"I talk them through it": Teacher Mediation of Picturebooks with Sparse Verbal Text during Whole-Class Readalouds

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Abstract

Picturebook readalouds have been promoted as a rich resource for strengthening literacy development in young children and discussions of picturebooks have become a common – if threatened – practice in the primary grades. One subset of the diverse body of children’s literature teachers can draw from is picturebooks with sparse verbal text. Such picturebooks may place additional demands on both teacher and student during whole class readalouds, who in their responses must attend even more closely to the print that is there as well as to the illustrations and other visual features of the books. The present study explores the particular “affordances” (Gibson, 1950) of such texts and how one teacher maximizes these potentials as she orchestrates three readaloud experiences in an urban kindergarten classroom.

Picturebook readalouds have been promoted as a rich resource for strengthening literacy development in young children (Hoffman, Roser, & Battle, 1993) and have become a common practice in the primary grades (Morrow & Brittain, 2003). Teachers looking to engage with their classes in picturebook readalouds now have a diverse and extensive body of works from which to draw. Although picturebooks do not generally contain lengthy stories, some are notable for the minimalism of their written texts (Temple, Martinez, & Yokota, 2006). In Yo! Yes? (Raschka, 1993), for example, the story contains a total of 34 words, whereas such classics as Where the Wild Things Are (Sendak, 1963) and Make Way for Ducklings (McCloskey, 1941) contain 338 and 1,151 words respectively. Books like Yo! Yes? constitute a picturebook subgenre: picture storybooks with sparse verbal text. These books are relatively rare in children’s literature: of the 73 Caldecott Medal and Caldecott Honor recipients from 1990 through 2006, only 3 books contain sparse verbal text [Tuesday (Wiesner, 1991), Yo! Yes? (Raschka, 1993), and No, David! (Shannon, 1998)]. Such picturebooks may place additional demands on the teacher and students during readalouds, who in their responses must attend even more closely to the print that is there while focusing on the illustrations and other visual features of the books.
Making sense of picturebooks with sparse verbal text is not simply a matter of decoding print: readers must draw on a range of strategies to negotiate the multiple sign systems in these complex visual aesthetic objects. This paper reports on a study that examined one kindergarten teacher’s mediation of three such books during whole-class readalouds, considering the ways in which she maximized the books’ “affordances” (Gibson, 1950) while supporting the collaborative development of narrative meaning.

Theoretical Frame

Reader response theories (Beach, 1993; Rosenblatt, 1978) suggest that individual readers transacting with a literary text will produce a variety of responses. During storybook readalouds, these different interpretations and perspectives may be shared and discussed by students and teachers, who together form an “interpretive community” (Fish, 1980). Over time, participants in the interpretive community co-construct understandings of what represents valid literary response, a process influenced by the types of responses that the teacher shares, scaffolds, and validates in interaction with students (Ballenger, 1999). Research has also shown that the nature of response varies depending on the genre of the text being shared (Shine & Roser, 1999), pointing to the importance of text characteristics in shaping the talk of teachers and students. Picturebooks read aloud are “performed texts” with multiple cue systems, including the author’s written text, the illustrator’s visual text, and the teacher/performer’s oral text, which comprises reading as well as mediation through additional talk (Golden & Gerber, 1990). Thus, the teacher plays a critical role in constructing the texts to which the community responds and in drawing attention to the potentials of each text. While some empirical research has considered the ways in which teachers assist in children’s construction of meaning from picturebooks (Roser & Martinez, 1985; McGee, Courtney, & Lomax, 1994; Sipe, 2003), this research has not dealt specifically with picturebooks with sparse verbal text and their particular challenges.

Teacher mediation helps children negotiate the multiple sign systems at play in picturebooks, an art form in which words and pictures combine in a synergistic relationship (Sipe, 1998). Words and pictures are differently suited to providing information: Nodelman (1988) notes that pictures present a holistic view, drawing on viewers’ knowledge of conventions of representation, while words are better able to communicate the emotional or narrative significance of visible gestures, causal and other grammatical
relationships, and the relative importance of different visual elements. In cases where the verbal text is sparse or entirely absent, then, it may be more difficult for the reader to ascertain what is important in the illustrations (and the story), how the elements are related, and what is implied about characters’ inner states and the trajectory of the narrative. Doonan (1993) suggests that the verbal text compels the reader to continue reading in a linear way, whereas the illustrations tempt the reader to stop and linger. This tension may also pose a challenge for readers of books with sparse verbal text, because the forward impulse from the print may be reduced, making for a more disjointed experience of reading that could compromise the development of a unified narrative. Research on children’s interpretations of wordless books suggests that children enjoy navigating exclusively pictorial books and utilize sense-making processes similar to those they apply to books with print (Crawford & Hade, 2000). However, other studies indicate that teachers may consider wordless books to be difficult and may avoid them because of inhibitions they feel about compensating for the absence of verbal text (Lindauer, 1988; Whalen, 1994). Wordless books have generally been studied in the context of eliciting individual children’s production of stories rather than in whole-class readalouds (Avery, 1996; Reese, 1996), but the existing research does point to the challenges wordless picturebooks present and to the potentially increased importance of teacher mediation when little or no written text is present. This study builds on the existing research by considering how one teacher mediates readalouds of picturebooks with sparse verbal text in a whole-class setting. Given that the nature of the text influences classroom literary discussions (Shine & Roser, 1999), looking closely at mediation of this picturebook subgenre can reveal possible approaches for accessing these texts’ potentials and developing students’ literary understanding (Sipe, 2000).

Method

The data for this study were collected as part of a larger, yearlong study of children’s responses to picturebooks (Sipe, 2003; Sipe & Daley, 2005). The research site was a kindergarten classroom located in a high-poverty public school (over 75% of students were eligible for free or reduced lunch) in a major city located in the eastern United States. During the school year, class enrollment varied between twenty and twenty-five students, all of whom were African American. The classroom teacher, Mrs. Martin (a pseudonym), was a European American with ten years of teaching experience in the school district. Multiple interactive readalouds (Barrentine, 1996)
were a central aspect of her daily classroom practice, and conversations around picturebooks spilled over into other literacy experiences, such as journal writing and independent reading. Her readaloud approach has been characterized as a “storytelling style” with much divergence from the written text and inclusion of student experiences (Sipe, 2003).

From the corpus of thirty-one complete transcripts (created by the teacher from audiotaped readalouds), we identified three readalouds in which picturebooks with sparse verbal text were used: *Yo! Yes?* (Raschka, 1993), *No, David!* (Shannon, 1998) and *David Goes to School* (Shannon, 1999). Considering that only 4% of the 1990-2006 Caldecott books were picturebooks with sparse verbal text, it is notable that this teacher selected such books 10% of the time, thus giving them a more prominent place in her classroom than their representation within award-winning children’s literature would suggest. Data for this study consisted of the three transcripts, accompanying fieldnotes, and an interview with the classroom teacher.

The three picture storybooks used in this study all have a minimal number of words (34, 60, and 74 respectively), with the print aesthetically integrated into the illustrations. These storybooks differ qualitatively from concept books with low word counts, such as alphabet books, in that they present narratives. In all picture storybooks the words and pictures work together to convey the narrative and leave gaps for the reader to fill, but in picture storybooks with such concise verbal text there are more extensive gaps that the teacher and children must negotiate in order to articulate a coherent story. If, as Nodelman (1988) suggests, the illustrations and words in a picture storybook are differently suited to providing particular kinds of information, then when the verbal text is limited the active reader must compensate for its brevity by drawing on all the semiotic resources that are available. Teacher mediation, then, is particularly critical in maximizing the affordances of these semiotic resources, helping students recognize and utilize what is present in the storybook.

For the three texts that are the focus of our study, the little print that does appear is speech: in the case of *Yo! Yes?* (Raschka, 1993), the words are a dialogue between two children attempting to initiate play, while in the David books the words are reactive utterances from an adult figure in response to David’s naughty behavior. This is not always the case in picturebooks with sparse verbal text: for example, *Rosie’s Walk* (Hutchins, 1968) is omnisciently narrated. Though the texts in this study all contain the same kind of print, they do vary in the organization and temporal structure of the narrative. *David Goes to School*, for instance, presents a succession of David moments from the same school day, while *No, David!* is an episodic
collection of mischievous scenarios, some restricted to a single opening, and others fleshed out across page turns. Thematically, all three texts provide likely connections to children’s lives: initiating friendships, interacting with other children and adults, and following (or not following) imposed rules. Given the affordances and limitations of these particular picture storybooks, we sought to examine more deeply the strategies one teacher used to mediate understanding of the narratives.

Analysis proceeded on three levels: First, each picturebook was examined alongside the transcript to determine which book features were being referenced. For the peritext (all the components of the picturebook other than the words of the story and their accompanying illustrations) and each opening (a double-page spread that presents the story and illustrations) of the picturebook, we delineated what was communicated by the verbal text and what was communicated by the illustration(s). This analysis revealed the affordances the text presented, suggesting areas where teacher mediation might be more salient in order to help students fill potential gaps in their understanding of the narrative. Second, for each transcript, we looked within each conversational turn (Sinclair & Coulthard, 1975) by the teacher and assigned each utterance [whether a sentence or a fragment] a conceptual label (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). These conceptual labels were used to form conceptual categories of teacher mediation by the constant comparative method (Glaser & Strauss, 1978; Lincoln & Guba, 1985) of modifying, combining, and dividing the conceptual labels iteratively and recursively during analysis (Bogdan & Biklen, 1992). Third, in order to determine the sequence of teacher talk, stretches (Beach & Philippot, 1999) of conversational turns corresponding to each opening were analyzed (also by the constant comparative method) for (1) discourse patterns; and (2) timing of the reading of the verbal text. The resulting conceptual categories were triangulated with teacher interview data in order to formulate more robust categories that capture how the teacher responded to and guided discussion of both text features and emergent student interpretations. The teacher interview provided an insider perspective on the contributions of these books to her practice, and on the relationship between her mediation of picturebooks with sparse verbal text and the other types of readalouds she led.

Findings

Analysis of the data provided details about how Mrs. Martin’s underlying philosophy regarding the purpose and nature of classroom
readalouds manifested itself in tangible practices. In this section of the paper, we use the teacher’s stance on picturebook readalouds to frame readaloud experiences in this classroom, focusing then on five sets of mediation approaches that seemed explicitly tailored to the characteristics of picture storybooks with sparse verbal text. The general readaloud stance, which Mrs. Martin brought to every readaloud in her classroom (Sipe, 2003; Sipe & Daley, 2005), should be distinguished from her careful deployment of five mediation approaches in order to exploit the affordances of each of the three picturebooks with sparse verbal text. Here, we see in action the ways that mediation is shaped by particular textual features. Table 1 presents the number of teacher utterances in each conceptual category for each of the three readalouds, as well as the percentage of total teacher utterances represented by each category.

Throughout the three book discussions and in our interview with her, Mrs. Martin expressed her conception of readalouds as collaborative discovery, where student input is essential to engaging with and making meaning from the text. She noted that the interactive readaloud “gives [students] an opportunity to speak, lets them know that you honor what they say, and that what they say is important.” This stance included explicit teacher talk regarding the value of student ideas, such as her encouragement that “you can’t be wrong” when urging students to predict from the cover, or when she highlighted the tentative nature of her own interpretations. For instance, when unpacking the cover of Yo! Yes? and the possible relationship between the two boys, Mrs. Martin urged, “Take a guess. I don’t know what he wants. What do you think?” Such a statement equates student interpretations with those of the teacher, creating a classroom environment where student talk is at the center of the collaborative construction of narrative meaning.

The teacher’s readaloud stance was also revealed in readaloud routines and general elicitations for co-construction, such as open invitations to respond, requests for clarification or expansion, and meta-talk about features of picturebooks and their importance for literary interpretation. Throughout the transcripts, the teacher’s commitment to valuing student language was evidenced by her frequent echoing of student contributions, even when these seemed obscure or implausible, and in her intentional use of children’s wording within more elaborated utterances. These moves emphasized her vision of the readaloud as a context for honoring children’s voices and building joint understanding, rather than as a vehicle for the transference of teacher interpretations. Teacher utterances related to the general readaloud stance, including statements of philosophy, procedural
moves, and the uptake of child language, constituted 25.3 percent of total teacher utterances across the three readalouds.

Within this context of the readaloud as a collaborative discovery, we noted five types of mediation approaches that pertained to the unique affordances of picture storybooks with sparse verbal text:

1. Developing Visual Analysis Strategies

In mediating understanding of the narrative in these three texts, the teacher explicitly scaffolded the development of visual analysis strategies during 12.4 percent of her utterances. During an interview, she noted that pointing out certain details or probing for particularities in illustrations increases student interest in the pictures as a means for developing interpretations, prompting students to “look longer.” These picturebooks, like all picturebooks, are aesthetic objects meriting close attention to visual features. However, picturebooks with sparse verbal text foreground the key role of illustrations in communicating information: the brevity of the text means that we need to look longer to make narrative meaning, and these books present opportunities to do just that. The primacy of visual analysis in these readalouds is underscored by the teacher often waiting to read the verbal text until the illustrations had been unpacked through class discussion (5 of 16 openings in *No, David!*; 11 of 16 openings in *David Goes to School*).

   a) Labeling and describing illustration elements. Due to the gaps in the verbal text, a greater degree of naming is left up to readers, who need to determine who the characters in the text are and what it is these characters are doing. Noting details in the illustrations becomes a visual strategy for identifying narrative elements. For instance, the seventh opening of *David Goes to School* shows David gazing out of the classroom window with his back to readers, while the clouds in the sky take on different shapes. Mrs. Martin commented, “He’s looking up at the clouds and...that kind of looks like a dinosaur and this one kind of looks like a...” to which students immediately replied, “That’s a turtle!” In this sequence, she guided students toward several illustration details that get at the meaning of what is occurring in the picture, thus contextualizing the admonishment that David pay attention. This strategy was more prevalent in the *David* books because the settings and scenarios change from opening to opening, while in *Yo! Yes?* the situation remains consistent.

   b) Attending to body positioning and facial expressions. The teacher pointed to characters’ body positions and facial expressions as a means of uncovering their emotional state and reactions to the happenings of the
story, information that is not conveyed by the verbal text. When discussing the title page of *David Goes to School*, which shows the body of the teacher from her shoulders down, Mrs. Martin asked, "You can't see her face, but how does she look?" Here, she alluded to the fact that were the teacher's facial expression available it would be a rich source of information to readers; at the same time, she directed attention to available physical cues that do suggest the character's emotional state. Furthermore, imitating these postures supported children's recognition of character emotions. As she noted in the interview, "they can get their whole body into it. It's all encompassing, it's all consuming, and they can really enter the book more." This embodied understanding begins with the illustrations.

c) Tracking differences across illustrations. During discussion of the second opening of *David Goes to School*, a student noted an electrical plug in the corner of the page, an illustration element she had first seen on the cover. Mrs. Martin responded, "There's that plug, she was looking for that plug! She saw it on the front cover, and we couldn't figure out what it was connected to. Let's watch that plug and see what...maybe we can figure out what's plugged into it." The teacher expanded on the strategy of tracking illustration details by suggesting that comparing these elements across openings can serve as a means of constructing narrative understanding. Interestingly, in this particular example the student's observation was not central to interpreting the story; however, rather than refute or marginalize the contribution, Mrs. Martin used it as an opportunity to teach a viable strategy for determining whether aspects of illustrations are significant for making sense of the story. Recurrence may indicate significance, and in the absence of verbal cues this visual strategy takes on added importance.

d) Using illustrations to test interpretations. The teacher helped students move from noticing and following illustration details to using these elements to test narrative interpretations. She related illustration elements to the verbal text, modeling the use of illustrations as evidence for or against ideas, and questioned students as a means of gathering proof for interpretive hypotheses. For instance, in the fourth opening of *Yo! Yes?*, a child posited that the little boy was hurt, to which Mrs. Martin replied, "OK, he looks like he's holding his arm." She supplied a visual detail as evidence in support of the student's interpretation.

2. Mining Available Print

The teacher mined each picturebook's brief verbal text, encouraging children to reflect on features such as punctuation or vocabulary as means of interpreting the meaning of the words. These elements of the print become
tools for drawing together the text as a whole, as well as the materials for student attempts to read. 14.6 percent of teacher utterances focused on exploring the potentials of thesparse verbal text.

a) Unpacking print conventions. In No, David!, the teacher commented on the punctuation in the title to initiate a discussion about intonation. She noted, “Exclamation point! So they are not saying [in a monotone] ‘No, David;’ they are saying, what?” The students responded to her invitation, and through their oral rendering of the text discovered the speaker’s anger with David, a theme that frames the entire story. This kind of mediation was especially prominent in Yo! Yes?, representing 14.3% of teacher turns in that discussion, because the variations in punctuation helped reveal the changes in tone within the conversation at the center of the narrative. Consistently attending to punctuation is key to discerning the subtle shifts in the boys’ speech as their relationship develops, accounting for Mrs. Martin’s repeated attention to this feature.

b) Exploring vocabulary. The sparse verbal text necessitates that each word be understood to the fullest. The second opening of David Goes to School, for example, shows David’s face as he opens the classroom door and peeks in. The illustrations alone do not provide a definitive representation of David’s behavior, and it is the word “tardy” that contextualizes the visible action and narrows its possible interpretations. In the classroom discussion, the teacher guided students in unpacking the vocabulary through connections to their own classroom experiences, and concluded by restating the definition that “tardy means late. Tardy is another way of saying late.”

c) Attending to embedded and peritextual print. Mrs. Martin treated every trace of print – within illustrations, in the front and back covers, in autographs – as a possible means of acquiring narrative information. During discussion of the second opening of No, David!, which depicts David precariously perched as he reaches for something on a high shelf, Mrs. Martin pointed to the label on the jar as a clue to the action in the story (turn 2) that resulted in the mother’s vague reactive speech. At the end of this excerpt she reiterated that this narrative detail could be ascertained through the print in the illustration (turn 7):

1. Lakia: He’s getting something.
2. Teacher: What do you think he’s getting up there? It says something on the jar, what do you think it says? He’s trying to get something, what do you think he’s trying to get?
3. Maurice: Jelly.
4. Lakia: Mayonnaise.
5. Teacher: Mayonnaise? What do you think he’s climbing up there to get, Lakia? What would you try to climb up and get at your house? That you might want really bad? … Okay, Deshawn?
6. Deshawn: Cookies!
7. Teacher: And it says ‘Cookies.’

This approach was unavailable to Mrs. Martin during the reading of Yo! Yes? because this text does not contain embedded print.

d) Contextualizing print. The teacher did not merely read the text, but contextualized the words of the story with her own additions that clarified the surrounding narrative. The print in all three picturebooks is speech, yet there is an absence of quotation marks or narration to indicate this explicitly. The teacher bridged such gaps by expanding on the verbal text, usually in ways that seamlessly intermingled her own words with those of the picturebook. In Yo! Yes?, she often delineated the words spoken by each character, noting, for example, “Now he’s saying ‘Hey!’ and the other little boy is saying ‘Who?’” The alternation of speakers throughout this text contrasts with the consistent speaker in the David books. Mrs. Martin’s more frequent use of this strategy with Yo! Yes? helped clarify the dialogic nature of this story.

e) Inviting children to read. The small amount of print on each page fostered a focus on individual words, and the teacher opened spaces for students to attempt to read the verbal text. A typical instance occurred on the ninth opening of David Goes to School, in which David is depicted in the midst of an animated dispute with a classmate. Mrs. Martin asked Jamal, “What does it say?” The students were often able to read all or part of the story text, and Mrs. Martin both welcomed and celebrated their contributions to the reading.

3. Probing for Underlying Relationships

In addition to helping students understand the “what” of the picturebook, the teacher guided student inquiry regarding the “why” of the story, probing for underlying relationships in order that the group might collaboratively build a richer narrative than the brief verbal text would suggest. Nodelman (1988) notes that words influence the interpretation of illustrations by “specifying cause-and-effect and other grammatical relationships between parts of pictures and series of pictures” (p. 215). During 18.1 percent of her talk, the teacher worked to draw out these
relationships, which are not made explicit by the sparse verbal text. The proportion of these types of talk varied across the three books on account of differences in their structure: the episodic plots of the David books make it more challenging to figure out how specific scenarios came to be and what they mean for David’s relationship with the adult in each story. The continuity of the story in Yo! Yes?, and the fact that it depicts the process of establishing an interpersonal relationship, locates the ambiguity in the intentions of the boys’ utterances rather than in the causal sequence.

a) Character relationships. The teacher sought to develop children’s understanding of the connections between characters, the roles that they play, and the conflict that can result. In the discussion of No, David!, she elaborated on the role of a mother and the relationship between mother and child (turn 1). One student’s understanding of the conflict that can result surfaced through an analogy drawn from popular culture (turn 4):

1. Teacher: Even when you get in trouble your mommy still loves you. It’s just a mommy’s job, she’s got to watch out for you and keep you safe. Kevin, what did you want to say?
2. Kevin: I liked the part when he was laughing and he laughed just like the Joker!
3. Teacher: The Joker! Okay. On Batman. He did have kind of a demonic grin, didn’t he?
4. Kevin: The Joker thinks it’s funny but Batman thinks it’s not funny!

The mother-child and teacher-student relationships featured in the David books, depicted through a series of conflicts that often arise between adult and child, provided fertile ground for the exploration of the relationships that string these episodes together. Through the teacher’s mediation, the students developed a sense of these relationships as beginning before the story and continuing beyond its end.

b) Intention. Much interpretive work during the readalouds focused on determining the intentions behind characters’ actions and speech. The reasons for David’s misbehavior, for example, were probed with such questions as, “Why do you think he acts up at school?” and “Why is it hard for David to do the right thing?,” opening discussion of whether David was inherently bad or merely seeking attention. By probing the intentions behind character talk, the teacher could get at the sophisticated idea that speech is not transparent or literal but rather a tool used by speakers to accomplish
social goals. As the class discussed the fifth opening of \textit{Yo! Yes?}, the teacher asked, "What do you think he means by saying, ‘What’s up?’" When the children suggested that the character is “trying to say hi” to the other boy, she expanded their suggestion and reconnected it to its meaning in initiating a conversation: “When somebody says ‘What’s up?’ that means ‘What’s going on, what’s up, hi.’”

c) \textit{Causation}. Causal relationships operating within and across pictures may not be readily apparent in picture storybooks with sparse text. This is especially true of episodic plots, for when much time elapses between openings, causal connections may be weak or entirely absent. After establishing what was happening in a given illustration, the teacher often probed for student inferences about why it was happening, and thereby encouraged the narration of events that may have preceded those depicted. In the fourth opening of \textit{No, David!}, for instance, the teacher followed up a student description with a question probing causation:

Terrell: Water coming down all over.
Teacher: And why do you think the water is coming down?

This “why” question led to extended discussion of how the scenario came to be. In \textit{Yo! Yes?} the continuity of the conversation made the causal sequence clear, and thus there was no need for teacher mediation of this type.

4. \textit{Connecting the Story to Readers’ Experiences}

In all three readalouds, the teacher’s talk built bridges between the storybooks and her students’ lives, with this type of talk making up 15 percent of her utterances. Together, she and the students identified analogues for story characters and events in their own experiences. In \textit{Yo! Yes?}, Mrs. Martin elicited individual connections from students about parallel situations in their lives: "Did you ever have a time when you were looking for somebody to play with and you couldn’t find anybody? And did you make a new friend? How did you do it? Did you ask them to play? What did you do?” This line of questioning served to elicit connections in the form of retellings narrating the friend-making process, a structure that parallels the story itself.

In \textit{David Goes to School}, communal connections frequently emerged linking David’s hijinks in school to the kindergarten class’ routines and shared history. When David tries to skip the line in the cafeteria (eighth opening), the teacher asked the students what they would say at their school (turn 1):
1. Teacher: “Wait your turn, David!” Or you would say, if someone got in front of you...
2. Khalil: No busting!
3. Teacher: No busting! Right. So he busted!

The story event is “translated” into the terminology shared by the kindergarten class. The teacher also draws on communal knowledge of what particular students have done: Joey is cited for gum chewing (fourth opening, “You had a whole pocketful the other day!”), and Maurice for staying outside once recess has ended (tenth opening, “I always have to come looking for you ‘cause you’re not in line!”), and the children endorse these equivalencies. This type of mediation was especially prevalent in the discussion of this story due to the parallels between the events in *David Goes to School* and the shared classroom context in which the readaloud took place.

Notable in the readalouds is the near-absence of intertextual connections made by either the teacher or the students, given that intertextual talk has been found to be common in readalouds mediated by this teacher (Sipe, 2003) and by other teachers (Sipe, 2000). We attribute this absence to the uniqueness of these books as well as to the immediacy generated by speech-based texts. The children have heard many of the same rebukes as David, and heard or said many of the same phrases as the *Yo! Yes?* boys, so both the content and format of the books may foster more connections to life than connections to other texts.

5. Building a Cohesive Whole

While the teacher lingered over individual openings to explore the ideas and gaps each one presents (Doonan, 1993), she also worked to integrate the openings and thereby create a sense of the story as a coherent whole. Her mediation helped the children identify recurrent patterns, connect and synthesize different openings, and track the status of co-constructed understandings. This type of mediation represented 14.6 percent of total teacher utterances.

a) Establishing story structure. All three books display a pattern at the level of the opening: in *Yo! Yes?* the boy on the left speaks, then the one on the right; in the *David* books, David does something mischievous, and either his mother or his teacher reacts verbally. The teacher structured her talk in a complementary way, using the book pattern to guide interpretation. On the first opening of *No, David!* she established the pattern (“What’s David doing that she’s saying no about?”), and then took it up on subsequent pages
(third opening, "What do you think she’s saying no to now?"). Identifying and attending to a recurring structure helps the children to see how the storybook works – how the structure of parts (openings) creates a structure for the whole (the book).

b) Connecting and talking across pages toward synthesis. Although pictures in sequence imply a general temporal order (Nodelman, 1988), more elaborated understandings of how openings are related in space and time require integration of visual and verbal information across openings. The episodic plots of the David books contain significant gaps that the teacher endeavored to mediate by talking across pages. In discussing David’s bathtub shenanigans (No, David!, fourth opening), the children speculated that the overflowing water could begin to flood down the steps and endanger the mother. The teacher replied, “Yes, right, and look at the beautiful beige carpet she has and now it might be all wet and muddy!” This comment reinforced the spatial relationship she had been building with the children (the bathroom is on a floor above the living room, which appeared on the previous page) as well as the sequence of events (now the carpet might be wet in addition to being muddy). Similarly, in David Goes to School, the teacher guided students in connecting the different snapshots of David’s day, as when she said, “Now this is after lunch, they went outside,” providing an explanation for the change of setting and referencing the passage of time. Temporal and spatial cues are absent from the written text, and the teacher responded to these gaps by inviting and supplying talk that elaborated such linkages. In Yo! Yes?, this type of mediation helped the students to synthesize the collection of utterances into a description of the plot sequence and to consider the theme of the story. Through questioning and references to particular points in the book, Mrs. Martin encouraged the students to summarize and retell the story, which required that they come up with their own descriptive language to capture the essence of the boys’ conversation. It took a number of teacher turns (11.4% of the total) to help students move from responses to individual openings or words to a more general description of the sum of those parts.

c) Restating co-constructed understandings. As the class progressed through the book, the teacher periodically summarized the ideas and understandings the group had developed together. These “status reports” served to synthesize lengthy discussions as well as to provide a common point of departure for the next part of the story. On the second opening of No, David!, after prolonged speculation about what David was doing and why his mother would disapprove (28 total conversational turns), the teacher provided this recap:
Of course, he might fall! Maybe that’s why she’s saying ‘No, David!’ She’s got those cookies up really high because she doesn’t want him to get them, but he’s up there climbing trying to get them. And not only is he not supposed to have the cookies but he could fall, he could fall.

Her restatement drew together several threads from the preceding conversation (why this is a bad idea, what the mother intended, what David wants) and provided a transitional frame for the turn to the next page by highlighting the conflict that is the centerpiece of the book.

Conclusions and Implications for Teaching and Further Research

This study suggests that teacher mediation of picture storybooks with sparse verbal text can take a variety of forms and perform a variety of functions. The teacher supported the development of visual analysis strategies, attended to all available print, delved into implicit relationships, facilitated links to students’ lives, and wove together coherent overall narratives, all based on the many contributions she elicited from her students. Although such texts may provoke anxiety for some teachers who are uncertain about how to proceed in the absence of an elaborated verbal text, Mrs. Martin’s approaches to mediation suggest multiple possible entry points. The applicability of her mediation approaches will differ according to the affordances of each individual storybook with sparse verbal text – as we saw across the three readalouds, the use of particular strategies varied and followed from the features present in each picturebook. Aware of the possible gaps in the texts, Mrs. Martin guided students in focusing on the semiotic resources that were available in order to make narrative meaning and build literary understanding. These picturebooks could be given merely a cursory presentation; however, this teacher did not privilege words over illustrations, and instead saw these books as worthy of deep and lengthy exploration. She treated picture storybooks with sparse written text as a rich source for personal connections, visual/verbal interpretations, and grappling with complex themes.

This study refines and extends previous work on classification schemes for teacher talk during readalouds (Roser & Martinez, 1985; McGee, Courtney & Lomax, 1994; Sipe, 2003) by focusing on a particular text type with much potential for scaffolding the development of students’ literary understanding. Picture storybooks with sparse verbal text present unique affordances for classroom literature discussions. Quite the opposite
of watered down or simplified picturebooks, they are in fact a distillation— a concise presentation of all the essential features of literature. This teacher’s mediation encouraged attention to words, pictures, themes, and the evolving construction of a story, providing a model for the close study of literature that will continue to be relevant for students in later grades. It is precisely the brevity of the verbal text and the associated challenges to the reader that open a space for close looking and deep discussion. By requiring much of the reader— determining relationships, inferring emotional states, and pulling together episodic plots— picturebooks with sparse verbal text support the development of an active literary response stance which readers can apply to all varieties of texts. Though a number of the conceptual categories seem applicable to readalouds of texts with different lengths and from different genres, the present study is significant in detailing how Mrs. Martin helped young children make meaning of these three picture storybooks as complex visual aesthetic objects, attending to the particularities of each text and thus providing a model of the deep and sensitive exploration of the available semiotic resources.

Further research could compare the use of mediation strategies with picturebooks with varying amounts of verbal text. Such research could (1) refine and extend our understanding of these five general mediation approaches, (2) determine the variability of mediation strategies relative to verbal text length, and (3) identify additional mediation strategies or combinations of strategies used by other teachers. The present study did not consider how the students took up response strategies across the three readalouds or how these strategies transferred to other texts read aloud. Analysis of readaloud data sets that represent a longer time span and a greater variety of texts would allow researchers to trace the emergence and application of interpretive strategies by students.

Much current emphasis in classrooms is placed on providing children with texts they are able to decode. Picturebooks with sparse verbal text present opportunities for children to experience reading the words on the page, but can also build foundational understandings about literature through discussions mediated by the teacher. Given all of the pressures that surround classroom teaching “in these times” (Lytle, 2006), with readalouds increasingly rushed and superficial (Copenhaver, 2001), picturebooks with sparse verbal text provide teachers with ideal material for working within and against the constraints of an ever-diminishing emphasis on the exploration of trade books. Picturebooks with sparse verbal text, while exposing children to high-frequency words and print conventions, contain the range of semiotic resources present in traditional picturebooks and pose
particular challenges to readers as they work to make sense of the books. These distillations of the picturebook form provide unique opportunities for the development of children’s visual and verbal analytic abilities. Until now, literacy researchers have not focused on teachers’ mediation of this subgenre in whole-class readalouds. Our study contributes to understanding how these texts, judiciously scaffolded by a teacher, can be rich sites for collaborative wondering and interpretation.
References


Table 1. *Number and Percentage of Teacher Utterances by Conceptual Category Across Three Readalouds*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Conceptual Categories</th>
<th>Yo! Yes?</th>
<th></th>
<th>No, David!</th>
<th></th>
<th>David Goes to School</th>
<th></th>
<th>Totals</th>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>n</td>
<td>%</td>
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<td>%</td>
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<td>%</td>
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<td>116</td>
<td>31.6</td>
<td>66</td>
<td>16.6</td>
<td>262</td>
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<td>6.8</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>5.5</td>
<td>52</td>
<td>5</td>
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<td>1b. Attending to body positioning and facial expressions</td>
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<td>5.9</td>
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<td>4.6</td>
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<td>3.5</td>
<td>47</td>
<td>4.5</td>
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<td>1c. Tracking differences across illustrations</td>
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<td>0</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>1.3</td>
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