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Examining the interpretations children share from their reading of an almost wordless picture book during independent reading time

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Keywords

almost, independent, reading, their, share, children, interpretations, examining, during, book, picture, wordless, time

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ABSTRACT

*This paper shares findings from part of a larger project exploring students' interpretations of children's literature during independent reading time. Examined in this paper are interpretations by students in Grade 4 (aged 9–10 years) about the messages conveyed in the almost wordless picture book *Mirror* by author and artist Jeannie Baker. *Mirror* shares a multicultural perspective on life through its portrayal through collage of the lives of two families living in different countries. Data were collected as semi-structured interviews and observations recorded as field notes. Chambers' (1994) 'Tell Me' framework informed the question schedule of the semi-structured interviews, which were designed to promote opportunities for students to share their interpretations following independent reading time. Emerging themes from data analysis are considered through critical literacy lens (Janks, 2010). Further, implications for the use of almost wordless picture books in classroom reading experiences are identified in connection with the development of children's cultural awareness and sensitivity (Short, 2003).*

Introduction

Reading is complex and multifaceted both within and outside school and as 'literacy' has broadened from being print centric to multimodal, the teaching of reading has focused on meaning making through multiple modes. This increased complexity also demands the taking of a critical reading stance as a reader attempts to understand the beliefs, values and positions offered within these diverse texts (Janks, 2012). Taking a critical stance is about reading 'against a text' and 'learning to have your say' (West, 1994, p. 93). A reader with a critical stance questions norms and rule systems, and exercises their power to take action that enhances lives (Comber, 2013; Luke, 2012). Short and colleagues (2003; 2004; 2011) argue that it is this ability to critique and to realise the existence of other perspectives that supports the development of true sensitivity and insight into others' experiences

across cultures and within cultural groups.

Pedagogically, teachers are expected to create and deliver systematic and explicit reading experiences for students. Their aim is to arm students with a range of skills that work alongside text decoding such as visual, media and critical literacy for successful engagement in this environment. Whole class and small group learning experiences are designed with the intention (and perhaps assumption) that learners will apply these skills to their independent engagement with texts. But do they? How do children interpret and respond to the texts they access independently of teachers? How can we learn about their interpretations and responses?

Our study investigates children's interpretations of a common form of children's literature – a picture book – during a common daily classroom practice – independent reading. The students were not part of an instructional teaching episode, instead they were

invited to share their interpretations following independent reading time. Capturing students' interpretations provides insight into their personal reading experience (Galda, 2013). Furthermore, it can develop teacher understanding about how critical and visual literacy skills taught during teacher directed episodes have (or have not) transferred into students' independent reading.

Independent reading time

Independent reading time is an enduring and common practice in Australian primary schools where students read texts considered to be within the scope of their reading capability. Students are usually free to choose reading material and children's literature of many forms will feature, for example, novels, picture books, magazines and factual texts. Alongside enjoyment, its purpose is to provide time for students to put into practice the skills taught during teacher directed lessons. As independent readers, Allington (2002) recommends Grade 4 students access a broad range of texts for a minimum of 20 minutes independent reading time daily.

Research about independent reading has focused on student engagement (e.g. Garan & DeVogd, 2008) and home/school literacy connections (Krashen, 2004). Other applications include students' reading development in: fluency (e.g. Allington, 1983; Garan & DeVogd, 2008), vocabulary (e.g. Krashen, 2004; Kelley & Clausen-Grace, 2006), letter knowledge and phonemic awareness (e.g. de Jonga & Shareb, 2007), and comprehension related to standardised testing (e.g. Freeland et al., 2000; Kelley & Clausen-Grace, 2006). This study takes a focus on children's interpretations of a children's literature text during independent reading time.

Children's literature

Keifer (2008) observes that children's literature (picture books with narrative) is primarily intended to engage an aesthetic response. The protagonist is usually a child or representative of one, the plot is usually resolved satisfactorily and the content is generally something of interest to a child, such as friends or family. While engagement is obviously central to winning readers' attention, it is through overt and implied ideologies (Hollindale, 1988; Sarland, 1999) that the reader is positioned to envisage the world, their role in it and the roles of others. Short (2009) argues that social, ethical and cultural ideologies within children's literature communicate how one might 'be' in the world. Vasquez, Tate and Harste (2013) concur, observing that ideologies endow the reader with particular identities – child

or adult, boy or girl, citizen and so on. Further, children's literature communicates certain responsibilities and obligations, for example, good manners or meeting personal challenges, potentially influencing a child's developing identity (Chaudri & Teale, 2013; Flanagan, 2013; Haynes & Murriss, 2012). For child readers, then, important considerations emerge for having time to interpret the messages on offer (Arizpe, Farrell & McAdam, 2013); skills to examine the interests served and omitted in the perspectives shared; and the ability to identify alternative perspectives (Janks, 2010). That is, the opportunity to take a critical stance. This is significant considering the types of children's literature that children access at school.

Children's literature for learning

Children's literature at school is acknowledged as a vehicle to personal discovery, an 'inquiry into life' (Short, 2011, p. 50), 'a resource that aids in the exploration of self, others and knowledge of the world' (Arizpe et al., 2013, p. 241). In considering children's literature as a cultural exploration, we take Rosenblatt's (1982) position that reading is 'a transaction, a two-way process involving a reader and a text at a particular time under particular circumstances' (p. 268). To this transaction, the reader brings a unique body of knowledge, values and experiences (Rosenblatt, 1986) within which they make meaning. For young readers, these transactions are limited by a 'smaller personal history' (Hoffman, 2010, p. 242) that has grown within the body of values, beliefs and positions of the significant adults in their lives such as parents and teachers. It is necessary, then, for children to spend time establishing their own understandings and for teachers to access these interpretations so that relevant literacy experiences can be developed.

This study utilises a well known form of children's literature, the picture book, specifically, the almost wordless picture book. Arizpe (2013, p. 165) defines almost wordless picture books as those that 'minimise the role of print in the narrative'. Here, images convey the message or story, positioning the reader as coauthor (Pantaleo, 2005). As coauthors, readers must take risks with meaning making through their imagination, social and cultural knowledge and the ability to make inferences (Arizpe, 2013; Pantaleo, 2005).

In reading an almost wordless picture book, the interplay between the limited print and images affords and promotes multiple interpretations of meaning (O'Neil, 2011; Pantaleo, 2013; Serafini, 2014) as readers build critical understanding about the cultural and social ideologies conveyed (Janks, 2014). This unique combination points to the need for explicit

instruction to develop children's understanding of the way the visual design, for example, vector, gaze, and proximity, conveys particular messages (Callow, 2013; Jalongo, Dragich, Conrad & Zhang, 2002). But Arizpe (2013) and Serafini (2014) also argue that in order to cope with such complexity, children must have opportunities for extended interactions with an almost wordless picture book before being expected to share their understandings. In this study, participants spent extended independent time with Jeannie Baker's almost wordless picture book *Mirror* (2010).

Mirror, a complex and sophisticated almost wordless picture book

Mirror (2010) recounts through collage the routines of a day in the life of two families, one in Australia and one in Morocco. Its unique design invites readers to view the stories simultaneously. The left side, introduced in English, recounts the Australian story. These characters live in an urbanised inner city suburb in the coastal metropolis of Sydney. The right side, introduced in Arabic follows the Moroccan story. Its characters, dressed in traditional djellaba, are set in remote rural inland Morocco. The male child characters carry the storylines as they accompany their father over a single day.

Mirror is two almost wordless picture books contained in one covering and joined at the spine. The 'stories' comprise two initial sets of single image pages followed by two sets of eight double page collages containing multiple images. The recount is conveyed through a series of intricate collages where some take a narrow and others a wide angle on the events of each family's day. Print text embedded in some collages form part of the scene, for example, QANTAS on an aeroplane in the Australian scene and NIKE on a Moroccan child's Tshirt.

The peritextual content comprises two sets of three single print based pages. The first page explains, 'The Western and Moroccan stories in this book are designed to be read side by side.' In other words, when the left hand opens the first page of the Australian story, the right hand opens the first page of the Moroccan story, and so on. The print text is limited almost exclusively to this section. The story is introduced,

There are two boys and two families in this book. One family lives in a city in Australia and one lives in Morocco, North Africa. The lives of the two boys and their families look very different from each other and they are different. But some things connect them ... just as some things are the same for all families no matter where they live.

An afterword explains the motivation for the creation of *Mirror* and perhaps something of its purpose,

... outward appearances may be very different but the inner person of a 'stranger' may not be a stranger at all ... Inwardly we are so alike, it could be each other we see when we look in a mirror.

Overt and implied ideologies of *Mirror* centre on multiculturalism and notions of 'sameness despite difference'. Its unique format constructed from dual perspectives invites multiple responses. Its subject matter, cross-cultural understanding, is identified in curriculum policy as something of significance for young people (ACARA, 2012). Jeannie Baker is a well-established, prize-winning Australian children's author and artist whose books are used extensively in Australian schools. An almost wordless picture book like *Mirror* would commonly form part of the material available during Australian primary school experiences such as independent reading time. As such, critical literacy theory provides a useful lens through which to consider the ideologies of *Mirror* in connection with the children's interpretations.

Critical literacy as a theoretical lens for the present study

A critical literacy lens affords a focus on children's literature in terms of a text and its power (Janks, 2010; Luke, 2012) because it encompasses the broader 'historical, socio-political and cultural contexts' (Arizpe et al., 2013, p. 243) within which a text sits. *Mirror* and the children's interpretations are considered across the four interrelated dimensions of Janks' (2010) interdependent framework for critical literacy education: *power*, *access*, *diversity* and *design*. Briefly, *power*, refers to the way a text conveys particular views or promotes particular choices. The dimension of *access* focuses attention on the types of texts one is able to engage with, both physically and cognitively. This is particularly relevant where students have backgrounds different from existing school cultures. *Diversity* refers to the ways meaning is represented within text, where the author has drawn on their own social and cultural selves to create a message. Often powerful texts are exclusive not only because of the groups they represent (or don't) but also in the modes through which the meaning is expressed (Janks, 2010). The final dimension, *design/redesign*, promotes opportunities for readers to understand the way a text is constructed (the design), for example, using visual literacy to examine how colour conveys mood. Within this dimension, *redesign* offers opportunities for the creation of new texts that promote views from less powerful groups or less popular perspectives (Janks, 2010; Comber, 2013).

The purpose of the present study

In the larger project, interpretations of and responses to children's literature texts were sought from Grade 4 students and their teachers across three schools. Teachers reflected on their own interpretations and expectations about their students in connection with the students' actual responses following independent reading. The children shared their interpretations and responses through interviews and creatively through a range of media (Mantei & Kervin, 2014) as they considered their understandings. There was no intention to engage in reading instruction in this project, but to understand the reading approaches and personal interpretations of independent Grade 4 readers and their teachers.

The findings reported in this paper focus on the students' interpretations shared during group interviews following independent reading time. These questions framed the focus in this paper:

- How do students interpret the stories in the almost wordless picture book *Mirror* during independent reading time?
- What implications are there for the ways students access sophisticated children's picture books in their classrooms?

Conducting this study were two researchers who are experienced classroom teachers and classroom based researchers, and a research assistant. Protocols remained consistent across data collection: one researcher conducted all interviews, one made field notes and the research assistant captured video and audio recordings.

The study occurred in three schools in a multicultural region south of Sydney, Australia following ethics approval from the systemic school body and the university Human Research Ethics Committee. The principals of Schools 1 and 3 invited the researchers to their schools and recommended the study to the principal of School 2, who subsequently extended her invitation. Teachers in each school indicated interest to their principals and subsequently the study was conducted with students from Grade 4 (aged 9–10 years). The NSW BOSTES (2012) recommends *Mirror* for students from Grade 1 in primary to Grade 10 in secondary school. Located midway between these points, Grade 4 is considered an appropriate cohort.

The teachers invited participation from students in their class who they believed would be interested in reading *Mirror* and engaging with the researchers. Students and parents were made aware during the initial information session, on printed information sheets and consent forms that *Mirror* would be the

focus text. Understanding what they would read and with whom they would share their interpretations was key in offering the students a choice about reading material for independent reading in line with regular classroom procedures. Ultimately, it was the students who made the decision to participate in the study. The researchers worked with each group of students in their schools in an area identified by and in line of sight of their teacher.

Participants and their schools

School 1: located in an inner urban suburb of low-mid socio-economic status. This suburb has experienced ongoing change through a growing refugee population resulting in cultural diversity in the school population previously unseen. Six students (two boys, four girls) from the same class elected to be part of the study. Their teacher reported they were well known to each other. All participants had come to Australia in the previous four years, five from Burma and one from the Democratic Republic of the Congo.

School 2: located in an urban suburb of low socio-economic multicultural status. Here, extended family groups are common and grandparents are active in childcare while both parents work. Consequently, many students are bilingual and have travelled overseas with grandparents to the countries of their non-Australian heritage. Six students (four boys, two girls) from the same class elected to participate. These students came from Australian Indigenous, Lebanese, Macedonian and Serbian backgrounds.

School 3: located in an urban suburb of mid-high socio-economic status. Here, many parents hold professional qualifications and may travel some distance to the city for work. The suburb has a predominantly native English speaking population. Four students (two boys, two girls) from the same class elected to participate. Their teacher identified them as 'good thinkers' and all came from native English speaking backgrounds.

In total, a small sample size of 16 students participated in this study focused on a single almost wordless picture book. As such, readers should not consider the results to be generalisable. Instead, the findings are positioned as an opportunity for educators to reflect on their own settings, their students' reading practices and the texts with which they engage during independent reading time.

Research design

The research team and each school group met twice over 10 days (e.g., on two consecutive Mondays). Each meeting had two parts:

- Independent reading: Students read *Mirror* individually and in pairs, independently of the research team.
- Group interview: Students identify points of interest and initial interpretations of the stories. Then the students and researcher ‘walk through’ the text beginning to end to further explore their interpretations. This includes reading together the Arabic and English printed text at the beginning and end of the picture book.

Each child retained a copy of *Mirror* throughout the study so they could revisit it at home and school. The picture books were then donated to the libraries of each school.

Chambers’ (1994) ‘Tell me’ framework informed the interview structure for all meetings as it is well respected and acknowledged as a tool that creates space for children to share their interpretations about their reading and the broader world. At meeting one, examples of ‘Tell me’ prompts included:

- Tell me some things you notice about this book.
- Tell me what you think it could be about.
- Was there anything you liked/didn’t like? Tell me more.
- Was there anything that puzzled you? Surprised? Tell me more.

The second meeting prompts were designed in response to emerging categories from analysis of responses shared at the first meeting. Examples include:

- When we met last time, you talked about lots of the differences you saw. Tell me about any similarities you’ve noticed.
- Tell me about anything these stories remind you about in your life/the broader world.
- Let’s look at the boys’ lives and talk about some things you notice.
- Are you surprised about anything someone else said about the stories?
- What advice would you give a friend about this book?

Data analysis

The researchers individually and then together used constant comparative analysis (Corbin & Strauss, 1990) to identify categories and emerging themes in data gathered in the initial interviews. This early analysis revealed a focus on the differences between the settings, both visually in terms of urban and rural landscapes, and socially in terms of wealth. For example, the adverb ‘just’, as in, ‘on the left [Australian] side there’s GPS navigators and here [on the Moroccan side]

they *just* have donkeys’ (emphasis added) was used 11 times to draw comparisons between the stories.

As such, the second interview schedule was designed to prompt students to share the connections they had made between the stories, to their personal experiences and to their world knowledge. These data were subsequently analysed by the researchers individually and then together, in isolation from the first set, and then across the full data set. The dimensions of power, access, diversity and design (Janks, 2010) were then used to analyse connections between the emerging themes and ideologies identified in *Mirror*.

Findings from interviewing students about their interpretations of Mirror

The predominant theme emerging from data analysis was that *Mirror* is a story about difference. Specifically, the students considered that ‘they’ (Moroccan people) were quite different from ‘us’ (Australian people). Within this theme, a wealth/poverty binary sat alongside a sense of sympathy for and superiority over the Moroccan people. A secondary theme also emerged where students identified literal similarities between the stories. These themes are now discussed in connection with the data.

The perception of difference

Evident in the students’ interpretations was a perception that the stories in *Mirror* should be read side-by-side and further, that they should be compared. Early interpretations identified *Mirror* as a story about difference. For example, one student explained, ‘Well, it’s about the differences, like how North Africa is and Australia is, and the differences between them’ (School 2, Meeting 1). Another appeared to consider the difference so great he had no access to the Moroccan text. He ‘read’ the Arabic script, ‘Blah, blah, blah, blah ...’ stating, ‘... yeah, can’t read it sorry’ (School 3, Meeting 1).

Summations in the second meeting revealed this sense of difference was sustained despite repeated engagement. For example, ‘it’s about two families’ (School 1, Meeting 2); ‘tells the difference between two families’ (School 3, Meeting 2) and it is about ‘... the way people live and how they’re different’ (School 3, Meeting 2). One student stated,

I’d tell my friends that it’s very lovely and very nice pictures ... But the best thing is that you see how two very different people live (School 2, Meeting 2).

The observation in the afterword, that people and settings ‘look very different from each other and they are different’ appears quite evident to these students.

A poverty/wealth binary

The sense of this difference as a binary of wealth and poverty became evident in the students' interpretations. For example,

- Well, one is rich and one is poor (School 1, Meeting 1)
- That side [Moroccan story] is poor and that side [Australian] has a road and houses (School 1, Meeting 1)
- We've [Australians] got everything and they've [Moroccans] got nothing (School 3, Meeting 2)

When prompted for justification, to 'tell me more', the students appeared to privilege urban development and acquisition of goods. For example,

- These ones are sitting on a chair [Australians] and these ones are just sitting on the floor (School 1, Meeting 2)
- They [Moroccans] don't have what we have. We have cars and planes and they just have to walk (School 3, Meeting 1)

One student stated what she apparently felt was obvious, 'Well they *are* poor; they live in Africa! They don't have a lot ...' (School 3, Meeting 2).

The sense of poverty was further expressed in observations about Moroccan life,

- They just look really dirty (School 3, Meeting 2)
- They have no electricity (School 2, Meeting 2)
- They don't have chairs – they're sad (School 1, Meeting 1)

The students' focus on material possessions appears to promote a view of wealth that positions the characters and setting of one story over the other. Further, they appear to have included themselves as wealthy members of the wealth/poverty binary.

A sense of sympathy and superiority

Persisting throughout the interactions was a sense that Morocco is a poor place where the people 'don't have what we have' (School 2, Meeting 1). One student lamented, 'there's too much poor people in Morocco' (School 2, Meeting 2) and subsequent responses saw students express their sympathy as wishes for the Moroccan people, for example,

- ... that they could have more houses and things to do like school, which the Morocco family doesn't have (School 3, Meeting 2)
- ... that the Moroccans had more cars so they could drive (School 2, Meeting 2)

Alongside this, however, emerged a sense of

superiority of 'us' (Australian people) over 'them' (Moroccan people). For example, one student consistently labeled the Moroccan characters 'the poor people' (School 1, Meeting 1&2), and another identified them as 'the peasants' (School 2, Meeting 1&2). One student expressed his belief about Australia's superiority related to urbanisation,

... we're much more civilised, [reading a Sydney billboard advertising a tropical holiday destination] 'Wouldn't you rather be here?' We have a lot more things like planes ... and Yellow Express [a courier business]... and towers (School 3, Meeting 1)

Another consistently identified the Australian family as 'the wealthies' (School 3, Meeting 1&2). This student also expressed a sense of responsibility for Moroccan people because of their poverty. He explained,

It's sort of like Christmas in church. You have to put something under the tree and it gets transported to the poor ... so the wealthies have donated to them [the Moroccan family] and now they've got like tea and tables and the telephone and computers and everything (School 3, Meeting 2)

With the exception of the computer at the Moroccan market, there is no evidence of these items in the Moroccan story. While such comments came predominantly from one student in School 3, they were neither challenged nor refuted by the others. Rather, the students were observed in video footage and through field notes to laugh periodically, nod in apparent agreement and continue reading.

Literal similarities

'Tell Me' prompts for the second meeting were designed to gather students' independent interpretations about perceived similarities. In this meeting, a focus was taken on the male children, the main character in each story as the students reread what was now a familiar text. While they were indeed able to locate similarities between the stories, they remained literal. Responses included,

- Ummm the boy's doing fun stuff here and that boy's doing fun stuff there (School 1, Meeting 2)
- They're eating – dinner and dinner (School 1, Meeting 2)
- ... this father is wearing a blue top and this father is wearing a blue top. And the boy is wearing jeans and a red top and this boy is wearing jeans and a red top (School 3, Meeting 2)
- ... and both the babies are wearing yellow clothes (School 1, Meeting 2)

Comparisons of visual similarities imply only literal interpretations that 'some things are the same for all

families'. At no time did students make more fundamental comparisons, for example, identifying the families as cohesive groups creating safe environments.

Discussion

These are surprising findings. The research team was surprised that the students identified with white Australian nuclear family scenes as representations of their personal cultures, that is, 'us'. In fact, none of these students lived in urbanised, affluent suburbs and some lived in extended family groupings more familiar to the Moroccan story. The team was also surprised that a cultural practice such as sitting on the floor was construed as poverty, especially when many of the interviews were conducted with the researchers and children sitting on the floor! And it was surprising that the perception of Africa as poor and needy continues to endure alongside one of Australians as wealthy, civilised and thus superior.

To be clear, our concern is not that 16 Grade 4 students across three schools in one multicultural region appear to have formed what Short and Thomas (2011) describe as 'superficial understandings about people around the world' (p. 149), including those in their own country. Rather, it is the possibility that as teachers we may miss opportunities to unearth these limited perceptions and to design experiences that promote a critical stance by broadening cultural awareness in teachers and students alike (Short & Kauffman, 2004).

In responding to our first research question, we use Janks' (2010) interdependent framework for critical literacy education to explore connections between the students' interpretations and the ideologies in *Mirror*. In response to the second, we consider opportunities for teachers to develop students' propensity for taking a critical stance beyond teacher directed episodes.

Considering students' interpretations through the dimensions of power and design

When reading independently, these students appeared to read *Mirror* as a comparison of two groups. It seems they interpreted the 'mirror' to be the reflections, the literal similarities in the characters, the colour of their clothes and their daily activities. The obvious dissimilarities in geography and culture appear to have perpetuated a sense of great difference for these students as the extreme remoteness of the Moroccan setting juxtaposed with the dense urbanisation representing Australia has obscured a sense of sameness.

Drawing on Janks' (2010) dimensions of power and design to consider *Mirror's* ideologies perhaps sheds some light on the source of these students'

interpretations. *Mirror* is the work of a native English speaking author/artist renowned internationally for the exploration of culture and urban development through collage, and, as such, is a powerful text. In its design, Morocco is presented from a Western perspective, an outsider's view (Flanagan, 2013). Its unique design invites comparison. Physical placement of the stories side by side inside one cover implies a connection, which by the title could be similarity, but, as seen in this study, was construed as difference. The reading instructions in *Mirror* state first in English and then in Arabic that, 'The Western and Moroccan stories ... are designed to be read side by side'. 'Western' maintains the first position in the instructions in both stories and in the introductory text, potentially foregrounding the Western view. An underlying ideology here seems to position the Western story as dominant, powerful.

It seems the readers in this study responded to this Western centric view as they demonstrated a perception of their own (Australian) culture as the 'barometer' (Flanagan, 2013, p. 18) or 'the norm against which to judge other perspectives and cultures' (Short & Thomas, 2011, p. 157). It is interesting to consider how students may have interpreted *Mirror* had it combined images from more physically or culturally similar communities, for example, the Australian outback positioned alongside remote Morocco, or the Moroccan coastal metropolis of Casablanca with its population of 3.181 million adjacent to an inner city Sydney suburb.

Considering students' interpretations through the dimensions of access and diversity

During independent reading, these students appeared to respond to the images as snapshots of Australian and Moroccan life rather than as sequenced events recounting a day in the life of each family. For example, on a page containing collages of a meal, the students observed differences between the food eaten, sitting positions, furniture and even the physical structure of each home rather than considering it as one of a series of events typical of family life.

Janks' (2010) framework, now through the dimensions of access and diversity, affords a focus on *Mirror's* reading demands and the students' responses. In terms of access, the images in *Mirror* must be read linearly since the text is a recount, a sequence of events. This restriction for reading image is less common in children's picture books and requires a particular reading strategy. Furthermore, like the print in the Moroccan story, the images are read right to left, something not apparent to these students, potentially challenging meaning making.

Pictures are often considered easy reading since print decoding is not required; however, Serafini (2014) observes that *Mirror* presents complex challenges in its treatment of abstract social issues. The foreword (print) directly stating *Mirror's* purpose is brief; and while a longer explanation is shared regarding its ideological stance, it sits beyond the story in its end pages. The reader is required to draw the initial print message forward through the text as they engage with the complex images. It is only if the reader moves beyond the end of the story to the end pages, that they can then gather more direct information. The increased use of one mode (visual) over another (print) reduces the diversity of modalities for meaning making (Janks, 2010) and therefore creates its own challenges.

It seems that for the students in this study, the somewhat interrupted interplay between text and image identified by Pantaleo (2013) and O'Neill (2011) as important for meaning making has created challenges in the context of drawing on their own lived experiences and understandings to access *Mirror's* complex messages. The ambiguity created by the prevalence of the visual mode, the demand for linear left to right then right to left movement and the students' focus on individual events over the 'story' appears to have led these readers to narrow, even stereotyped views.

Considerations about the ways students access almost wordless picture books

The students in this study shared their interpretations from extended independent reading of an almost wordless picture book that presents somewhat stereotyped versions of Western and African culture, family structure and gender roles. Not evident in their responses was a sense of reading against the text (West, 1994), of challenging its messages (Janks, 2010) or of insight into the unique cultural identities of themselves and others (Short & Thomas, 2011). Developing a critical stance has long been a focus of reading pedagogy and it is through these lessons that we can consider the implications of the findings of this study.

Consider the place of almost wordless picture books for directed teaching episodes

As an almost wordless picture book, *Mirror* falls outside the categories of texts such as basal readers or novels that are usually recommended for a teacher directed program, especially in the case of older readers. For independent readers such as those in Grade 4, texts like these are generally displayed on a bookshelf for independent access and engagement. However, considering the complexity of almost wordless picture

books, the cultural ideologies they convey and their related reading challenges stemming from the synergy of multiple semiotic modes (e.g. visual and linguistic), it seems appropriate to broaden the types of texts used in teacher directed episodes. The inclusion of almost wordless picture books would allow teachers to develop students' critical reading strategies when linguistic modes are reduced while others, in this case the visual mode, take priority.

Look for opportunities to focus on critique and personal cultural identity

Mirror is recommended to teachers as a resource representing multicultural views to develop cross-cultural understandings (BOSTES, 2012). However, Flanagan (2013) takes a different view, describing *Mirror* as an over-simplified representation of both cultures that undermines its stated ideology of sameness through 'images that affirm racial stereotypes' (p. 18). Flanagan's view perhaps resonates with the students' Western centric interpretations in this study where the making of connections to the fundamental values of people and cultures (Short & Thomas, 2011) and cross-cultural understandings remained unexplored.

The inclusion of an almost wordless picture book such as *Mirror* in teacher directed episodes not only offers opportunity to develop students' multimodal reading skills, it could further support students to develop their own cultural identities (Short, 2003; Short & Thomas, 2011). That is, an understanding that one's personal perspective is just one of many ways – none more or less important than another – to view the world (Short & Kauffman, 2004). Short (2009) argues that an inclusive ideology achieved through personal cultural identity development can lead to improved intercultural understandings and therefore the propensity to take a critical stance that challenges stereotypical views of cultures, lands and people.

Monitor the development of independent and flexible critical reading strategies

Rosenblatt (1986) and Galda's (2013) recommendation that students have time to independently develop and share their understandings about the texts they read was important in this study because it provided insight into the students' somewhat superficial understanding of *Mirror*. Indeed, Short and Kauffman (2004) observes that students' initial interpretations represent for teachers opportunities to identify their existing understandings about themselves and the world and then to plan for the broadening of these through direct teaching episodes.

Concluding comments

Learners are regularly prompted during teacher directed episodes to apply the focus skills, strategies and understandings to independent engagement. This common pedagogical practice allows learners to develop flexibility and independence with decoding words, reading fluency and a range of other reading skills and strategies. The taking of a critical stance is no different. During direct teaching episodes, teachers can teach specifically for the development of the critical stance and also for its flexible application beyond that lesson. By gathering students' interpretations from independent reading, teachers can monitor and respond to students' development as critical readers of almost wordless picture books through pedagogically appropriate learning experiences.

Janks (2012) argues that critical literacy education must focus on the role of text in maintaining or challenging existing practices that promote the views and beliefs of some over others. Almost wordless picture books offer teachers opportunities to develop in their learners a propensity for reading with a critical lens that allows them to consider their own lives and the lives of others within and across cultures and to respond through action to promote greater equity. It is through the development of this independence that learners can operate both within and beyond the school setting to understand, challenge and take action in response to the multiple and multimodal messages by which they are confronted.

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