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## **“That Just Really Knocks Me Out”: Fourth Grade Students Navigate Postmodern Picture Books**

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*What happens when children come across texts that push the boundaries of what they expect to encounter when they pick up a picture book? There exists a genre of nontraditional picture books, commonly referred to as “postmodern picture books,” which is characterized by a variety of alternative literary and illustrative devices. Given that these books often deviate from traditional narrative structure and elements, traditional comprehension strategies may not be effective in assisting students’ understanding of the story. The purpose of this study was to examine and interpret the ways in which a small group of successful fourth grade readers navigated five postmodern picture books. Video transcripts and field notes from ten individual think aloud sessions and five group book club discussions serve as data sources that reveal the complexity of the ways in which students navigated these books.*

Being literate in the 21<sup>st</sup> century means making sense of a bombardment of media sources, thinking critically, and choosing what to read and how to go about reading it. The technological and social changes in the world may account for changes in the texts readers encounter and the ways they use and interact with these texts. While many literacy researchers currently focus on comprehension of electronic texts, such as those found on the Internet (e.g., Coiro & Dobler, 2007; Kymes, 2005), others suggest that there is a relationship between these digital genres and emerging nontraditional print genres such as postmodern picture books (Dresang & McClelland, 1999; Labbo, 2004). Like the Internet, which provides a highly interactive experience that requires users to make choices about what to click on and how to navigate websites, postmodern picture books require readers to make choices about how they read them. As literacy becomes more broadly defined, there exists potential in examining how children interact with nontraditional print texts such as postmodern picture books.

Moreover, a closer look how readers engage with postmodern picture books is important because the books are comprised of alternative characteristics such as intertextuality, ambiguity, and non-linearity, features that offer unique opportunities for critical analysis and meaning-making. However, the complex characteristics found in postmodern picture books can also have the negative consequence of turning readers away in frustration (Serafini, 2005). The presence of these literary devices often requires alternative ways of thinking about and navigating text and

there is presently a lack of understanding about how readers approach and understand this particular genre.

### **Postmodern Picture Books**

In the 1990's, a number of researchers (Goldstone 1999; Paley, 1992; Seelinger-Trites, 1994) documented a shift in children's literature from traditional linear texts to books that mocked the traditional picture book by experimenting with innovative ways of organization. Readers familiar with picture books featuring a traditionally organized plot with an easily identifiable beginning, middle, and end, began to encounter books that Goldstone (2002) described as "renegades from traditional book structure" (p. 1), or books that employed metafictional characteristics that purposefully brought attention to the text as fictive and a physical object (McCallum, 1996). For example, a reader of postmodern picture books may navigate multiple stories or may be directly addressed by a character within the story. In essence, the creators of a metafictional work of fiction draw attention to the gap between fiction and reality, reminding the reader that s/he is reading words on a page (Cashore, 2003; Waugh, 1984). In recent years, this group of books has developed into a genre recognized by some as postmodern picture books (Chatton, 2004; Hellman, 2003; Serafini, 2005).

Postmodern picture books are often characterized by a number of metafictional characteristics including the following: (a) the portrayal of the characters or narrator actually referring to the physical presence of the book or the process of creating the book (Goldstone, 2002; McCallum, 1996); (b) the use of illustrations that reveal the fictional reality of a story (Pantaleo, 2004); (c) the disturbance of traditional story grammar, including multiple narrative strands or multiple narrators; (d) the juxtaposition or intertwining of two or more narratives to create a new narrative (Hellman, 2003); and (e) the use of various experimental typographic styles with unexpected print conventions (McCallum). Additionally, postmodern picture books often exhibit a high degree of indeterminacy in terms of the plot, characters, and/or setting. They provide the reader with too little information, and gaps and ambiguities leave the reader to construct his/her own meaning (Pantaleo). Finally, postmodern picture books are often characterized as parodies that make fun of an author, illustrator, or a text. The employment of these devices purposefully works to bring the reader's attention to the "physicalness" of the text, working to push the boundaries of traditional picture books. At the same time, readers' conceptions about how picture books should be constructed and read are also challenged.

Some characteristics are not necessarily 'metafictional,' but they have the potential to be when combined with other devices (McCallum, 1996). Pantaleo and Sipe (2008) explain that picture books can vary in their degree of postmodernism, falling on a continuum. For example, *The Stinky Cheese Man and Other Fairly Stupid Tales* (Scieszka & Smith, 1992) is often considered a model postmodern picture book because it exhibits numerous postmodern characteristics. The "almost Fairy Tales" in this picture book are parodies of traditional fairytales, book construction, design, and content. It begins with the Little Red Hen requesting help to plant her wheat. The narrator interrupts to inform her that she is not allowed to tell her story because, "This is the endpaper. The book hasn't even started yet." Cinderella's tale becomes *Cinderumpelstiltskin or the Girl Who Really Blew It*. This book uses irony, parody, humor and surrealism to disrupt the reader's expectations of traditional fairytales. Next, consider *The Gospel Cinderella* (Thomas & Diaz, 2004), which is a parody of the traditional Cinderella tale and features an African American Cinderella in a southern swamp location with a gospel

theme. Aside from parody, this enchanting tale does not employ additional postmodern picture book devices that work to bring attention to the fictional state of the book, so it would fall on the opposite end of the continuum.

### **Postmodern Picture Books and Children**

Although there are numerous publications describing postmodern picture books (Anstey, 2002; Chatton, 2004; Goldstone, 2002; Hellman, 2003; Lewis, 2001; Paley, 1992) or picture books with metafictional characteristics (Cashore, 2003; Seelinger-Trites 1994; Wylie, 2006), there is little research available that explores how children engage with this nontraditional picture book genre. Pantaleo (2002) and Serafini (2005) conducted studies that involved elementary teachers who read aloud from postmodern picture books. In both studies, classroom teachers guided the exploration of picture books with alternative literary characteristics. In Pantaleo's study, first grade students commented on many metafictional characteristics during discussions and activities guided by the researcher. Serafini described how eight- to twelve year-olds in a multiage classroom dealt with three specific metafictional characteristics in the *Voices in the Park* (Browne, 1998), including non-linear structure, symbolism in the illustrations, and the relationship between the illustrations and written text. Some students were intrigued by these alternative literary devices, while others found them challenging and "weird" in a negative way. Serafini postulated that students who tolerated ambiguity and/or uncertainty in a story were better equipped to make sense of metafictional elements in text than those who shut down when encountering them.

In a third study, Styles and Arzipe (2001) provided an analysis of how children aged 4-11 responded to Browne's (1992) *Zoo*. A look at how children analyzed visual images in the text revealed that students were able to interpret the visual images and artistic features of the text through drawings and interviews. The methodology, however, does not detail the format in which children read the texts (e.g., read aloud or independently).

Although this research provides insight into how children read postmodern picture books while under teachers' guidance, few studies address how children navigate and make sense of postmodern picture books without explicit instruction. How might children navigate these books without the guidance of a teacher or another knowledgeable adult, and what can be learned from these readers?

### **The Study: Examining How Eight Students Navigated Postmodern Picture Books**

I spent six weeks learning how eight fourth-grade students navigated and made sense of five postmodern picture books. Each week, the students read a designated picture book independently (either on their own or with me in an individual think aloud session) and then came together for an after school discussion group in the school library to share their thoughts.

Postmodern picture books used in this study included (in this order): *The Three Pigs* (Wiesner, 2001), *Who's Afraid of the Big Bad Book?* (Child, 2003), *The Red Book* (Lehman, 2004), *Voices in the Park* (Browne, 1998), and *Black and White* (Macaulay, 1990). These books offered a high degree of a variety of metafictional elements, a span of publishing dates, and a variety of characteristics including humor, ambiguity, complexity, and surrealistic art that I anticipated children might enjoy. Complexity and familiarity influenced the order in which the books were introduced. *The Three Pigs* and *Who's Afraid of the Big Bad Book?* were the first

two books read by students because of the familiar story plot and characters. *The Red Book*, *Voices in the Park*, and *Black and White* were chosen as the latter books because of their relatively high degree of complexity.

### ***Theoretical Framework***

Research suggests that teaching readers to use comprehension strategies when constructing meaning from text is valuable practice (e.g., Afflerbach, 1987; Pearson & Dole, 1987; Pressley, 2000). Careful observation of expert readers can produce insight about specific strategies that they draw upon as they read, which can inform teachers about how to support other students. The present study's focus on exploring how proficient readers comprehend postmodern picture books is guided by the theory that much can be learned by watching and observing successful readers interact with postmodern texts. While I cannot presume to have located "expert" readers of postmodern picture books, the participants in this study were identified as students who showed a proclivity for thinking critically, which may also apply to the reading of complex, ambiguous texts.

The second theoretical base that frames this study is reader response theory. Opposing the idea that texts themselves are authoritarian and central, reader response theories recognize that readers bring what they know to texts, personally connecting to texts when making meaning. Transactional theories (Rosenblatt, 1978), in particular, focus on meaning-making in terms of the active relationship between the reader and the text in a situated context. This focus on the reader's role in meaning-making was central to the design of this study since postmodern picture books are noted for ambiguity and indeterminacy.

The methodological choice to facilitate small group meetings in which students talked with one another about the books they read was also fundamental to the design and interpretation of this study and its findings. Because social constructivist theories of learning (e.g., Vygotsky, 1978) put forth "the interdependence of social and individual processes in the co-construction of knowledge" (Palincsar, 1998, p. 345), students' navigation of the postmodern picture books was observed in two settings: individual think aloud sessions and a discussion group setting. The two settings allowed me to observe students' co-constructions of their understandings of the texts. The discussion groups were designed to emphasize the importance of personal response and learning as a social process (Raphael & McMahon, 1994).

### ***Methodology***

#### ***Participants***

Participants were selected from a large suburban elementary school in the southeastern United States where I had served as an on-site supervisor of preservice teachers for three years. Seeking students who were successful readers and thinkers, I asked a fourth grade teacher to identify eight students in her classroom who, in her opinion, showed a proclivity for reading complex, ambiguous books and demonstrated critical thinking abilities. The group consisted of five females and three males, and was comprised of seven European Americans and one African American. Participants chose their own pseudonyms to be used for the duration of the study: Cynthia, Lizzie, Samantha, Italia, Maria, Dalton, Tyler, and Cooper.

**Data Sources**

Data analyzed in this study included (a) transcripts from five discussion groups, which typically lasted approximately 45-50 minutes each; (b) transcripts from video-taped footage of ten individual think aloud sessions, which lasted approximately 30 minutes each (each of the eight participants attended one session with two of the participants attending two sessions in order to obtain two think aloud protocols for each of the five books); (c) my field notes, which I recorded after each session.

**Discussion groups: book club format.** Students met weekly for discussion groups in the school library, an informal after-school setting, to co-construct understandings of the postmodern picture books that they read. I intentionally worked to establish an informal environment within the group so that students felt comfortable sharing their thoughts with me in the think aloud sessions and with each other in the discussion groups. I asked students to use my first name, Elizabeth, in an effort to deliberately alter the traditional teacher/student construct so that they would view me more as an equal than as an authoritative teacher. I sat on the floor with the students, and I worked to redirect the discussion points and questions that were posed to me back to the students instead of controlling the discussion. The discussion groups were loosely based on Raphael and McMahon's (1994) book club framework.

I explained that our experiences would help me understand how children make sense of and interact with the characteristics in a certain group of picture books. I did not explicitly teach the students about postmodern picture books or metafictional characteristics. I also emphasized that there are no "right" or "wrong" answers in explaining one's thinking and that they would not be graded on any activities or discussions during the study. I also explained that it was okay to express preferences for each book read, and that it was acceptable to like or dislike a book or parts of a book. Students read the books before we met for each book club session.

Each discussion began with me asking students what they thought of the book and encouraging them to refer to specific pages when talking about the book. I tried not to control the discussion by reminding students to talk to each other, instead of looking to me. However, it should be noted that I was an active participant, asking questions if necessary to keep the discussion moving. Each session concluded with me briefly introducing the book to be read for the next week.

**Individual think aloud meetings.** I met with two students per week in order to obtain a deeper level of understanding about how they independently navigated each postmodern picture book. These meetings took place before the book club sessions. Think alouds were an integral component of the methodological design of this study, used to make the seemingly invisible process of reading postmodern picture books visible for the observer. Specifically, think alouds were used as a method of inquiry to identify and describe the processes that children used while they read the postmodern picture books aloud (Kukan & Beck, 1997). Students were encouraged to report their thinking throughout the process of reading aloud (Ericsson & Simon, 1993).

I introduced the concept of think alouds to students in the first book club meeting. In an attempt to avoid biasing students towards copying my thoughts about postmodern picture book characteristics, I modeled the think aloud process as I solved a three-dimensional puzzle. I then modeled the think aloud process while I read aloud a traditional picture book with a linear structure including a beginning, middle, and end in order to reduce the likelihood of biasing students towards identifying postmodern picture book characteristics. I then explained to students that when they read books with me in subsequent sessions, I was interested in learning how *they* think about the books as they read them and that I would be asking them to explain

their thinking to me. During these think aloud meetings, each student read the book for the first time with me in a meeting room in the library. Because there were five books, requiring ten total think aloud sessions, two students completed two think alouds each.

I attempted to take a “hands-off” role during these sessions in order to keep the process uniform and to avoid hindering the students’ thought flow. However, I interjected periodically with questions to clarify students’ comments and sometimes stopped to ask students what they were thinking if they paused and did not say anything. I was particularly cognizant of providing students with adequate “wait time,” sometimes waiting as long as eight seconds when students paused before I asked them to share their thoughts.

### ***Data Analysis***

Video transcripts and field notes from ten individual think aloud sessions and five discussion groups served as data sources for this study. Constant comparative analysis, as described by Glaser and Strauss (1967), was used to guide the analysis of transcripts and field notes. As a result of numerous iterations of identifying themes, I realized that the same themes were not going to be appropriate for both types of sessions (think alouds and book club sessions). Hence, I used one list of themes for the think aloud sessions and a modified list for the book club sessions. I then created codes for each theme and tested the codes on the data, modifying the themes and coding strategies throughout the process. Next, I viewed all videotape footage, took notes, and continued to refine themes. Finally, I went back to the transcripts and applied the codes corresponding to each theme in order to test the codes on the data. When I felt confident that the themes and corresponding codes would stand up, I continued to code the remaining data and further refined the themes.

In order to ensure trustworthiness and rigor, I sought feedback for one individual think aloud session and one book club session from a peer debriefer who questioned my choice of codes and checked my inferences. Responding to her questions about my codes prompted me to refine them for the final time. Verbalizations that were coded within in the individual think aloud and book club sessions are represented in Figure 1.

In the sections that follow, I first describe the results of the think aloud meetings, beginning with the main themes identified across each meeting: *emotional responses* and *problem solving*. I then delve into the problem solving category, offering descriptions and examples of the ways students solved problems as they read. Next I share the results from the discussion groups, beginning with the three main themes identified across each session: *aesthetic responses*, *reflecting on reading behaviors*, and *problem solving*. I present specific strategies observed within the problem solving category, followed by a more in-depth discussion of meaning-making within the book club sessions.

### ***Findings: Linear Navigation in Think Alouds***

During each weekly think aloud, a student read the postmodern picture book aloud while sharing his or her thoughts about the story. Analysis of patterns in this setting resulted in the identification of two themes identified across each session: *emotional responses* and *problem solving*. The problem solving theme is further described in two subcategories: *general story problem solving*, and *postmodern story problem solving*.

Figure 1. Total coded verbalizations in think aloud and book club formats.

Individual Think Aloud Sessions		Book Club Sessions	
Theme	Total	Theme	Total
Emotional Response	76	Aesthetic Response	89
General Problem Solving	68	General Problem Solving	38
Postmodern Story Problem Solving	74	Postmodern Story Problem Solving	100
		Reading Behaviors	18
Question	13	Question	52
Predictions	12	Illustrative or Font Features	101
Text/Media Connection	8	Text/Media Connection	27
Personal Connection	6	Personal Connection	3
Excitement When Own Ideas Were Correct	5	Excitement When Own Ideas Were Correct	2
Exploring	23	Intertextual Reference	17
Other Textual Feature	4	Other Textual Feature	28

**Emotional Responses**

During think aloud sessions, students exhibited a range of emotional responses when they encountered “strange” things in the postmodern picture book they were reading. Students seemed to experience six types of emotional responses when they came upon metafictional elements: *amusement, indifference, curiosity, discomfort, confusion, and irritation* (see Table 1).

Table 1  
*Emotional Responses to Metafictional Elements within Individual Think Aloud Sessions*

Emotion	Common Verbal Response	Total
Amusement	“That’s funny.”	29
Indifferent or Curious	“That’s weird.”	31
Discomfort	“That scares me.”	4
Confusion	“I don’t get it.”	11
Irritation	“I don’t like that.”	1

Upon encountering metafictional elements, some students laughed, giggled, smiled, and/or commented that something “was funny.” For example, Cynthia laughed out loud when she

realized that the characters were exiting the story frame and confusing the wolf in *The Three Pigs* (Wiesner, 2001):

That actually looks like he's going to like break down the door. (*laughing*) And then like it's cool how he can be like all of the sudden reality and then like a cartoon. (*reading aloud*) So the wolf huffed and he puffed and he blew the house in and he ate the pig up. (*thinking aloud*) He's like what, where'd they go? Where'd they go? He's like, not again! That's funny.

In a second example, Tyler appeared to be amused when he saw a particularly strange illustration in *Voices in the Park* (Browne, 1998):

(*reading aloud*) We both burst out laughing when we saw Albert taking a swim. Then we all played on the bandstand, and I felt really, really happy. (*thinking aloud*) Huh.

(*laughing*) Look at that guy. He's got a banana on his umm...pitchfork.

Both Cynthia and Tyler reacted to story elements in a positive manner.

On the other hand, some students reacted as if parts of the story were odd. They responded to this oddness in different ways leading to two different category codes: They either reacted indifferently to the metafictional elements or seemed intrigued or curious about them. Those who reacted indifferently noted that something was odd, but they seemed to dismiss it by choosing not to engage further as they continued to read. Those that were intrigued by the "odd parts" seemed to ponder the meaning of the odd part. I observed them taking what seemed like thoughtful pauses after they commented about the weirdness in the story. Often, they commented that something was "just weird" or "strange." Lizzie used the word "weird" to describe the non-linear plot device in *Black and White* (Macaulay, 1990): "That sort of is weird because it skips straight from the train line place straight over into this field talking about Holstein cows."

Less common reactions fell in the categories of *discomfort*, *confusion*, and *irritation*. These verbalizations demonstrated that the students were uncomfortable with the "strange" things in the text, and they described them as being "scary" or said that they were not sure "what to think of it." Students sometimes seemed confused, making comments about not understanding the story. They shared that they "didn't get it," or "didn't understand it." Lastly, some participants seemed irritated when they came upon the "strange" things in the text. For example, after reading *The Three Pigs* (Wiesner, 2001), Cooper explained that the story was frustrating for him because he tried to figure out what was going on and he wanted the story to be more straightforward: "You want to figure out what they are doing. But at the end you finally figure it out but you like just wanna know what they're doing right when they're doing it." Overall, students exhibited a range of emotional responses when they encountered the metafictional elements in the books they read in individual think aloud sessions.

### ***Problem Solving***

Problem solving surfaced as a significant aspect of the ways students navigated the postmodern picture books in think aloud sessions. After noticing the "strange things" in the texts they were reading, students typically shared thoughts that showed evidence of problem solving in an attempt to figure out the story. Two problem solving categories were created: *general story problem solving* and *postmodern story problem solving*.

Verbalizations that were coded within first category of problem solving, *general story problem solving*, showed evidence that as the student was reading, s/he noticed that something was different and took action to problem solve and figure out the story as s/he would when reading any story. For example, as Lizzie read *Black and White* (Macaulay, 1990), she shared her thoughts as she attempted to figure out the identity of the old woman on the train: "Well, in that

other picture it looked like the lady was all white, so maybe she's a ghost. Or maybe the boy has just been dreaming and he thought he woke up from dreaming but he's still dreaming." A second example of general story problem solving is illustrated when Samantha noticed the Santa gorilla character in *Voices in the Park* (Browne, 1998) and attempted to figure out what was happening: "Looks like he's probably selling something. And, someone probably threw these [paintings] out of the house."

The second category of problem solving, *postmodern story problem solving*, describes problem solving more specifically in terms of metafictional elements. Verbalizations that fit in this category illustrate that the reader actively participated in the postmodern picture book story world as s/he worked to figure out the story. The reader's verbalizations alluded to postmodern characteristics and worked to make sense of one or more of the metafictional elements: intertextuality, symbolism in illustrations, non-linear aspects of the text, gaps or relationships between reality and fiction, multiple narratives, and/or indeterminacy. Tyler's verbalization exemplified one aspect of postmodern story problem solving: making sense of the complex symbolism in the illustrations in *Voices in the Park* (Browne, 1998):

Maybe she was angry and she might have lit the tree on fire. Or maybe like how she feels. That's like what happens to the stuff around her and stuff. Like when she was yelling the tree's leaves were like off and now she's mad the tree's on fire.

This quote demonstrates that Tyler noticed hidden, surrealistic clues in the illustrations that reflected the character's austere, angry mood. In a second example, Cynthia appeared to actively participate in the postmodern story world as she read aloud *The Three Pigs* (Wiesner, 2001), a postmodern version of the traditional, familiar tale. In this book, the three pigs discover that they can actually exit the story in order to escape from the wolf. They then travel to other stories via a story page that is folded into an airplane, picking up a few characters along the way. The following transcript unit shows evidence that Cynthia noted the relationship between reality and fiction as the characters moved from story to story when she described how the cat's appearance changed in the illustrations:

And like that just really knocks me out because it's got like stripes and now it's just like plain orange [the cat]. That's weird. So I think that all of these are gonna like fall on them and they're gonna be like hey who turned off the lights?

Cynthia was an active participant in the postmodern picture book story world and made sense of metafictional elements. When she said, "they're gonna be like, *hey, who turned off the lights?*" she seemed to be actively participating in the story by speaking for the characters in the text. Sixty-eight instances of general story problem solving and 74 instances of postmodern story problem solving were totaled throughout the ten think aloud sessions. See Figure 2 for the problem solving results of each think aloud session. A closer look at the story problem solving patterns reveals some patterns, which are described below.

***Themes within the problem solving patterns.*** As students read each story in a think aloud session, they steered between general problem solving and postmodern problem solving when reading aloud. Their strategies for problem solving followed three general patterns: *general-to-postmodern*, *general-to-general*, and *postmodern-to-postmodern*. Figure 3 graphically represents the relationship of these themes.

Within each session, it was common for the students' problem solving to move back and forth from general problem solving to postmodern problem solving throughout the sessions. For example, as Cooper read aloud *The Three Pigs* (Wiesner, 2001), his pattern of problem solving was as follows: G-P-P-G-G-P-G-P-P. Cooper began his think aloud by sharing thoughts about



**General to general.** Some students did not move from general story problem solving to postmodern story problem solving, or they vocalized only a few instances of the more complex postmodern problem solving. When Samantha read aloud from *Voices in the Park* (Browne, 1998), her problem solving strategies remained categorized as general story problem solving (13 instances); she did not move into the next category of problem solving within the postmodern picture book story world. In her think aloud session, Samantha became fixated on the illustrations, pointing out the strange things on each page.

**Postmodern to postmodern.** Two participants, Cynthia and Dalton, began and ended their think aloud sessions with statements that indicated postmodern problem solving. These two students were noted to have the most instances of postmodern story problem solving and also had the most instances of making predictions about the plot and posing “wonder questions” (I wonder if *this* could happen ...). For example, while reading *The Three Pigs* (Wiesner, 2001), Cynthia shared this prediction: “So I think that all of these are gonna fall on them and they’re gonna be like, *hey who turned off the lights?*” After finishing this story, she posed a “wonder question” about the possibility of modifying the story: “I wonder if there could be something like that where they’re the wolf and they get blown out by the pig. That’d be cool. Like in reverse. Like the original three little pigs.” Cynthia and Dalton shared more postmodern problem solving verbalizations than the other participants in individual think aloud sessions, indicating that they spent a good deal of time thinking about and making sense of the complex metafictional elements in the stories they were reading.

**Summary of findings for think alouds.** It seems, then, there was a linear pattern to how students navigated through the books in individual think aloud sessions. This pattern involved noticing something different in the story (metafictional elements), sharing emotional responses to the metafictional elements, and then finally moving into various problem solving modes. In comparison to the individual think aloud session results, the book club meetings produced a more interactive, dynamic navigation pattern. The following section describes the book club themes and provides excerpts from the transcripts to illustrate the themes.

### ***Findings: Dynamic Navigation in Book Clubs***

After students read the books independently, they met as a group to discuss the book. A description of the results of these weekly book club meetings with excerpts from the transcripts to illustrate the themes follows.

#### ***Aesthetic Responses***

Students shared responses similar to the emotional responses described in the individual think aloud sessions previously discussed. However, in book club sessions, it seemed as if they had moved past the initial emotional responses and instead shared with each other their feelings about and attitudes toward the story and portions of the story. Borrowing from Rosenblatt (1978), I call this focus on the reading experience an *aesthetic* response. The students had a tendency to frame their aesthetic responses as evaluative (see Table 2).

Students shared positive aesthetic verbalizations about the books. “I like it” was the most commonly shared aesthetic response. During the book club discussion of *Who’s Afraid of the Big Bad Book?* (Child, 2003), Dalton shared that he liked the way the book had “flipped out” pages and how it looked like “a hole in the page.” Nick thought the book was funny because the main character, Herb, cut pictures out of the book, added telephones to the illustrations, and drew mustaches on the characters. Participants repeatedly shared that *The Three Pigs* (Wiesner, 2001)

was “funny” and they “liked it.” Tyler thought it was funny when the pig was blown out of the story and Cooper shared that “it was cool how they kept going into different stories.” Noteworthy is the finding that “I like it” was an aesthetic response shared during all book club sessions, except *Black and White* (Macaulay, 1990).

Table 2  
*Aesthetic Responses to Metafictional Elements within Book Club Setting*

Aesthetic Responses	Common Verbal Response	Total
Positive	“I liked it.”	24
Negative	“I didn’t like it.”	2
Discomfort	“That is scary.”	15
Confusion	“I don’t get it.”	2
Irritation	“I don’t like that.”	20
Bored	“It was boring.”	6

On the other hand, students also shared negative aesthetic responses. They sometimes came to book club voicing their dislike of the story. For example, Cynthia and Samantha both came to *The Red Book* (Lehman, 2004) book club session with furrowed brows. Cynthia said that she did not like the book because it was “just a picture book,” and it looked like something “that a preschooler would read.” Samantha said: “There were no words and I was expecting it to be something you could actually read. You can read that, but you’d have to understand the pictures first.” Sipe and McGuire (2006) might describe this evaluation of the story as “preferential or categorical.” For these students, it seemed that *The Red Book* did not match their conception of what they typically enjoy reading, so they initially rejected it, describing why they did not like the book.

The only aesthetic response that was expressed by students in all five book club sessions was confusion. During the discussion of *The Three Pigs* (Wiesner, 2001), students shared that they were confused by the way the letters were falling off the page. Cooper described his confusion: “Like when the words were everywhere and you couldn’t tell what they were trying to say.” During the discussion of *The Red Book* (Lehman, 2004), Cynthia admitted that she was confused by the author’s picture on the back book jacket flap. The illustration features the author drawing a picture of herself, drawing a picture of herself, drawing a picture of herself, and so on. Cynthia explained her befuddlement with this illustration: “Yeah I whenever I started doing that I could not like get it straight. I’m like ok. I just drew that and then I don’t get it. I cannot get it straight whatever I do.”

During the group discussions of *Voices in the Park* (Browne, 1998) and *Black and White* (Macaulay, 1990), students commented on several occasions that something was “scary.” For example, when students discovered eyes on the illustration of a lamppost in *Voices in the Park*, several exclaimed that it was “creepy,” “scary” and “freaky.” Lizzie repeatedly commented that the hidden images in the illustrations of *Black and White* were “scary” or “creepy.” As noted in the previous section, the emotional response shared the most in the individual think aloud sessions was “It was weird.” In contrast to this finding, “It was weird” was the emotional response shared the least in book club sessions.

In summary, students shared a range of unsolicited aesthetic responses throughout discussions about the postmodern picture books. They continually expressed their feelings about and attitudes toward the postmodern books they were discussing.

***Reflecting on Their Own Reading Behaviors***

In book club sessions, students sometimes shared the ways they read the stories independently. They shared their own behaviors when reading the text, strategies they used when reading the text, or ideas for strategies they might be able to use. Occurrences of sharing reading behaviors and strategies were particularly common in the discussions of *Who's Afraid of the Big Bad Book?* (Child, 2003), *The Red Book* (Lehman, 2004) and *Black and White* (Macaulay, 1990). For example, Cynthia shared with the group that she accidentally skipped the first page when she was reading *Who's Afraid of the Big Bad Book?* on her own. Italia admitted that she skipped portions of the text on a page spread in the same book. During the *Voices in the Park* book club discussion, Lizzie shared how she used post-it notes when she read the book independently:

*Lizzie:* I wrote all the characters for each voice.

*Elizabeth:* Why did you, why did you do this?

*Lizzie:* Well, I couldn't really figure out what the story was about. So, I wrote down all the characters and found out that some, that they sort of blend together in some of the voices.

It was also common for students to share ideas about strategies they might use when reading the book in the future. For example, during the discussion of *The Red Book* (Lehman, 2004), students talked about the possibilities of reading the book backwards and upside-down. They also discussed the possibility of adding pages to the end of the story. Dalton explained: "And then you stick it onto a piece of notebook paper and you like glue it to the back, and then you could like add more pieces of paper to make the story go on." They seemed to like the idea of continuing the story so that others could find adventures in the red book. During the book club discussions, students shared the ways in which they read the postmodern picture book on their own and even explored possible alternative ways to read the books.

***Problem Solving Strategies***

In terms of problem solving strategies shared in group sessions, participants showed evidence of significantly less time spent *general story problem solving* (38 instances) and more time spent *postmodern story problem solving* (100 instances). See Figure 4 for a graphic representation of the problem solving patterns. This finding was consistent with the finding from the think aloud sessions that most readers moved from general problem solving to postmodern problem solving. If students who read the books individually at home showed evidence of the same pattern, it would make sense that less of the book club time would be utilized for general story problem solving, and more available for postmodern story problem solving. For example, during the discussion of *The Red Book* (Lehman, 2004), students spent some time at the beginning of the session problem solving within the general category as they discussed whether or not the main character was a girl or a boy:

*Italia:* I thought it was a boy! It has no eyelashes on it.

*Lizzie:* Definitely a boy right here (points to back of book).

*Cynthia:* Yeah, me, too.

*Samantha:* Yeah, but it looks like a girl from there (pointing to back of book).

As the session progressed, students began sharing more verbalizations that showed evidence of postmodern story problem solving. For example, in the following conversation,



*Red Book* (Lehman, 2004), *Voices in the Park* (Browne, 1998), and *Black and White* (Macaulay, 1990). Students asked the most questions during their discussion of this final book. Their questions were sometimes directed at the group, sometimes directed at me, and other times stated as “I wonder...” For example, Dalton asked the group a question about a character: “Hey, do you guys think that in the back picture, do you think that that might be the boy that’s in the story that’s wearing stripes, maybe inside?” A discussion between Dalton and Cynthia followed on this topic.

**Illustrative features:** Commonly, students also pointed out and discussed illustrative features of the books during book club sessions. Illustrative features include any features of the illustrations or text on the pages of the book. Students discussed illustrative features noticeably more often during discussions of *Who’s Afraid of the Big Bad Book* (Child, 2003), *Voices in the Park* (Browne, 1998), and *Black and White* (Macaulay, 1990) than they did during the book club sessions on *The Three Pigs* (Wiesner, 2001) and *The Red Book* (Lehman, 2004). The discussion of *Voices in the Park* produced the most verbalizations about illustrative features (n=55). The discussion repeatedly returned to what students called “hidden things in the pictures” throughout this book club session. For example, the following interaction demonstrates how the participants focused on the illustrations:

*Cynthia:* I read the little...

*Dalton:* I read the pictures three minutes ago.

*Cynthia:* ... little add-ins like everywhere. There’s like an elephant, then a tree on fire, and then like Gorilla Poppins.

*Italia:* There’s an elephant right here.

*Samantha:* Yeah. There’s just every little detail.

**Looking to other textual features.** In book club sessions, it was also common for participants to talk about other textual features such as the book cover, the dedication page, the back of the book, biographical information about the author, the copyright page, book flaps, the title page, the price, and recommended ages for the readership. During the discussion about *Who’s Afraid of the Big Bad Book?* (Child, 2003), Lizzie pointed out details on the title page: “I think it’s sort of strange how in the front right here it says, ‘This book belongs to Herb.’ And it has the bananas about bananas sticker there.”

Later in the same book club session, Dalton brought attention to the age recommendation on the front flap: “At the first, it says ages four to seven. I think that we’re like too old for that one.” A discussion about age recommendations followed his comment in which several participants argued that the age recommendation was incorrect because the book was, in their opinion, too difficult for younger children to comprehend.

**Making connections to other texts or media.** It was common for participants to make connections between the books they were discussing and other books they read and/or television shows. For example, some students immediately connected *Who’s Afraid of the Big Bad Book* (Child, 2003) to the popular cartoon television series *Charlie and Lola*, recognizing Lauren Child’s illustrations. Lizzie also brought a copy of the chapter book *Utterly Me, Clarice Bean* (2003), also by Lauren Child, to the book club session to share with the group.

As the book club sessions progressed, it became more common for students to connect the book they were discussing with previous books they had read and discussed in book club sessions. For example, Italia and Maria connected *Voices in the Park* (Browne, 1998) to *Who’s Afraid of the Big Bad Book?* (Child, 2003) and *The Three Pigs* (Wiesner, 2001), respectively. They pointed out that all three of the books contained stories within the story. Another example

took place during the discussion of *Black and White* (Macaulay, 1990) when Samantha described how the story reminded her of *Voices in the Park* because there were hidden things in the illustrations for the reader to find in both books.

**References to intertextuality.** Intertextuality is a metafictional device in which familiar stories are intertwined or juxtaposed to create a narrative (Hellman, 2003). During book club sessions, participants pointed out and discussed intertextuality in four out of the five discussions. Students did not use the term “intertextuality,” but they did discuss how different stories were present in the book. For example, during the discussion of *Black and White* (Macaulay, 1990), the students noted:

*Samantha:* Well, it’s a lot of different stories . . .

*Italia:* Different stories.

*Samantha:* . . . that are totally unconnected, and then, but once you read it then . . .

*Italia:* They’re switched around.

*Samantha:* . . . they get connected.

In the excerpt above, Samantha and Italia are discussing how *Black and White* features more than one story in the narrative. In the following example, participants noticed the intertextuality present and took it a step further by attempting to make sense of the different stories featured in *Black and White*:

*Maria:* Oh! I think I forgot to state about that picture that the ripped up paper could be like the snow the boy . . .

*Cynthia:* I got it.

*Maria:* on the train.

*Cynthia:* Is that a train stop?

*Maria and Dalton:* Yes.

*Maria:* Because a train is going through.

*Tyler:* Oh!

*Cynthia:* Oh! Maybe that’s the train in this story. This story one, this one, and this one. That is awesome!

### **Book Club: Furthering Understanding of the Story**

The fourth grade students in this study came to further their comprehension of each story through the group discussions that followed their individual readings. As I stated earlier, I did not directly teach the students any of the characteristics of postmodern picture books, so when the conversation turned to discussing the metafictional elements, it happened as a result of the students themselves. Students spent a great deal of time during book club sessions working to problem solve various aspects of each plot. They asked each other questions, pointed out illustrative details, looked to other textual features for clues about the plot, made connections to other books and the media, and even pointed to the intertextuality present in many of the books.

While it may seem that the students figured out each story’s complex plot by themselves, without my help, that is certainly not the case for all five books. The final two books discussed in book club sessions, *Voices in the Park* (Browne, 1998) and *Black and White* (Macaulay, 1990), proved to be the most complex, and verbalizations indicated that students reached a limited understanding on their own. Although the majority of the time spent during book club sessions was student-led, I interjected toward the end of each book club session and asked more specific questions in order guide them to understanding *Voices in the Park* and *Black and White*.

For example, as I listened to students discuss *Voices in the Park* (Browne, 1998), it became apparent that the students were not aware that the book presented four different

perspectives of the very same day in the park. As the book club session neared the end, Cynthia shared her thoughts about why there were four voices in the book, “Every day it’s like they hear each other like differently.” I said, “Wait. You said every day. So, is it four different days?” Cynthia, Lizzie, and Italia all agreed that the book represented different days for each voice because of the different font styles. At this point I stepped in and pointed out a detail in two illustrations, leading students to the realization that the book was describing the same day from four different points of view. Despite this interjection into the conversation, I believe it is important to credit the students’ thinking; they reached a higher level understanding of the books by talking with their peers in the book club sessions.

Lizzie’s experience with *Black and White* (Macaulay, 1990) illustrates how one student came to gain further understanding of a book through the group discussions. In the individual think aloud session, Lizzie was clearly frustrated as she attempted to make sense of the four simultaneous narratives present in *Black and White*. Throughout her reading of the book, she shared that the book was “weird” and “scary” and she struggled to make sense of the story’s plot. At the conclusion of the book, she shared with me that she “didn’t get” the book. She turned to the book jacket flap and the “warning label” on the title page, seeming to search for clues that would shed light on the plot. During the next day’s book club session, Lizzie shared with the group how uncomfortable I made her feel in the think aloud session: “And you kept staring at me like when I read it to you. I don’t like when people look at me! I felt like I did something wrong!” My interpretation of this comment is that she was uncomfortable with the book and therefore felt that my looking at her was a negative thing because Lizzie participated in a think aloud session prior to this one and did not feel as if I was “staring at her.”

Despite Lizzie’s visible discomfort with *Black and White* (Macaulay, 1990) in the think aloud session, data indicate that she gained understanding of the plot in the book club session. Not only was she the first participant to discuss the story’s plot as she asked her friends if they read the “warning label” on the title page of the book, but she pointed out that the burglar in one quadrant was the same as the burglar from another quadrant. She exclaimed, “Oh! So that’s who that is!” She then shared that she thought that the burglar was a woman. Cynthia and Samantha told her that the burglar was disguised as a woman. In the following transcript unit, Cynthia made a discovery about the plot that caused Lizzie to make her own discovery:

*Cynthia:* Oh! I just made a connection! Look! You know here they’re wearing the stuff [newspapers] ... now they are. (She points from one quadrant of the two page spread to another quadrant.)

*Lizzie:* Yeah. And then they’re, and then they’re ripping it up.

*Cynthia:* I got something! I got something!

*Lizzie:* And then they’re ripping, and then they’re ripping it up!

*Cynthia:* Yeah.

Lizzie gained knowledge about the story from this interaction with Cynthia. The notion of learning through social interaction, or social constructivist learning theory (Vygotsky, 1978), is illustrated here as Lizzie built on Cynthia’s comment about the plot and drew her own conclusion from the text.

As stated in the previous section, some students arrived at book club meetings expressing negative opinions of and feelings about the stories they read on their own. These students actively participated in the book club discussions and seemed to gain both more understanding of and appreciation for the story as they discussed it. It appears that the students held certain beliefs about how stories should be constructed and navigated. When these expectations were

challenged by the presence of metafictional devices, frustration ensued, and some students reported that they “didn’t like” the story. As these students discussed the stories, their statements demonstrated that they came to more understanding, but most maintained their original opinion and claimed that they did not like the book at the conclusion of the book club discussion, sometimes despite remarks and behaviors that indicated that they enjoyed it.

For example, at the beginning of the book club session devoted to *Who’s Afraid of the Big Bad Book?* (Child, 2003), Cynthia shared that she didn’t like the story because it was difficult to read due to the different print conventions and wandering font. Later in the same session when participants were talking about the pages that featured upside-down font, Cynthia said that she thought the author was “smart” for inserting upside-down pages and admitted that she “got into it and it was funny.” She continued to actively participate in the discussion about the book, gaining understanding about the plot. For example, she asked the group how Herb got out of the book: “If he was on the floor, how could he fall on the floor? If the book is on the floor and he’s in the book.” A lengthy discussion ensued in which participants worked to understand this page, discussing various possibilities. Although Cynthia appeared to enjoy the book and gain understanding about the story’s plot, she maintained that she “didn’t like the book” at the conclusion of the book club session.

### ***Conclusions***

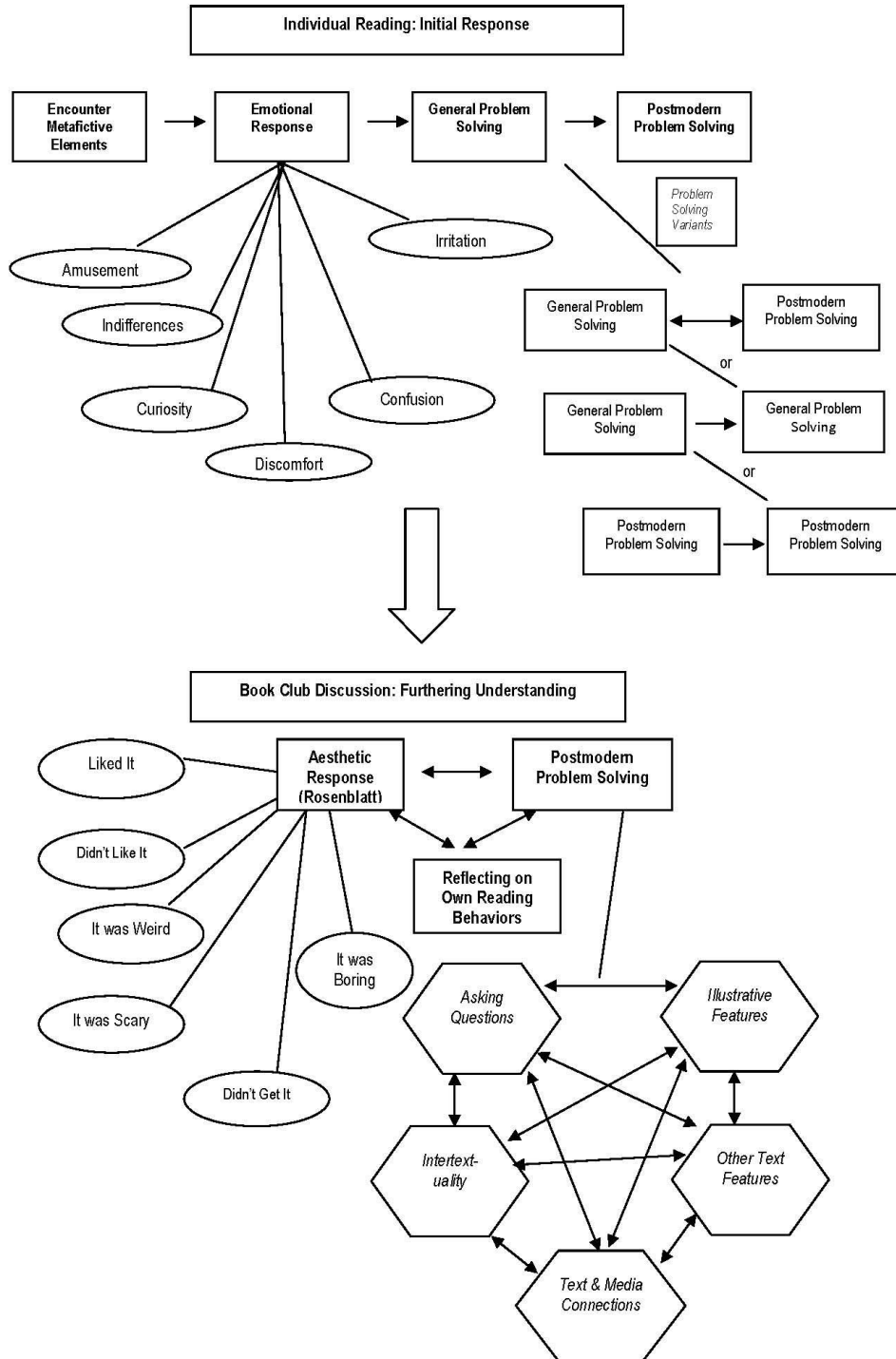
Interpreting and comprehending texts involve highly complex processes that vary greatly depending on the reader, the text, and the situation (Rosenblatt, 1978). While generalizations about how children comprehend postmodern picture books cannot be made, some conclusions can be drawn about how the fourth graders in this study navigated five postmodern picture books (see Figure 5).

Students followed a recognizable pattern by which they navigated the books independently in think aloud sessions: encountering metafictional elements, showing an emotional response, and solving problems. However, there was much variance within the problem solving pattern. When students discussed the postmodern picture books in group settings, a more interactive, dynamic navigation pattern was identified in which participants shared aesthetic responses, reflected on their own reading behaviors, and spent a great deal of time problem solving within the postmodern picture book story world. Participants often used five specific strategies to solve problems: asking questions, pointing out illustrative features, referring to intertextuality, connecting to other texts and media sources, and looking to other text features (such as book flaps and dedication pages). It is also significant to note that the fourth grade students in this study came to further their understanding of each story’s complex plot through the group discussions that followed their individual readings.

### **Final Thoughts**

Many elementary teachers provide support and instruction in traditional narrative story structure and plot, aiding comprehension by teaching students to expect a beginning, middle and end in stories they encounter. Since many contemporary texts for children, including postmodern picture books, do not typically follow this formula (and in fact, defy many other traditional components of traditional picture books), some readers might not be equipped to make sense of these books and may even reject them in frustration. With the present study’s focus on exploring

Figure 5: Model of the postmodern picture book reader.



how children independently navigate postmodern picture books, without direct instruction from an adult about metafictional elements, new information has been made available.

The research on children and postmodern picture books thus far has focused on teaching students the literary devices present in postmodern picture books. However, without support from a teacher, the eight fourth grade students in this study were generally able to navigate and understand five postmodern picture books. They demonstrated a number of emotional responses to the books in both the individual think aloud sessions and in the book clubs. These students furthered their understanding of and appreciation for the complex picture books through their talk with one another in an after-school book club setting.

Further research might focus on the comprehension strategies used by students in this study and how they compare to traditional comprehension strategies that are promoted in classrooms. It might also be insightful to investigate how preservice and inservice teachers navigate postmodern picture books. More information is needed about how teachers respond to these books and how these responses may affect the incorporation of this genre into the curriculum.

The results of this study demonstrate the possibilities of engaging with postmodern picture books, including opportunities to think critically, analyze illustrations, reread for meaning, tolerate and entertain ambiguity and indeterminacy, and discuss texts with peers. As the environment in which children grow up is increasingly characterized by the interactive and nonlinear nature of digital media, it becomes increasingly important to broaden conceptions of text and prepare children to make meaning with various types of texts including nontraditional print texts. The alternative literary and illustrative devices present in postmodern picture books offer unique opportunities for children to be challenged in this manner.

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