

A Journey with the Wild Things: A Reader Response Perspective in Practice

by Frank Serafini

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Adopting a reader response perspective in the elementary reading curriculum involves a change in the way students and teachers talk about books and in the expectations teachers have about how students respond to their readings.

Rather than focusing on the identification of a single main idea, students in a literature-based model supported by reader response theories are encouraged to construct multiple interpretations of a text and to share their ideas with the other readers in their classroom community. The value associated with these individual responses is not determined by a reference to the answers provided in some commercially produced answer key but rather is negotiated in the discussions surrounding the text that take place in a particular classroom. The legitimacy of these interpretations or meaning constructions involves the readers' ability to produce coherent interpretations, providing evidence of their ideas and extolling the virtues of their interpretations to the community of readers.

Reading instructional practices that are informed by a reader response perspective are designed to enlarge a student's repertoire of responses to a particular text (Hancock, 1993). Helping students assume new perspectives about literature, developing each reader's ability to respond to readings, and creating a community of readers that are willing to share their interpretations with each other in a supportive environment are some of the goals of a reader response-oriented classroom. The experiences provided in accord with reader response theory view the reading and sharing of children's literature as a space for interpretations to be voiced and discussed, possible meanings to be critiqued, and members of an interpretive community to become active participants in the meaning making process (Serafini,

2001). In essence, teachers embracing a reader response perspective are trying to change the ways in which a classroom community of readers talk about children's literature and the roles that children's literature play in the elementary reading curriculum.

In my intermediate multiage (grades four and five) classroom during the 2000-2001 school year, I tried to restructure my read alouds and whole group discussions to explore new ways of engaging with a text and sharing interpretations that would be supported by a change in theoretical perspective. I wanted my instructional practice to align with my expanding theories of reading and constructing meaning in transaction with texts. During this project, I came to understand how identifying and sharing picture books that focus on a central theme, revisiting a cornerstone picture book over an extended period of time, disrupting a text, and creating visual representations of classroom discussions provide alternative perspectives for the reader to expand students' interpretations and understandings.

Identifying and sharing quality picture books around a central theme

At the beginning of the year, my class read and discussed *Where the Wild Things Are* by Maurice Sendak, and my students became quite concerned about whether Max, the central character in the story, actually left the room or whether he dreamed up his

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adventure. I read this book every year. It is one of my personal favorites, and I have been able to use this text to help students realize there is more to a picture book than meets the eye. Each year students are surprised by the complexity of this classic children's book.

As I listened to the students' discussion about the story, I thought of other books that reminded me of *Where the Wild Things Are*, articulating the central theme as "escaping reality." Although I began with Sendak's classic, I wanted to extend the study to include those other books to deepen the students' understanding. I highlighted picture books because they invite readers to transact with visual images as well as written text in order to construct meaning during their reading. The interplay between text and illustrations makes picture books unique and requires readers to attend to different semiotic systems to construct meaning (Sipe, 1998).

The books I selected for use in this classroom project (See Table 1) connect to the escaping reality theme, have multiple layers of meanings, and invite the reader to return again and again to the text to construct new and varied interpretations. The illustrations in these books support the con-

Table 1

Picture Books that Focus on the Central Theme of Escaping Reality

<i>Hey Get Off Our Train</i>	By John Burningham	At bedtime, a young boy takes a trip on his toy train and rescues several endangered animals.
<i>George Shrinks</i>	By William Joyce	Taking care of a cat and a baby brother turns into a series of adventures when George wakes up the size of a mouse.
<i>Salamander Room</i>	By Anne Mazer Illustrated by Steve Johnson	A young boy finds a salamander and imagines the many things he can do to make a perfect home for it.
<i>Edward and the Pirates</i>	By David McPhail	Once Edward has learned to read, books and his vivid imagination provide him with great adventures.
<i>Tar Beach</i>	By Faith Ringgold	A young girl dreams of flying above her Harlem home, claiming all she sees for herself and family.
<i>Moon Tiger</i>	By Phyllis Root Illustrated by Ed Young	After getting in trouble because of her little brother, Jessica Ellen imagines a visit from a giant tiger that can take her flying through the night.
<i>The Field Beyond the Outfield</i>	By Mark Teague	When Ludlow begins to play baseball to help combat his fears, he is placed so far out in the outfield that he becomes involved with an adjacent game in which a most astonishing thing happens.
<i>The Paradise Garden</i>	By Colin Thompson	Tired of his mother's shouting and the noise of the city, Peter runs away to a beautiful garden, where he stays until he finds a way to bring a part of it home with him.
<i>Just a Dream</i>	By Chris Van Allsburg	When he has a dream about a future earth, devastated by pollution, Walter begins to understand the importance of taking care of the environment.
<i>Humphrey's Bear</i>	By Jan Wahl Illustrated by William Joyce	Humphrey has wonderful adventures with his toy bear after they go to bed at night, just as his father did before him.

struction of meaning and offer readers a different perspective from which to consider the story.

Each book contains a sense of ambiguity between text and illustrations and does not present an immediate resolution to the tensions developed in the story. In the picture book *Where the Wild Things Are*, for example, Sendak describes Max's travels as going "through night and day and in and out of weeks and almost over a year." This statement is in conflict

with Max's return and the hot supper waiting for him. As the children tried to resolve this tension, one student suggested that Max's mother probably used a microwave oven to reheat the food so that it was warm when Max returned from his travels.

Edward and the Pirates, by David McPhail, presents the reader with another set of tensions. In this book, Edward has an active imagination that he uses to explore the world of the texts he reads. McPhail allows reality

to blur with imagination as Edward imagines book characters coming to life and his parents entering his story worlds. Like Sendak, McPhail does not draw a definitive line between imagination and reality but lets the reader decide when the two have crossed over. Students in my class were able to make close connections between the two books. They suggested that Edward has an imagination like Max, that they both escaped reality to an imaginary world they had created and

that they returned to the safety of home and family at the end.

Still other books explore the theme in different ways. In Colin Thompson's *The Paradise Garden*, the students were introduced to a more realistic version of escaping reality. In this story, the central character hates both the noise of the city where he lives and the fights between his separated parents, and he escapes to the London Botanical Gardens where he creates a new world far from the troubles of his real life. In *Moon Tiger*, by Phyllis Root, a young girl is scolded by her mother and sent to bed for not reading to her little brother. She escapes her room by riding on the back of her Moon Tiger that takes her away to far away places and eventually brings her back to the comfort of her home. *Humphrey's Bear*, by Jan Wahl, is also very similar to *Where the Wild Things Are*. As Humphrey, the central character, goes to sleep, his teddy bear grows and grows until the bear takes Humphrey away on a sailing adventure. In many of the books used in this unit of study, the central characters are brought back to their home safe from their adventures and are left to ponder what they have learned in the process.

Each book offered my students new examples of children's escaping the reality of their lives and using their imaginations to transport the central characters to new worlds and adventures. The quality of our discussions throughout this project was due in large part to the depth of the texts, the literary connections students made across the books selected, and the ways in which students could relate to the plight of the central characters.

A cornerstone text

Where the Wild Things Are is a quintessential example of a book that focuses on escaping reality. I wanted my students' discussions of this cornerstone text to provide a foundation for understanding the other books in the study. By spending an extensive

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amount of time reading and discussing *Where the Wild Things Are*, I wanted to demonstrate to my students the value of revisiting a text to construct a variety of interpretations.

Not only am I concerned with the quality of the picture books that I choose to share in my classroom, I am also concerned with the ways these books are presented and the amount of time allocated for discussions. As a classroom teacher, I have so many wonderful picture books that I believe are important to share each year. I often feel pressured to read one each day and simply move on to a new book the following day. In my hurry to expose children to a wide variety of children's literature throughout the course of a school year, I may inadvertently demonstrate a "read it once and move on" mentality about interacting with a piece of literature. I believe that this is a mistake. In our rush as educators to cover the reading curriculum, we often forget to uncover the richness of each book.

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Disrupting a text

Picture books are constructed with both text and illustrations available to readers. In order to change students' perspectives about the stories we are reading, I decided to disrupt the text by presenting the illustrations and the written text separately. Although pic-

ture books are clearly not intended to be read in this manner, and the synergistic relationship between text and illustration that is used to construct meaning is not available when experienced separately, I wanted to see how my students would respond. After we had read and talked about *Where the Wild*

Things Are, we took the book apart, literally!

We looked at a version of the written text without the illustrations to see what this perspective may offer. I typed up the words of the book on a single sheet of paper, made an overhead of the text for our class discussions, and provided copies for each student to write their comments on as they read. By looking at the text in this manner, students began to notice things that they had not mentioned when we had read the book in its entirety. One student said that it looked like a poem when I typed it up; another noticed the words in bold print. We discussed how short this particular book was, containing fewer than four hundred words. Students also noticed that the word "and" and other phrases were used repeatedly throughout the text. They commented on the words Sendak used to describe Max's journey and noticed that some of his sentences

were really quite long. The disruption of the book, focusing on the written text, forced students to look at the structure of the language and to pay particular attention to the words and phrases that Sendak used in telling the story. Allowing my students to see only the written text without the illustrations focused their

interpretations on different aspects of that written text compared to when I had simply read it aloud.

The following day, I disrupted the book in a different manner, highlighting the illustrations. This time I laid out the pages of the book in storyboard fashion across one of the walls of my classroom. I took apart two paperback copies of the book so that we could see

all of the images simultaneously. Students noticed how the illustrations increased in size as Max continued towards the climax of the story. Because of the storyboard layout, they were able to talk about the illustrations as a whole, rather than simply one picture at a time. Students noticed that the moon was in the same place in the first series of illustrations and that Max was located on the left side of the illustrations. When Max came back from his adventures, however, he was positioned on the right side of the illustrations. Students paid close attention to the Wild Things themselves and discussed their human features, especially their feet. By viewing the text and the illustrations in three different formats—text only, storyboard, and as a complete picture book—we were able to extend our interpretations of the text and look at the illustrations and written text from new perspectives.

Creating visual representations of literature discussions

Over my career as an elementary teacher, I have relied on the use of wall charts extensively in my classroom to keep track of the learning and discussions that have taken place. Specifically, I use wall charts to provide a visual representation of discussions. These charts serve as an audit trail for the intellectual journey that takes place during a particular unit of study, preserving in written format the responses to our readings and the interpretations and connections. These charts have helped us to ask new questions, to remember our discussions, and to make connections to other stories. Visual representations that I have used successfully in my classroom include Impressions-Wonderings-Connections charts and an Emerging Categories comparison chart.

Impressions-Wonderings-Connections charts

While reading each book in the escaping reality unit, beginning with

Where the Wild Things Are, I created a series of three large wall charts—one for our impressions, one for our wonderings or lingering questions, and one for our personal and literary connections. Impressions comprise what students noticed as they read the book. Some examples of my students' impressions after reading *Where the Wild Things Are* include:

- I noticed that the picture Max drew in the hallway was a Wild Thing.
- Max sent the Wild Things to bed, just like his mom did to him.
- Max's bedroom looks boring. There aren't any toys.
- The moon changed phases in the book.
- Max's mom must have been fed up with his behavior.
- Max was playing and lost track of time, so he didn't see his mom put his food on the table.

Wonderings are simply the questions that students generate as we discuss our stories. It is important for students to ask the questions in class, as well as the teacher. I learn much about my students' thinking and reading abilities by listening to the questions they ask. Here are some questions they generated after reading *Where the Wild Things Are*:

- How could Max's food still be hot?
- Why did Max wear a wolf suit?
- Where did the private boat and the crown come from?
- Why isn't Max's mom worried about Max if he was gone that long?
- Why isn't Max's wolf suit dirty if he was dancing in the forest?
- How could Max smell the food if he was so far away?

These questions demonstrate that my students were engaged in the story and were perplexed by the ambiguity and open-ended quality of Sendak's book. As the unit progressed, we offered answers to some of the questions and others were left open. The hardest thing to help children understand was that some questions may never be answered. I had to avoid offering my opinions too early in the discussion for fear that

students would think my answers were the right ones or that I preferred certain responses.

Additionally, I want my students to make both personal and literary connections to the stories we read. Personal connections are the ways the stories we read remind us of our lives and experiences, and literary connections are the linkages we make to other books, poems, plays, television shows, and movies. Some examples from the Escaping Reality unit are:

- Max reminds me of my brother because he is always getting sent to his room.
- In another book we read, *Higglety Pigglety Pop*, there was a white dog like Max's.
- Things seem to grow when the characters are using their imagination.
- Sometimes these characters only escape into their own minds.
- Children are always being sent to bed in these stories.

These examples show how my students are making connections to their lives and the books we have read. They recognized the motif of things growing in *Where the Wild Things Are*, *Salamander Room*, and *Humphrey's Bear*. They realized that the characters in *Tar Beach*, *Where the Wild Things Are*, and *Edward and the Pirates* often sought to escape reality through journeys in the mind. They noted that in *Where the Wild Things Are* and *Moon Tiger* the children were punished by being sent to bed.

Emerging Categories comparison chart

Comparison charts have been used to help students recognize the elements of literature and compare one version of a story with another (Young & Ferguson, 1995). Generally, these traditional comparison charts include the titles of the various books read and discussed down the left hand column and several elements of literature along the top of the chart, often including setting, characters, point of

view, tensions, and author's purpose. As each book is read, teachers fill out the chart based on student responses. These charts are typically designed to assess students' knowledge of the essential elements of literature mentioned above.

Unfortunately, in my experience these traditional comparison charts have reduced the discussions to an "elements of literature scavenger hunt." As my students and I have worked to fill in these charts, I have noticed that the complexity of my students' interpretations and the wonderful connections they construct across the texts we read seem to disappear. The structure of the traditional comparison chart, focusing entirely on the elements of literature as separate categories, limits our discussions and ways of responding to texts. Being able to identify the elements of literature does not support quality discussions and interactions. How we learn about the elements of literature and our understandings of their relationship to the construction of story is as important as our ability to identify them.

In contrast to the traditional comparison chart, I initiated a comparison chart based on categories that emerged during our discussions. I identified eight categories that emerged from our connections chart and which were prominent aspects of our discussions. These categories were then used to create a chart to help students re-visualize our connections across texts. For this unit, the headings included: (a) Escaping Reality, (b) Growing, (c) Windows, (d) Changes in Character, (e) Animals as Catalysts, (f) The Role of the Bedroom and (g) Parent-Child Relationships.

I have included one of the charts that was created in this unit of study (See Figure 1.). As students offered ideas, I wrote down what I could and then allowed students to fill in other thoughts as time permitted. These charts became important artifacts as we began to read new books. Students began to make stronger intertextual

connections as each new book was presented. By following my students' lead and using the connections they made in our literature discussions to create the visual representation charts, our conversations about books were expanded and enriched. The charts clearly assessed the students' understanding.

Conclusion

If we believe that readers construct meaning in transaction with texts, we must change the way we talk about texts, the types of questions we ask students, who gets to ask the questions, the expectations we have for our class discussions about literature, how we assess reading comprehension, and the ways we require readers to respond to their reading. In other words, we need to change how teachers and students transact with a piece of literature if we are to change the way students read and see themselves as readers.

How we respond to our students' interpretations and discussions around a piece of literature and how we support and value the interactions in our classrooms exert a tremendous impact on the ways that students come to know the reading process and the social practices associated with children's literature endorsed in our classrooms. We need to choose literature that supports the construction of a plurality of meanings and creates a space that provides the opportunity for students to explore their responses to literature and to share them in a community of readers. Teachers need to support a variety of responses to the stories read and avoid the tendency to reduce the discussion to a search for a single main idea. We are still teaching children how to play the reading game, only the rules have changed to allow more freedom of expression and more student investment in the interpretive process. ■

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Figure 1

Categories Comparison Chart

Escaping Reality

Something is going on between the parents and the child that causes him to escape.
Sometimes the escape just takes place in the children's mind.
When there is a problem, the characters try to escape or go to sleep.

Growing:

Each kid grows up after an encounter or adventure.
Sometimes the animals or the room grew.
Growing is the adventure's first step
In most of these stories, something is growing, usually in the children's imagination.

Windows:

The windows are sometimes the beginning of the adventure.
There are windows so you can see the moon.
You can escape out of windows into the world.

The Moon:

Sometimes the moon is in the window to tell you time has passed without saying it.
It is like a clock in the setting.

Change in Character:

Sometimes in their adventures, the characters' perspective changes when they remember something.
The character goes on an adventure and does something to realize that they were wrong about something.
They come home after learning it.
In some of the stories, the characters were mean and learned to be nice.

Animals as Catalysts:

The animals were imaginary friends.
The animals were friends that helped the characters get through their troubles and solve their problems.

Sleeping / The Bedroom:

Someone or something makes the character go to his or her room, and it is there that the characters find their friends and leave on an adventure to conquer their troubles.
The parents tell the child to go to his/her room, and in the room he/she makes up a story in his mind and the perspective changes.

Parent / Child Relationships:

The child is mad at the parents and travels on a story or an adventure. When the kid gets back, the parents are mostly right.
In the end, the children realize what they did was wrong, and then they come back.
In *Where the Wild Things Are*, Max realizes he was wrong and comes home.
Most of the characters have a mother figure in the story.

Response to "A Journey With the Wild Things"

by Susan Glynn Mulé

Just days before reading *A Journey With the Wild Things*, I was engaged in a conversation with some other mothers about children's literature. One mother was protesting about a book being read by her child at school. She was appalled not only by the teacher's selection of fantasy but also by the very fact that so much fiction was being used in the classroom. The mother believed that only nonfiction was appropriate reading and did not allow her children to read fiction outside of school assignments. Fantasy was too much for this woman to take and she was enraged that the teacher had made such an improper selection. "When you read," she insisted, "it should be to learn something."

It's funny how we get caught up in the lenses through which we view things. My current lens is this conversation. I can't get this woman out of my mind. I think of all of the wonderful children's literature out there, so much of which is high quality fiction, and I go a little crazy. Fantasy, in particular, has been under serious attack lately. I think I'm more exposed to it, since I move in homeschool circles. So, this conversation played and replayed itself in my mind as I journeyed with Frank Serafini's classroom adventure with the *Wild Things*. As I read, I pondered how important it is to escape from reality from time to time and how Serafini had used this need as a theme to teach his students so much. Interestingly enough, Serafini's book selection stood out for me more than did his techniques. To me personally, what was important was that he used his techniques during fantasy. Running through my head during two readings of the article was my desire to shove the Serafini article under that woman's nose and scream at her, "Kids do learn through fantasy!" All within this theme, Serafini helped

his students discover how to peel through layers of meaning, how to look for the motivation behind a character's actions, how authors use symbols to support their themes, and how to compare and contrast stories and ideas. With a fantasy picture book as the cornerstone, Serafini taught his students about storyboards and language structures. He also taught his students one of life's hardest lessons — that not all questions have answers.

As for the techniques, I do intend to try them with my eight year old daughter. I'm actually planning to share part of the article with her, particularly about Serafini's being a teacher of fourth and fifth graders. My child is going through a bit of a phase of feeling like she is too old for picture books and there are too many great books out there she hasn't seen yet. I think the strategy of disrupting the text will be particularly interesting, given my daughter's visual tendencies. Even as I write this, I wonder how my science-oriented daughter will respond to dissecting a story. It will also be interesting to discover how she compares those stories which are already familiar to those which are new to her. And, will she bring up other fantasies she has read, adding her own ideas to the comparison chart we create together? Will she learn the same concepts as Serafini's students? How will she respond to the theme? I could, I realized, change the theme. She would still learn the concepts. Or, I could teach the same concepts in other ways.

I wondered about the mother whose children were denied the joys of fantasy literature. I did not know her, but I longed for her to see what Serafini had accomplished. His classroom events are evidence that we can learn from the experiences of others, even if that person is a fictitious character in a fantasy world. The things that he accomplished were possible because fiction is an excellent tool for evoking response and because Serafini allowed his students the luxury of

responding to and talking about the story. I was reminded, as I read, of my own love affair with stories. I thought about the fullness that fiction, especially fantasy, has given my life and all that I have learned from reading these kinds of stories. I imagined the wonders that Serafini's students must have shared with one another and how their lives were enriched by these interactions with each other and with the books. I wondered how many of these children might be inspired to create their own journeys, their imaginations nurtured by the fantasy.

"When you read," the woman had insisted, "it should be to learn something." I realized that her words were remarkably true as I read through Serafini's article. Sadly, it is a truth this particular mother will probably never know or understand. Fortunately, there are teachers out there who do — and who choose to risk journeys with *Wild Things*.

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