“It’s like playing, but learning”: Supporting Early Literacy through Responsive Play with Wordless Picturebooks

This qualitative study describes the ways that first-grade children make meaning with wordless picturebooks through play as reader response.

Noah, Cody, and Tuan (pseudonyms) sit beside each other on the rug near the front of the classroom reading Thunderstorm, a wordless picturebook by Arthur Geisert (2013). This story portrays a farm at different stages during a destructive storm.

Cody: Oh! [Points at the illustration of lightning hitting a power line] . . . I know this, it happened to me . . . and the lights . . . so if that gets broken or punched in half [tapping the illustration of the power line], then boom, everything goes pitch dark. What if that happens right now? It does . . . Ahhhhh!!!! [Looks around as if the lights are out, touching the carpet to find his way around]

Tuan: And there’s all kinds of cows, too . . . look out! [Stands up and walks around the other boys as if he cannot see in the dark]

Cody: Yah, then we can’t find power, then we would be, then we would be so scared! We would just cry . . . and cry, and cry . . . and now we don’t know where are the toys . . . and we trip, and fall! And we would never find our mom and dad, or sister. And now we can’t read. And nothing! [Shakes head slowly, clenches his teeth, and holds his fists up under his chin, as if he is afraid]

Tuan: And now I can’t be able to play inside cars! [ Throws his arms in the air]

Cody: Next we do . . . how do we get it? Can we . . . let’s fix it! [Moves his fingers into pincher positions and begins to adjust and fix the power line in the illustration] It’s back on!

Noah: Whew!

As teachers and researchers, we have observed numerous instances similar to the vignette above, where children interweave playful responses with picturebook readings. The boys’ creative responses demonstrate how play, as a cultural production (a developmentally appropriate activity for young children) and as a part of youth culture, can mesh perfectly with emergent and early literacy learning (Christie & Roskos, 2009) in the classroom. Informed by our observations of children’s natural tendencies to incorporate play into their learning and inspired by the potential of meaningful play in the classroom, this study began.

This article explores the culture of childhood through children’s imaginative worlds of story and play. We construct the argument that children’s playful responses to wordless picturebooks, their responsive play (Flint, 2016, 2018), can support literacy development in the classroom. First, we present the theoretical concepts most relevant to our data analyses and discuss how these, informed by recent research findings, intertwine to create a theory of responsive play. These theoretical concepts...
are drawn from and interwoven throughout the article’s narration and the analyses of the children’s play. Then, we introduce the classroom context and research methods that frame this eight-month study. In the conclusion, we suggest that when children draw from personal and intertextual knowledge, including popular culture, responsive play provides opportunities to bring wordless picturebooks to life by infusing them with personal meaning and context, thus informing children’s literacy development (Rosenblatt, 1938, 1978). We further suggest that the ways in which the children utilize the wordless picturebooks to become the characters, retell stories, relate to stories on personal and cultural levels, create intertextual connections, and build upon their knowledge of popular culture, all through responsive play, help them create transformative classroom spaces where literacy learning is supported.

Centering Children’s Wordless Picturebook Play in Reader Response

In this article, informed by research on children’s play, popular culture, and drama, we center play in reader response theory to better understand children’s transactions with and their playful responses to wordless picturebooks. We also focus on the ways that wordless picturebooks facilitate the children’s responsive play and literacy development.

A Culture of Childhood: Children’s Play and Popular Culture

Through their play, children are able to connect to and explore various aspects of their worlds (Bakhtin, 1981; Dyson, 1989, 1993, 2003; Paley, 2004; Wohlwend, 2013b). As children use play to make sense of their worlds, they also engage in wider social culture(s) as they enact various roles and identities. In this sense, play can be viewed as a “critically reflective, cultural activity” (Guss, 2005, p. 234) and as the work of children (Paley, 2004). Children use play to access, navigate, understand, and interpret various aspects of culture within their worlds. Wohlwend (2013b) suggests that when children play and pretend in this capacity, they open up access to familiar contexts of culture and make sense of multifaceted cultural spaces. Correspondingly, recent research reveals that children appropriate social and cultural tools to position themselves as knowledgeable and to create affinity playgroups in classroom contexts, based upon commonalities (Corsaro, 2003; Dyson, 2003; Wohlwend, 2011).

Children also draw on popular culture to simultaneously inform their play and their meaning making. Sipe (2008) suggests that children reflect their experiences with and their knowledge of cultural texts and products—including books, movies, video games, toys, advertisements, TV programs, music, and the work of illustrators and artists—through their playful and performative responses to literature. Research by Wohlwend (2011, 2013a) and Dyson (2003, 2006, 2008) similarly note that children connect to each other, access playgroups, and reconfigure classroom power relations by sharing their knowledge of popular media. These findings further suggest that popular media (including artifacts such as media-related toys) are part of children’s home cultures and of the culture of childhood as a whole; as such, they inform children’s literacy practices within the classroom context (Wohlwend, 2011, 2013a).

Play allows children to utilize their sociocultural resources—including their cultures, literacy and discourse practices, pop-culture knowledge, languages, skills, beliefs, attitudes, and values—to actively learn about their worlds in a social context (Butler & Weatherall, 2006). In the classroom, we draw from these sociocultural resources to help children create meaningful connections and build understanding.

Reader Response: Transacting with Stories

Reading is a two-way, transactional process between readers and texts wherein readers bring their personal knowledge and past experiences to the task in order to construct meaning and understanding (Rosenblatt, 1938, 1978). As they create their own storylines for wordless picturebooks and respond through play together, children draw
on their personal and experiential knowledge, as well as their funds of knowledge—their sociocultural ways of knowing (Gonzalez, Moll, & Amanti, 2005)—to understand, connect with, and make meaning with stories.

Simultaneously conditioning each other, “the reader looks to the text and the text is activated by the reader” (Rosenblatt, 1978, p. 18). Within the reading transaction, there are continuous interactions between meanings, each of which impacts the other (Bakhtin, 1981). Within this framework, readers must draw upon their past experiences with literacy, language, popular culture and media, and life as the “raw materials out of which to shape the new experience symbolized on the page” (Rosenblatt, 1938, p. 25). Meaning, therefore, is fluid, and is newly constructed with each transaction. Similarly, Bakhtin’s (1981) concept of dialogism suggests that everything means or is understood as part of a greater whole and that there is continuous interaction between meanings, all of which have the potential for impacting the other. As children read together and respond to wordless picturebooks through play, their reading becomes a dialogic meaning-making experience (Bakhtin, 1981) in which children draw from various personal and experiential resources to construct understanding.

Furthering Rosenblatt’s transactional theory and framing it within a classroom context, Sipe’s (2008) offers a theory of literary understanding that is relevant to contemporary young children with a wide variety of ethnic, racial, and socioeconomic backgrounds. Sipe’s (2008) reader response framework suggests that as children respond to text in numerous ways, they are engaged in various types of literary meaning making, and through their responses, they demonstrate literary understanding.

**Dramatic Responses**

Recent research indicates that classroom spaces for reader response in the form of dramatic story retellings and reenactments greatly support young children’s literacy learning (Adomat, 2009, 2012; Edmiston, 1993; Martinez, Cheyney, & Teale, 1991; Morrow & Rand, 1991; Vukelich, 1991). Retelling stories through drama enriches children’s learning by expanding the possibilities for how they create and express meaning and understanding (Adomat, 2009). Dramatic response invites children to engage in meaningful discussions and to negotiate diverse perspectives and identities as they interpret stories in various ways. This type of drama opens the door to a space in which children feel safe and free to explore picturebooks as well as their lives in relation to the characters and the stories within them.

**Responsive Play: Connecting Reader Response, Drama, and Play**

Extending the research on children’s dramatic responses to stories, Rowe’s study (1998) found that book-related dramatic play among preschoolers was a “context for literacy learning . . . and a process of comprehending books, expressing one’s reactions, experiencing books in affective and kinesthetic ways, as well as a means of inquiry, and participating in literacy events” (p. 11).

Children’s literacy skills are developed through the interconnected links between the picturebooks, their talk, and their playful responses to stories.

When viewed through a reader response lens and informed by research on dramatic responses and book-related dramatic play, children’s **responsive play**—their play as a form of reader response—is an important part of children’s literacy-learning processes (Evans, 2012; Flint, 2016, 2018; Rowe, 1998). Young children often utilize play in ways similar to how adult readers utilize language and written response (Beach, 1993; Rowe, 1998). Children’s spontaneous play in response to picturebooks is not only a way for them to reflect upon stories in a developmentally appropriate way, it is an integral part of their literacy learning as a whole (Evans, 2012; Rowe, 2007). Correspondingly, children’s literacy skills are developed through the interconnected links between the picturebooks, their talk, and their playful responses to stories (Flint, 2018).
Becoming Storymakers: Playing with Wordless Picturebooks

Wordless picturebooks have grown in popularity and have versatile uses in the classroom (Arizpe, 2013; Crawford & Hade, 2000). Wordless picturebooks, or mainly wordless picturebooks, can be defined as “sequenced picture texts” (Rowe, 1996) or wordless narratives (Beckett, 2012) in which the reader relies on the illustrations to make meaning. The reading of wordless picturebooks is an open-ended process in which children make sense of stories by bringing their background experiences and personal histories to bear on the visual images they encounter within the books (Crawford & Hade, 2000). These books are also “an important type of text in which young children can encounter vicarious social contexts of stories” (Lysaker & Alicea, 2017, p. 44). Wordless picturebooks thus “provide a basis on which storytakers and storymakers can construct meaning and build their own narratives” (Crawford & Hade, 2000, p. 66).

Children’s wordless picturebook reading has been studied on various fronts (Jett-Simpson, 1976; Lysaker & Sedberry, 2015; Mantei & Kervin, 2015; Pantaleo, 2013; Serafini, 2014). Research findings indicate that children often respond actively and playfully, both bodily and verbally, to wordless picturebooks as they construct meaning (Crawford & Hade, 2000; Flint, 2010). As wordless picturebooks often connect visual literacy, cultural literacy, and print literacy, they can support a variety of skills (Jalongo, Dragich, Conrad, & Zhang, 2002) when paired with children’s play.

The Study

Context: Playing in a First-Grade Classroom

In today’s standards-driven era, early childhood educators face tremendous pressure to support the development of all young children’s literacy learning. Strict policy mandates and academic standards have increased the expectations for young children (NAEYC, 2009), which has caused an emphasis to be placed on explicit literacy instruction and has diminished the use of play in the classroom context. While there is much research on the topic of play-literacy connections that support the use of play in the classroom (Bodrova & Leong, 2007; Christie & Roskos, 2009; Corsaro, 2003; Dyson, 2003; Owocki, 1999; Paley, 2004; Wohlwend, 2011, 2013a), play as a form of reader response, and specifically play in response to wordless picturebooks, is not as widely examined (Rowe, 1998). Accordingly, this study focused on young children’s playful responses to literature in a first-grade classroom. The purpose of this study was to develop deep understandings about the ways that children construct meaning as they respond to literature through play.

The school where this research took place sits on the outskirts of a metropolitan area in the Southwestern United States. Given that play is generally not permitted in the classroom and is thus not easily observable, this study implemented a Read and Respond Center wherein children were invited through picturebooks, collaborative talk, and Character Cutouts (described in the Methods section) to respond to literature in playful ways. Employing the Read and Respond Center allowed for the creation of a space in the classroom in which play was encouraged and valued and wherein children’s play in response to stories could be readily observed and analyzed.

In this eight-month study, 30 first-grade children (6- and 7-year-olds) were observed while they utilized the Read and Respond Center and responded to picturebooks through play. This portion of the study focuses on 14 of the 30 children’s responses to wordless picturebooks in particular, as they provide rich examples of play as reader response. Ethnicity, reading level/intervention status, and ELL (English Language Learner) status varied greatly among these students. Of the 7 boys and 7 girls represented in this portion of the study, 7 were White, 4 were Hispanic/Mexican American, 1 was Vietnamese, 1 was Hispanic/Mexican American and Pacific-Islander, and 1 was Hispanic/Mexican American and White. Four of the 14 students participated in school reading interventions, and 1 participated in required ELL classes. All 14 spoke English, 6 spoke Spanish, and 1 spoke Vietnamese (to varying levels/degrees). Because factors such

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as these can reflect the unique knowledge that each child brings to the classroom, these students were chosen as purposive samples for their general diversity in these respects.

Accordingly, diverse literature, which included a range of languages, cultures, topics, and gender roles, was utilized in the Read and Respond Center in order to elicit meaningful and playful responses from the children and to connect to classroom learning (see Table 1).

For the purposes of this article, we focus on the wordless picturebooks the children responded to. These include *Thunderstorm*, by Arthur Geisert (2013), and *Tuesday*, by David Wiesner (1991). In *Thunderstorm*, Geisert uses closely hatched etchings to render the power and destructive potential of a Midwestern thunderstorm. In *Tuesday*, Wiesner uses colorful illustrations to tell the story of frogs that mysteriously begin to fly through a town on their lily pads in the middle of the night. This book received the 1992 Caldecott Medal for illustrations.

These wordless picturebooks contain multifaceted visual details and nuanced illustrations that allow the readers to join in the adventures and concoct their own storylines. Because they are wordless, these books allowed the children to draw on their knowledge, experiences, and sociocultural resources to interpret and extend the illustrations and the storylines in ways that were personally meaningful to them. The way the children constructed meaning together as they read and responded to these stories provided detailed information about how wordless picturebooks lend themselves to story retell and playful responses and the ways that children connect their experiences and their knowledge to books without words.

**Methods**

The Read and Respond Center was implemented purposefully, with vague instructions, so that children did not feel there were “correct” or “incorrect” ways to interact within it. The children were told that there was going to be a new center in which they were able to read books with their friends and use various cutouts to respond however they liked. They were also told that they were allowed to play in the Read and Respond Center, but had to use respectful noise levels, stay on the rug, and relate their play to the book (see Figures 1 and 2).

This study utilized a modified version of Patricia Edmiston (Enciso)’s (1990) Symbolic Representation Interview (SRI) to invite responses from students. This research method asks the readers to create and manipulate paper cutouts that represent story characters as well as themselves (as the reader) while they are reading. This method was implemented with individual readers and was

**Table 1. Books used in the Read and Respond Center**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Author</th>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Publisher</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Munsch, R.</td>
<td><em>The paper bag princess</em> (M. Marchenko, Illus.)</td>
<td>Toronto, ON: Annick Press.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shannon, D.</td>
<td><em>David goes to school</em></td>
<td>New York, NY: Scholastic.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Figure 1. Children in the Read and Respond Center**
utilized as a form of “interview” in order to measure reading engagement. When children utilize this method of response, they do not have to rely solely on their “linguistic abilities to express the complex, simultaneous emotions, thoughts, actions, and questions that might be part of [their] reading experiences and transactions” (Enciso, 1996, p. 180). The SRI allows children to more fully express themselves while reading, and it makes their reading engagement more observable to the teacher and the researchers.

In the modified version of the SRI that we present here, small groups of students were provided a picturebook along with the Reader, Author, Illustrator, and Character Cutouts (see Figures 3, 4, and 5) in order to invite playful reader responses and transactions. Though they are similar to puppets, these cutouts were utilized less as “props” and more as “invitations” for the children to engage in playful responses to stories. While Enciso’s research (1996) and her use of the SRI focused primarily on introspection and gaining insights into what children were thinking as they read, this research focused on utilizing the modified SRI and the cutouts to encourage children’s use of play as a means of response.

Throughout this qualitative exploration of children’s play in response to stories, several
Creating Intertextual Connections

Children’s responses to each other and to stories are continuously and recursively informed by their previous experiences, knowledge, and texts in multimodal capacities (Kress, 2003). As such, intertextual knowledge is important, in that children continuously draw upon their experiences and their knowledge, from a variety of multimodal sources, to inform their understandings of and their responses to stories while they construct meaning through play.

“Superfrog to the Rescue!”: Engaging in Media and Pop-Culture Play

In the following vignette, children read Tuesday by David Wiesner. Together, they draw from their intertextual knowledge about popular culture, specifically TV and movies, to inform their understandings of and their responses to the picturebook.

The children flip through the pages of the book and laugh at the illustrations of the frogs flying around the town. They read through the book fairly quickly and then decide "who to be," referring to the Character Cutouts.

Cody (Holding the frog cutout): Yah, I’m flying around! (Moves the cutout in a flying motion over the page)

The boys continue flipping through pages and using the cutouts to “fly around” in the scenes as illustrated on each page. Noah, who has chosen to become the reader, narrates the story for each page, since the book is wordless.

Cody (Looking at a page that depicts many frogs in the air): They’re invading like aliens! **Men in Black!**
Cody (Looking at a page where the frog has a sheet around his neck like a cape): One frog is like a Superman . . . Superfrog to the rescue!

Cody: Uh oh, more frogs are invading. Ahhhhhhh!

Tuan: They’re invading!

Noah: Aaaahhhhh!

In this vignette, the boys suggest that the frogs seem to be “invading” the town and that they are similar to aliens in this regard. Drawing from his knowledge of movies, Cody shouts, “Men in Black!” referencing the popular movie about aliens on Earth. The boys, prompted by the illustration in the book of a frog in a cape, also reference their media and pop-culture knowledge, this time in regard to superheroes. Because the frog has a cape on, he takes on the persona of “Superfrog,” similar to Superman, in the eyes of the boys. These media and pop-culture references inform the boys’ responses and actions as they read the book, make connections, and respond through imaginary play.

This superhero theme was noted in other reading sessions, as well. Reading the Tuesday book, then becoming a frog in her responsive play and reacting to the frog in the cape, Julieta suggests, “Hey, everybody . . . we have a superhero!” Similarly, Mateo reads a book and suggests, “I’m gonna save the world! I’m Batman!” Young children’s incorporation of superhero narratives in their play and in their writing has been explored in many capacities (Dyson, 1994; Marsh, 2000; Paley, 1984). Findings suggest that this type of play is attractive to children, who utilize it to explore autonomy and agency as they position themselves as important people and/or heroes within the play context (Marsh, 2000).

The children drew from their intertextual knowledge in relation to popular culture and media in a variety of ways in order to try on important roles and identities, such as superheroes, as they constructed meaning and understanding through their responsive play. Making these types of connections and trying on these different identities is important for children in that, as they make “. . . use of popular and traditional cultural symbols (like Superman or Cinderella), children may position themselves within stories that reveal dominant ideological assumptions about categories of individuals and the relations between them” (Dyson, 1996, p. 472). These connections allow children to critically reflect upon stories and, in doing so, to strengthen their literacy development.

“I’m the Gingerbread Man!”: Drawing from Other Stories

In this vignette, Mateo, Paige, and Lucia read Tuesday.

Mateo: Nom, nom, nom, I’m eating pork chops for dinner! (Using the Reader Cutout to pretend to eat all the illustrations). I’m gonna eat these pigs! Nom, nom, nom, nom! (Chasing the cutouts that Paige and Lucia are holding)

Paige: Get away from me! (Speaking as the frog to Mateo’s frogs)

Lucia: Ahhhh! (Holding the dog cutout)

The kids chase each other’s cutouts and try to “eat” each other.

Mateo: You can’t catch me, I’m the Gingerbread Man!

Lucia: (Laughs)

Mateo uses the Reader cutout to “eat” the pigs at the end of the story, referring to them as pork chops—drawing from his experiential knowledge about where pork chops come from. Prompted by the flight of the frogs in the story and the way they chase a dog in one of the illustrations, the children playfully chase each other as they become these characters within the story. During this responsive play, Mateo draws from his knowledge of other stories, in this case, “The Gingerbread Man,” playfully suggesting, “You can’t catch me. I’m the Gingerbread Man!” as the children chase each other with the cutouts. Mateo draws on his intertextual story knowledge to simultaneously inform his interpretations of the Tuesday story and the play that the children are engaged in (Flint, 2018).
Similarly, Lucia and Lily draw on their knowledge of other stories as they transact with Thunderstorm.

**Lucia:** I’m the piggies. Oink, Oink!

**Lily:** I’m the baby foxes! This is, these are the fox family, so I’m gonna be that fox. (Turning pages) Foxy Loxy! Goldilocks and the Three Foxy Loxies!

The girls in this excerpt become the animal characters in the story. When Lily notices that there is a fox in an illustration, she shouts, “Foxy Loxy!” This indicates that Lily is relating the fox in this story to the fox in the story of Chicken Little. Lily then says, “Goldilocks and the Three Foxy Loxies!” Drawing from two different tales and interweaving them with the Thunderstorm book, Lily creates connections that allow her to make interpretations and to construct meaning and understanding through her play as reader response.

**Becoming Characters and Retelling Stories**

As suggested by Rowe’s (1998) study of children’s book-related dramatic play, the “transmediation of meanings from books to the medium of dramatic play and back again was often a transformative experience. . . . reading created new potentials for children’s play” (p. 30). When they engage in responsive play with wordless picturebooks, children are able to reinterpret stories, construct knowledge on a personal level, and gain new perspectives as they become the characters and transform the story ideas from one sign system (illustrations) to another (oral language, play) (Owocki, 1999; Short, Harste, & Burke, 1996).

In the following vignette, Collin, Madison, and Daniella also read Tuesday.

**Collin** (Retelling the story): They went into a house. Now turn the page. (To Daniella) And there was an old lady sleeping, and the turtles were sticking their tongues out, and changing channels. (Sticks his tongue out)

**Madison** (Flying her frogs around the page): Woosh!

**Daniella:** It’s not a turtle.

**Collin:** It’s a toad. I’m by the old lady’s face! (He becomes one of the frogs in the illustration)

**Daniella:** The grandma is sleeping while the frogs eat her up! (Turns page)

**Collin:** And the toad runs right by a dog. Then the dog was running from a bunch of toads that were smiling.

**Madison** (Flying her frogs around the page as if they were being chased by the dog): Ahhhh!

**Daniella:** (Turns page)

**Collin:** And then one morning, they started running, because they were supposed to be hibernating, but in the night time they loved it.

**Daniella:** (Turns page)

**Collin:** And then it was morning, they were jumping so high, they were having fun. Ohhh, they went in the water, look at his legs!

Collin has taken the illustrations (graphic signs) and reorganized, reworked, and recreated—transmediated—the story through other sign systems (language, gesture, play) as he retells the story and cooperatively reinterprets and makes sense of it with Madison and Daniella.

Similarly, in the following vignette, Julieta and Mariana also read Tuesday together and cooperatively retell the story as they play.

**Julieta:** I’m a frog . . . I’m flyinnggggg! There’s a house everyone! (Flying the frog cutout through the air)

**Mariana** props the book open/up on the basket so they can read the book and use the cutouts at the same time.

**Julieta:** My brother’s hanging on the rope! (As a frog) Hey, everybody . . . we have a superhero! (Referring to the frog in the cape)

**Mariana:** Find the Grammy! How ‘bout we change this channel, this isn’t good to watch.

**Julieta:** We have to fly away from the dog, everybody!
Mariana: Wait, we’re not scared of you now, giddypup!

Julieta: (Laughs)

Mariana: Ahhh! We’re off our lily pads! We have to do something before everybody falls!

Julieta: We’re falling into the water! Retreat, retreat!

Mariana: I wanna be that guy. (The detective)

Julieta: We can’t believe it . . . we were flying!

During their play, the girls become the characters, interpret the story, and create their own storyline to the Tuesday book. Through their responsive play, they reenact and retell the story in their own words as the characters and from within the story. Their playful retellings give the girls “more meaning to create and interpret” and a context in which they can reinterpret the characters and the storyline. This creates more opportunities for them to offer “their own ideas and suggestions” (Enciso & Edmiston, 1997, p. 77) as they make sense of the book.

**Through their responsive play, they reenact and retell the story in their own words as the characters and from within the story.**

“Sploooosh!”: Drawing on Personal and Experiential Knowledge

Readers, and children specifically, seem to naturally and universally connect story events or characters to their own lives (Sipe, 2008). When children draw stories to themselves in this capacity, they “develop the ability to make much more important and meaningful connections as they become more astute and sensitive readers” (Sipe, 2008, p. 153).

Reading Thunderstorm, Logan, Daniella, and Diego use their experiential knowledge to inform their responses and to make connections to the story and each other.

Logan: I’m the reader!

Diego: I’m this. (The tornado)

Logan: Once upon a time there was a storm. (Turns the page) There was three piggies’ house. (Pointing to the pigs in the illustration)

Diego (To Daniella): Be the pigs . . . be the pigs!

Logan: There was one pig house with straw.

Diego: Hey look, sheep! (Pointing to the illustration and to Daniella)

Daniella: (Laughs)

Logan: There was three houses, so the first pig house was made out of straw, the second.

Diego: Pigs! (He finds the pig cutout and moves it over the page as he becomes the pigs) Oink!

Logan: The second one was made out of . . . out of wood. And this one (pointing to the house in the illustration) is made out of bricks.

Daniella: I’m sheep. (Holding the sheep cutouts)

Logan: It’s raining.

Daniella: It’s a rainstorm! There was lots of rain.

Diego: It’s me . . . it’s me, I’m a tornado! (Referring to the tornado on the page)

Logan: It was a big storm. (As the reader)

Diego: Woah!!! That’s water! (Pointing to the illustration of the storm)

 Daniella: One, one world, um, this, this world, it had water floods . . . it was big water, in the ocean.

Logan: Yah.

Daniella: Yah, that happened. (Nodding her head)

Logan: That happened when I was in California. I saw a humongous flood! (Spreading his arms to show the large size of the flood)

Daniella: It was big, it was big. (Nodding her head) It was the ocean . . . it was the ocean and the whole world was flooded.
Diego: Floods? (Tilts his head to the side and looks at Logan)

Logan: It covered my tent . . . it covered my tent. (Moving hands to gesture a high level of water)

Diego: It was just all water, huh? Sploooosh! (Waves his hand over the illustration as a wave of water)

Logan and Daniella (Nodding): Yah.

As Logan becomes the narrator and retells the story, he draws on his experiential knowledge in relation to home and school picturebook-reading experiences. He also uses traditional picturebook language and begins the retelling with “once upon a time,” taking on a narrator and/or storyteller Discourse (Gee, 2012)—a way “of behaving, interacting, valuing, thinking, believing, speaking, and often reading and writing, that are accepted as instantiations of particular identities” (p. 3).

Drawing on his experiences with books, Logan demonstrates his enculturation into the world of the picturebook-reading event as he appropriates traditional picturebook language, specifically in relation to fairy tales, which often begin with “once upon a time” (Heath, 1983). He draws on his knowledge of picturebook structure and read-aloud performances to inform his responsive play, guided by the book and informed by his role as the reader/narrator of the story. Logan then pretends that the story he is telling is similar to (or is) the story of “The Three Little Pigs.” He draws from this well-known (to him) text to imaginatively reinterpret the story and illustrations. He references and points to illustrations in Thunderstorm as he describes and retells portions of “The Three Little Pigs,” connecting and intertwining the two stories in playfully responsive ways. Diego plays along and is excited to find the pig and tornado Character Cutouts so that he can join in on Logan’s playful story reinterpretations and become these story characters. It is clear that the children in this vignette drew from their experiential reservoirs (Rosenblatt, 1938) in relation to traditional picturebook reading and traditional tales in order to make connections to the book and draw it to themselves so as to reinterpret the story and construct meaning.

In the next section of this vignette, the children become different characters as they transact with the story and the illustrations. As they play in response to the picturebook, Daniella describes her knowledge of a flood that happened in real life. She is referring to a tsunami or hurricane (as she describes the storm as coming from the ocean) that covered, in her estimation, the whole world. Logan relates to Daniella’s shared knowledge as he tells his own story about a flood he personally witnessed in California while on a camping trip. The thunderstorm and tornado in the story brought great destruction to the farm. Daniella’s experiential knowledge is utilized to prompt meaningful discussion and to inform the group’s meaning making in relation to these destructive forces, as depicted in the book, while they playfully respond to the story events.

Learning about these types of storms and flooding as Logan and Daniella share their knowledge and experiences with him, Diego asks a clarifying question, “Floods?” Logan helps Diego to understand the meaning of “flood” by demonstrating the water’s level through gesture and suggesting that it covered his tent. To sum up his newfound knowledge, Diego uses responsive play to demonstrate his understanding by washing over the illustration with a mighty “sploooosh!” and an imagined wave. The children in this vignette drew from and shared their own knowledge and experiences, through responsive play and discussion, in order to make sense of the picturebook in relation to their own worlds.

The Power and the Potentiality of Responsive Play

In the classroom context, childhood cultures are demonstrated as a fusion of multiple cultural systems; a hybrid of funds of knowledge (familial, communal, social, linguistic, developmental, and cultural knowledge, etc.) and experiential, personal, and intertextual knowledge, intertwined with the practices associated with school and classroom culture (Moll & Gonzalez, 1994; Souto-Manning, 2013). As children appropriate these cultural tools
and resources and demonstrate them through their play, they are able to both recreate and challenge societal norms (Carrington, 2003; Fiske, 1989). Play is thus simultaneously reproductive and generative, as children are continuously “stretching, reconfiguring, and re-articulating their resources” (Dyson, 2001, p. 11) as a way to participate in and critique their worlds. Through their play, children explore different aspects of childhood and adult cultures as a way to interpret and understand the world(s) they live in.

In the vignette that opens this article, the classroom play that the boys entered into while reading Thunderstorm created a social context that encouraged and supported their understandings and interpretations of the story as they read the book together. Through their play, the boys retold the story by drawing on various personal knowledge sources, connections, and life experiences. In this capacity, the boys’ play motivated their collective interest in reading and understanding the story and in discussing the story events. Conversely, their meaning making and their discussions of story events and illustrations informed and motivated their playful responses. These interactions allowed for the creation of a space within their classroom in which the boys were able to practice and extend their literacy learning.

Through their play, children explore different aspects of childhood and adult cultures as a way to interpret and understand the world(s) they live in.

Throughout this study, responsive play allowed children to create a classroom space in which they could draw from their personal knowledge, their experiences, and popular culture to dialogically make connections with wordless picturebooks in order to learn more about the stories, about themselves, about each other, and about their worlds (Leander & Rowe, 2006; Paley, 2004; Wohlwend, 2013a). The ways in which the children drew from their various knowledge sources afforded them opportunities to bring the wordless picturebooks to life and to imbue them with meaning and context, thus informing their understandings and their literacy learning (Rosenblatt 1938, 1978).

**Implications for Classroom Practice**

Specific implications of this study include the need for teachers of young children to:

- Examine their personal beliefs about incorporating play and youth culture (including pop-culture and media) in the classroom setting and consider their potential benefits and developmental appropriateness
- Use diverse, wordless picturebooks as unique instructional, read-aloud, partner reading, and classroom library choices
- Provide opportunities for young children to pair wordless picturebooks (along with a variety of diverse picturebooks) with responsive play to extend literacy learning
- Provide young children with a Read and Respond Center (or similar Literacy Center) that allows space and time within the classroom context for children to practice and extend their literacy learning in developmentally appropriate ways (through talk, play, drama, creative response, etc.)
- Intentionally observe and analyze children’s playful reading responses in order to learn about students, inspire a responsive curriculum, document progress toward meeting literacy standards, and measure the usefulness of responsive play as a classroom tool
- Use “kid watching” skills (Owocki & Goodman, 2002) and “play watching” skills (Reynolds & Jones, 1997) to observe and analyze responsive play in relation to student learning and development and to construct detailed knowledge about the ways that children integrate play and literacy in the classroom setting

In today’s restrictive educational climate where the culture of childhood, including children’s...
play and the use of popular culture, is not generally valued as a generative source of learning, the findings of this study challenge traditional notions of effective early literacy instruction in the classroom context. These findings also signal the need for classroom teachers to reflect upon their beliefs about drawing from and building upon children’s knowledge of popular culture and media, as well as utilizing play in the classroom, and urges them to consider that play, as a “dominant behavior of childhood” (Gaskins, 2014, p. 34), is essential for children’s learning and development, and as such, should be encouraged in the classroom context. Findings further suggest that teachers value children’s play as a valid form of reader response and that they consider implementing, observing, and analyzing responsive play in their classrooms. Finally, these findings advocate for the pairing of wordless picturebooks and responsive play, as they are complementary and support literacy learning (Jalongo, Dragich, Conrad, & Zhang, 2002).

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Children’s Literature Cited


Tori K. Flint and Marietta S. Adams | “IT’S LIKE PLAYING, BUT LEARNING”

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“It’s like playing, but learning”: Supporting Early Literacy through Responsive Play with Wordless Picturebooks

Wordless picturebooks offer unlimited opportunity in the classroom! Here are some lesson plans from ReadWriteThink.org using this text genre:

Applying Question-Answer Relationships to Pictures
- A picture is worth a thousand words as students are guided in viewing wordless picturebooks and responding to four different types of questions about the images they see.

Creative Writing through Wordless Picture Books
- Students are exposed to wordless picturebooks and begin developing storylines, both orally and in writing, using an online, interactive story map.

An Activity with David Wiesner’s June 29, 1999
- Students explore the delightful illustrations in Wiesner’s book and identify elements that make the emotions in the story obvious to someone reading the book.
  http://bit.ly/1Njs9OK

Cultivating New Voices among Scholars of Color Program, 2018–2020

The NCTE Research Foundation’s Cultivating New Voices among Scholars of Color (CNV) program is designed to provide two years of support, mentoring, and networking opportunities for early career scholars of color. The program aims to work with doctoral candidates and early career postsecondary faculty of color to cultivate the ability to draw from their own cultural and linguistic perspectives as they conceptualize, plan, conduct, write, and disseminate findings from their research. The program provides socialization into the research community and interaction with established scholars whose own work can be enriched by their engagement with new ideas and perspectives. The 2018–2020 CNV program participants are listed below:

- Sara P. Alvarez, Queens College (CUNY), NY
- Lucía Cárdenas Curiel, Michigan State University, East Lansing
- Wintre Foxworth Johnson, University of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia
- Justin Grinage, University of Minnesota, Minneapolis
- Davena Jackson, Michigan State University, East Lansing
- Lydia Canaan Kiramba, University of Nebraska, Lincoln
- Saba Khan Vlach, University of Texas at Austin
- Kira Lee Keenan, University of Texas at Austin
- María Leija, University of Texas Rio Grande Valley
- Teaira Catherine Lee McMurtry, Milwaukee Public Schools, WI
- Joaquin Muñoz, Augsburg University, Minneapolis, MN
- Arturo Nevárez, University of California, Riverside
- Tiffany Nyachae, Buffalo State University (SUNY), NY
- Ah-Young Song, Teachers College, Columbia University, NY

Call for Nominations

The Outstanding Elementary Educator in the English Language Arts Award recognizes a distinguished national or international educator who has made major contributions to the field of language arts in elementary education. Nomination information can be found on the NCTE website at http://www2.ncte.org/awards/outstanding-educator-elementary/. Nominations must be submitted by November 1, 2018. The award will be presented at the Elementary Get-Together during the 2019 NCTE Annual Convention in Baltimore, Maryland.

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