Children Reading Picturebooks

Interpreting visual texts
Second edition

Evelyn Arizpe and Morag Styles with a new chapter by Margaret Mackey

With contributions from Helen Bromley, Kathy Coulthard and Kate Noble
This book is dedicated to our dear friend and colleague, Helen Bromley, who was part of the research team and wrote Chapter 5. Helen was an inspirational teacher and researcher who devoted her professional life to children’s literacy and literature. She touched the lives of all who knew her.
Contents

List of illustrations ix
Notes on contributors xi
Preface xiii
Acknowledgements xiv
Introduction: reasons for a second edition of Children Reading Pictures xv

PART I
The original empirical research on children responding to picturebooks 1

1 Research design, methodology and underpinning theory 3

2 On a walk with Lily and Kitamura: how children link words and pictures along the way 16

3 A gorilla with ‘grandpa’s eyes’: how children interpret ironic visual texts – a case study of Zoo 33

4 ‘Letting the story out’: visual encounters with The Tunnel 48

5 Putting yourself in the picture: a question of talk (Helen Bromley) 62

6 ‘The words to say it’: young bilingual learners responding to visual texts (Kathy Coulthard) 75

7 Picturebooks and metaliteracy: children talking about how they read pictures 89

8 Thinking aloud: looking at children drawing in response to picturebooks (Kate Noble) 99
PART II
Theoretical perspectives and new research on children responding to picturebooks 121

9 Theories and frameworks: supporting research on visual literacy 123
10 New research on children responding to picturebooks 134
11 New case studies of children responding to picturebooks 145
12 Digital picturebooks (Margaret Mackey) 169
13 Moving forward on response to picturebooks: implications for research and pedagogy 180

Appendices 189
Bibliography 197
Index 209
Since 2003, a popular module on children responding to picturebooks has been included in the Cambridge Master’s course, Critical Approaches to Children’s Literature. In Glasgow, the MEd in Children’s Literature and Literacies also supports students who choose to write their dissertation on this topic. Several PhD theses have reader response to picturebooks at their core at both universities. Clearly, the range of publications on children reading pictures in the last ten years combined with our own enthusiasm for the topic has rubbed off on those we have taught. In this chapter we look at three varied examples of the research undertaken by students working on our Master’s or doctoral programmes¹ who have shared our ambition to find out more about children’s interpretations of picturebooks.

Our initial research revealed that we often learned more from group discussions and inviting drawings from children than from conventional semi-structured interviews. Since then our students have convinced us that there are many other means of providing evidence of children’s responses to picturebooks by using a variety of data collection methods, including annotating copies of spreads from a picturebook, adding text to blank speech bubbles, games with simple puppets of key characters and dramatic play based on picturebooks.

Indeed, it is encouraging to find that our results of fifteen years ago are largely borne out by more recent student researchers and we believe their results deserve a wider public. To that end, we have selected examples that show children of various ages and abilities engaging with three different picturebooks. Each researcher has selected a focus based on their choice of picturebook, the age of the children² they were working with and their own particular interests. As in our original research, we were impressed by the commitment of the children to the task and the insightfulness of many of their responses. We hope the examples which follow give a flavour of the quality of scholarship going on in our universities and schools relating to children’s responses to picturebooks. Only minor editing, agreed by all, was concerned.

Case 1: Susan Tan³

We begin with an extract from a study by Susan Tan, who was working with three 9-years-olds using Maurice Sendak’s We Are All in the Dumps with Jack and Guy (Dumps) (1993). We chose the following extract from a much longer piece of
work because (i) it shows the emotional impact of a complex picturebook on young readers; (ii) it demonstrates how much information about children’s responses to a text can be provided by asking them to draw; (iii) it is a good example of how well chosen questions and a discerning teacher can elicit profound reactions in young readers; and (iv) it shows how children of this age, while alert to some of the harsh realities of life, need to look for elements of hope in what they read, especially relating to family life.

*Dumps*, among other things, is about homelessness. Susan began by drawing attention to the plain brown endpapers with the texture of cardboard, which you might expect children to link with cardboard shelters of the homeless. Here is Max responding to the request, ‘Tell me about the endpapers’, after two readings of this picturebook:

**MAX:** Just the material, like it’s a bit like card, but then it’s like rough, sandpapery card surface. So maybe it’s a mix of sandpaper and card. [ . . . ]

**INTERVIEWER:** Do you think it connects to the story at all?

**MAX:** Not really. It just might be . . . it just feels weird, so it might be the type of area . . . that it’s like that, maybe it’s rough . . . like . . . like, their lives. Rough like their lives.

First of all, it’s worth noting that Max needs time to say something important. He begins with a negative, ‘Not really’, but then you can almost hear him thinking aloud as he goes beyond an interpretation of the endpapers as similar to the cardboard boxes Jack and Guy live in to make a metaphorical connection between the roughness of the paper and the harshness of the children’s lives. Here is Susan’s account.

Many critiques levelled at *Dumps* argue that it is too graphic for children, yet my participants demonstrated an immediate awareness of the impoverished world Sendak had created, lending credence to Sendak’s own claim that ‘the children know’ (Sendak 1998). When asked what sort of place this was, Oscar simply replied, ‘a dump’. Similarly, as they looked at the cover in the group reading, all three children agreed that the book was about homeless children seeking shelter. The participants demonstrated that they were aware of, and willing to engage with, what Lewis (2001) terms ‘ecology’ within picturebooks – the environment and ‘ecosystems’ created by picturebooks themselves, as well as the series of relationships created by the ‘reading event’ as children encounter texts (p. 46). As they acknowledged the realities of homelessness, the children demonstrated a deep understanding of what Lewis identifies as the ‘social and cultural contexts’ in which ‘language and literacy [are] always embedded’ (p. 47). Commenting on one character in Sendak’s spread, Max remarked:

**MAX:** That guy’s looking a bit sneaky, like a detective, maybe that was his job before.

**INTERVIEWER:** So you think he doesn’t have a job now?

**MAX:** Yeah, that’s probably why he’s homeless.

From the material fact of the children’s homelessness, the students then became what Margaret Meek (1988) terms ‘the teller and the told’ (p. 25), deriving narratives from
the images about the children’s lives on the streets and demonstrating an awareness of what such lives might entail. Max remarked, as Jack and Guy are being flown through the heavens: ‘I wonder why there are all those little angel things up there? . . . I bet it’s all of their friends who have died.’ In this acknowledgment of death and the assumption that Jack and Guy have had friends, presumably other street children, who have died, Max not only tapped eerily into one of the references on this spread – where Sendak pays tribute to the late James Marshall – but demonstrated an all-too accurate understanding of the realities of poverty and homelessness.

But most 9-year-olds can’t face too much harsh reality. Max was not the only child to invent a happy ending for Dumps. Each expressed mixed responses. In separate interviews, both Max and Cora labelled the end of Dumps as a ‘sort-of happy ending’. When asked why, Cora explained that, ‘now Jack and Guy are being nice to the little boy, and the little boy is really happy now that he’s got a friend or something’, but ‘they’re still like homeless, and they still haven’t got much clothes (our emphasis)’. Similarly, Max felt it was ‘sort-of happy, because the boy actually has people to be with, but it’s still not that happy because they don’t actually have a house still. It’s like happy, but not happy (our emphasis)’. Oscar, who was particularly focused on ideas of family and home, even distinguished between ‘home’ and the physical site of a ‘house’ when asked what constituted a happy ending, explaining that the ending was ‘good’ because ‘they’re home and they are happy again,’ but not good ‘because they haven’t got a house . . . like, they live somewhere, but they don’t have a place to live in (our emphasis)’.

After their interviews, I asked the participants to draw a response to the book. All the children decided to include a happy ending in their drawings. Cora drew a vibrant and colourful house in an illustration complete with all three characters, text and a speech-bubble. (Note the positive colours, the pretty butterfly and flowers against a vivid sky, the bright sun, the kisses round the ‘We are happy now’ statement. The importance of ‘We’ve got a home’ is emphasised by a speech bubble, three exclamation marks and a couple of kisses! The smiling children’s arms are raised in a positive salute.)

Compared to Cora’s, Oscar’s illustration of a home is sparse, and did not include Jack, Guy or the little boy. However, in his description of the seemingly simple drawing – featuring a house with three windows and labelled ‘home sweet home’, Oscar revealed a great deal of thought behind the drawing.

OSCAR: It’s the future and they buy a house, and the moon’s smiling.
INTERVIEWER: And the pictures in the windows?
OSCAR: That’s the stairs, and a spare room.
INTERVIEWER: And what about these spots of green on the house?
OSCAR: Mould that they need to clean up.

With his emphasis on ‘stairs’ and his choice to include a ‘spare room’, Oscar created a world of plenty, a home in which all are provided for and extra space abounds. Even further, with his inclusion of ‘mould’ above the windowsills, Oscar created a detailed world of domestic routine, implying longevity, stability and domestic ownership in this tiny detail of a household-chore. But Oscar’s greatest domestic focus was revealed when asked about the figure in one of the windows, a silhouette whom he identified as ‘Jack’s dad: the one with the hat’.
When asked if anyone took care of Jack and Guy, the whole group demonstrated a fascinating unwillingness to consider that children might live without parents. Max decided that ‘they look like they’re about teenagers or adults’, thus old enough to live on their own. Similarly, while Cora posited that ‘they [had] a dad or something to look after them’, even though he was not shown or ever present. Oscar, however, not only maintained that Jack, Guy and the little boy had parents, but took great pains to ‘find’ them in the text. When asked who takes care of Jack and Guy, Oscar promptly flipped the book to the beginning and systematically went through and ‘identified’ parents for all of the children. On one spread, Oscar found the little boy’s mom, and on another, found a pair of feet that could belong to his dad. He found parents for Guy in a similar fashion, and pointed out a man who ‘could be Jack’s dad because they’ve got the same hat’. Continuing to construct Sendak’s storybook world, ‘telling’ the story even as it was ‘told’ (1998: 25) to him, Oscar created a detailed narrative of family, and extended that narrative into his own illustration (Meek 1988). Lessening the harshness of the street-world, he gave Jack, Guy and the little boy parents, and envisioned a happy ending where they could live in their ‘home’ – still together amongst their community, but this time in a house, ‘a place to live in’.

*We Are All in the Dumps with Jack and Guy* is a complex text, which most adult readers would find demanding. It was no surprise, then, that the children interviewed, who only saw the book twice, responded with confusion over certain aspects of the story – often needing to ‘work out’ what was happening. Yet, while the children’s understandings of the complete textual and narrative details may have varied, each child communicated a strong emotional and moral reaction to the book,
not only understanding its social message, but going further to engage deeply with its moral questions and complexities. Drawing from the text, from their knowledge of the outside world, and from their own experiences, the children parsed out the intricacies of Sendak’s human narrative. However, at the same time, each participant demonstrated a fascinating limit to their ability or desire to fully comprehend the implications of Jack and Guy’s social situation. As the children were presented with a cruel and ugly world, and, for the most part, understood this world, they simultaneously worked in the spaces left open by the ‘playful picturebook’ (Lewis 2001: 81), utilising the open-ended nature of counterpoint visual and textual interaction to create their own narratives. Children were given parents, characters were given histories, and moments in-between and beyond the pages of the story were drawn out in vibrant detail. Faced with a text that many call too adult for children to comprehend, the participants embraced most of its gritty intricacies, claiming Sendak’s world and story for their own.

**Case 2: Kim Deakin**

Kim Deakin’s research focused on an 8-year-old autistic boy, Danny, who attended Richmond Hill Special School where she was his teacher. Danny was a great enthusiast for reading and Kim was surprised one day to find him writing and drawing on a picturebook, behaviour that was unusual for him. When she questioned him gently, his excitement was almost palpable. Here is her account of Danny’s encounter with Polly Dunbar’s *Penguin*, a delightful picturebook that explores for young readers what it means to understand another person.
As I turned the page Danny jumped up and down bellowing at the top of his voice, ‘SAY SOMETHING!’ Laughing and pointing to the page of a picturebook he had drawn all over, he continued, ‘Sorry, Kim, Danny, Kim look, LOOK! EATS, LION EAT’S BEN/DANNY!’

This study examines Danny’s exploration of Dunbar’s picturebook and how he used the ambiguities and nuances of the illustrations to give him the time and space to bring his own experiences to the text. The empathy displayed for a fictional character provided a rare glimpse into Danny’s altered perspective on the world. Nikolajeva explains how the interplay between illustrations and words in picturebooks can provide a tool for children to glean an understanding of human emotions from fictional characters, but cautions that ‘mind-reading normally develops at the age of five and is slower or even totally impeded in autistic children’ (2012: 275). Likewise, Martin suggests that ‘The tools of friendship, such as reciprocity, sympathy, and empathy, are a formidable challenge for a child with autism’ (2009: 110).

I began with these questions to help me unravel some of the possibilities:

- How does the interplay between words and images in *Penguin* help Danny explore human emotions?
- How does Danny bring his own experiences to the text?

I felt for this research I required a methodology that would provide a way of recording observations that would ensure validity and robustness. I turned, therefore, to research methods used in early years settings, such as child initiated, free-play, as they better reflected the cognitive and developmental stage Danny displayed.

Reifel draws on research by Paley in which stories, whether through literature or fantasy play, help children to ‘interpret and explain [their] feelings about reality’ (cited in Reifel 2007: 31). Following Reifel’s model, I proposed to capture Danny’s engagement with Dunbar’s picturebook by facilitating three focused but child-led sessions over a two week period, supplemented by observing spontaneous responses that presented themselves during normal classroom activities. The story hinges on Ben’s unhappiness with the unresponsive behaviour of Penguin, until one day Penguin does something extraordinary.

The lack of a setting or background for *Penguin* offers an uncluttered white space which Nikolajeva and Scott suggest ‘reflect the child’s limited experience of the world’ (2001: 63). This minimalistic effect means the reader has no distractions from the images of emotional connection (or disconnection) between the characters.

As Serafini points out, ‘the positioning of objects and characters determines their importance and how viewers react to them’ (2009: 21). Hence, a dual perspective is created between the reader and the characters, enabling the former to enter the imaginary situation and exchange places or to watch subjectively the interplay between the characters as they act out the scenario.

In Figure 11.3, the emotional tension between the characters is demonstrated by their physical distance and gaping white space, while the gutter provides a physical barrier which emphasises how disconnected they are. Ben gets increasingly frustrated by Penguin’s lack of response to his friendly overtures. As his fury hits a crescendo, an enormous speech bubble dominates the centre of the spread, signalling a significant turn in the plot as the face of a disgruntled looking lion creeps in, perhaps a metaphor for an authority figure. However, Penguin becomes the unlikely hero by siding with Ben and biting Lion on the nose (Figure 11.4).
Figure 11.3 Penguin and Ben

Ben ignored Penguin.

Figure 11.4 Penguin and Lion

Penguin ignored Ben.
The twist at the end of the story is shown by the text, ‘And Penguin said . . . ’ (Figure 11.5), where a huge pictorial speech bubble projected from Penguin’s open beak empowers emergent readers to re-tell the story supported by the sequential illustrations and through the ‘voice’ of Penguin. As a consequence Ben is finally able to understand that Penguin, although non-verbal, has become the friend he so desperately wanted at the beginning of the story.

In this picturebook, Dunbar has created a welcoming space for children to explore their own emotions through the perspectives of fictional characters.

Each element of Danny’s communication observed throughout the study was recorded following Reifel’s (2007) model to create a ‘text’ of actions: non-verbal and verbal responses, supplemented by photographs, mark-making and drawings. This enabled me to analyse the effect of the devices Dunbar employed such as space and drama, gaze and perspective, use of language and typography.

Danny’s clandestine mark-making in the picturebook suggest that his connection with Dunbar’s characters and scenarios were intrinsically linked with his own experience so that he was able to enter a fictional world that explored some of the reality of his own life. Danny retrieved information from both word and image; he memorised words, often repeating the refrain, ‘Penguin said nothing’, and his mark-making gave indications of how he was feeling. For example, Danny’s response to Ben’s tantrum sequence can be seen to have triggered a powerful memory of his own.
A whirl of looping lines obliterates the words, *Penguin said nothing* (Figures 11.6 and 11.7). Here we can see the picturebook providing Danny with a vehicle through which he could pause and reflect and show common purpose with the characters – all at his own pace.

Danny also demonstrates self-referentiality, through mark-making (Figure 11.8). Danny’s ‘tadpole’, which he confirmed as a representation of himself by naming it, is placed in-between the physical gaps of Penguin and the action of Ben being eaten by the Lion – literally positioning himself within the fictional scenario. When asked ‘who’s that?’ he jumped up and down with excitement, ‘IT’S DANNY, IT’S DANNY! LION EATS BEN. EATS DANNY!’ Danny felt the need to physically fill
the gap. Indeed, I would suggest Danny’s altered perspective required him to have a literal reference point through his drawings. The zigzag line across the half-eaten Ben and a strong vertical line across Lion perhaps indicate that Danny reckons he is next in line to be eaten, or even acting as protector of Penguin. On subsequent readings when asked ‘who is that?’ his commentary confirms he has adopted Ben’s role, but interestingly has also begun to understand Penguin’s alternative perspective:

Picture, blue, Danny.
Put Ben in the lion.
Danny in the lion.
Watch out penguin!

The impact of Dunbar’s drama of being eaten by a lion intrigued Danny and his marks (Figure 11.9) tracked the process of him being swallowed from mouth to tail, his signature and comments confirming self-referentaility:

Lion’s eaten.
Lion’s he’s eaten Ben.
He’s eaten Danny.

Valuable insight into how Danny identified himself with Ben’s character and how he eventually replaced him was revealed further in his blue and orange felt-pen drawing
New case studies of children responding to picturebooks

155

(see Figure 11.10). Unlike previous marks made across Dunbar’s illustrations, where he seemed content to stand beside Ben, this drawing highlights a shift in perspective and for a time Danny appeared to create a double personality, a mix of himself and Ben. Danny began drawing in the middle of the page using blue loops for Penguin’s face and body with flippers on the left. Unhappy with his first attempt he placed the toy penguin firmly upside-down and changed to an orange pen. With almost palpable concentration he drew the feet at the top followed by body, head and features, finally adding flippers.

Deciding on blue, which, interestingly, he had used throughout the picturebook, following Dunbar’s choice for depicting an imaginary lion (signifying perhaps his understanding of the difference between real and imaginary worlds), he then produced a much more sophisticated schematic representation of a human body; upside-down, with clearly defined legs but no arms. Remarkably, he then drew two faces, one noticeably smiling, enjoying the fun of being upside-down and the other looking on, more serious.

When asked ‘Who’s that?’ he named each face, revealing himself to be the happy boy playing alongside Penguin. This both altered the action in the story, providing an alternative scenario of Penguin joining in and playing, but also clearly showed Danny swapping roles with the unhappy Ben.

Danny confirmed himself firmly within this fictional world later during an ICT lesson. Here (Figure 11.12) purely from memory, he added detail to his orange ‘tadpole’ drawing, representing Lion’s mane and beautifully captured the self-satisfied smile.
as in Dunbar’s illustration. Dunbar’s words, ‘Lion ate Ben for being too noisy’ were paraphrased below the picture, indicating Danny was now replicating Ben’s fate.

Can a picturebook then, as Paley suggests (2005: 15), be the catalyst to provide a vehicle for a child with autism to explore, investigate and reproduce human emotions? Or perhaps, as Kress and Van Leeuwen (2006) suggest, the ‘emotive immediacy’ that visual images provide ‘... allows the viewer to scrutinize the represented characters as though they were specimens in a display case’ (2006: 43). The answer was an overwhelming yes. By instinct, Danny spontaneously demonstrated Paley’s assertion (2005: 57)
that ‘the more complex the thought the greater is the child’s need to view its meaning through play’, accurately mirroring Ben’s facial expressions and gestures as he explored difficult human emotions in a safe environment, giving him the opportunity to enact and understand attempted reciprocal communication. This further enhanced his understanding of both Ben’s and his own puzzling attempts at communication. The futility of Ben’s efforts at reciprocal communication were evident to Danny through Dunbar’s presentation of differing vectors between the characters. As Ben only looked directly out towards the beholder once it offered Danny the opportunity, as Nodelman (2008: 20) suggests, to become more objective and realise that Ben ‘is not seeing everything’. Penguin, however, gazes out from the book at least ten times demanding attention, to which Danny responded on one occasion, ‘Silly Penguin. Says nothing’.

In subsequent readings Danny enjoyed emulating Ben’s ‘dizzy dance’ but commented ‘Penguin didn’t dance’. Although he continued to mimic Ben’s actions throughout the tantrum scene, Danny developed a more objective perspective giving him insights into how Penguin may have felt being subjected to that level of anger. On one memorable occasion, silence descended in the classroom as the adults witnessed Danny suspended in reflection (Figure 11.13). Hogan reminds us of the ambiguous nature of understanding ‘precisely’ (2011: 4) what someone is imagining in response to a story but this pivotal moment appeared to nudge Danny into creating a surprise of his own. He had moved from his introspective, autistic perspective, through Ben’s egocentric frustrations, then experimented with Penguin’s more selfless, altruistic behaviour. Pausing, tracking and commenting on the action, ‘Penguin bit lion’, he suddenly assumed the heroic role of Penguin and with great glee, bit Lion’s nose.

Could it be, as Paley believes, that stories not only allow children to explore complex human emotions within a safe fantasy world but also enable them to transfer that knowledge to the real world? Dunbar certainly invited children to take ownership
of her picturebook and Danny demonstrated the capacity to respond by projecting emotions onto inanimate toys. All the more extraordinary as Wolfberg comments that children with autism ‘rarely produce pretend play by . . . activating dolls as agents’ (1999: 3). Many readers enjoy exploring a fantasy world to escape reality but, paradoxically, Danny, with his altered perspective on life, entered a fictional world to explore reality. Dunbar’s picturebook serves this function for children who are at the faltering beginnings of trying to fathom how relationships work, to learn that they may yet be able to understand themselves and others. Real life is full of emotionally charged situations and other children’s reactions are often fleeting and unpredictable. Picturebook scenarios provide the luxury of space and time to explore, imagine, wonder, think and reflect.

For Danny, the empathetic lessons learnt seem to have become embedded, giving him a promising new perspective when communicating with his peers. Three weeks after my study, Danny, whose normal approach to children new to him often proved unwelcome (such as putting his face much too close to the new child, smelling their skin, touching their mouths, eyes, hair, etc.), was observed smiling as he approached a non-verbal child. Paraphrasing Penguin, Danny was heard to say:

Who’s that?
That’s Sam.
Say hello, say hello to Danny.
No, Sam says nothing.
Sam doesn’t talk.
Ahhhh poor Sam.
Case 3: Jennifer Farrar

Jennifer Farrar’s MEd research project explored some of the links between the aims of critical literacy practices in an early years classroom and the effects of the metafictive devices used in postmodern picturebooks, such as David Wiesner’s *The Three Pigs*. Guided and informed by an understanding that seeks to position the text as a constructed object, Jennifer considered what younger learners’ responses to Wiesner’s text might reveal about their ability to adopt a critical, analytical stance. Using a variety of data collection methods, including literature circles, pupils’ written or drawn responses and verbal annotations of their own work, Jennifer suggests that metafictive devices can provide readers with access to a critical metalanguage by provoking discussions about how and why texts are assembled. This study also demonstrates how picturebooks might be able to inspire or encourage sophisticated critical literacy practices in the early years, both as powerful pedagogic tools offering readers ways of making meaning from the multiple texts that surround them, and enabling young children to question and challenge the status quo in the pursuit of equality and social justice (O’Brien and Comber 2001: 153). Inspired by Pantaleo’s enquiry into Wiesner’s *The Three Pigs* with a similar age group of 5-year-olds (2002), Jennifer set about conducting her own study.

As well as making reference to the decision-making powers of authors, I also repeatedly referred to David Wiesner by name to draw pupils’ attention to the existence of the ‘human’ at the end of the pen. If children can ‘internalise the interactive behaviour of the adult who is reading the story’ (Morrow and Gambrell cited Pantaleo 2002: 72)
then I wondered whether the pupils would notice and replicate my focus on the ‘decisions that authors make’ (Kamler and Comber 1997). I am aware that the use of such an interventionist approach could be interpreted as an attempt to ‘put words into children’s mouths’ (O’Brien 2001: 167). Yet, like O’Brien, I have undertaken this research in the belief that teachers should make it possible for learners to inquire into and, if necessary, challenge the positions taken by texts ‘as well as the sorts of readers . . . they produce in the process’ (p. 167).

My general research question was to ask whether picturebooks containing meta-fictive devices might act as sites for critical literacy and whether this could be detected from pupils’ responses? My analytical approach was informed by the correlation between Luke and Freebody’s decoding and meaning-making resources (1997) and some of the Halliday-inspired categories employed by Farrell, Arizpe and McAdam (2010) to analyse pupils’ annotated spreads.

A sweep through the data recorded during the literature circle sessions suggested that many pupils tended to relate to the text as subject; that is, their comments were linked to narrative development, characters’ feelings, the identification of an interesting illustrative detail or anticipating key aspects of the plot.

[At this point in the Wiesner text, the pigs’ paper aeroplane has crash-landed.]

ALL: Uh-oh!
LEWIS: They crash!
FINN: The wolf looks surprised because he didn’t think he was going to get all crunk-led up.
ABBIE: It’s like an ocean.
ANDREW: The wolf looks like he is in the story now.
LOTTIE: I can see the wolf there . . .
JF: You can still see that the wolf is still in the old story. He hasn’t learned to jump out, has he?
ANDREW: That pig looks like . . . you can’t see the white furry bits . . .
ABBIE: (laughing) Look at his eyes!
ANDREW: L . . . and the paw looks different.
JUDY: I think he’s got off the aeroplane and got all dizzy.

This extract is representative of many of the group discussions: the pupils are not perturbed by the ‘seemingly chaotic narrative’ of the picturebook (Goldstone 2004: 199) and meaning emerges out of this chaos as a result of both individual and shared reading experiences. Andrew, for example, appears focused on discovering links – or inconsistencies – between the ‘old’ story world where the wolf remains, and the ‘new’ world the three pigs jump into; Judy seems to build on Abbie’s comment about the pig’s wonky eyes by providing a reason for them: ‘. . . he’s got off the aeroplane and got all dizzy’; while Finn also suggests a hypothesis for the wolf’s surprised expression.

The nature of these comments seems to confirm Farrell, Arizpe and McAdam’s description of meaning-making as a process, where, during the first stage, readers attempt to anchor or ‘situate the characters and actions’ (2010). Their work suggests that pupils may need to respond to the text-as-subject before being able to move onto more critically focused text-as-object comments. Similarly, Smith describes the stages of the meaning-making process as the accumulation of ‘layers of resonance’, which,
once in place, provide the ‘playground in which meaning is constructed’ (2005: 8). By depicting meaning-making as a many-layered process, both studies seem to suggest the value of re-reading texts, to allow pupils more opportunities to consider the texts from different perspectives.

I attempted to frame my approach to the text as an enquiry into the decisions made by Wiesner, following examples provided by O’Brien and Comber (2001). For example, when discussing the different ways the pigs are drawn in the different story worlds, Abbie incorporated my approach into her answer: ‘Maybe David Wiesner wants us to think you can get the same story but paint it, do it differently.’ Her comment also reveals an understanding of authorial intent and its impact on the reader. During a different group discussion about Wiesner’s use of white space, Lucy said:

Because David Wiesner wanted the . . . there’s some pictures to show that they know, to let the people who are reading the book, to let them know they are flying away and there is going to be no more writing.

Lucy’s initial use of ‘Because David Wiesner . . . ’ is evidence of her willingness to adopt new ways of talking about texts, but as her change of direction mid-sentence reveals, she was uncertain about how to best express her ideas. Helen’s experience was similar:

JF: Why has David Wiesner done that? [Had the wolf blow the pig out of the story.]
HELEN: In all the other stories, people don’t come out of the story and maybe just to make it more interesting he has done it.
Helen’s answer indicates that she wanted to compare *The Three Pigs* to other texts she knows, showing an awareness of generic conventions and the possibility of alternative versions, but she struggled to articulate her ideas. Previous studies have found that students’ expressive potential may be hobbled by their lack of visual grammar or metalanguage, leading to short, non-specific comments such as Helen’s, ‘he wants to make it more interesting’, which may fail to convey the extent of a student’s deeper understanding.

Despite their unfamiliarity with the approach, these examples reveal that some pupils did begin to respond to the text-as-object status by attempting to replicate some of it – including some aspects of the metalanguage I had modelled – in their answers or comments. This supports the idea that pupils will ‘take on the ways with words, or the ways with reading, that the classroom promotes’ (Smith 2005: 23). As a further example, the following response occurred during a discussion about the double-page spread that shows the pigs facing a plethora of story choices. They walk between the pages of different stories, laid out as strings of story boards, which stretch off into the distance, suggesting their breadth and possibility:

JF: Why is David Wiesner trying to show us that there are loads of stories and loads of different decisions?
Rachel: Because we could choose . . . we could pretend that they are in another story.

By linking Wiesner’s depiction of multiple story possibilities with the reader’s ability to choose between them, Rachel alludes to the processes of selection and synthesis that are ‘fundamental’ to making meaning (Rosenblatt 1986: 123). Similarly, her use of ‘pretend’ suggests an understanding of the nature of the relationship between the reader and the fictional text: that the reader must adopt a stance towards the material they encounter (Rosenblatt 1986: 124). Although it is impossible to tell if Rachel would have offered such a response without prompting, it seems reasonable to suggest that either my own stance or Wiesner’s text offered her the possibility of a scaffold or a structure upon which to build (McClay 2000: 100). Of course, some of my Wiesner-focused questions prompted different sorts of answers:

*Figure 11.16 The pigs sniff out new stories (Wiesner 2001)*
New case studies of children responding to picturebooks

JF: Why has David Wiesner done that? Why has he blown the pig out of the story?
IONA: I’m going to catch him! [lots of giggling; pupils pretend to catch the pig in their hands.]

While all of the exchanges, including the above, were interesting and enjoyable, some of the more insightful text-as-object focused comments were clearly prompted by Wiesner’s use of metafictive features. In particular, students responded enthusiastically to the contradictory nature of the verbal/visual relationship (Anstey 2002: 447; Pantaleo 2004b: 231). In the following extract, John refers to the disparity between the written text (which claims the wolf has eaten the pig) and the visual (which shows the pig exiting the story frame) leaving the perplexed wolf looking around hopelessly for his lunch:

JF: Why does it make you laugh?
JOHN: Because they have said two different things about it.
JF: Who has said different things about it? What do you mean?
JOHN: So they have said one thing and then another thing about the same thing.
JF: So you mean that the words tell you one thing and the pictures tell you another?
JOHN: They tell you different things.
JF: So which one is the real story then? How do you make a story if one thing is telling you one thing and another thing tells you something else?
JOHN: You put both in.

Figure 11.17 Breaking boundaries (Wiesner 2001)
John responded by deconstructing what has occurred – the contradiction of the written and visual elements – in order to pinpoint what made it so amusing. In addition, his comment ‘you put both in’ offers an insight into the ‘inner conversation’ (Walsh cited in Farrell, Arizpe and McAdam 2010) that took place when he encountered – and made meaning from – a metafictive device of this type.

Similarly, Rachel’s response to the same device provides a snapshot of her thought processes, showing how she seemed to struggle to decide which mode to place most ‘trust’ in:

JF: How do you make sense of it [the fact that the words say one thing and the pictures another]?
RACHEL: Because the words are right and the pictures are not. No, the picture’s right and the words are not.
JF: How do you decide?
RACHEL: Because I know he didn’t eat it up because the picture looks like [he’s] blowing and [the pig’s] going ‘hey, you blew me right out of the story’!
JF: So if you are reading this . . . how do you know if the words are right or the pictures are right?
RACHEL: Because I made up my mind and I know what it is.
ANNIE: This is just a different version of The Three Pigs.

From this exchange, it seems Rachel’s instinctive reaction was to privilege the written over the visual without question, perhaps because this is in keeping with schooled literacies (Meek 1988), but she changed her mind after consulting the text. Her re-consideration of which mode to prioritise is interesting because it suggests the ‘ecological’, interdependent nature of the relationship between words and images in picturebooks, where a consideration of both is necessary for meaning (Lewis cited in Pantaleo 2011c: 63). In addition, it hints at the power of metafictive devices – such as the indeterminacy created by contradictory words and pictures – to provoke or ‘prod’ readers into paying closer attention or to read the text differently from normal.

By discussing how they made sense of the conflicting words and pictures in Wiesner’s text, both John and Rachel seem to describe something of the transaction between reader and text (Rosenblatt 1986). John’s recommendation that any conflict between words and images could be resolved by ‘imagining it in your head’ suggests an awareness of the way readers utilise their personal context or knowledge in order to make meaning from the ideas presented by the text (Rosenblatt 1986). Similarly, Rachel’s response seems to refer to the individual nature of the meaning-making process. Despite her initial confusion, she was quickly emphatic about the validity of her own interpretation, as her repeated use of ‘I know’ and ‘I made up my mind’ suggests. In a sense, by emphasising the power of her version, Rachel obliquely alludes to the multiple interpretations that are possible from every textual encounter (Anstey 2002), a point that is succinctly reinforced by Annie’s comment about the existence of alternative versions: ‘This is just a different version of The Three Pigs.’

I hoped to gain insights into children’s creation of meaning from images by asking pupils to describe the decisions they had made as authors. Would there be any evidence that Wiesner’s use of metafictive devices had enabled pupils to respond to the text as an object? Would the pupils be able to sustain the text-as-object focus by
considering their own texts as artefacts, and from a critical distance? Finally, from this, could I suggest that pupils had engaged with critical literacy practices?

My initial analysis of the ten pupils’ ‘stories about their stories’ provided a bewildering array of data. Wary of the generalisations that could result from an attempt to assign their responses to categories (Lichtman 2012), particularly when referring to such a small sample size, I read the students’ own texts and transcripts in search of ‘text-as-object’ type responses, as I had done previously. Additionally, I used Pantaleo’s list of metafictive devices (2004b) to help interpret the children’s work, with the wider aim of establishing links to critical literacy practices. In the next section, I attempt to show how they may be linked back to the text or to an example of a critical literacy practice.

Wiesner’s use of metafictive devices in The Three Pigs seems to have inspired some of the children. His ‘jumping out of the story’ technique was used to great effect across a variety of imaginative situations: Lottie’s Goldilocks hopped out to safely avoid the wrath of the returning bears; Nicole’s bored princess was able to jump out of her story into a more exciting location while William’s characters used it both to escape from peril and to stage a comeback. Similarly to Wiesner’s use, where the pigs jump out of the traditional Three Pigs narrative in order to avoid the attentions of the predatory wolf, the pupils also disrupted traditional narrative time and space relationships (Pantaleo 2004) in order to bring about an escape or rescue of some sort. It is hard to tell if the pupils were attracted to the technique because it allowed them to ‘hyperlink’ parts of different stories together, or because it created an emergency exit for characters facing peril. The fact that they incorporated it into their texts shows the ease with which they can absorb aspects of the texts that surround them. In addition, having characters ‘jump out of a story’ draws attention to the fact that the text is a story – an artefact replete with limits or boundaries – that, as Wiesner’s example demonstrates, can be transgressed and redrawn, only differently (Biesta 2005).

Wiesner’s text appears to have inspired other forms of transgression, such as Helen’s mermaid, who was bored by her life because she ‘knew everything’ about it. Instead she wanted to wear a bikini and go surfing in a different part of the ‘very deep sea’. Unlike Rachel, Helen’s narrative doesn’t transgress its temporal or spatial limits. Instead, her text seems to challenge the boundaries of traditional character types. Her use of a bored mermaid is interesting and could perhaps be interpreted as a comment on gender roles and the representation of female characters, yet her treatment of the father/king figure is also significant. Helen described how her king differed from the other storybook kings she knew because he agreed to the surfing, provided the bikini and told the mermaid to be careful: ‘In all the other stories, the kings don’t want the mermaids to go off but I wanted it to be different so I made a different decision.’ From Helen’s explanation, it is clear that she is aware of the author’s role as decision maker and the transformative power this entails, which I interpret as a text-as-object response. By interrupting her knowledge of taken-for-granted assumptions about kings (as inflexible and domineering), she created a character who listens (‘[he’s] a person she goes to talk to’) and takes his daughter’s feelings into account (‘the king knew that she really wanted to go on an adventure’). Yet, to return to the earlier point about the importance of metalanguage (Callow 2008), the critical potential Helen shows appears to be curtailed by her lack of vocabulary for talking about texts. When asked why she wanted to make her text different from ‘all the other stories’ she
referred to, she replied: ‘Because if things are different it is really nice.’ As Arizpe and Styles (2003) suggest, greater knowledge of a technical vocabulary could help pupils like Helen to articulate their responses with greater clarity.

Of course, it is not possible to tell if the authorial decisions Helen took were inspired by examples from Wiesner’s text, yet by asking her to explain them it is possible to trace aspects of the picturebook’s influence. For example, she seems impressed by Wiesner’s decision to tell the tale of The Three Pigs in a way that ‘shatters readers’ expectations’ (Goldstone 2004: 197), instead of revisiting familiar material. She compared the versions of the story she already knew unfavourably with Wiesner’s: ‘In my story [the versions she has at home] . . . they just run to the next house and it is always the same.’ Interestingly, Helen’s interest in Wiesner’s techniques can be traced back to the smaller group sessions, when she reacted with approval and enthusiasm to the way that Wiesner’s characters could jump in and out of different stories: ‘I had never thought of it before and it’s quite a good idea.’

A third and final example comes from William, whose story of the feud between a pig, a wolf and a mouse uses the ‘jumping out of the story’ technique. As his text is predominantly image-based, asking William to comment on it was useful as it enabled me to interpret his own interpretation of the text, rather than simply relying on the results of my own analysis. The value of asking pupils to express and explain the thinking behind their text was underscored by the fact that William was able to point out his use of contesting discourses (Anstey 2002), a feature I had overlooked, presumably due to my adult tendency to privilege the written word and to skip and scan over visual texts, despite my best intentions.

Figure 11.18 William explained that his words and images told different stories
‘The mouse got eaten up by the pig and the wolf.’ Why did you decide to have that happen?

WILLIAM: Because it’s like the story you read but it wasn’t actually real because he . . . blew it out of the story.

JF: So who blew it out of the story?

WILLIAM: The wolf and the pig.

JF: So your words tell us he gets eaten up but does he really?

WILLIAM: No.

JF: Oh, I see, so your pictures are telling us . . .

WILLIAM: . . . like that they were blown out of the story.

JF: So your pictures are different from the words?

WILLIAM: Yes.

JF: That’s interesting. Why did you decide to do that?

WILLIAM: Because . . . you get to see different stories.

Although William’s answers are brief, they also provide evidence of how he appears to have internalised and reconstructed Wiesner’s use of contradictory words and pictures. Like Watson (1993), I felt astonished by William’s insight and annoyed at my failure to immediately recognise what he was doing. By asking him to justify the decisions he had made as an author, I was inviting him to reflect on his own work and hoped that I was creating the means for him to express his thoughts about reading and the production of meaning.

Despite these ambiguities, and the impossibility of separating the power and influence of the metafictive devices from the impact of my role as a facilitator, some of the responses discussed here seem to indicate that pupils were willing to tolerate an approach with a ‘critical edge’ (O’Brien 1994), shown by their willingness to wonder or speculate about why texts have been created in a particular way. As Comber has noted, young children come to school with sophisticated analytical skills: the task for teachers is to help develop them (2001: 171).

I would like to tentatively conclude that postmodern picturebooks have the potential to function as sites of critical literacy practice as Wiesner’s text appears to meet many of the qualities identified by Pantaleo (2004) and Anstey (2002): it is consciously constructed to challenge the reader; its unusual layout and design forces the reader to access the text in a non-linear way; the use of contesting discourses require a heightened level of reader interaction and make multiple readings possible while its non-sequential nature creates ambiguity and indeterminacy (2002: 448).

In common with other studies using metafictive picturebooks, I conclude that texts such as *The Three Pigs* can help to develop new literacies (Anstey 2002: 456; Pantaleo 2004), perhaps because they provide a platform for talking about texts and how they are structured. Many researchers in this field have emphasised the importance of metalanguage to critical analysis (Comber 2001; Arizpe and Styles 2003; Callow 2008) and texts such as Wiesner’s provoke the need for such a vocabulary by drawing attention to the act of authoring. When Goldstone notes that postmodern picturebooks do not ‘blanket the reader with their stories’ (2004: 201), her use of ‘blanket’ is apt because – to extend the metaphor – the reader is not entirely covered up or smothered by the world of the story: there are
‘limbs’ visible and not everything is tucked in snugly. In texts such as *The Three Pigs* we see the edges and may be prompted to ask what they are, why they exist and who decided where they should be.

In agreement with other studies into the critical potential of learners in the early years, I conclude that approaching a text as an object of enquiry, rather than focusing on its subject or content, can provide pupils with the room to distance themselves from texts and view them critically (O’Brien 1994). Additionally, asking pupils to verbally annotate the decisions they have made while constructing their own stories appears to be a useful way of encouraging more classroom talk and thinking about how texts work and how language is used and manipulated by every user, including the pupils themselves.

Running parallel to this could be a similar project with teachers or parents, to introduce (or reacquaint) them with the metafictive devices that postmodern picturebooks contain. Not only would this help to anchor and develop a shared metalanguage both in the classroom and at home, but it might also help to convince adult co-readers that reading picturebooks counts as ‘work’.

**Notes**

1 The ‘students’ have, of course, all given their permission for these extracts to be used and brief biographical details are given.

2 Although our examples are of children aged 5–9, we could have chosen equally interesting research with young people from 10–15 years.

3 After gaining an MPhil and excellent PhD from Cambridge University, Susan returned to USA. She is a Postdoctoral Teaching Fellow at the University of Massachusetts, Boston. She received the 2015 Gish Jen Fellowship for Emerging Writers at The Writers Room of Boston.

4 Kim Deakin gained an MEd from Cambridge University in 2014. Kim was Literacy Co-ordinator at Richmond Hill Special School in Luton. Her Headteacher, Jill Miller, encouraged her to work in the creative way that is evident in this chapter. Kim has since moved to Somerset.

5 Please note that at the request of Danny Wilkinson, his parents and the school, their actual names are given.

6 Jennifer Farrar is an ESRC-funded, final year PhD candidate from the University of Glasgow. Her PhD, which builds on the project described here, explores how parents and their young children respond to the metafictive devices used in a set of picturebooks, including Wiesner’s *The Three Pigs*. Jennifer has worked as a journalist and teaches English at secondary level. Her interest in critical literacy’s role in the early years stage has been sparked by her experiences as a parent of young children.