COCONSTRUCTING MEANING

Interactive Literary Discussions in Kindergarten Read-Alouds

Jessica L. Hoffman

Classroom read-alouds are a context with great potential for higher level literacy instruction in early childhood. To reach this potential, students require teacher support during read-alouds to construct complex meanings from high-quality children’s literature.

Reading aloud to students has long been common practice in early childhood classrooms. Not only is being read to highly engaging for students, but research has demonstrated how reading aloud can promote language and literacy development through interaction among students and teachers about texts. For example, when teachers and students discuss concepts of print while reading, reading aloud can enhance print awareness (Justice, Pullen, & Pence, 2008; Levy, Gong, Hessels, Evans, & Jared, 2006). When they discuss word use, students learn new words and develop their vocabularies (Blewitt, Rump, Shealy, & Cook, 2009; Hargrave & Sénéchal, 2000; Justice, 2002; Mol, Bus, & de Jong, 2009; Silverman, 2007; Wasik & Bond, 2001). And when they discuss elements of the story, story comprehension improves (Dennis & Walter, 1995; Morrow, 1985; Wiseman, 2011; Zucker, Justice, Piasta & Kaderavek, 2010). Reading aloud clearly has many benefits when teachers and students interact and discuss texts.

Nevertheless, if we compare the kinds of literacy learning that reading aloud has tended to emphasize (i.e., print awareness, vocabulary, and story comprehension) with the kinds of literacy practices our changing society demands (i.e., interpretive and critical reading), even the most effective strategies such as those listed in the preceding paragraph fall short. Although certainly beneficial, very basic foci such as print, vocabulary, and story comprehension are not enough: Literacy involves much more than features of print, word meanings, and story grammars. Although longitudinal data make clear that levels of literacy achievement have not changed significantly over time (National Center for Education Statistics, 2009), requirements for full participation in our society have changed, and demands for new literacies necessitate a focus on interpretive, critical literacy.

Jessica L. Hoffman is an Assistant Professor of Teacher Education at Miami University, Oxford, Ohio, USA; e-mail hoffmajl@muohio.edu.
meaning construction (Coiro, Knobel, Lankshear, & Leu, 2008).

This article presents how one researcher and a kindergarten teacher worked together to redesign reading aloud as a classroom practice, to focus on higher level literacy practices to meet 21st century literacy demands. I define higher level literacy practices as those focused on actively constructing meaning through analysis, interpretation, and critical thinking, resulting in interpretations of text, rather than comprehension of literal-level content explicitly in text. For example, recalling character names in a story would be considered a low-level literacy practice, because that information is explicit, leaving little room for interpretation. In contrast, interpreting character motivations would be a higher level literacy practice, because the reader must analyze the information explicitly in the text and synthesize it with her own knowledge and experience to construct meaning that is interpretive and goes beyond the text itself.

In this article, I begin with a brief overview of reading aloud as it is commonly practiced, followed by a review of studies that have successfully infused higher level literacy practices in early childhood instruction. Then, I outline our collaborative design process, our resulting instructional design for reading aloud, and considerations for application in other settings.

What Do Early Childhood Classroom Read-Alouds Typically Look Like?

In general, early childhood classroom read-alouds have been characterized as common practice, and one highly valued by teachers, but also lacking emphasis on or substance in the discussion of texts (Beck & McKeown, 2001; Dickinson, 2001). In a 1993 The Reading Teacher article, Hoffman, Roser, and Battle described the “modal,” or average, read-aloud experience from their data on 537 classroom observations:

The classroom teacher reads to students from a trade book for a period between 10 and 20 minutes. The chosen literature is not connected to a unit of study in the classroom. The amount of discussion related to the book takes fewer than 5 minutes, including talk before and after the reading. (p. 500)

More recently, Beck and McKeown (2001) found that teachers tended not to engage children in discussing major story ideas and that the two most common approaches to comprehension supports were highly ineffective. Dickinson (2001) also reported that most teachers did not approach book reading in an “intentional manner” (p. 201). As Teale (2003) stated in his account of the history of reading aloud, “[studies] converge to indicate that the typical read aloud leaves much to be desired” (p. 123).

What Can Classroom Read-Alouds Be?

Research focused on literary understandings (as opposed to research on reading aloud as instructional practice reviewed earlier) have found that children are entirely capable of engaging in higher level literacy practices when their meaning making is facilitated by teacher supports and interactive discussion. Examples include studies of critical literacy (Vasquez, 2010), multiliteracies (Crafton, Brennan, & Silvers, 2007), and literary analysis and response (Eeds & Wells, 1989; Pantaleo, 2004a, 2004b; Sipe, 2000, 2008).

These studies of higher level literacy instruction have two common elements: the form of the discourse is interactive discussion, allowing for freer student talk than is observed in a traditional three-turn teacher initiation, student response, teacher evaluation (IRE) pattern (Cazden, 2001), and the focus of discussion is on interpretive meaning, rather than literal level comprehension.

Making It Happen in a “Typical” Kindergarten Classroom

Although the work of researchers reviewed earlier is valuable in terms...
of exploring the possibilities of young children’s interpretative efforts, many of these studies were limited to descriptions of students’ responses, without systematic analysis of the teacher talk required to support such responses. In addition, many only studied teachers (or researchers) already expert in children’s literature and literary discussion (Pantaleo, 2004a, 2004b; Sipe, 2000, 2008), rather than investigating how such instruction might be brought about with teachers novice in the practice. Therefore, this study explored how a teacher with no experience in higher level literacy instruction infused such practices into her classroom read-alouds.

The teacher and I met when I facilitated professional development (PD) for preschool teachers in her school. During this time, she expressed an interest in PD specifically related to early literacy instruction, because she felt her schoolwide PD opportunities failed to support her professional goals as a kindergarten teacher. She was also dissatisfied with the basic skills focus of the school-adopted literacy program. To address her professional needs and based on previous research on higher level literacies in read-alouds, we established the following PD goals for the teacher’s instruction and for students’ responses to literature during read-alouds: (1) to change the form of teacher and student talk from mostly IRE to interactive discussion, and (2) to shift the focus of discussion from mostly literal-level foci on what is explicitly in the text to higher level interpretative meaning.

Why Interactive Discussion?
Interactive discussion is crucial to meaning making with texts because meaning construction is dependent on social interaction and language (Vygotsky, 1978). Interactive discussions provide much-needed “meaning-space” for children to explore tentative understandings (McGee, 1995 [drawing on Corcoran, 1987]). In addition, how teachers interact with students makes a difference. Wells (1995) reported that when teachers controlled talk, they tended to guide meaning toward their own interpretations, but when they acted as participants in discussions with students, meaning tended to be collaboratively constructed. These and other researchers (e.g., Sipe, 2008) agree that when students are encouraged to respond freely, meaning making profits from insights of young children that would never have surfaced if they were only permitted to respond to teacher questions.

Why Interpretive Meaning Making?
Comprehension of the literal information in texts is of course important. However, good readers do much more than take in the literal—they analyze meaning to identify and pull out important pieces of information, synthesize that meaning with their own background knowledge and experience, and interpret meaning from their unique perspectives. As Rosenblatt (1978) explained, reading is a transaction in which meaning is negotiated by both the text and reader. Not all readers do this naturally, especially inexperienced readers, but readers can be apprenticed into interpretive approaches to text, which can better prepare them for higher level literacy demands. This study focused on interpretive meaning as literary understandings, based on the work of Sipe (2000, 2008). Sipe’s (2008) theory of literary understanding of young children described five types of literary responses:

1. Analytical—treat the text as “an object of analysis and interpretation” (p. 264)
2. Intertextual—relate the text to other texts
3. Personal—connect the text to the reader’s personal life
4. Transparent—represent intense involvement with the narrative world of the story (i.e., the student is lost in the book experience)
“A broader definition of meaning as interpretation rather than only comprehension.”

5. Performative—manipulate the text (i.e., the reader brings the text into the real world by acting out some aspect of it).

These categories of response exemplify a broader definition of meaning as interpretation rather than only comprehension while also illustrating the higher level thinking inherent in the demands of literary discussion, thus framing our goals for types of literary response to support in interactions with students.

Our Collaborative Design Process

Context and Participants
I collaborated with a kindergarten teacher in a charter school in a large urban district, Ms. Maddox. Ms. Maddox is a young African American woman, with a bachelor’s degree in education. She was in her eighth year of teaching and had 5 years of experience teaching kindergarten, all at this particular school. Ms. Maddox had no previous experience in higher level literacy instruction.

Her class of 22 students was 100% African American and received free or reduced lunch. The students lived in the charter school’s surrounding neighborhood, which was predominately low-income, but they tended to have higher percentages of working parents than students in the neighboring public schools. All teacher and student names are pseudonyms.

Professional Development
The teacher and I met in group PD sessions monthly for 6 months, 1.5 hours each, each with a different focus (e.g., interpreting literary constructs in text, intentional questioning and response). The teacher volunteered her time to participate in the PD; there was no course credit, and she still attended all of her school-sponsored PD sessions. As compensation, she received the collection of children’s literature used in the study as a permanent contribution to her classroom library.

The goal of PD was to design instructional supports, which are strategic moves by a teacher (usually through discourse) that provide opportunities for students to engage in new practices with high chances for success. PD sessions were broken into collaborative learning activities based on the cycle of instruction: reflect, plan, teach, assess. Prior to each PD, we read a selection of professional literature. At the PD session, we first reviewed and discussed the reading to build background knowledge to inform our reflection. We then reflected on our instructional design through collaborative video and transcript analysis of teacher instructional supports to identify those that best supported students’ attempts at interpretative meaning making and those that could be improved through refinements. Finally, we planned revised instructional supports for the next read-alouds, drawing on reflections to plan future instruction. Ms. Maddox then taught the subsequent read-alouds and assessed student progress informally during the read-aloud as well as more formally through video analysis in the next PD.

Instructional Materials
The teacher read only picture books because of their prevalence in literature for young children, their ability to support the decontextualized language of the text with the visual context of the illustrations, and their opportunities for complex multimodal meaning making (Sipe, 1998). Consistent with Sipe’s definition of the picture book, throughout this article the word text refers to the synergistic meaning constructed through both the language and the images of the picture book, a literary art form composed and interpreted as a holistic piece. I worked closely with two internationally recognized experts in children’s literature to choose books on the basis of their inclusion of the following:

- A narrative story structure (to support literary discussion; other forms of text were read by the teacher for other purposes)
- Complex ideas worthy of discussion
- Rich, descriptive language
Artful incorporation of text and illustrations that support *transmediation*, in which the meaning from the text and the meaning from the illustrations are interconnected in a way that results in a sum greater than its parts (Sipe, 1998)

A book length that could be read in its entirety in 20 to 30 minutes, including discussion

A selection of books was presented to the teacher, from which she chose the texts to read to her class (see Table). All books were read aloud to the class at least twice to allow interpretive meaning making to develop over repeated readings of the text, a well-documented practice (Dennis & Walter, 1995; Martinez & Roser, 1985; McGee & Schickedanz, 2007).

### Table: Children's Literature Selected for This Study

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Author</th>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Publisher</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

The Resulting Design: Instructional Supports for Interactive Literary Discussion

Across iterations of redesign through six PD sessions, we developed four effective instructional supports for interactive literary discussion related to the two goals of the study: building interactive discussion and interpretive meaning making.

**Instructional Support 1: Encouraging Student Talk to Build Interaction**

In response to the goal for interactive discussion, after beginning PD, Ms. Maddox designed and taught her students procedures for their participation during read-alouds, assuming that the transition from requiring students to raise hands to encouraging free participation would be a chaotic one. She decided to allow students to talk at will during the read-aloud, but in a quiet voice. Then, if the teacher initiated discussion with a question, the students were to raise their hands. But instead, she almost immediately allowed students to freely answer questions, ask questions, and make responses at any point during her read-alouds. This simple change to her read-aloud routine provided the much-needed meaning space (McGee, 1995) for children to offer and explore interpretations of texts with their peers, live in the meaning-making process.

The classroom climate appeared to already have established a clear goal for all instruction—to participate and learn—and therefore the transition to interactive discussion was not a difficult one for Ms. Maddox and her class. There were of course times when many students responded at once to particularly exciting points in the text or in divisive discussions. For example, while reading *Zinnia and Dot* (Ernst, 1992), a story of two hens trying to hatch one egg, several students repeatedly spoke over each other to explain an event in the story.

**Dion:** Ms., Ms. Maddox they fussin’ and fightin’....

**Gregory:** They rivals!...

**Student:** They arguin’. [all talking at same time]

**Jennifer:** Ms., Ms. Maddox that’s what rivals mean!

**Dion:** They’re fussin’ and fightin’.

**Danny:** I don’t agree.

**Ms. Maddox:** Well, one at a time.... So you don’t agree with Jennifer, Danny? [many students talking at once]... OK, so let’s... Jennifer, what did you say?
Jennifer: That what rivals mean, like when they want their eggs to be like the prettiest.... I have friends like that.

Ms. Maddox: Uh-huh.

Jennifer: They [my friends] think their pets is like cuter, but they [Zinnia and Dot] think their eggs are like the most precious...

Ms. Maddox: Oh, OK.

Danny: They’re supposed to sit on them. [disagreeing with the interpretation of the event]

When students’ simultaneous sharing interrupted meaning making, Ms. Maddox focused on getting back to the significance of the ongoing discussion, saying, as in the example above, “Jennifer, what did you say?” or, at other times, the quick and effective, “Let’s get ourselves together.” These simple management moves communicated to students that the purpose of free participation was collaboration in meaning making, so when too many speakers shared at once, she focused on the need to hear others’ contributions, rather than on controlling students’ ways of communicating with strict procedures for participation (e.g., raising hands).

Instructional Support 2: Strategic Use of Reconstruction of Meaning

In her initial efforts to foster interactive discussion, Ms. Maddox tended to overly rely on encouraging student responses by repeating and affirming contributions, but was hesitant to build from students’ (mis)interpretations. The following excerpt is from Ms. Maddox’s second reading of Seven Blind Mice (Young, 1992), a story about blind mice who each feel separate parts of a gray elephant and imagine what they feel to be different, but similarly shaped objects (e.g., one imagines the trunk is a green snake). Several students expressed misconceptions about the literal-level meaning of the book, which still persisted after the first reading of this book, but Ms. Maddox only acknowledged their responses and moved on to other students; she searched for a “correct” answer from the next student, without working with students to reconstruct their misunderstandings.

Ms. Maddox: Who can tell me what they remember about the book? Dion.

Dion: They [mice] turn everything different colors and they now found out what it was.

Ms. Maddox: So Dion said that they turn everything different colors. Does anyone else have a different answer? What they remember about the book? Scott.

Scott: They was going to check out what was in the elephant.

Ms. Maddox: What was in the elephant? And one more.

Scott: It was in a snake. It was a snake.

Ms. Maddox: It was a snake? We’ll see. Jazmyn, what do you remember about, something different from what Dion said?...

In this transcript, Dion’s and Scott’s contributions represented complete misinterpretations, and their sharing of them without any reconstructive effort from the teacher only perpetuated the misunderstanding for the class across two readings of this text. Although encouragement of student ideas is important to creating an interactive climate, relying inappropriately on encouragement can and did lead to unaddressed misinterpretations.

In PD, Ms. Maddox and I explored the issue of students’ misconceptions, concluding that although there is much room in literary discussion for different but equally valid interpretations, that does not mean that any and all interpretations are equally valid. So when a student’s response is clearly misinterpreting central meaning that is more literal and explicit, it is detrimental to their experience of the book to not reconstruct that meaning with them. After this PD session early in intervention, Ms. Maddox demonstrated intentional efforts to reconstruct students’ responses. For example, in her second reading of Poinsettia and Her Family (Bond, 1985), Ms. Maddox asked a question aimed at identifying the motivation for Poinsettia’s action (which...
had been presented fairly explicitly in
the story), to which a student replied
with only a description of Poinsettia’s
behavior. Instead of searching for another
response, Ms. Maddox worked with the
student through additional prompting to
reconstruct his response (in bold).

Text: She pinched a brother,stepped on a sister...
Ms. Maddox: Why is she doing all this? ... Why do you think she
pinched her brother?
Dylan: ’Cause she was mean to them.
Ms. Maddox: ... Yeah, she is mean for
pinching, but why, what is the reason that you
think she pinched him?
Dylan: ’Cause he was sitting in his favorite sister’s chair.
Ms. Maddox: Good job Dylan, ... ’Cause I can remember in the
book when he was curled up in her favorite seat,
and Dylan just made

that connection. So, she
pinched her brother,
because her brother was
sitting in her favorite place
to read.

Here we see that Ms. Maddox did
not “fish” for a correct response from
another student, but instead prompted
Dylan with a refined question to support
him in reconstructing his understanding.
This is an example of Ms. Maddox’s
strategic use of reconstructive talk
to intentionally scaffold students’
construction of meaning in the text that
was more definite and less negotiable.

**Instructional Support 3: Strategic Use of Coconstruction of Meaning**

To achieve our goal of truly interpretive
meaning making, Ms. Maddox had
to move beyond reconstruction of
literal meanings with students toward
cocoonstruction, in which meaning was
constructed through the discussion itself.
The difference between the two forms
discourse is perhaps best illustrated
by contrasting the preceding example
of reconstruction with the example that
follows. In this excerpt, Ms. Maddox read
Janela’s Dress (Daly, 1999), a story of a girl
who unwittingly destroys her mother’s
brand new fabric, focusing on a page
depicting Janela in the streets of her town,
wrapped in the material she has fashioned
like a dress, while Janela’s dog (Taxi) is
pulling on the material with his teeth,
with a myriad of mischief surrounding her.

Notice the negotiation of meaning in bold.

James: Taxi ate it.
Ms. Maddox: Taxi, well I think it was
torn because Taxi was
what?
Dion: Pullin’ it!
Ms. Maddox: He was pulling it with
his teeth.

**Gregory:** He was trying to help.
He was trying to help!

**Ms. Maddox:** I don’t think Taxi was
trying to help. I think
with all the excitement—

**Student:** He was trying to pull it!
**Student:** He was trying to eat it.

**Gregory:** I think he [Taxi] was
trying to help because
the boy ran over the
material.

**Ms. Maddox:** Oh, that’s a good
observation!

**Kia:** I think he [Taxi] was
trying to take it away
from him [the boy on the
bike].

**Ms. Maddox:** Gregory said, maybe
Taxi was probably trying
to help Janela save
the dress because Taxi
probably noticed that the
boy was on there so he
probably was trying to
pull it.

**Students:** So she... To get it out.

**Ms. Maddox:** To get it away from under
the bike. That’s a good
observation, Gregory. I
didn’t think of that.

In this excerpt, Ms. Maddox and the
students were discussing interpretations
of the illustration showing Taxi the dog
pulling on Janela’s material, initially
interpreted as Taxi contributing to the
destruction of the material. However,
Gregory then initiated the idea that Taxi
was trying to help Janela by pulling
the material away from another source
of trouble, an interpretation that was
first rejected by both the teacher and
other students, but then ultimately
taken up by multiple participants, jointly
authored by Gregory, Kia, Ms. Maddox,
and other students contributing to the
discussion. Even though Ms. Maddox's first inclination was to try to reconstruct Gregory's meaning to match her own interpretation, she changed her mind, acquiesced that control, and achieved a truly coconstructed interpretation of text and image with her students.

**How Did She Do That?** In our analysis we identified two necessary components for coconstruction: capitalizing on student-initiated responses and the use of follow-up questioning to guide the meaning-making process across multiple participants' contributions. Simply by allowing and encouraging students to freely respond during the read-aloud, Ms. Maddox achieved an increase in student-initiated responses (student talk other than responses to a teacher question, such as bringing up a new idea, or responding to another's comment without prompting). However, only encouraging free response was not enough to support coconstruction. Read-aloud discussions with free student participation in another teacher's class in the larger study demonstrated how young students offered a series of unrelated questions and comments at a break in the reading of the text, which resulted in more student-initiated talk, but not coconstruction. To achieve coconstructive discussion, young students need to learn how to pursue one topic in more extended discussion, as in the talk in Ms. Maddox's class.

To turn student-initiated responses into coconstructive meaning making, the teacher must guide students to build on responses, and Ms. Maddox did just that through her use of follow-up questioning. This excerpt of a second reading of *Duck and Goose* (Hills, 2006) illustrates Ms. Maddox's use of follow-up questioning; see next how she paused to discuss two characters' emotions during an argument occurring in the story (questioning in bold):

Ms. Maddox: *We said yesterday that their faces looked like they were kind of what?*

Students: Mad.

Dion: But the yellow one [Duck] was mad and the black one [Goose] wasn't. Because, because the black one was yelling and the other one was not.

Ms. Maddox: So, we said that the duck appears to be mad, but what does Goose's face look like it appears to be?

Gregory: He look like he's bored.

James: He look like he's trying to be sad.

Jennifer: He looks like, he's saying like “sorry,” but he has a sad face.

Ms. Maddox: So he looks...kind of like you put your head down [demonstrating] and say, “Sorry,” you know. Oh, that's a good one. **Anybody agree with Jennifer?**

James: Yes, and I do that to my daddy sometimes. I be like [making expression].

Ms. Maddox: **Why do you agree with Jennifer that he looks like he's trying to put his head down and say that he's sorry?**

Steven: He didn't mean to do it.

Ms. Maddox: He didn't mean to do it.

Here, Ms. Maddox used a responsive blend of questioning and prompting for students to respond to each other, reconstruction of student ideas, and some simple encouragement of student contributions. In the end, Ms. Maddox's questioning created an interactive discussion that scaffolded students' interpretive efforts and coconstructed the meaning of the text and illustration portraying the characters' emotions through the discussion of them, instead of communicating that the meaning resides in the book or the teacher.

**Instructional Support 4: Shifting Focus From Literal to Interpretive**

The second goal for our instructional design was to shift the focus of talk in read-aloud discussions from literal meaning of the text toward interpretive meaning. To do so, Ms. Maddox and I preread, analyzed, and planned discussion points for the children's literature read-aloud to prepare to engage students in higher level meaning making. When she read aloud, Ms. Maddox emphasized a few literary elements central to each text during the read-aloud, but she did not focus exclusively on those preidentified elements and instead drew on the children's multiple responses to the text as an authentic part of the meaning-making process. Therefore, they analyzed characters and personalized, made intertextual connections and interpreted symbolism, resulting in complex interpretations of texts, rather than engaging in a “lesson” on interpreting symbolism, for example.

Once Ms. Maddox shifted toward interpretation of texts, the class's discussions began to include higher level foci as a necessary part of interpreting quality literature. For example, when the class read *Beautiful Blackbird* (Bryan, 2003), a highly symbolic text addressing issues of race, culture, and society, Ms. Maddox intentionally prompted students' thinking about the symbolic meanings to fully appreciate the text.
Arguably very few kindergartners are capable of independently interpreting abstract literary symbolism, as evidenced after the first reading of this text, when this class summarized it as, “[The birds] were all different colors at the first part, and then they want to be black,” and “The blackbird painted the gray bird black.” However, the kindergartners in Ms. Maddox’s class were very capable of participating in scaffolded discussions of symbolism, as in this excerpt from the second reading, in which they discussed the meaning of the blackbird:

Text: A long time ago, the birds of Africa were all colors of the rainbow...clean, clear colors from head to tail. Oh so pretty, pretty, pretty!

Ms. Maddox: Remember that we said Africa was a continent. Do you remember that? Do you know what the people look like who live in Africa?

Jennifer: They’re black like us, and they wear this stuff on their, they wear this hat on their hair...

Ms. Maddox: Now, remember we said that Blackbird was in Africa and Jennifer said that people in Africa look like we do, so what do you think Blackbird represents?


Jennifer: Us.

Ms. Maddox: Yeah, he might look like us. He might represent who we are, OK?

Text: Birds flew in from all over. With a flip-flop-flapping of their wings.

Ms. Maddox: So when birds flew from all over, if Blackbird is from Africa, and they flew in from all over... all these different birds represent people that are what? [extended discussion in which children state the birds may come from different homes (e.g., grass, trees), different states (of the United States)]

Ms. Maddox: Or different what? What do you see? ...

Steven: Colors!

Ms. Maddox: Oh, Steven, good job! These birds might represent people that are different what, Steven?

Steven: Colors.

Ms. Maddox: People that are different colors.

This excerpt demonstrates how Ms. Maddox engaged her kindergartners in a level of interpretation of this story that they would almost certainly miss without her guidance. Although most of the interpretive content was modeled by Ms. Maddox, and thus this excerpt is less coconstructive than the previous example, Ms. Maddox clearly made efforts to engage children in the meaning-making process. Here, she assumed the role of orchestrator, rather than facilitator, in response to her students’ needs. Although the kindergartners in Ms. Maddox’s class were capable of more independently interpreting more concrete ideas, like the interpretation of character motivation seen in the previous excerpt, they often struggled to contribute as independently in discussions of more abstract literary elements, such as theme or symbolism. Therefore, at times when the interpretive effort Ms. Maddox desired seemed beyond her students’ reach, rather than abandon it as too complex for kindergarteners, Ms. Maddox more heavily scaffolded students’ meaning making. This excerpt exemplifies Ms. Maddox’s efforts to lead her students through a process of thinking about symbolism, supporting them step by step to accumulate and piece together clues from the text, the images, and background knowledge to actively construct the meaning.

Putting It All Together: A Visual Model of Coconstruction and Interpretative Meaning Making

First of all, it is important to reiterate that multiple forms of teacher discourse are necessary to achieve interactive read-aloud discussions like Ms. Maddox’s. Teachers will need to simply encourage student responses at times, and responses more related to literal meaning will require reconstructive efforts by the teacher. But although several forms of talk may be present during interactive discussions, an overall emphasis on coconstruction appeared specifically supportive of interpretive meaning making and, vice versa, coconstructing meaning required

“Overall emphasis on coconstruction appeared specifically supportive of interpretive meaning making.”
points to discuss that were open to multiple interpretations.

Analyses of discourse patterns highlighted the ways Ms. Maddox guided coconstruction to support student interpretive meaning making. As depicted in the Figure, this instructional approach is distinct from an IRE model of discourse (Cazden, 2001) because either the student or the teacher can initiate discussion, and multiple participants may respond at once and to each other. Also, in this approach the teacher does not end the turns with an evaluation, but rather builds from student responses to construct more refined meanings. In coconstruction, the teacher analyzed the student response(s) for clarity, completeness, and/or depth and, if more refined meaning could be constructed, prompted the students with a question or comment. Thus she contributed to the process, but supported students to coconstruct more developed interpretations. This cycle could occur over and over, as observed in long discussions comprising dozens of contributions in Ms. Maddox’s read-alouds. The cycle ended when either the meaning constructed was clear and complete enough that the teacher acknowledged or praised the work, or the meaning was constructed over so many contributions that she felt compelled to summarize the coconstructed product for students. Obviously live discourse interactions are more complex than the simplified model illustrated here; however, this model proved effective for Ms. Maddox in guiding her overall approach to responses to students during interactive discussion to create a more coconstructive environment.

**Coconstructing interpretive meaning may simply take more time than supporting literal understandings of the text, requiring longer discussions of each response to fully construct meaning.**

---

**About the Texts You Read**

When we consider reading aloud an instructional strategy to support higher level literacy development, the text matters. To have the opportunity for complex meaning making, we must read a text that warrants and demands deep levels of processing. Generally speaking, if the text comprises mostly literal, predictable content readily understood by students with little room for multiple interpretations, it will not be strong enough to drive meaningful interpretive discussion. When choosing narrative literature such as that used in this study, teachers should look for texts with complex ideas worthy of discussion, well developed characters, rich and complex language use, and artful integration of visuals, as described previously (see Table).

**Extending the Read-Aloud and Discussion**

As Ms. Maddox infused interactive discussion and interpretive meaning making in her read-alouds, we observed two related changes. First, her read-aloud sessions grew longer, from approximately 23 to 30 minutes. Second, lengths of discussions within the read-aloud also expanded (increased 45%). It appeared that coconstructing interpretive meaning may simply take more time than supporting literal understandings of the text, requiring longer discussions of each response to
fully construct meaning and resulting in longer read-aloud sessions overall.

**Cultural Considerations**

Interpretation and discourse are both related to culture, and so it is important to recognize the role culture plays in students’ interpretation and discussion. In Ms. Maddox’s class, for example, she shared aspects of cultural identity and primary discourse with her students because they were all African American. Ms. Maddox may have benefited from some shared cultural perspectives in interpreting student responses, but that is not to say that a teacher must share a cultural identity with students to engage in interpretive interactive discussions. What is necessary (and what Ms. Maddox demonstrated) is for teachers to strive to understand students’ unique perspectives, be open to interpretations other than their own, and free students from expectations that they communicate in a particular discourse in their interpretive and interactive efforts. The more open, accepting, and encouraging the teacher can be of ideas and ways of expressing them, the freer students will feel to offer insights, and the richer coconstructed interpretations will be.

**Summary**

In this age of digital and multiliteracies, there are increasing demands for interpretive critical thinking in interactions with texts of all kinds. We can begin to foster these higher level literacy practices with children in instruction, and one authentic context is the classroom read-aloud. Through our work across 1 year with a kindergarten class, we redesigned instruction for the classroom read-aloud to incorporate more interactive discussion focused on interpretive meaning and demonstrated the possibility for higher level literacy instruction with a teacher who had never shared literature in this way. We found that instructional supports aimed at coconstructing meaning with students that supported their meaning making through questioning best supported interpretive meaning making. Coconstructed responses to literature resulted in much higher level interpretations of text during read-alouds. Through this process, teachers and students can shift understandings of “meaning” from something preexisting in texts to something constructed through texts, themselves, and others.

**REFERENCES**


**TAKE ACTION!**

To begin coconstructive interpretive discussions during read-alouds, follow these steps:

1. Choose high-quality children’s literature, complex enough to warrant discussion.
2. Preread books before reading with students, so you have some ideas of points that will support deep discussion.
3. Redesign read-aloud routines to encourage free student participation throughout the reading, instead of relying and enforcing hand raising.
4. Plan for and support the extra time needed during the read-aloud to discuss the text (including illustrations).
5. Guide students’ meaning-making efforts to respond to the text, to you, and to each other to more deeply pursue one topic for longer lengths of time, rather than allowing several disconnected contributions during breaks for discussion.
6. Focus on truly interpretive points in the text—those that are open to multiple valid interpretations from differing perspectives.
7. Enjoy the process! Teachers who truly marvel at children’s meaning making more effectively create classroom environments that value and support coconstruction.

www.reading.org


