumbling block for many of my students. In my experience, readers who were less experienced and less willing to take risks in reading had a more difficult time accepting the zoomorphic characters, and some would not even attempt to analyze the story. They found it to be too confusing or stupid, questioning why
they would be monkeys (chimps) and not humans. The subjects I chose for this study also found the use of chimps frustrating and confusing but agreed to persevere with the story. They did have opinions on why the author chose chimps however.

Bob: The cover is brightly coloured to catch your attention and if you pay attention you see that they are monkeys, not people. There are strange looking plants but when you look inside you see that everything is how you would see it today except for the monkeys.

Heidi: Maybe it is like an internal/animal world? So he is half man/half gorilla and maybe this is a half people/half animal world?
Antonio: The half gorilla/half people or monkeys thing. That part still confuses me.

Luna: I think it is really cool the way they do it in the monkey way and not in the people way because then it would seem like a normal book and not a postmodern book. I think it was cool the way they used gorillas. I liked that.

In the group session, the students talked about the fact that they were gorillas and that there were people in the background. They began discussing random symbols that they noticed but they did not spend much time discussing or analyzing what those symbols meant in relation to the story. Again here is a brilliant opportunity for a skilled teacher to focus in on the symbols Browne used and how they related to the overall theme of the story. There was some discussion about why gorillas were chosen and although most of the students felt it was random, Luna made a thoughtful comment.

Luna: For me it made sense, it made it a different book. If they were people it would be hard to figure out. So the fact that they were gorillas made it okay for everything else to be weird.

This reinforces Doonan's (1992) notion that "giving humans animal heads is a way of dealing with potentially painful issues in a form that will not alarm young children but will still be able to provoke lively debate among adolescents" (p.48). Although Luna was not necessarily referring to the emotional theme of the story, she did understand that the zoomorphism allowed the author to create distance between fantasy and reality.
Position

The positioning of the characters on the page was not a huge area of discussion but I was particularly interested in their comments about the image on the second recto image, where the mother realizes that Charles is missing and Smudge’s father is sitting on the far end of the bench reading the paper.

Shayla: *She (the mother) is more neat and tidy so her side is all clean but his side is all messy and there is garbage.*

In the group session I showed the second recto image again and then showed the seventh recto image, where Smudge and Charles are shown from the back, each sitting beside his/her parent. The pole is still dividing the image, although the division is somewhat more equitable now. I asked them what they noticed about these two pictures. They did eventually come to the idea that the two images were the same bench but from a different angle. I suggested that perhaps the pole was serving as some kind of division between the characters, thinking this might elicit more conversation but they just agreed with me and did not go any further.

Obviously if this were a teaching situation this moment would have served as an excellent segue into a deeper discussion of the book’s theme. The only other references made to the book’s design was the eighth verso image, where Charles is going down the slide and the slide is directly facing the reader and even extends the reach of the frame. Bob thought it was cool how it came out of the picture, while Shayla thought it was strange that it appeared to be going off the page.

Indeterminacy

According to Lewis (2001), indeterminacy is the opposite of excess. It is the gaps the author and illustrator, in the case of picture books that the reader is required to fill in, in order to make sense of the story. Panteleo, in her book *Exploring Student Response to Contemporary*
Picturebooks, maintains that it is the synergy between the words and the images that creates this indeterminacy. The reader is required to use the information gained from both the words and the pictures to fill in what the author and illustrator have not, thus positioning the reader as co-author. As the students who participated in the study read through Voices in the Park, it was evident that this co-authoring was taking place as they tried to make sense of the story.

Bob: *So the people are monkeys, I am starting to get that. But I am still not sure why they are monkeys with human emotions.*

Heidi: *Looks normal but they are monkeys.*

Here Bob and Heidi understand that the characters have human emotions but they are still confused by the zoomorphism. They continue to read on and Bob infers that Smudge’s dad is happier on the way home from the park because he was spending time with his daughter and talking to her.

Bob: *She’s happy, so he goes and spends time with her and he becomes happier.*

While at the park the characters are shown sitting on a park bench from various different angles. The children are also shown playing together, as are the dogs. Although there is a lot of visual imagery there is minimal text and action being shown, thus leaving the reader/viewer to fill in the gaps.

The students used their background knowledge, and the minimal information they gleaned from the text and images to put together a deeper story than the one being recounted by Browne. All of the students spent considerable time trying to piece together, which dog belonged to which family and they all enjoyed the interaction between the two dogs while they played at the park.

Heidi: *I guess they are all starting like with people going to the park. Oh the dogs are playing, oh that might be Victoria.*
Bob: The dogs are having so much fun, the colours are brighter and by the end of the day they are extremely bright.

Shayla: Hey isn't that the girl that was on the other page with the boy and the man? It is like they are linked. Okay I think she is the lady that was sitting on the bench when he sat down. I think this other lady is yelling at her dog. (still thinks there are two different ladies)

By the end of the book, all of the students understood that each of the characters was recounting a trip to the park that took place on the same day, at the same time but from the character’s particular perspective. The image that probably sparked the most discussion was the street scene. All of the students agreed that it was brighter and more colourful on the way home because the change in the character’s mood but what was interesting is that Antonio noticed that the two families were going home from the park to two different neighbourhoods. We only see a glimpse of Charles’ home from the outside on the first page of first voice and we see inside his home on the first page of third voice. As for Smudge we only see the street scene so we don’t know if she lives in a house or an apartment. As for the interior we only see an image of the father sitting in an overstuffed chair with no background. Given this lack of information both Luna and Antonio used their background knowledge to visualize the characters home situations.

Antonio: These two families do not live in the same neighbourhood that is for sure.

Luna: Smudge and her dad look like people from the inner city. It is a pretty sad looking city. I think she lives on the east side and he lives on the west side. (This reflects the socio-economic situation of Luna’s particular city)

Lastly the discussion arose about the images in the book and whether or not they helped or hindered the reader in their understanding of the story. At the beginning of the study we had a session where we looked at other postmodern picture books and Shayla commented that some of those books all fit together at the end but that Voices in the Park still had things that didn’t fit. Antonio didn’t think the pictures were completely misleading like in some other “weird” books.
He felt that after reading the book and looking carefully at the pictures he was able to figure it out. Several agreed that the pictures generally helped you but some things were put in there to distract you, like the trees shaped like peaches, for example. They agreed that things like that made you stop and try and figure things out, you had to try and put it all together.

**Nonlinearity**

The passage of time in Voices in the Park was a point of confusion for some of the students, however those who were confused were willing to push that confusion aside as they felt it did not really interfere with their overall understanding of the story. All of the students agreed, after discussing the story as a group that the story started in the morning, that everyone went to the same park to walk the dog, and that they all went home later on that day. We see that Charles and his mother leave before Smudge and her dad but the students felt that very little time elapsed between the two families leaving the park.

Antonio: *Maybe time goes on and every time it is retold at the beginning the sky was bright. I'm not sure. The boy is leaving with the mom. Maybe Smudge is leaving later. The sun is already down so maybe they just left a little later.*

One image, in particular, caused some confusion. At the half way point of fourth voice (Smudge’s point of view), the two children and the two dogs are merrily playing on the bandstand. Anything outside of the bandstand appears to be nighttime and everything inside the bandstand is light and sunny and appears to be daylight, except the characters shadows are cast on the floor of the bandstand. This caused most of the students to pause and speculate on the passage of time.

Shayla: *See now it is the happy-go-lucky place (bandstand). It is daytime here but nighttime in the sky. Light-light, dark-dark. I think it could be the next day or even two days because there is only one day setting and one night setting. But then again each time they come in the background is different so...*

She pauses and I reassure her that it is okay to be unsure.
Shayla: *I think it could go either way because there are clues either way. I think the author wanted to make the mood with the background.*

Although many questions about the passage of time did present themselves, the students did not allow this ambiguity to stop them from persevering with the story.

**SECTION 5: Discussion**

The purpose of this paper has been to explore how students respond to postmodern picture books with metafictive devices and then how they engage in meaning-making strategies to comprehend the text. There has been limited research in this area and with the growing popularity of this subgenre of book, I felt it was worthwhile to explore these questions. Like Serafini (2005), I found that although the participants initially found this book "weird" and "confusing" they were intrigued with the interaction between the text and image and they were willing to persevere with the story.

New literacies are changing the way in which we need to prepare our students. It is imperative for students to become competent negotiators of meaning. They need to be able to use strategies that will allow them to understand more than just narrative text. Online reading is often non-linear and requires readers to make decisions about what to read next. Symbolic representation, illustrative technique and design and layout play an important role in both fiction and non-fiction texts that our students will encounter, both on the page and on the screen. Traditional comprehension strategy instruction should be coupled with explicit instruction focusing on the metafictive devices highlighted in this study. As students are made aware of the different features and organization of postmodern texts with metafictive devices, they can begin to transfer this skill to other types of non-linear texts such as, websites and non-fiction texts. Direct instruction of illustrative techniques, layout and design will draw the reader’s attention to the deliberate way in which the author uses these techniques to further the narrative of the story.
and how this in turn makes the reader consider more than just the text as meaning. By introducing the metafictive device of indeterminacy, the reader is forced to co-create the text with the author in order to fill in any gaps in meaning, thus encouraging or moreover demanding the reader to engage in critical thinking. These literary devices require different ways of thinking about how to make meaning. The face of reading is changing with the influx of interactive and digital media, and as educators it becomes increasingly important to teach our students the strategies necessary to access these new and challenging texts.

References


**REFERENCES TO CHILDREN’S LITERATURE**


"WHOSE LINE IS IT ANYWAY?"

Appendix A: An annotated bibliography of postmodern picture books with metafictive devices
Here is an annotated bibliography of postmodern picture books that can be used to support your instruction of this genre.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Book Cover</th>
<th>Book Title and Author</th>
<th>Annotation</th>
<th>Metafictive devices</th>
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<tr>
<td><img src="image" alt="Previously" /></td>
<td>Ahlberg, A. and Ingman, B. (2007) <em>Previously</em>. Cambridge, Massachusetts: Candlewick Press</td>
<td>This book is a follow-up to “The Runaway Dinner,” a parody of the Gingerbread Man where a sausage hops up off a plate and runs away with the knife and fork. Previously reverses direction and this mash-up of fairy tales shows characters living happily ever... before. A very interesting concept illustrating cause and effect. Ingman’s beautiful acrylics use perspective that allows the reader to experience the journey in reverse. He combines simple line drawings with painted full-page spreads. He uses line and motion that makes your want to strap on your seat belt and join the ride.</td>
<td>Intertextuality, Parody, Irony</td>
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<td><img src="image" alt="Voices in the Park" /></td>
<td>Browne, A. (1998). <em>Voices in the Park</em>. New York: DK Publishing.</td>
<td>A trip to the park to walk the dogs is the premise of this story, told in four voices. Each person’s recount of the same event may be seemingly the same but we soon learn that not everyone sees things the same way. Browne uses the backdrop of a London park to tackle issues of class, oppression and hope in this cleverly assembled, engaging book. His illustrations are rife with cultural allusions that create a disruption in the narrative. This disruption allows the reader the time to begin to construct his or her own view of the characters and their trip to the park. The full colour panels draw you in and the use of light and tone create a mood and feeling that enables you to see the view from the park by a different pair of eyes each time. Creative use of different fonts gives “voice” to each of the characters. This book will mean different things to each reader as they create a story in the park.</td>
<td>Non-linearity, Symbolic Representation, Multiple Narratives, Indeterminacy, Typographic Experimentation</td>
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<td><strong>Burningham, J.</strong> (1977) <em>Come Away from the Water, Shirley.</em> New York: Harper Collins.</td>
<td>Shirley and her parents head off for a carefree day at the beach but both parties have a very different view of what that means. Shirley’s preoccupied parents are full of dire warnings about the dangers at the beach, while Shirley’s imagination takes her on a multitude of adventures. Burningham creates a lonely portrait of a child who is left to create her own adventures with danger, pirates and buried treasure because her parents are unable to engage with her. Children will delight is Burningham’s colourful and creative depictions of Shirley’s adventures and hopefully parents will be encouraged to put down the paper and become part of the adventure.</td>
<td>Multiple Narratives</td>
<td>Irony</td>
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<td>Cronin, D. and Bliss, H. (2007) <em>Diary of a Fly.</em> New York: Harper Collins</td>
<td>This cleverly presented book is the latest installment in of the “diary” series collaboration by Cronin and Bliss. Other diaries include that of a worm and a spider. Cronin’s creative dialogue teams nicely with Bliss’ creative and hilarious drawings. This is another example of the blurring of genres so popular today in picture books. The story is silly and whimsical but it is peppered with real facts about flies and their abilities. Bliss has used the zoomed in perspective reminiscent of Van Allsburg in “Two Bad Ants” to give you the right there experience. The end papers with the “taped” in photos and captions round out this very creative book.</td>
<td>Indeterminacy</td>
<td>Typographic Experimentation</td>
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<td><strong>Macaulay, D.</strong> (1990). <em>Black and White.</em> Boston: Houghton Mifflin.</td>
<td>“WARNING—This book appears to contain a number of different stories that do not necessarily occur at the same time. Then again, it may contain only one story. In any event, careful inspection of both words and pictures is recommended.” This Caldecott winning masterpiece tells the story of the interruption of train service and the impact it has on people’s lives. This book allows readers to “see” that things are not always Black and White. It is an illustrative delight that blends a variety of techniques including watercolour, sepia wash, line and coloured ink drawings and combine them with an unusual style and layout to both engage and intrigue readers.</td>
<td>Multiple Narratives</td>
<td>Indeterminacy</td>
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In nine brief seemingly unconnected chapters Macaulay creates a set in motion a series of events that luckily all work out in the end. Albert and his horse June set out on a trip to the market to sell their melons. A few innocent actions turn the worlds of the other characters upside down. This is a wonderful example of a postmodern picture book as it plays with non-linearity, intratextuality and parody brilliantly. A cause and effect tale that like "Black and White" will have you wondering if these events are related or not. Macaulay's playful drawings are colourful, vibrant and hilarious. Children (and adults) of all ages will have a wonderful time putting the pieces together and deciding whether taking a "shortcut" was a good idea or not.


Snowflake Bentley is a brilliant example of genre blending, an engaging narrative about a man, who as a child was fascinated with the beauty of nature, in particular, the snowflake. Snow in Vermont was no anomaly and many dismissed this passion as silly. Bentley showed the world through his beautiful photographs the wonder of the natural world and the intricacy of snowflakes for those who would take a closer look. The story of his pursuit, coupled with facts displayed on the side of each page about snowflakes, photography and the work of the real Snowflake Bentley are highlighted by the beautiful woodcuts by artist, Mary Azarian. Their intricate design and craftsmanship have combined to create a beautiful hybrid of art and science.


A delightful story about friendship. Officer Buckle, with his faithful sidekick Gloria makes a popular team when they give their safety talks. Officer Buckle is disappointed when he learns that maybe it is not his safety advice that is making them so popular. They soon learn that being alone isn't half as much fun as being together. The illustrations in this book are fantastic from cover to cover. The use of the star motif is visible throughout the book, from the front cover, the end papers, the student's
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<th>Title</th>
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<td>The Stinky Cheese Man and other fairly stupid tales</td>
<td>Scieszka, J., and Smith, L. (1992)</td>
<td>The second in a collection of eight collaborative efforts with illustrator, Lane Smith, Jon Scieszka takes a hilarious and irreverent look at our most beloved fairy tales. The story begins with the Little Red Hen and her story of bread but the reader soon realizes that the fairy tale world as they know it will be turned upside down. The thread that ties these tales together is the Stinky Cheese man who believes he is being pursued by the fairy tale characters a la the Gingerbread Man, however the opposite is actually the case. This classic postmodern picture book is a brilliant example of metafiction as the elements of the book tumble off the page. The table of contents itself almost knocks out the poor red hen. The classic characters are given a voice and they use it to express their outrage at the silly and illogical direction that their original stories take. This is one of the best known fairy tale parodies whose original layout and design leave readers begging for more. Lane has captured the essence of the red hen's annoying voice by using a red font throughout. The font appears to grow, shrink and particularly melt at the smell of the stinky cheese man. Jack in the Beanstalk's long and drawn out story drips of the page to highlight its neverendingness. The interplay of text and illustration in this book create a postmodern masterpiece.</td>
<td>Self-Referentiality, Parody, Intertextuality, Typographic Experimentation</td>
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<td>Bad Day at Riverbend</td>
<td>Van Allsburg (1995)</td>
<td>It starts out like any other day in the sleepy western town of Riverbend. Not much happening until the sheriff sees a bright light in the distance. A stagecoach covered in mysterious goo rides into town and suspicion rises. What is this curious phenomenon? A posse investigates and makes a shocking discovery about Riverbend. This book is a departure from VanAllsburg's typical</td>
<td>Self-Referentiality, Parody</td>
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<td>For anyone who has ever owned a cat you will relate to Chester and his temperament. Mélanie Watt makes every attempt to tell the story of a mouse living in a country house, but Chester the cat has another idea. Even with the introduction of a very large dog, Chester perseveres to become the star of this very entertaining book. Watt's creative use of layout, font and narration has created a hilarious story that truly captures the &quot;my way or the highway&quot; nature of the cat. This book was rendered in pencil and watercolour and was digitally assembled into a simple, fun and playful story. The simple line, repetitive structure and page layout makes this a favourite for &quot;kids&quot; of all ages.</td>
<td>Self-Referentiality</td>
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<td>Intertextuality</td>
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<td>Parody</td>
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<td>Multiple Narratives</td>
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<td><strong>Wiesner, D. (1991). Tuesday.</strong> New York: Clarion Books.</td>
<td>Tuesday begins like any other night that is until frogs take flight. In this almost wordless book, Wiesner takes the reader on a flight of that includes looking in on a midnight snacker, watching a little television and going to battle with a territorial dog. This book, reminiscent of 1950s style sci-fi invites the reader to join the adventure and the unlimited possibilities. If frogs can fly, maybe pigs can too. You will have to wait until next Tuesday to find out. The full colour two-page spreads use perspective to make the reader feel he or she has taken flight along side the frogs. Wiesner’s use of light and motion make this book visually stunning and allow the reader to fully engage in the adventure.</td>
<td>Indeterminacy</td>
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<td>Parody</td>
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<td><em>Caldecott Winner (1992)</em></td>
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<td><strong>Wiesner, D. (2001). The Three Pigs.</strong> New York: Scholastic.</td>
<td>Not your regular version of the traditional tale. In Wiesner’s version, things aren’t always as they appear. You are drawn in by “Once upon a time” but things go in a much different direction. Wiesner’s use of framing, white space, sepia and white, childish fonts for the nursery rhymes, speech bubbles and the book as an artifact, coupled with the incredible variety of illustrative styles makes this a version</td>
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<td>Parody</td>
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<td>Metafiction</td>
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<td>Wisniewski, D. (1997). <em>The Secret Knowledge of Grown-Ups.</em> New York: Harper Collins.</td>
<td>This creative collection of &quot;secret&quot; files attempts to shed some light on the conspiracy theory behind parents and their nonsensical rules. Wisniewski is touted as the revealer and illustrator of this collection of secret documents. The cover looks like a secret file and his creative use of cut and crumpled paper create the illusion that these files had best not fall into the wrong hands. The bright colours and over the top illustrations add hilarity to this top-secret discovery. Each page follows the same format of rule, official reason, and of course the truth. The predictable form and creative text would serve as a wonderful springboard for creative writing.</td>
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<td>Yorinks, Arthur. (1986). <em>Hey, Al.</em> Illustrated by Richard Egielski. Toronto, Ontario: Collins Publishers.</td>
<td>Hey, Al is a lovely story about friendship and seeing your cup as half full not half empty. When Eddie and Al long for an easier life they get their wish. They are carried off by a colourful bird to paradise but soon realize that maybe their old life wasn't so bad after all. Richard Egielski's colourfully framed images take the reader to a tropical</td>
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