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Why Aren’t All Books Happy?

Laura Purdie Salas

I am not a happy book
That’s not the part that was written for me

When you read me,
your stomach churns like a cement truck
while I show you dark parts of life
you might not want to know

parents who leave, friends who die, darkness that shadows a life

—or—even worse—
parts of life you already
know about because
you are living through it
feeling alone

and that is my lot in life
to hold your hand as it holds me
and absorb your tears
that fall on my pages

and show you how to survive

happy books are invited to
birthday parties and
get passed from kid to kid

but I am satisfied to be the
book that you read under the covers
with sunrise
dawning in your eyes
Former teacher Laura Purdie Salas has written more than 125 books for kids, including the Can Be . . . series (Bank Street Best Books, IRA Teachers’ Choice), BookSpeak! (Minnesota Book Award, NCTE Notable), and If You Were the Moon. Laura shares inspiration and practical tips with educators about poetry, nonfiction, and more. Visit Laura at laurasalas.com.
An Open Letter to Teacher Heroes

Sheryl Lain

Dear Fellow Teachers,

I do not have to know you personally to know you are heroes. I’ve seen you teach with focus and grace. You’ve taught kids how to write and prove a hypothesis; you’ve taught them how to read stories that change their lives; you’ve taught them how to solve for $x$.

I have watched you keep the delicate balance between being a teacher with knowledge and skills and a warm person who sees potential in every single student. Goethe spoke of potential. He said that when you look at people and reflect what they are, that’s all you’ll get—what they are. But when you look at people and reflect what they might be, you open up the doors of their futures. That’s what you do. You teach with both your mind and your heart, and kids can see their potential reflected in your eyes when you look at them.

You will live in the memories of your students. In first grade I had Mrs. Shabbot. She had silver hair that she wore in a braided circlet on the top of her head. She had vivid, almost violet blue eyes. Mrs. Shabbot taught all of us to read—town kids and farm kids, rich kids and poor kids. “Jump, Jip, Jump, said Alice and Jerry.” I remember she kissed me once on the cheek when Dad came to collect me early for Christmas break. I remember her after nearly seven decades.

Far down the line, you will live on in someone’s life because you are a teacher. You gave students knowledge they’d never attain without you, and you gave them affection (though you probably haven’t kissed them!).

I remember a study I read once. It seems that some social service agency conducted a survey of highly at-risk kids—kids who were fostered out, kids whose lives we can only imagine. When these youngsters were asked who gave them hope, 80% of them said a teacher. You are this beacon of hope for countless students.

I remember a story Mrs. Mauck told me. She taught first grade in a high-poverty school. Some of her students carried bruises on skin and soul. Every day after school she walked one particular little girl to the edge of the playground and waved her home. Mrs. M. suspected that the curb between the school yard and the street was this child’s boundary between safety and fear. So Mrs. M. waved her home, stood in the winter wind and waved as long as the child could see her. One day, as Mrs. M was waving, that little girl stopped and turned around. She started to run; she ran straight into Mrs. M’s arms. “God blesses you, Mrs. M.”

Mother Teresa once spoke about her work with the sick and dying and her efforts to help orphans in India. After the speech, someone stood and asked, “You have done so much to make the world a better place. What can I do?”

Just love the children,” Mother Theresa replied. Mrs. Mauck did just that.
You labor in the field with kids. There is history to teach and science, there is literature as well as music. Teaching is a huge job, daunting even, especially in the face of the challenges you encounter—changes in curricula, testing, and mandates of every kind. But I remember Helen Keller, another of my heroes, when she said, "I am only one; but still I am one. I cannot do everything, but still I can do something; I will not refuse to do the something I can do."

Thank you for doing what you can do. You make all the difference in the world.

Sheryl Lain began teaching on the Wind River Indian Reservation. Before her recent retirement, she served as the director of the Wyoming Writing Project, international consultant for the Bureau of Education & Research, language arts coordinator for kindergarten through twelfth grades at the district level, and instructional leader of teachers at the state level. She published a book about building community in the classroom entitled A Poem for Every Student.
Grief-Themed Literature for Elementary School Children

Melissa Allen Heath

Abstract
Although children grieving over the death of a loved one are common in today’s elementary classrooms, teachers are not adequately prepared to offer their students the support that they need. Dr. Heath, internationally recognized for her work with traumatized and grieving children, describes the tasks of grieving that children go through and explains how bibliotherapy can be used by teachers to “compassionately companion” a child or group of children going through the grieving processes. A sample lesson plan is included along with lists and summaries of recommended books and a list of resources for parents and teachers.

Disney’s “happily ever after” endings are not the same fairy tale endings originally envisioned by authors such as Hans Christian Anderson and the Grimm brothers. For example, in Anderson’s original 1837 tale of The Little Mermaid, the story ends with the mermaid throwing herself into the sea to end her life (Anderson, 2014). She does not marry the handsome prince as portrayed in the 1989 Disney movie. Similarly, the Grimm brothers’ fairy tales are often considered quite harsh and brutally graphic in representing human suffering, abuse, and death. According to many adults, such fairy tales as originally written are not appropriate for sharing with young impressionable children. Whenever possible, caring adults take precautions to shield children from life’s harsh realities.

One topic that is particularly difficult to discuss with children is death. In fact, most parents and teachers are uncomfortable talking with children about death (Goldman, 2014; Worden, 2008). Based on a survey of 1,253 members of the American Federation of Teachers, (including 813 classroom teachers and 440 teaching assistants, guidance counselors, school psychologists, and support staff), even though seven out of ten teachers report currently having a grieving student in their classroom, less than one in ten teachers reported feeling prepared to address grief issues with their class (The American Federation of Teachers and New York Life Foundation, 2012). Additionally, half of participating teachers reported that over the past year students had asked them for advice on how to support a grieving peer.

According to the same study, 92% of teachers, teaching assistants, and school staff reported that childhood grief is a serious problem in schools, and that this issue deserves more attention from school personnel. Furthermore, in regard to how schools are addressing children’s grief-related needs, half of the participating teachers graded their school as a C or lower. One barrier that most
significantly kept teachers from adequately supporting grieving children was insufficient training and/or professional development.

**Purpose**

In contrast to happily-ever-after book endings, in real life children must adapt to death and loss. Death is a part of life. With basic guidance and age-appropriate resources, teachers and parents will be better prepared to address grieving children’s emotional needs. Having age-appropriate resources will also assist caring adults in guiding children, not around, but through the intense and challenging feelings associated with grief.

In this article, I focus on meeting the grief needs of elementary school-aged children. As a basic foundation, I describe the tasks of grief children commonly face (Wolfelt, 2002; Worden, 1996, 2008). I then provide a brief overview of bibliotherapy. With this understanding of needs and a method, I recommend children’s literature that addresses the tasks of grief, offering a sample bibliotherapy lesson plan for K–6th grade teachers. As an appendix to the article, I provide a list of grief-themed educational resources for elementary school teachers (Table A-2) and a table listing and describing specific children’s picture books that align with one or more tasks of grief that grieving children must go through (Table A-2).

**Tasks of Grief**

Following the death of a loved one, each person’s grief is unique. However, common challenges arise during the healing process. Rather than the linear stages of grief, as described by Kuübler-Ross (1969), Worden (1996, 2008) identified tasks of grief. Based on his extensive work with bereaved children, Worden (1996) described the following challenges that children struggle to resolve: (a) accepting the reality of death; (b) facing the intense emotional pain of grief, not turning away; (c) adjusting to changes resulting from a loved one’s death; and (d) remembering and memorializing the death and life of the deceased person, not attempting to forget.

The tasks of grief are not sequential, nor is there an endpoint for grief. A person is never really finished grieving, because grief is a process that ebbs and flows across one’s lifetime. For example, if Maria’s mother died from cancer when Maria was 8 years old, this loss will be keenly felt during holidays and special occasions (e.g., Mother’s Day, Maria’s graduation, her wedding, and the birth of her children). Maria’s loss will elicit various emotions across time as she understands death and grief through the lens of her maturing developmental perspective.

As children’s grief becomes integrated with daily life, with support the sadness softens and intense emotions become less intrusive and more manageable (Worden, 1996, 2008). However, Wolfelt (2002) offered a warning: “If over time, children are not compassionately companioned through their complicated mourning journeys, they are at risk for behavioral and emotional problems” (p. 655). Caring adults, including teachers, have opportunities to compassionately companion children who grieve the death of a loved one.

**Bibliotherapy**

Timeless stories such as Aesop’s fables teach children about society’s moral and social expectations. Comparable to this, bibliotherapy uses children’s literature to teach and encourage individuals to heal on an emotional level. Stories support individuals in better understanding their own and others’ emotions and perceptions. Carefully selected books provide examples that model adaptive coping strategies and open opportunities for increased insight.

Certain stories pique our interest and stick with us (Heath & Heath, 2008). Some stories are especially powerful; they stir deep feelings within us that propel us to action and promote change. We remember such stories.
In a school setting, teachers have the option of using bibliotherapy to open conversations about tough topics, such as death and grief. It is important for teachers to understand that the use of bibliotherapy is not limited to therapists. Although teachers are not expected to provide mental health care, they are expected to provide a physically and emotionally safe learning environment for their students.

Bibliotherapy, like medical care, is provided on varying levels of skill and expertise. For example, an individual does not need to be a doctor in order to place a bandage on a child’s scraped knee or to provide CPR; but a doctor’s skills and expertise are required to perform surgery. Similarly, a teacher does not need to be a therapist to share a self-help book that addresses a personal need or to read a picture book with students to prepare them for attending a funeral. However, a therapist’s skills are needed to use bibliotherapy in addressing the needs of an individual who is coping with the aftereffects of sexual abuse and struggling with posttraumatic stress. Situations considered clinical require the expertise of a seasoned therapist. On the other hand, we all face the challenge of coping with a loved one’s death and living with grief.

When reading carefully selected grief-themed stories, teachers help support students’ emotional understanding and healing. These stories also encourage and reinforce adaptive coping strategies. In identifying specific books that best fit a situation, teachers might talk with a librarian or ask the school-based mental health professional for assistance. To gain a better understanding of children’s grief, teachers might also search the Internet for book lists and short instructive handouts on supporting bereaved children. Internet sites that specialize in children’s grief include the Dougy Center (http://www.dougy.org/) and the National Alliance for Grieving Children (https://childrengrieve.org/resources-0). Additional resources are listed in the Appendix in Table A-1.

**Literature Selection**

I propose teachers use children’s grief-themed literature to teach and enhance the coping skills of bereaved youth. Based on my experience in selecting children’s books, I provide the following advice for teachers’ and parents’ consideration. First of all, the type of death should be considered so that the book matches the context of what children are experiencing. For example, the death of a pet may be a safe starting place to initiate a classroom discussion about death; most children have experienced the death of a pet.

Two book lists, with details and summaries, are provided in this article. The book list at the end of the article (Table 1) includes the books discussed in the article in the sequence in which they are mentioned. The list identified as Table A-2 in the appendix includes several additional books that I recommend.

Although not about a pet’s death, the lesson plan at the end of this article is based on a story about an animal “disappearing.” Although one might conclude the rabbit in Rabbityness died, this is not directly stated in the book (Empson, 2012). With this story merely talking about being separated from a loved one or a pet offers a prelude to discussing death.

Another caution is to carefully read the book prior to sharing it with students. In previewing the book, I always consider the quality of the story and whether children will enjoy the book’s illustrations. I also consider whether or not the book contains religious beliefs or dialogue countering religious beliefs. This is a very important consideration because of the wide range or religious and...
Consider how you want to present the book, including whether you want to rely on an organized lesson plan. Review the lesson plan at the end of the article and consider adjusting this template to fit your classroom’s needs. The lesson plan template includes several sections: information about the book, a synopsis of the story, a lesson objective, lesson materials and advance preparation, key vocabulary words and concepts, and a short pre-reading activity. After the book has been read, a post-reading discussion helps pull together important information and clarifies specific points you may want to emphasize. Following the short discussion, an activity helps children to apply what they have learned and extends the story into real-life application. Following the activity, the students need to come back together as a group so the teacher can clarify the lesson’s objective and highlight the major take-away points of the bibliotherapy experience.

Classroom Activities Supporting the Tasks of Grief

As described in the previous section, an activity is intended to fortify important concepts. The following are examples of activities that supplement children’s grief-themed literature in helping children to address the tasks of grief.

**Accepting the reality of death.** Have a discussion about accepting tough situations or accepting situations over which we have no power. Ask students to raise their hand if they have ever fallen and been hurt. Explain that gravity pulls things down to the ground. It is a law of nature. Even if we do not like it, even if we do not want it, gravity will continue pulling things down to the ground. That is how gravity works.

Then go into a deeper discussion about pets dying. Ask students to share examples about how hard it was to say their final goodbye to a beloved pet. Explain, “None of us wants our...
pet to die. But after a pet dies, even if we choose to not think about the pet’s death, the pet is still dead. This is so hard to accept!" On the blackboard, list the names of individuals that students could talk with when they have trouble accepting a pet’s death. Because most students will have an example of a pet dying, keep the discussion focused on a pet’s death rather than on a person’s death. Also talking about an animal’s death is a safer and less intense starting place for this type of discussion.

Facing the intense emotional pain of grief. This activity, strong hands, helps children understand the importance of others’ support as we face our grief. Ask, “What is the strongest and biggest part of your hand?” Explain, “Your palm holds and pushes heavy things.”

Ask students to push on their desk with one finger. Then ask them to push with the palm of their hand. Explain that if you are stopping something that is coming toward you, your palm or fist is a much stronger force than one finger.

Give each student a piece of blank paper and a pencil or crayon. Ask students to make an outline of their hand by placing their hand on the paper and drawing around their fingers and the rest of their hand. For children ages 8 and older, ask them to write words on one or more of the paper fingers to represent things they do not understand about death or things that make them feel anxious or afraid (e.g., funeral, grave, casket, bad dreams, ghosts, illness, cancer, seeing dead person, getting sick, having an accident). For younger children, ask them to draw small pictures or symbols.

Then ask students to write/draw on the palm of the paper hand, things they can do (coping strategies) and names of trusted individuals who will comfort them when they are afraid. After the drawing is complete, have them cut around the outside of all the fingers (not between them).

Ask students to fold the paper fingers in to the palm of the hand. This represents that we are stronger when we rely on trusted individuals for support and when we use coping strategies. Explain that we are not alone when we grieve; we have others to help us face tough feelings.

Adjusting to changes resulting from a loved one’s death. This activity involves listing details that describe “before the death,” and “after the death.” After reading Mama Does the Mambo (Leiner, 2001), draw a line down the middle of a poster board. At the top of the first column, print the word BEFORE. At the top of the second column, print the word AFTER. Review the details in the book. Ask the students what Sofia’s life was like before her father’s death. Children might say, “The mother and father danced.” “Sofia enjoyed watching her parents dance.” “She enjoyed how her parents were loving to one another.” Write the children’s responses in the first column. Underneath after in the second column, write the children’s responses telling how things were different after Sofia’s father died. Children might say, ”Mother was sad.” “Mother did not want to dance.” “Men were dating Sofia’s mother, and Sofia did not like
them.” Close the discussion by reviewing how the things that were different were not necessarily always bad, but having our lives change requires us to change how we do things. It pushes us beyond our regular and familiar routines. Sometimes these changes make us sad, sometimes angry, and sometimes confused or frustrated. On a positive note, sometimes good things might come about because of the changes, like Sofia’s mother asking her daughter to dance the mamba with her.

**Remembering and memorializing the death and life of the deceased person.** The following activity is based on the sea glass metaphor by Heath and Sheen (2005, p. 121). The purpose of this activity is to help children understand that over time, with the support of others, the sharpness and intensity of painful feelings associated with grief become smooth and rounded like sea glass. Sea glass can be collected from a seashore or purchased from a craft store.

Ask the children, “What is sea glass?” Pass pieces of sea glass around the classroom. Explain that over time ocean waves and sand gradually smooth out the sharp edges of broken glass. As we walk in the sand along a seashore, ordinary broken glass will cut our feet, but the softened edges of sea glass will not cut our feet. At first when someone dies, we have very strong feelings. We are sad. We cry. We may be angry. Our hearts hurt! Our feelings are very strong. We may feel overwhelmed! We wonder if we will always feel this way? Our feelings are like the sharp edges of broken glass: they cut us and we hurt. But our feelings will not always be this intense and powerful. Just like sea glass, over time and with others’ support the edges of our feelings are smoothed and rounded. At some point we will be able to think about our loved one and enjoy our memories of being together. We will be able to look at pictures and smile. We will be able to talk with others about our loved one, and we will be able to enjoy our memories together. We will always have our memories, but they become softer and less painful. As a reminder, display the sea glass in a visible place in the classroom.

**Summary**

Children’s grief is a highly sensitive and significant issue that is not sufficiently addressed in schools (The American Federation of Teachers and New York Life Foundation, 2012). In this article, I described bibliotherapy as a possible classroom strategy to support children as they face the challenges inherent in being separated from deceased loved ones. In Table 1 I listed the four tasks of grief, and included information about and summaries of the books described in this article that are especially helpful for each task. Table 1-B of the Appendix continues the list to include books I recommend but have not discussed specifically in the article.

Reading grief-themed books in classrooms helps children understand the reality of death and helps children know that they are not alone in facing their grief. With added support from peers and teachers, children will be prepared to adjust to the changes following the death of a loved one. They will also understand the importance of remembering and memorializing their deceased loved one. These are important life skills that will help children adapt to loss and change across the life span.
### Table 1: Description of Grief-Themed Books Described in This Article

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Book information and synopsis</th>
<th>Interest level Grade range</th>
<th>Main character</th>
<th>Type of death</th>
<th>Task of grief</th>
<th>Accept reality of death</th>
<th>Face painful emotion</th>
<th>Adjust to Change</th>
<th>Remember &amp; memorialize</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><em>Rabbitivity</em> (Empson, 2012); 27 pages</td>
<td>Grades K–6</td>
<td>Black rabbit (no name)</td>
<td>Rabbit disappears one day, no explanation of cause</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>The Tenth Good Thing about Barney</em> (Viorst, 1971); 25 pages</td>
<td>Grades K–4</td>
<td>Written in first person from young boy’s perspective</td>
<td>Barney (cat) dies; no mention of cause</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>When Dinosaurs Die</em> (Brown &amp; Brown, 1996); 32 pages</td>
<td>Grades K–3</td>
<td>No main character, many dinosaurs of all ages</td>
<td>Briefly describes types of death, such as old age, illness, accidents, infant death, war, drug abuse, suicide</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>The Goodbye Book</em> (Parr, 2015); 30 pages</td>
<td>Grades K–3</td>
<td>Fish (no name)</td>
<td>One fish says it is hard to say goodbye to someone</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Mama Does the Mambo</em> (Leiner, 2001); 40 pages</td>
<td>K–6</td>
<td>Sofia</td>
<td>Father’s death, no mention of cause</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

This colorful and quirky book, with few words, tells a story of a unique rabbit who loved doing typical rabbity things, but also loved sharing his unrabbity talents—painting and music. The happy forest is filled with his unrabbitiness. Then one day rabbit is gone. The forest turns gray; the bright color and music are gone. Nothing is left but a big black hole. As the rabbits venture down the hole they discover rabbit’s gifts. Soon the forest is again filled with color and music. All the rabbits join in painting and music.

A young boy’s cat, Barney, dies. His mother asks her son to think of 10 good things about Barney to share at the funeral. He thinks of nine but has trouble coming up with the tenth good thing. He finally thinks of all 10. Black and white pen and ink illustrations are nicely detailed. Religious information: A disagreement about heaven arises between the boy and his friend. Father states, “We don’t know too much about heaven…we can’t be absolutely sure that it’s there (p. 14).” This might not align with some families’ religious beliefs about life after death.

This informational book has small detailed pictures with information about many types of death. Pages 18 and 19 have ideas for how to welcome someone back to the classroom after a classmate’s family member dies. Religious information: On pages 28–29 information about life after death is discussed. The following statement may be offensive to those who have strong spiritual beliefs about life after death: “No one can know for sure what comes after death, but almost everyone has an opinion about it” (p. 28). The book includes a glossary with common terms related to death and customs related to honoring the dead. Because of all the small details, unless using a projector this book would be difficult to share with a whole classroom.

The book covers the wide variety of feelings associated with loss and saying goodbye. Although death is never mentioned, readers assume a fellow fish died. The fish reminisces about memories with the friend. This book is about coping with separation from a loved one and ends on a positive note, *that there will always be someone to love you and hold you tight*. The story could address topics such as death, divorce, moving, etc. Parr’s brightly colored, simplistic, thick black-line drawings are eye-catching and will hold children’s attention.

In this story, set in Cuba, Sofia describes how after her Papá’s death, Mama stopped dancing. Sofia especially missed watching her Mama and Papa dance the mambo. Sofia tells how life was before her father’s death and how life was after. The story ends with Mama, her new friend Eduards (who unfortunately cannot dance), and Sofia attending the dance at the Carnival. When the dance music starts, to Sofia’s amazement, Mama motions for Sofia to be her partner in dancing the mambo. Illustrations are bright and colorful, giving the flavor of the Cuban community.
Bibliotherapy Lesson Plan

Created by Melissa A. Heath

TASK OF GRIEF: REMEMBERING & MEMORIALIZING

BOOK INFORMATION

Book Title: *Rabbityness*
Author: Jo Empson
Publisher: Child's Play
Year: 2012
ISBN Number: 978-1-84643-482-2
Number of Pages: 32
Reading Level: Early second grade, but interesting to all ages

BOOK SYNOPSIS

This book starts out in black and white, but later incorporates vivid colors to express the influence of Rabbit's music and art. Rabbit not only likes rabbity activities, he also likes unrabbity activities. Sadly and unexpectedly, one day Rabbit is gone. Nothing remains, except a black hole. Everyone in the forest community misses Rabbit. Representing the community's grief, the woodland loses its brilliant colors. Wondering what happened to Rabbit, the rabbits go down the dark hole. Although they do not find Rabbit, he left gifts behind—musical instruments and art supplies. The rabbits fondly remember Rabbit, and following his example they begin to participate in creative unrabbity activities. Once again the forest becomes filled with music and bright colors.

LESSON OBJECTIVE

Children will identify reminders of a person who is no longer present with them.

LESSON MATERIALS AND ADVANCE PREPARATION

Materials for post-reading activity: (select type of activity—drawing or writing)

- Drawing activity: plain white typing paper and colored markers for each child
- Writing activity: lined paper and pencil for each child

KEY VOCABULARY AND CONCEPTS

Review the following terms or concepts that might be unfamiliar to your students.

- **Rabbity**: Normal, common, typical activities that are expected of rabbits (or children), such as going to school and doing homework
- **Unrabbity**: Uncommon, unusual activities that might not be expected of a rabbit (or child), such as doing more than required, learning karate, speaking more than one language, writing a story, playing a musical instrument, etc.
- **Joy**: A feeling of great happiness
- **Disappear**: When something is gone, and you can no longer see it
- **Remember**: When you think back on something that happened in the past—you don’t forget it because you can no longer see it.
**PRE-READING ACTIVITY**

Show: The front cover of the book, a black rabbit with splotches of colorful paint

Ask:  *Have you ever seen a rabbit? What do rabbits do most of the time?*

Explain:  *Today we will learn about a rabbit that did uncommon things.*

**READ THE BOOK**

**POST READING DISCUSSION**

The rabbit was gone one day (disappeared). Ask the child/children, "*Where do you think Rabbit went?*” Explain reasons why you might not see someone. Examples might include a friend moving far away, a grandparent dying, someone becoming very sick and not able to come to school, etc. Ask the students the following questions: *What do you think happened to Rabbit? Why do you think Rabbit left his friends gifts? Has anyone ever given you a gift that helped you to remember them after they were gone* (moved away or died)? We are sad when we cannot be with the ones we love. However, even though we feel sadness, we do not want to forget these people and what they mean to us.

**POST READING ACTIVITY**

Adjust the following activity to children’s developmental level and specific needs.

Ask the children to think about something that helps them remember a person who is no longer with them. Have them either draw a picture (for younger children) or write a short description (for older children) of what helps them remember that person. Then ask the children to break into dyads and “pair and share” their drawings or written descriptions. Make sure all children have an opportunity to explain their remembrance. Some children may need some help in identifying an object that helps them remember a person. Share examples, such as grave stones, pictures, favorite books, letters, and other examples of keepsakes.

**CLOSURE**

Our classroom benefits from each student’s unique qualities. Years from now, when we are no longer in the same classroom, we will remember each person—the things the individual said and did; our school classroom pictures; something we wrote in our journal; a good time we had together, etc. As a reminder to the child/children, place the drawings/written descriptions in a visible place. Add a word strip “REMEMBER” above the students’ work.
References


Appendix

Table A-1 Sources of Help for Teachers and Parents

Websites with Booklists and Bibliotherapy Recommendations

1. [http://librarybooklists.org/fiction/children/jbibliotherapy.htm#jbibdeath](http://librarybooklists.org/fiction/children/jbibliotherapy.htm#jbibdeath) This website includes numerous library booklists on a variety of topics, including death and grief.

2. [http://www.ala.org/alsc/compubs/booklists/dealingwithtrag/booksseparation](http://www.ala.org/alsc/compubs/booklists/dealingwithtrag/booksseparation) This link features a list of children and youth books on separation and loss, compiled by the Association for Library Service to Children.


4. [http://www.dougy.org/](http://www.dougy.org/) The Dougy Center website sells books on a wide variety of grief-related issues for individuals of all ages. The site also has recommendations for talking with children and adolescents. Activities are provided to help children and teens cope with grief. The site’s information for parents will help them prepare children to attend—or not attend—a funeral.

5. [http://childgrief.org/documents/Bibliography.pdf](http://childgrief.org/documents/Bibliography.pdf) Children’s Grief Education Association provides an extensive list of children’s books on death and grief. However, this list was last updated in 2004, so newer books will not be listed.

6. [http://www.aft.org/childrens-health/mental-health/supporting-grieving-student](http://www.aft.org/childrens-health/mental-health/supporting-grieving-student) American Federation of Teachers (AFT; no date). Titled Supporting the Grieving Student, this site has a video webinar on addressing student grief and a presentation for teachers. The AFT also offers a Web-based collection of resources for children, parents, and educators.

7. [https://sowkweb.usc.edu/about/centers-affiliations/national-center-school-crisis-and-bereavement](https://sowkweb.usc.edu/about/centers-affiliations/national-center-school-crisis-and-bereavement) This site, sponsored by the National Center for School Crisis and Bereavement, has crisis intervention materials and resources.
8. http://www.sesamestreet.org/content/grief A free kit, When Families Grieve (Sesame Street Workshop, 2010), and a free packet produced by Sesame Street are available online. This Internet site has numerous videos featuring Muppets and people talking about grief. Topics include how children and adults feel after a loved one dies. The videos include a variety of scenarios: an uncle’s death, a father’s death, a mother’s death, a father’s suicide, etc. They show how to talk about feelings that are related to grief. A short booklet contains information about how to support children after a loved one’s death. The kit includes a children’s book (in Spanish and English), Something Small: A Story About Remembering.

### Additional Sources

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Resource</th>
<th>Description of resource</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><em>When Someone Dies: A Child-Caregiver Activity Book</em> (National Alliance for Grieving Children, 2016); 78 pages</td>
<td>This is an activity book for children, which includes information for parents and caregivers about the impact of grief on children. The activities are designed to help children cope with their grief by better communicating and understanding their feelings. The book also offers information that helps adults communicate with their child about death and grief.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kit: <em>When Families Grieve</em> (Sesame Street Workshop, 2010)</td>
<td>This free packet produced by Sesame Street is available online at <a href="http://www.sesamestreet.org/content/grief">http://www.sesamestreet.org/content/grief</a>. This Internet site has numerous videos featuring Muppets and people talking about grief. Topics include how children and adults feel after a loved one dies. The videos include a variety of scenarios: an uncle’s death, a father’s death, a mother’s death, a father’s suicide, etc. These videos show how to talk about feelings that are related to grief. A short booklet contains information about how to support children after a loved one’s death. The kit includes a children’s book (in Spanish and English), Something Small: A Story About Remembering.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Supporting Children after a Suicide Loss: A Guide for Parents and Caregivers</em> (Montgomery &amp; Coate, 2015); 30 pages</td>
<td>This easy-to-read book helps parents and caregivers understand how to talk about death specifically by suicide. Pages 24–27 include information about addressing suicide in school settings. Practical need-to-know topics are included such as how to help a child or adolescent decide whether or not to attend the loved one’s funeral. The book emphasizes the importance of giving children opportunities to feel comfortable talking about suicide and asking questions about suicide (reducing stigma).</td>
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### Table A-2: More Grief-Themed Books for Bibliotherapy

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Book information and synopsis</th>
<th>Interest level Grade range</th>
<th>Main character</th>
<th>Type of death</th>
<th>Task of grief</th>
<th>Accept reality of death</th>
<th>Face painful emotion</th>
<th>Adjust to Change</th>
<th>Remember &amp; memorialize</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Badger’s Parting Gifts</strong> (Varley, 1984)</td>
<td>K–6</td>
<td>Mole</td>
<td>Badger dies (old age)</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
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<tr>
<td>If a principal, teacher, or staff member dies, a teacher might share this book with a classroom of students. This book demonstrates appreciation for an older and wiser person’s leadership and for the integral part these individuals play in our lives. After Badger dies, although it takes a while, eventually all the forest animals are fondly remembering the gifts (lessons) Badger gave them. The book ends with Mole thanking Badger, and Mole believing that somehow Badger heard his thank you. The book’s illustrations resemble Beatrix Potter’s drawings.</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Saying Goodbye to Lulu</strong> (Demas, 2004); 27 pages</td>
<td>Grades K–4</td>
<td>Written in first-person from young girl’s perspective</td>
<td>Lulu (dog) dies of old age</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
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<tr>
<td>A beloved family dog, Lulu, ages across time. Eventually Lulu becomes very tired, stops eating, goes to sleep, and then dies. This book’s illustrations of tears and hugs show the family’s sadness. The mother, father, and young girl bury the dog in a box with favorite toys and a sock from each family member. When spring arrives, the family plants a cherry tree near the grave. The book ends with the young girl holding a puppy, smiling, and acknowledging that although the new puppy is not Lulu, she will love the new puppy. Illustrations are done in watercolor, pen and ink, and colored pencil.</td>
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<td><strong>Sammy in the Sky</strong> (Walsh, 2011); 27 pages</td>
<td>Grades K–4</td>
<td>Written in first-person from young girl’s perspective</td>
<td>Sammy (12-year-old dog) gets sick and dies</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
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<td>This story is about the “best hound dog in the whole world” (p. 1). When the dog Sammy was 12 years old he had a large lump on his neck. His health rapidly declined. He became very sick and died. Father buried the dead dog in the backyard woods. (There was no funeral, and kids did not attend the burial). The story concludes with an end-of-summer celebration to remember Sammy: blowing bubbles and imagining that Sammy is in the clouds chasing the bubbles. Beautiful watercolor illustrations are by Jamie Wyeth. Religious information: The mother explains that the dead dog’s physical body is like a shell and that his spirit will be everywhere (on the 10th page that includes text) and that the dog will always be with us (last page of text).</td>
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<td><strong>Life and I: A Story about Death</strong> (Larsen, 2016); 40 pages</td>
<td>Grades 3–12</td>
<td>Written in first person, with “Death” as the main character</td>
<td>Tells about death in general, including death of animals and people</td>
<td>X</td>
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<tr>
<td>Book information and synopsis</td>
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<td><strong>This is a rather unusual story about death and life personified as individuals who work together and keep a balance in nature. I recommend this for older students (3rd grade and above). The artwork is sweet and sensitive. This book asks questions about what individuals believe: “Will they be burned or cremated? Can their ashes be scattered in the winds of a mountaintop? Will they go to Heaven? Will they be born again?” Information is left open to interpretation. Older students could discuss the wide variety of traditions related to death and burial. This book portrays the characters Life and Death as friends, working together.</strong></td>
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<td><strong>Everett Anderson’s Goodbye</strong> (Clifton, 1983); 32 pages</td>
<td>K-3</td>
<td>Everett, young African American boy</td>
<td>Father’s death, no explanation of cause</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
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<td><strong>This book portrays a young boy who grieves the death of his father. The charcoal drawings beautifully depict strong emotions associated with grief. Pictures of the mother comforting her son illustrate the importance of feeling loved and supported when facing the death of a loved one. Although this book is based on Kübler-Ross’s (1969) five stages of grief, several tasks of grief are also addressed.</strong></td>
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<td><strong>Ida, Always</strong> (Levis &amp; Santoso, 2016); 36 pages</td>
<td>Grades K-6</td>
<td>Gus, polar bear</td>
<td>Ida becomes ill and eventually dies</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
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<td><strong>This sensitive story is based on two polar bears (Ida and Gus) that actually lived in New York City’s Central Park Zoo. Ida and Gus are very close friends. Ida becomes sick, and shortly thereafter dies. The story emphasizes that those we love, though dead, always remain with us. Always is emphasized. Feelings, such as disbelief, anger, sadness, humor, loneliness, and caring compassion are all woven into the story. Illustrations are beautifully detailed and enhance the story’s emotional message. The story ends with Gus, though alone, confidently assured that Ida is <em>right there. Always.</em></strong></td>
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<td><strong>The Memory String</strong> (Bunting, 2000); 33 pages</td>
<td>Grades 2-6</td>
<td>Laura—approximately 10 or 11 years old</td>
<td>Laura’s mother died 3 years ago; no mention of cause</td>
<td>X</td>
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<td><strong>Laura’s mother died three years ago. Laura now lives with her father and stepmother, Jane. Laura treasures a string of buttons gathered from various relatives’ clothing. The string of buttons, started by her great grandmother, was handed down to Laura. Each button holds special meaning. One day the string breaks and the buttons are scattered across the lawn. Although father and Jane help gather up the buttons, one button remains missing, the father’s military button. This was Laura’s mother’s favorite button. After Laura goes to bed she overhears her father suggest to Jane that they could replace the lost button. Jane says, “No substitute allowed.” Father and Jane continue searching in the darkness with flashlights. Ultimately, Jane finds the missing button. The following morning, Laura asks Jane to help re-string the buttons and considers the future possibility of adding one of Jane’s buttons. In addition to showing how one girl memorializes and remembers her deceased mother with the string of buttons, this story also offers an example of learning to live with change after the death of a loved one. Realistic illustrations show true-to-life emotions.</strong></td>
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<td>Book information and synopsis</td>
<td>Interest level</td>
<td>Main character</td>
<td>Type of death</td>
<td>Task of grief</td>
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<td><strong>The Dead Bird</strong> (Brown, 1938); 42 pages</td>
<td>Grades K-3</td>
<td>Group of children, one girl and three boys (possibly 7–9 years old)</td>
<td>Dead bird; no mention of cause</td>
<td>X</td>
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<td><strong>Blow Me a Kiss, Miss Lilly</strong> (Carlstrom, 1990); 32 pages</td>
<td>Grades K-3</td>
<td>Sara—approximately 6 or 7 years old</td>
<td>Elderly neighbor becomes ill and dies</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
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<td><strong>I’ll Always Love You</strong> (Wilhelm, 1985); 32 pages</td>
<td>Grades K-2</td>
<td>Boy (no name) who ages across time</td>
<td>Pet dog, Elfie, dies of old age</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
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<td><strong>Flamingo Dream</strong> (Napoli, 2002); 32 pages</td>
<td>Grades K-3</td>
<td>Young girl (no name), approximately 7 or 8 years old</td>
<td>Father dies of cancer</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
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<td><strong>Grandma’s Gloves</strong> (Castellucci, 2010); 28 pages</td>
<td>Grades K-3</td>
<td>Young girl, possibly 7 or 8 years old</td>
<td>Elderly grandmother gets sick and dies</td>
<td>X</td>
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This classic grief-themed children’s book describes four children coming across a dead bird, which is described in detail. After burying the bird in the woods they have a funeral, and on a rock covering the grave they write, “Here lies a bird that is dead.” Every day they returned to the grave to add flowers and sing, until they forgot. The last picture shows the children playing in an open field adjacent to the partially visible grave of the bird.

Sara lives across the road from an elderly lady, Miss Lilly, and her cat, Snug. They become good friends. Miss Lilly shares stories from her past. To show their friendship, Miss Lilly and Sara blow kisses to one another. Old age is accurately portrayed. Miss Lilly becomes very sick and dies. Sara reflects on fond memories of Miss Lilly. She also takes care of Snug, the cat. Children will identify with Sara’s feelings. The book’s pictures are nicely detailed.

Told from a young boy’s perspective, the story portrays Elfie, the dog, and the boy growing up together. The dog gradually ages and becomes old. The boy tells the dog that he will always love him. When the dog dies, the family buries the dog, and all cry and hug each other. The boy does not want another dog right away, but imagines that when he does get another pet, he will tell the pet, “I’ll always love you.”

This true-to-life story is told from a young girl’s perspective. As her father’s cancer progresses during his final year of life, his physical changes are compared to the changes in the color of leaves from summer to fall. At the end of the book the girl and her mother are shown making a memory book. *Flamingo Dream* does not offer religious or spiritual support, which some parents may want. The colorful collage-like illustrations and crayon drawings resemble a child’s artwork.

A young girl describes her close connection with her grandmother. They enjoy each other’s company and both love gardening. Soon after the grandmother becomes sick and disoriented, she dies. A memorial with family and friends gives an opportunity for everyone to share their memories of grandma. Upon leaving, each person chooses something to take home to remember grandma. Mama describes a few of grandma’s things that are special to the young girl. Feeling sad, the girl gets grandma’s gardening gloves. They talk about growing a garden and how the girl will teach mama everything about gardening.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Book information and synopsis</th>
<th>Interest level Grade range</th>
<th>Main character</th>
<th>Type of death</th>
<th>Accept reality of death</th>
<th>Face painful emotion</th>
<th>Adjust to change</th>
<th>Remember &amp; memorialize</th>
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<tr>
<td><em>Where Are You?</em> (Olivieri, 2007); 21 pages</td>
<td>Grades pre K–2</td>
<td>Young boy (no name), possibly 4 or 5 years old</td>
<td>Death of a non-specified family member</td>
<td>X</td>
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<td><strong>This story is told from a young boy’s perspective, and the deceased person is not clearly identified. The boy asks questions. Answers are not given, but as parents read the book, these questions can provide them with opportunities to explain their beliefs.</strong> <strong>Religious information:</strong> The boy asks one question that has religious implications: “Maybe you are an angel now with beautiful wings” (p. 6). The illustrations are simply and nicely drawn.</td>
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<td><em>The Velveteen Rabbit</em> (Williams Bianco, originally published in 1922); 41 pages</td>
<td>All ages</td>
<td>Stuffed toy rabbit</td>
<td>Stuffed rabbit is put in a sack of rubbish to be burned</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>This is a classic story, identified as one of teachers’ top 100 favorite books. Although it is not specifically about death, the feelings and emotions that are portrayed in this book deal with loss and separation. A young boy becomes attached to his stuffed rabbit. The rabbit believes that he will become real if the boy loves him. Over time the rabbit loses his newness, and his material is worn thin. Then the boy becomes ill with scarlet fever. Per doctor’s orders, the rabbit is placed along with other contaminated toys in a sack soon to be burned. The rabbit cries a tear. A fairy appears and takes the rabbit to the forest where he is changed into a real rabbit. Seasons pass. The book ends with the rabbit visiting the forest where he and the boy used to play. The boy catches a glimpse of a real rabbit that strangely reminds him of his velveteen rabbit.</strong></td>
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<td><em>Sophie</em> Fox, 1989); 32 pages</td>
<td>Grades K–3</td>
<td>Sophie, starts as an infant and across time grows and becomes a mother</td>
<td>Grandfather becomes old and dies</td>
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<td><strong>This book shows a close-knit African American family across generations. The book starts before Sophie’s birth and ends with Sophie nurturing her own child. Grandfather ages across time and then he dies. The book includes birth and death, the life cycle. The book’s bright illustrations beautifully depict love and family unity.</strong></td>
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<td><em>A Place in my Heart</em> (Aubrey, 2007); 24 pages</td>
<td>Grades K–2</td>
<td>Andrew, a young African American boy (4 or 5 years old)</td>
<td>Grandfather dies, no mention of cause</td>
<td>X</td>
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<td><strong>This book is about a young African American boy whose grandfather dies. The family members express feelings about the grandfather’s death, and they support one another (hugs and reassurance). The book ends with Andrew watching ladybirds (ladybugs) and fondly remembering his grandfather. Andrew’s grandfather had said, “When you love someone they have a place in your heart always” (page 23). The final page offers guidelines for using this book to talk with children about death and associated feelings.</strong></td>
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<td>Book information and synopsis</td>
<td>Interest level Grade range</td>
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<td><em>Tear Soup</em> (Schwiebert &amp; DeKlyen, 1999); 56 pages</td>
<td>Grades 3–12</td>
<td>Grandy (grandmother)</td>
<td>Non-specific, says she suffered a big loss</td>
<td>X</td>
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Grandy suffered a *big loss*. This loss is not specifically defined, but the reader may assume the loss is the death of a loved one. Grandy goes into great detail about making tear soup (grieving). She talks about the ingredients and the lengthy never-ending process of making tear soup. The story goes into detail about the wide variety of feelings Grandy is experiencing and the many ways others respond to her needs. The story ends with Grandy and her grandson on a porch swing. The grandson asks her what he will do after Grandy dies. She reassures him, “Don’t worry, I will leave you my recipe for tear soup” (page 45). *Religious information:* On pages 28–29 Grandy is attending church. She talks about being *mad* at God and yelling at God. She wonders where God was when she was feeling all alone. “Still Grandy trusted God, but she didn’t understand God . . . Grandy keeps reminding herself to be grateful for ALL the emotions that God had given her” (page 29). The detailed earth-toned artwork aligns with the story’s message. NOTE: I give this book to families who have suffered the death of a loved one. One woman told me that after her husband’s death she and her children (as a family) read this book daily. She gives the book credit for helping her through an incredibly difficult time.

| *The Fall of Freddie the Leaf: A Story of Life for All Ages* (Buscaglia, 1982); 32 pages | Grades 2–6 | Freddie the Leaf | Metaphor of nature’s changing seasons | X | X |

This classic story demonstrates that death is a part of life. Freddie emerges in the spring and enjoys the life of a leaf. As fall arrives, the weather becomes cold and the leaves turn a different color. Daniel, the wise leaf, explains that it is time for the leaves to change their home (die). The story ends with an explanation that the dried Freddie, which fell from the tree and landed on the ground, would eventually join with the water and nourish and strengthen the tree. *Religious information:* When Freddie asks, “Where will we go when we die?” Daniel explains, “No one knows for sure. That’s the great mystery!” Religious families who believe in an afterlife may not agree with this statement.
Melissa Allen Heath is an associate professor in the Department of Counseling Psychology and Special Education at BYU, as well as being a licensed psychologist and a nationally certified school psychologist. She teaches graduate classes, primarily in school-based crisis intervention. Her additional research interests include children’s grief, bibliotherapy, suicide prevention, social skills, and social-emotional learning. Dr. Heath has been the recipient of BYU’s Wesley P. Lloyd Award for Distinction in Graduate Education.
Rethinking Rubrics for Elementary Writers

Nadia Wrosch
DeeDee Mower

Abstract
Rubrics have been widely adopted as summative assessment tools—as grade guides for both teachers and students. The authors of this article argue that using rubrics for judging and assigning grades is misuse, resulting in students misunderstanding the importance of content, focusing their efforts on avoiding errors in mechanics, and thus getting high grades for mediocre work. Proposing that rubrics need to be rethought and recognized as valuable tools for formative assessment, they recommend emphasizing students’ creativity, helping them recognize strengths and needs in their writing skills, and using rubrics as a basis for giving meaningful feedback.

What do we know about rubrics? When you think of rubrics, what picture forms in your mind? For some of us a rubric may look like a tidy efficient matrix to organize criteria to be used to evaluate students’ written work. Others may picture themselves sitting thinking about what will go in the matrix, looking at the clock watching precious time go by. Does the feeling you have about rubrics influence the way you create them? We recommend reviewing what we know about rubrics and how they can assist us in the classroom more efficiently, especially in elementary students’ writing.

Rubric use has been widespread for a few decades now. Rubrics are popular because they help teachers define the writing characteristics that determine their grading of student work. However, Susan M. Brookhart (2013a, p. 4) stated that rubrics are “descriptive and not evaluative.” How do we interpret that as educators? Are we using the descriptions in the rubric to justify judgements of student writing rather than to guide productive evaluation? The descriptions we choose to place in rubrics need to be clear to the students (Sadler & Andrade, 2004) and to us. Word choice within rubrics can make all the difference. Brookhart (2013a) suggested the rubric should be our communication tool with our students in helping them understand the qualities of their own writing (p.11).

This article is designed to enrich teachers’ awareness of how we might rethink the use of rubrics, because rubrics are valid as instructional tools rather than judging devices. We begin this paper with current valid criticism of rubrics, especially as they are used to judge and label written work, although we are promoting the use of rubrics. We then review the concepts of writing that are explicit in the core curriculum for elementary writers, which can guide us in creating rubrics. We consider how we might
use alternative forms of criteria within rubrics to increase student creativity because we know it is often an underplayed aspect of student writing. We conclude with the argument that rethinking rubrics by incorporating creativity as a component can help students understand how to improve the quality of their own written work. Our purpose is to help teachers to understand in what ways they can help individual students improve in their writing.

Rubric Critique

We want to begin by critically analyzing how rubrics are being used in classrooms today. W. James Popham (1997) argued that rubrics do not help teachers in designing their lessons. He suggested that teachers tend to use rubrics without any reflection on how analyzing the data from the rubrics could be used to modify or improve their instruction. He also argued that textbook publishers continue to be part of the rubric problem by creating summative rubrics as part of their literacy programs. Once publishers began providing rubrics in their prepackaged programs with the assumption that they would be applicable to the majority of students, rubrics became overly detailed in order to fit that type of majority need. Rubrics soon became more focused on test mastery than on skill mastery overall. Currently rubrics have been used mainly to provide a summative assessment or grade for students rather than considered as a formative assessment. This is a point that is worth considering.

Alfie Kohn’s (2006) work asserted that rubrics may be destructive rather than helpful for improving students’ writing. He suggested that rubrics have allowed students to comply with the requirements described, but although grades in writing have been higher because of the use of rubrics, the students’ writing has been lackluster because they have been denied access to creativity. This also has contributed to the concept for teachers that the writing process is a technical process and not as complex as we know writing to be. Because of the design of rubrics, students can receive high scores for poor, unsubstantive, written work.

Writing Standards

The Common Core State Standards Initiative provides useful concepts to consider in creating writing rubrics, yet they are often not used in this way. For example, the Standards emphasize four writing aspects: (a) the three types of writing, (b) the writing process, (c) the quality of student writing, and (d) practice in writing across all disciplines for real purposes. Calkins, Ehrenworth, and Lehman (2012) suggested a continuum from grade to grade by stating, “Rubrics are most helpful if they are grounded in a K-12 learning progression that links one grade to another, showing progression of skill development” (pp. 196-197). This implies that the progression of writing skills, such as grammar, spelling, and punctuation, is linked to grade level rather than student level. Also the emphasis on skills creates a misconception that improving writing through idea development is less valuable than knowing the mechanics of writing (Baker, Cooperman, & Storandt, 2013).

Mentor texts, especially poetry, often misconstrue the mechanics of writing in order to emphasize the content. Students are sent mixed messages about mechanics in some of their readings, but they hold fast to the mechanics with their own writing when grades are at stake with summative rubric assessments. If they are continually penalized when mechanics are incorrect, students become aware that the content of their writing is less important. Ogle & Beers (2012) stated, “A rubric used with a writing assignment identifies content, organization, sentence structure, vocabulary, and mechanics as the elements” (p. 48). In this sequence content is only one-fifth of the writing assessment. We can understand why students’ written work is becoming lackluster because we have devalued the content in our overuse of rubrics as summative assessments. This paper argues that rubrics fail to help
students know how to improve their writing by measuring limited skill sets rather than the creative elements of the content.

For example, the rubric in Table 1 demonstrates that a student might be able to receive a high score on a piece of writing even if the writing content was actually poor, with no depth of knowledge, variety of resources, or originality.

Table 1: Example of a Poor Rubric

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>4</th>
<th>3</th>
<th>2</th>
<th>1</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Facts</strong></td>
<td>The paper includes at least 6 facts about the animal and is interesting to read.</td>
<td>The paper includes 4-5 facts about the animal and is interesting to read.</td>
<td>The paper includes at least 2-3 facts about the animal.</td>
<td>Several facts are missing.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Graphics</strong></td>
<td>All graphics are related to the topic and make it easier to understand.</td>
<td>One graphic is not related to the topic.</td>
<td>Two graphics are not related to the topic.</td>
<td>Graphics do not relate to the topic.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Neatness</strong></td>
<td>The poster is exceptionally attractive in terms of design, layout, and neatness.</td>
<td>The poster is attractive in terms of design, layout, and neatness.</td>
<td>The poster is acceptably attractive, although it may be a bit messy.</td>
<td>The poster is messy or very poorly designed.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Grammar</strong></td>
<td>There are no mistakes in grammar, punctuation, or spelling.</td>
<td>There is 1-2 mistakes in grammar, punctuation, or spelling.</td>
<td>There are 3-4 mistakes in grammar, punctuation, or spelling.</td>
<td>There are more than 4 mistakes in grammar, punctuation, or spelling.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The only acknowledgement of content in this rubric is the number of facts, not their nature, significance, or development, and certainly not the students’ ability to relate the facts or to think critically or creatively about them. Even graphics become countable items. The “no mistakes” in mechanics ensures only that students will not try creative expression because it is too difficult to spell or punctuate.

As we considered how rubrics might be better used as formative assessments, especially in writing, it was evident that emphasizing creativity might lead to ways teachers can reformulate their views about rubrics as summative assessments. Although it may be counterintuitive to the rubrics teachers have used or are currently using, formative rubrics can be a helpful tool for providing feedback to students on how to improve their work as an ongoing process and how to create written work that is communicating something new or solving a problem.

Rubrics as Formative Assessments

This section explains this alternative use of rubrics, beginning with a definition of formative assessment, then discussing how to use formative assessments as communication tools and how to implement rubrics as a type of formative assessment. According to Chappius (2015), formative assessments are “formal and informal processes teachers and students use to gather evidence for the purpose of informing the next steps in learning” (p 3). The definition emphasizes that the teacher gives formative assessments, the teacher works with the students to process the information, and the teacher and the students both take action to enhance knowledge and improve the students' writing. For formative assessment, the role of the teacher is to ask questions to focus attention on aspects for consideration:

- What are the strengths and weakness of the student’s work?
- What strategies are being used?
- What possible misconceptions need to be clarified?
• What selected feedback needs to be given to move the student forward?

Chappius (2015) suggested the students’ role in formative assessments can be implemented using two different techniques. The first technique is for each student to use the selected descriptive feedback from the teacher’s evaluation to make changes. The feedback is detailed and focused on one or two specific strategies chosen for improvement. The second technique is for the students to self-assess. An assessment is given from the teacher to help the students interpret their work, derive a conclusion, and make changes according to their evaluation of their work (Slomp, 2015). The students then determine what changes would be best. The purpose of these two formative assessment techniques is for the teacher and students to know what needs to be done for the students to be purposeful in their rewrites and more cognizant in their future writings.

Formative assessments can intertwine cohesively with rubrics. According to Brookhart (2013a), “A rubric is a set of coherent sets of criteria for students’ work that includes description of levels of performance quality of the criteria” (p 4). The rubric is a communication tool between the teacher and the students. Performance qualities are described in different levels of the rubric to assist the teacher, not in judging performance, but in using the descriptions to assess the performance (Chappius, Stiggins, Chappius, & Arter, 2012, p.183).

Choosing the headings of the levels in the rubric is up to the creator. The rubric can have words, symbols, or numbers to indicate the levels. Chappius et al. (2012) stated, “With the rubric, the level is the score” (p.184). This statement emphasizes the importance of word choice in the level headings and descriptions. Teachers can consider wording for descriptions by thinking of the student expectations in each level of achievement.

Thinking about what is expected of students who meet the requirements can be continued on in the same process for students who do not meet the requirements. It is important to keep this question in mind: What are students demonstrating that is measurable and observable?

An essential component of formative assessment is student self-reflection. The use of a rubric will assist in this aspect of student learning (Andrade, Wang, Du, & Akawi, 2009; Brookhart, 2013a). Could a student answer the question “Where am I now?” Could a student answer the question “Where do I need to be?” (Chappius, 2015, p. 12). These two questions should be addressed with students in assisting their self-reflection. These questions allow students to see where they have been and how far they have come. The students are self-regulating their learning as they become aware of the descriptions of the criteria in the rubric and evaluate ways they are using these qualities in their writing. This can allow the teacher and student to begin venturing into creativity through their writing.

Table 2 is an example rubric based on some of the Common Core State Standards that invite creative ideas for third grade writing. It was adapted from a draft proposed by The Teachers College Reading and Writing Project (2013). Both the draft and this adaptation were written in terms that could be used as formative assessment to guide teachers in analyzing students’ writing and planning more specific third-grade-level feedback for each of them. The version of the rubric given to the students would be specific to the particular assignment and focus on distinct aspects congruous with the students’ needs. It would also be written in language appropriate for third graders.
Table 2: A Writing Rubric to Guide Third Grade Teachers in Formative Assessment.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Third Grade Report Rubric</th>
<th>Level 1: Novice</th>
<th>Level 2: Intermediate</th>
<th>Level 3: Proficient</th>
<th>Level 4 Above Proficient</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Introduces topic and provides clear, defining conclusion giving focus to the topic.</td>
<td>Does not provide introductory or concluding statement(s). No sense of topic focus.</td>
<td>Provides short introduction or conclusion. Some attempt at topic focus.</td>
<td>Includes introduction and conclusion clearly related to content and showing purpose.</td>
<td>Introduction and conclusion establish meaning and attract interest. Focus is clear.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Develops topic with “facts, definitions and details.”</td>
<td>May just repeat the topic or give information not related to it.</td>
<td>Uses some information from a text to present the topic. May include information or opinion not related to text.</td>
<td>Uses facts, details, definitions to develop topic. Makes connections within and across information categories with linking words or phrases.</td>
<td>Gives “clear and compelling facts, details, definitions” supporting topic. Elaborates source information, relates support to topic. Complex transition.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Uses “linking words and phrases … to connect ideas within categories of information.”</td>
<td>Includes few or misused linking words. Does not indicate relationships. Does not show sequence.</td>
<td>Uses a few linking words such as first, second etc. Sentences do not fit smoothly together.</td>
<td>Identifies logical patterns — cause-effect, comparison-contrast, etc. Sees how sentences relate to main idea.</td>
<td>Describes and elaborates connections in logical, more “academic” way; uses complex transition showing relationships.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Understands and can define academic words including vocabulary specific to the subject matter.</td>
<td>Does not define words or defines them incorrectly. Does not relate words to the rest of the text.</td>
<td>Attempts to define words, but definitions may be confusing. May plagiarize definitions from the text.</td>
<td>Grasps word meanings on 3rd grade level topic/text. Can find term meaning from text or context.</td>
<td>Understands meaning of terms and phrases in academic/domain-specific material. Pulls examples from more than one part of text.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Writing Creatively

We conclude this paper with the argument that rethinking rubrics by incorporating the writing standards along with creativity helps teachers provide sufficient feedback for students to understand how to improve the quality of their own written work. We begin with a question: What do creative students do? Some responses we have heard from educators are that creative students can expand ideas, use descriptive vocabulary, reorganize thoughts, and apply thoughts to multiple areas. Brookhart (2013a) identified some additional characteristics of creative students: They go beyond the required tasks to find out answers for themselves; in looking...
for answers they use a wide variety of sources, including media, people, and events. When these students find the resources, they organize and reorganize ideas to assist in their learning. If they stumble during their process of learning, they do not stop—they use trial and error to continue. Failure is not an option, and they will find their answers.

Another question develops from these considerations: What do creative students do as they write? Brookhart (2013a) mentioned four important, though somewhat vague, criteria:

- Involve depth and quality of ideas that include remarkable concepts from a variety of contexts
- Consult a variety of sources
- Organize and combine ideas to solve a problem or create new information
- Welcome original contributions from issues or problems others have not considered (pp. 52-54)

We suggest these criteria because they link to the Common Core State Standards and lead to concepts of creativity that might otherwise be overlooked.

Using these four criteria can provide guidelines for teachers in creating a rubric for students. Teachers can decide which of the four criteria they consider important for students to focus on first. Presenting one criterion at a time helps students to develop individual skills. A teacher who has students who have already developed the chosen skill may use writing conferences to help them begin working on another capability.

How is a creativity rubric useful in practical ways? The purpose of the creativity rubric is not for a grade (Brookhart, 2013b). Its purpose is for formative feedback, giving students specific things to work on in their writing development. When a teacher has a conversation with a student about her or his writing, the rubric can expand teacher and student perspectives to see the student’s current threshold in writing development and identify specific areas to work on for improvement (Chappius et al., 2012).

**Conclusion**

This article has discussed how formative assessments allow both the teacher and students to take part in learning as a way to go beyond the teacher gathering evidence to assign a grade or make a very general plan for instruction. Throughout the article questions were presented to help teachers think about daily practices with students. The following are among other questions that may arise:

- What criteria do you want to use to assess student work and give formative feedback?
- How can rubrics be used to inform instruction and learning for the teacher and students?
- How do I foster creativity in the classroom?
- Am I making the most of my writing conferences?

These few questions should be considered when planning formative assessments for writing. Allow formative assessments to work for you by acknowledging the information gained as a puzzle piece to the student’s understanding of the performance rubric.

**References**


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Assessment in Children’s Literature: Ways Young Children Can Make Meaning from Stories of Testing and Competition

Deb L. Marciano
Jessica B. Graves
Sharon Black

Abstract

Forms of student assessment, particularly testing and competition, have generated high levels of anxiety and criticism from educators, families, policymakers, and members of the general public. How about the children, the most vulnerable of those affected. Authors and illustrators of children’s literature, including picture books and early chapter books, have attempted to represent assessment in ways that can help children to deal with their questions, misunderstanding, and fear. The authors of this article explain ways children make meaning from books they read or have read to them, including the relationship of visual images and text, cultural symbols and contexts from their daily lives, and personal responses to the characters. Teachers and parents can use knowledge of these processes in helping children understand and deal with this troubling aspect of their lives.

In October 2013 several popular authors and illustrators of children’s books, among them Judy Blume, Judith Viorst, Maya Angelou, and Lee Bennet Hopkins, submitted a letter petitioning President Obama and Education Secretary Arne Duncan to reduce high stakes testing in schools. This initiative, organized by The National Center for Fair & Open Testing (FairTest), reflects the opinions of some of the best known children’s book creators who contend that students spend more time preparing for reading tests than they do reading. More than 120 authors and illustrators expressed their concerns in that letter, claiming that current high stakes testing stifles creativity, authentic reading and learning, and exploration (Strauss, 2013). To date, implementation and requirements for high-stakes testing have not changed.

Criticisms of high stakes standardized testing are well known among educators (teachers and administrators), but little has been discussed that represents the most affected individuals—the children. Children receive information and form opinions in a wide diversity of ways. Research has indicated that picture books contribute to meaning making
in young children (Sipe, 1998, 2007, 2008; Sipe & Ghiso, 2005), and the testing and competition they are exposed to in the schools is one area in which a lot of meaning needs to be made.

This article investigated ways that assessment, specifically testing and performance competition, have been represented in the books children read or have read to them. To explore ways in which children receive potential messages, portrayals of assessment in children's literature have been noted as they might be processed and interpreted by children.

Fifteen picture and early chapter books with school assessment themes, published in the United States between 1980 and 2017, were examined. These samples of children's literature were not intended to represent research or compiled children's comments. However, many of them have been confirmed by teachers and parents as representing fairly accurately what children know and think.1

Examining ways that children's book authors and illustrators have represented testing and other assessment experiences for children has reinforced several ways in which children's literature is known to represent life experiences for these young readers and listeners, enabling them to make meaning as they read or are read to from these books. First, children make meaning from a combination of text and illustrations, not from words alone. Additionally, children make meaning in terms of their culture and surroundings; they do not process books in isolation, particularly books on omnipresent aspects of their experience such as assessment. Finally, children make meaning as they connect with characters in a story, both in their affinity with the characters as individuals and in their ability to see themselves in the characters' situations. Understanding these processes, teachers and parents can work constructively with the books to strengthen and enhance healthy attitudes toward assessment in the schools.

Relationship Between Text and Illustrations

Picture books are more than just books with pictures (Sipe, 2008); these books for young children juxtapose text and illustrations in ways that help young readers/listeners construct knowledge. "The story depends on the interaction between written text and image [as] both have been created with a conscious aesthetic intention" (Arizpe & Styles, 2003, p. 22). As they gain experience using the visual-verbal blend of text and illustrations to make meaning, young children learn to look for personal and social meaning in the pictures that will guide them as they seek meaning in the more abstract medium of words, which is less natural and automatic for many of them. Just as many draw in order to explore their ideas or experiences before writing about them, they may use book illustrations to work their way into the text of a story.

In interviewing second graders, Prior et al. (2012) found that these children were particularly attentive to pictorial story content such as character actions, facial expressions, body posture, and character relationships as they used "visual information to better understand the characters they [met] in stories" (p. 201).

Pinky and Rex and the Spelling Bee (Howe, 1991, illustrated by Sweet) is the third in a series of 12 about second grade "best friends"—Pinky (a boy who likes pink) and Rex (a girl who loves “boyish” activities); many children are quite familiar with the pair. In portraying the test or performance anxiety children often experience, the illustrator supports the text by focusing on facial expressions, posture, and nervous activities (or lack scholarly) reaction to representation of children’s views and experiences.

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1 Extensive examination of internet reviews was undertaken to get teacher and parent (though not
thereof) for three characters: Pinky, Rex, and Anthony (the new boy in class). The illustrations tell the story. As Pinky and Rex walk to school, Rex, a consistent poor speller, shows dismay in her face, which turns to terror as the two sit on a curb: She slumps nervously and grasps her chin in her hands. Pinky, recognized as the best speller in his grade, walks confidently with spring in his step. When they sit down, his facial expression turns to sympathetic concern for Rex, but he is still confidently upright. As Rex misses her first word in the spelling bee, her face accurately portrays first shame and then despair as the class laughs.

As the spelling bee continues, most of the students go down fairly quickly, except Pinky and Anthony. Afraid he may not win this time, Pinky's face shows the anxiety Rex showed on the way to school, and he seems to lean against the blackboard. Anthony stands tall and confident, pointing to himself as he talks to the student next to him. (Pinky, by the way wears jeans and baggy sweater; Anthony wears dressier pants and an elaborate sweater.) At lunch Pinky's face becomes more stressed; he slumps over with his elbows on the table. Rex, recognizing Pinky's feelings, assures him that there are worse things than losing a spelling bee; Pinky can't think of any. In his nervousness, he can't eat, but he drinks a lot.

After lunch Anthony misses a word and Pinky spells it correctly; he is still champion of the second grade, but the excess liquid from lunch is too much for him; he wets his pants in front of the class. Pinky's face shows complete horror followed by shame. Even Anthony looks shocked and steps backward for a moment before dancing up and down and laughing uproariously — along with many others in the class. Rex does not laugh, nor does the teacher, who is comforting and gentle in her expression as she puts her hand on Pinky's shoulder and looks directly into his eyes. On the way home Pinky is still upset, but his face relaxes a little as Rex puts a hand on his arm and the two declare their friendship. In the final picture the pair are racing home with comfortable expressions on their faces.

Thus from faces, postures, and gestures showing relationships, a very young child could easily retell the story — or perhaps project it initially. Even a child reading or absorbed in listening to the text has an enhanced experience by watching the faces, postures, and motions and emotions portrayed in the illustrations as the text carries narration and dialogue.

Cultural Symbols and Contexts

As they make meaning from the blend of pictures and text, children involve aspects of their culture and their surroundings. Familiar cultural symbols and contexts impact meanings children make by helping them connect pictures and story with what they understand and value (or devalue) in their daily experience. Studies by Hall (1997), Fiske (1991), and Rosenblatt (1978) have demonstrated ways in which such semiotics impact individuals' interpretation of what they view, hear, and read.

Popular culture is comprised and conveyed by many forms of media in addition to literature, including television, print ads, and the Internet (Baxter, 2010; Marciano, 2001), along with song lyrics and movies; these all have potential to contribute to young children's understanding of their world. Marc Brown's Arthur, a rather expressive third-grader mouse, has become his own cultural symbol among young children both for the huge (indeterminate) number of books about him, along with his own public television show. Like Pinky and Rex, Arthur is stressed over a spelling bee, which climaxes other stresses in his school situation.

Unlike Pinky, Rex, and their classmates, Arthur, his family, his classmates, and school personnel are animals. The teacher who is causing them grief is Mr. Ratburn, very distinctly drawn as a rat, though usually with
a detached rather than threatening expression on his face. In talking about him, the children choose threats commonly mentioned in their culture: Arthur is portrayed in one illustration as in prison with a huge ball and chain attached to his leg and in another as a target of spells emitted by Mr. Ratburn dressed as a vampire and surrounded by bats—looking threatening rather than detached on this occasion. The principal, a large bear, brings in a huge trophy, a common cultural symbol associated with stressful competition. Most pictures of Arthur include paper and pencil or a book or stack of books—more common symbols of assignments and assessments that children will recognize and relate to. Arthur's face is continually portrayed as worried and exhausted. His parents are consistently portrayed with mild support in their faces and postures; his preschool sister consistently has a mocking expression and obnoxious comments.

Irony is an aspect of popular culture that authors, poets, and illustrators bring to children’s picture books. Fiske asserted that it is important “to analyze texts in order to expose their contradictions” (1991, p. 105). The visually and linguistically ironic Testing Miss Malarkey (Finchler, illustrated by O’Malley, 2000) takes cultural irony and humor to a new level. Readers’ are prepared from the beginning as the cover shows a bewildered Miss Malarkey inundated by hands waving sheets of paper, the inside cover is a two-page spread consisting of a variety of sharpened pencils, the first title page shows the approach of an armored truck with IPTU Statewide Test on the side (say the initials slowly), and the second title page shows a policeman delivering the tests in a conspicuously locked strong box.

Cultural symbols of standardized test fears are rampant among the adults in the story: Miss Malarkey looks foolish biting her fingernails, Principal Wiggins literally flips his wig (high in the air) twice, and the P.E. teacher, Mr. Fittanuff, has the class practice meditation and yoga (tying himself in knots as he does it). Parents, of course, get their share of cultural satire. The narrating character’s mother has him fill out a ditto sheet based on his bedtime story, get plenty of sleep, and eat a huge breakfast; she even packs a Power Bar 2000 in his lunch. A PTA meeting is addressed by “Dr. Scoreswell, the Swengali of Tests,” complete with turban, and parents bombard him with questions on such matters as whether test results will damage their child’s chance for getting into an Ivy League university. A crowd of teachers portraying various pains and sicknesses are lined up at the school nurse’s office; only one student seems to need medical care, and she gets sick in the hall.

Children are not as overwrought as the adults; their expressions vary from slightly disturbed, to puzzled, to bored: Eye rolling and eye shutting both occur. One student falls asleep twice during the test, another draws ninja turtles on his scratch pad, and another gets so stressed about erasing that she erases her entire test.

Hooray for Diffendoofer Day, a text-illustration combination begun by Dr. Seuss and completed after his death by Jack Prelutsky (text) and Lane Smith (illustrations), carries assessment of an entire school into Seussian chaos. (Dr. Seuss himself has become a cultural symbol for readers and listeners of every age, and the presence of his name and many aspects of his style add to the cultural recognition.) Diffendoofer School is to be visited and evaluated—possibly closed. And it may be in some danger. The curriculum covers topics such as “smelling,” “laughing,” and “how to tell a cactus from a cow.” The faculty and staff play havoc with traditional teacher images. Everyone’s favorite teacher is Miss Bonkers—who definitely lives up to her name.

Though expressed very differently, the basic message from Diffendoofer School is the same as the lessons from Pinky and Rex, Arthur and his classmates, and Miss Malarkey’s students:
Traditional competitions and standardized assessments are not the most important events or accomplishments: Personal relations and caring, individuality and creativity, learning and loving it are what really make life richer and more joyful.

**Personal Connections**

*Connections to real-life experiences.* For the deepest, most complete meaning-making experience, children must be able to see themselves in the story characters—to connect their real-life experiences with those portrayed for participants in the story (Wolfenbarger & Sipe, 2007). As children engage with characters in the books they read and have read to them (Martinez & Roser, 2005; Prior, Wilson, & Martinez, 2012; Sipe, 2007; Sipe, & Ghiso, 2005), they make text-to-self connections (Rosenblatt, 1978; Harvey & Goudvis, 2007), which are foundational to the construction of knowledge.

Through discussions and activities, teachers can gently prompt some of these connections as they encourage children to engage creatively with the stories. For example, *First Grade Takes a Test* (Cohen, 1980, illustrated by Himler) introduces a group of children who have no idea of what a test is except for a terse comment from Anna Maria, the class show off: “Oh, good... Now we can find out how smart we are.” The multiple choice questions make no sense to the children: For example, how can George choose whether rabbits eat lettuce, dog food, or sandwiches when he knows that “rabbits have to eat carrots, or their teeth will get too long and stick into them.” George draws a carrot on his test. Only one of the children finishes the test or does very well on it—Anna Maria, who is taken out of the class to join a gifted program. The other children begin referring to themselves and each other as “dummy.” Their teacher stops them abruptly:

> Listen to me... The test doesn’t tell everything. It doesn’t tell all the things you *can* do! You can build things! You can read books! You can make pictures! You have good ideas! And another thing. The test doesn’t tell you if you are a kind person who helps your friend. Those are the important things (n.p.).

A review, written in conjunction with this book receiving an Oppenheim Platinum book award, suggested that teachers have students write about their feelings after taking a specific test and receiving its results (available at Goodreads.com, 2017), clearly seeking the text-to-real-life connection. The review also suggested that teachers “have the class point out and make a list of what each of their classmates is good at,” emphasizing connections to the heart of the story’s message.

Many books can also be entered through activities. Spoken Arts Media recommended that after reading *Testing Miss Malarkey* students can enjoy making up funny test questions and acting out skits based on aspects of the story (available at Spoken Arts Media.com, n.d.)—also putting themselves creatively into the story and some of its messages. A published study guide recommends that after reading and considering the roster of teachers for Diffendoofer School, students draw and name a teacher they would like to have (available from Seussville, 2010)—modeled, of course, on the eccentricities of Miss Bonkers and her cohorts. This “faculty” becomes a classroom display. Children can actually enter and join with the imaginations of Dr. Seuss and Jack Prelutsky.

Table 1 lists the 15 books that were examined in this study regarding their treatment of themes related to testing and other forms of assessment. To aid teachers in selecting books for classroom use, the genre, type of assessment, and approximate grade level of the book characters have been included, along with notes relevant to using the book.
Table 1: Books with Themes Related to Testing and Other Forms of Student Assessment

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Title of literature</th>
<th>Type of text</th>
<th>Type of assessments</th>
<th>Grade level</th>
<th>Comments</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Arthur’s Teacher Trouble</td>
<td>PB</td>
<td>spelling</td>
<td>3rd</td>
<td>100 word spelling test - Too much on tests</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>First grade takes a test</td>
<td>PB</td>
<td>standardized</td>
<td>1st</td>
<td>No one best answer in multiple choice; Sorting by ability</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hooray for Diffendoofer Day</td>
<td>PB</td>
<td>standardized</td>
<td>K-5</td>
<td>Progressive school must take standardized test; Threat of going to a one-size fits all school</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>In trouble w/teacher</td>
<td>TR</td>
<td>spelling</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>Good at other areas</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>It’s test day Tiger Turcotte</td>
<td>TR</td>
<td>standardized</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>Uncertain of which race to check, since he is multiracial</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jamaica &amp; the substitute teacher</td>
<td>PB</td>
<td>spelling</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Cheating</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Junie B 1st grade cheater pants</td>
<td>TR</td>
<td>writing</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Cheating</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mathsketball</td>
<td>PB</td>
<td>math</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>Math phobia despite preparation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Phoebe &amp; the spelling bee</td>
<td>PB</td>
<td>Spelling bee</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>Physically ill – strain on friendships</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pinky &amp; Rex &amp; the spelling bee</td>
<td>TR</td>
<td>Spelling bee</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>Strain on friendship; humiliation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Report card</td>
<td>CH</td>
<td>standardized</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>Doing poorly to make lower students look better; Takes a stand to degrade the tests</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Testing Miss Malarkey</td>
<td>PB</td>
<td>standardized</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>Teacher, principal and student anxiety; Everyone worries, everyone succeeds</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Anti-Test Anxiety Society</td>
<td>PB</td>
<td>all testing</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>Physical ills; Steps to relax</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Big Test</td>
<td>PB</td>
<td>standardized</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>Test preparation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Thomas’s sheep &amp; great geography test</td>
<td>PB</td>
<td>geography</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>Inability to sleep despite having studied very hard; too much information</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**TOTALS 15**

- 9 PB
- 1 CH
- 4 TR
- 5 Spelling
- 6 standardized
- 1 math
- 1 weekly
- 1 writing
- 1 geography

Note: PB = picture book, CH = chapter book, PO = poem, TR = transitional book

**Test anxiety as a prevalent problem.** When children are able to see themselves in the characters and situations portrayed in stories, they can feel the anxieties, frustrations, embarrassments, and other emotions reflected in the texts and illustrations. As they bring these feelings to the surface, they also observe how the characters deal with them. For example, they learn with the students of *First Grade Takes a Test* (a) that failing to understand test questions does not mean that they are “dumb,” (b) that what they *can* do is more important than a test score, and (c) that being a kind and caring person who helps friends is most important of all. This process, referred
to as bibliotherapy, is discussed in detail and exemplified skillfully in another article in this journal (Heath, 2017).

Many students (kindergarten through college) suffer from test anxiety. This can range from mildly uncomfortable to completely disabling. As teachers subtly guide students in making meaning, they can consider specific anxieties and symptoms of those in their classroom who would benefit from more direct explanation—as given by the teacher of the afflicted first grade.

Zeidner (1998) suggested that learning and test performance are impacted by test anxiety. We might add that human discomfort, disappointment, and discouragement are seriously impacted as well. The Anxiety and Depression Association of America (ADAA) has cited three causes of test anxiety, all of which are represented in one way or another in the books studied:

- **Fear of Failure.** While the pressure to perform can act as a motivator, it can also be devastating to individuals who tie their self-worth to the outcome of a test.
- **Lack of Preparation.** Waiting until the last minute or not studying at all can leave individuals feeling anxious and overwhelmed.
- **Poor test history.** Previous problems or bad experiences with test taking can lead to a negative mindset and influence performance on future tests (n.p.).

The most prevalent cause of test anxiety in the children’s books studied is fear of failure and its consequences. The first graders are afraid that the test will reveal that they are not smart (as noted by their bossy classmate; Cohen, 1980). Arthur knows he is representing his classmates, and he does not want to let them down (Brown, 1986). Pinky and Rex are both worried about their reputations: Rex being laughed at when she goes down early; Pinky being deposed as the best speller in the second grade (Howe, 1991). If the Diffendoofer School fails its assessment, the school will close and the students will have to go to a boring school that dully conforms to all the rules (Seuss, Prelutsky, 1998). In Miss Malarkey’s school the students are more puzzled than really fearful, but the principal, teachers, and parents are terrified because they know they will be judged if the students fail (Finchler, 2000).

Any of these books can support a teacher or parent in helping children to understand (a) that they are not alone in being afraid to fail, (b) that fear of failure is uncomfortable—even painful; they may worry about what families, peers, and teachers will think; they may even be concerned that their school will be closed or their teachers will be judged unfairly, but (c) they can understand, along with the book characters, that friends will still be friends, teachers will still care about them, and there are many things they can do that are far more important than test scores or spelling bee status.

A second common cause of test anxiety acknowledged by ADAA is lack of preparation. Pinky and Arthur have both prepared for their spelling bees, and both of them do well—in spelling the words, that is. A lack-of-preparation experience is portrayed in Jamaica and the Substitute Teacher (Havill, 1999). Jamaica loves her substitute teacher and tries hard to please her—Jamaica performs well consistently in a variety of subjects and skills. But she has forgotten about a spelling test, and, being unprepared, is not certain about one of the words. She looks on a friend’s paper, but is miserable afterward because she knows that her perfect paper is not really a perfect paper. She confesses to the teacher, who gently and supportively explains, “You don’t have to be perfect to be special in my class. All my students are special. I’m glad you’re one of them.” The illustrator (Anne Sibley O’Brien) has created a multicultural classroom, including both Jamaica and the teacher as
individuals of color, which strengthens the message of inclusion.

*Phoebe and the Spelling Bee* puts an interesting twist on learning spelling words. Phoebe does not want to bother to learn the list of words for the spelling bee, so she doesn’t. Because she is very creative, with a wicked sense of humor, Phoebe makes up silly rhymes about the words on the list. In making up the rhymes she actually learns the words, except *brontosaurus*.

*The Big Test* (Danneberg, 2011) puts a little mild satire on the issue of standardized test preparation. Mrs. Hartwell is so concerned that all of her students must be prepared for the tests that she overhears the lessons and practice. Test anxiety increases, along with visits to the school nurse. Mrs. Hartwell learns that what she really needs to do is teach the children to relax. As the readers laugh at the gentle humor, they are reassured that anxiety over testing is normal, and they can learn to control it.

Many students (and non-students, as well) have test anxiety because they have a past history of failing tests and assessments. For example, Rex, in the book about Pinky and Rex, has always been a poor speller. She is terrified of going down on her first word and having the class laugh. She threatens to go to the moon if this happens, and it does. She remains on earth, however, because Pinky needs her after his disaster. The book ends on an affirmation despite the events of the spelling bee.

The early chapter book *In Trouble with Teacher* (Demuth, 1995) introduces Montgomery, a third grader who has all three causes of test anxiety: his past history shows he is not naturally a good speller, he has not studied, and he is afraid his teacher, who is stricter and gives harder spelling words than his second grade teacher, will be angry when he fails the test. “The trouble lay low in the back of his mind. Montgomery tried to hide from it. He pulled the pillow over his head. But the trouble marched to the front anyway.” Montgomery does fail the test, but he (and the reader) can hardly believe that his teacher does not scold or embarrass him; she compliments the stories he writes, and she is willing to offer encouragement and help with the spelling problem. The tension is accurately reflected, but relieved by typical middle-grade jokes. The kid-friendly wording of the text and the cartoon-style illustrations enhance the underlying warmth and dry humor that make this book so attractive for the target age group of 9-12 year olds. Students can easily see themselves in Montgomery and learn lessons along with him. The strengths of this book were confirmed by its selection as a Children’s Book of the Year by the Bank Street College Child Study Children’s Book Committee.

In *The Anti-Test Anxiety Society* (Cook, 2014), highly test anxious B.B. believes that TEST stands for “terrible every single time.” Her teacher invites her to join the anti-test anxiety society, where she learns that TEST really means “think each situation through,” and the teacher gives her “12 amazing test taking strategies.” This book, put out by the National Center for Youth Issues, is a how-to book as well as a story.

Similarly, *Mathsketball: A Story of Test Anxiety* (Winnett, 2014) is a story of a test anxious individual with embedded direct advice for dealing with the problem. Ethan does very well on testing with most subjects — except math. He has a history of being unable to take math tests; every time he looks at a math test the numbers seem to become an alien language that he can’t understand. His friend Jack tries to help Ethan by playing a game of mathsketball: Each shot brings a math question. Ethan’s teacher also gives him ideas on how to relax both before the test and while he is taking it. The book includes many strategies and eight pages of activities that can be helpful in overcoming math anxiety.
Table 2 includes the books from the study charted to reflect the relationship of the themes concerning text anxiety as it is presented to children.

Table 2: Picture Book Themes Related to Test Anxiety

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Title of book</th>
<th>Fear of failure</th>
<th>Lack of preparation</th>
<th>Poor testing history</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><em>Arthur’s teacher trouble</em></td>
<td>Y</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>First grade takes a test</em></td>
<td>Y</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Hooray for Diffendoofer Day</em></td>
<td>Y</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>In trouble w/teacher</em></td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>Y</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>It’s test day Tiger Turcotte</em></td>
<td>Y</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Jamaica &amp; sub teacher</em></td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Junie B 1st grade cheater pants</em></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Mathsketball</em></td>
<td>Y</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Phoebe &amp; the spelling bee</em></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Pinky &amp; Rex &amp; the spelling bee</em></td>
<td>Y</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Report card</em></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Testing Miss Malarkey</em></td>
<td>Y</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>The Anti-Test Anxiety Society</em></td>
<td>Y</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>The Big Test</em></td>
<td>Y</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Thomas’s sheep &amp; great geography test</em></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>TOTALS</strong></td>
<td><strong>15</strong></td>
<td><strong>14</strong></td>
<td><strong>3</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Children make meaning from what they read or have read to them. They make meaning as they respond to the unique relationship and interaction of text and illustrations. They enhance meaning as they recognize the contexts and symbols from their culture that have become part of their lives, their thinking, and their behavior. They internalize meaning as they relate story characters to themselves, making significant self-to-text inferences that lead to changes in attitudes, values, and conduct. Regarding testing and other forms of school assessment, they are able to interpret much of what they absorb from their environment (specifically told to them, observed, or deduced from experiences and impressions) in terms of picture books, transitional books, and early chapter books that have been written for this purpose. If teachers and parents are aware of how children are making meaning on a topic that has as much influence and fear attached to it as school assessment, they can significantly help to relieve children’s test anxiety and influence them in developing healthy attitudes toward testing that at this time is mandated and unavoidable.
References


Children’s Literature References


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Favorite Diverse Children’s Books of 2016

Terry Hong

Abstract
These books feature diverse characters who—in a multiplicity of ways—suffer, learn, and generally triumph in their differences. Varying in genre from picture book to poetry, in setting from Kenya to California, and in ethnic focus from Muslim Bangladeshi to Ojibway/Anishinaabe (Canadian Native American), the books highlight struggles of eight- through eighteen-year-olds as they deal with family, social, and personal identity issues.

So this looming elephant keeps appearing: MAGA, as in Make America Great Again. Regardless of political affiliations, books can most definitely open our minds and hearts toward greatness. In our nation of migrants (whether immigrants, slaves, refugees, sojourners, travelers, because we all came from somewhere else, even the First Nations/Native Americans who scholars believe walked across the Bering Strait), the right books can provide ideal antidotes against xenophobia, prejudice, intolerance, hate, and every negative, hurtful, limiting -ism out there. Yes indeed—diverse books that reflect our ever-growing multiculturality will surely make America great again. To enhance your bookshelves—and continue to open minds—be sure to check out these notable, resonating, fabulously colorful 2016 reads.

Picture Books


When Sofia’s bouncing ball knocks over her mother’s purse, what spills out is more than just the usual keys and wallet; Sofia finds proof that her mother is a registered ALIEN,
“¡una extraterrestre!” She’s even more surprised when her mother confirms that the card is “real,” that her “dream was to get this card” when she first arrived in the United States. When she asks her father if he has such a card, he explains, “No, I don’t have a card like Mamá’s because I was born here.” Sofia can’t help but worry if she’s an alien too. Beyond the comical misunderstandings, Sofia learns just how aliens from anywhere can become proud Americans. René Lainez Colata’s own immigration experience, added as an author’s note at book’s end, as well as the book’s bilingual presentation, make this alien an even more timely, welcome, necessary story.

For the Maasai, once a nation of feared warriors, “the cow is life” as they are now peaceful, nomadic cattle herders. Kimeli is the first to offer his most valued possession, a cow. Others follow until 14 cows are offered to the people of America to commemorate the 9/11 tragedy: “Because there is no nation so powerful it cannot be wounded, nor a people so small they cannot offer mighty comfort.” The real-life Kimeli’s note at book’s end provides further testimony of the efficacy of compassion towards lasting peace.


A young Maasai man returns to his village in Kenya after being away for a long time with “one story [that] has burned a hole in his heart.” He remembers the “buildings so tall they can touch the sky”; he saw the “fires so hot they can melt iron”; he witnessed the “smoke and dust so thick they can block out the sun.” He was there in New York City on September 11, 2001. The men, women, and children of his village are silenced in disbelief, until an elder asks, “What can we do for these poor people?”


From our northern neighbors comes the story of Irene Couchie Dupuis, co-author Dr. Jenny Kay Dupuis’s grandmother, who when 8 years old was forcibly removed from her home by the Canadian government and sent to a residential school with her two brothers. The strict nuns had a single goal—to erase the indigenous Native American/First Nations
The Utter Journal of Literacy

heritage in the young children, even their very names. Irene was reduced to 759 for the duration of the isolated, abusive school year when she was subjected to more brutal labor than actual learning. When the summer break finally allows her to escape back to her home, her parents must find the defiant courage to keep their children safe. Lest readers think this is a story that happened far away, the U.S. shares the same shameful history of government-mandated residential schools for Native Americans. Dupuis, of Ojibway/Anishinaabe ancestry, shares her family legacy with honesty and pride—and reminds us all “there is still much work to be done.”


More than a full century before Brown v. Board of Education (1954), Little Rock Nine (1957), Ruby Bridges (1960), and the Civil Rights Movement, four-year-old Sarah Roberts entered the Otis School in Boston to begin her education in 1847. When she was denied access to the white school, her parents decided to fight back. Sarah’s 1849 case made history, but it didn’t change laws—until six years later, in 1855, when Boston became the first major U.S. city to integrate its schools. The rest of the country took another 99 years to follow Boston’s example. Award-winning nonfiction children’s author Susan E. Goodman tells Sarah’s powerful story with simple, inspiring intensity: By pulling Sarah’s 19th-century history forward over the next hundred-plus years, the author connects Sarah with 21st-century readers who continue the ongoing struggles for equality.


Amidst the apocalyptic aftermath of Japan’s March 2011 earthquake, a single poem managed to reach millions, reminding survivors of “the power to respond,” and inspiring almost a million volunteers to rush to the devastated Tōhoku region to help. That poem, which was broadcast as one of numerous public service announcements, was “Are You an Echo?” by Misuzu Kaneko, who had passed away over eight decades earlier. Born in 1903, Misuzu lived a short, difficult life, but her poetry was full of “a deep kindness toward all things whether they are alive or inanimate.” Today Misuzu’s poems “are part of every child’s curriculum at Japanese elementary schools,” and her work
is available internationally in 11 languages. For the first time, Stateside audiences get to experience Misuzu’s playful images, her thoughtful questions, and her empathetic concerns, written with such clarity and simplicity they are easily accessible to the youngest audiences.


Talking about families can sometimes be daunting for children, especially when they can’t check off those expected so-called “traditional” boxes representing who’s who of their bestest loved ones. Sitting in her classroom discussing “what we thought made our family special,” one little girl is not quite sure what she’ll share. “My family is not like everybody else’s,” she thinks to herself. As she learns from her fellow students, no family is truly like anyone else’s—and that’s something to celebrate. As Sara O’Leary configures her many delightfully diverse familial units, artist Qin Leng—with her signature style so overflowing with whimsy and charm—imbues each member with individual identity and unique personality, all brought together with enveloping warmth and unbreakable bonds. The message is powerfully simple: No one gets to define a family but the members themselves.


A young boy, curious about his “Ammi’s dot . . . a bright and pretty spot,” innocently asks, “Why do you wear that dot?/What’s so special about that spot?” His mother explains, “It’s not a dot. . . . It’s not a spot, it’s a bindi!” When the boy receives his own bindi, he connects with generations past and is inspired to embark on a journey of empowered discovery. Indian Canadian musician/filmmaker/writer Vivek Shraya (*God Loves Hair*) makes her picture book debut with gentle rhymes and warm whimsy, amplified by Toronto artist Rajni Perara’s richly hued illustrations. This multicultural, intergenerational story of young agency imparts an important lesson on both inclusivity and individuality.

Zomorod Yousefzadeh’s itinerant upbringing has already encompassed long distances—not just in miles, but across cultural, social, and political divides. Originally from Iran, her family is finally settling into a California condo. That summer of 1978, Zomorod renames herself Cindy, after Brady Bunch Cindy, and begins her American metamorphosis, discovering taco nights, Girl Scouts, Halloween, sleepaway camp, and more. And then her home country is in revolution: The Shah is ousted, Ayatollah Khomeini takes brutal control, and Americans are held hostage for 444 days. Being Iranian in the U.S. becomes a matter of survival. Through Cindy’s feisty, observant voice, memoirist Firoozeh Dumas (*Funny in Farsi*) distills a difficult chapter from recent history into an accessible coming-of-age novel infused with resonating issues that continue to affect today’s youth, from bullying to isolation, racism, activism, multi-generational challenges, and the need to assert independence.


Primrose Heights is home to only three Asian Americans: 12-year-old Chloe Cho and her parents. Despite Chloe’s growing interest in her Korean heritage, her astrophysicist mother and fish-store-owner father remain consistently mum about the family’s past, always hedging with excuses like “Talking about Korea . . . it’s complicated, and painful.” When a class project requiring a parent interview goes awry, Chloe’s parents are finally forced to divulge the truth, causing Chloe’s head to “pop like a supercheap balloon.” Struggling with this surreal revelation, Chloe aims her whip-smart sarcasm at the casual racism all around. Here’s how a straight-A first chair violinist becomes a formidable unidentified suburban object to contend with! Seamlessly blending realism with out-of-this-world fantasy, Mike Jung (*Geeks, Girls, and Secret Identities*) also manages to infuse thought provoking statements about identity, race, and living life as the only and “other”—or, as Chloe proudly insists, “waving my freak flag solo.” Go, Chloe, go!

Once upon a time, Soledad had two sisters and two loving parents. But tragedy can happen to anyone at any time, and suddenly Sol and her younger sister are transplanted from the Philippines to a run-down apartment in Louisiana. Too soon, they’re abandoned by their desperate father and left in the (so-called) care of an abusive stepmother. Buoyed by courage, new friends, and a fairy faux-grandmother on her side, Sol just might figure out how to navigate this strange new world. Award-winning Erin Entrada Kelly’s latest is a nuanced, delight-inducing story about living between two cultures, surviving loss, and finding family in the least expected places.


Seventh grader Castle "Ghost" Crenshaw runs fast with good reason: His father—armed with a loaded gun—forced Ghost and his mother to run for their lives. Three years later Ghost’s mother works hard to keep him safe, while Ghost tries never to ask for more than she can give. His temper, however, too often keeps him fleeing from trouble of his own making. When the track coach recognizes his immense talent, Ghost’s cocky arrogance initially gets in his way. How he finds his tremendous stride proves to be a realistic, exhilarating story. (Look for a wink-wink to Reynolds’s friend and fellow author Christopher Myers, son of the legendary Walter Dean Myers, one of Reynolds’s inspirations.) A 2016 National Book Award finalist, *Ghost*, the first of Reynolds’s four-part “Track” series, makes an ideal choice for even the most reluctant readers.

The Avalon Family Residence might sound nice, but it’s not: “peeling paint, cockroaches . . . our tiny room.” Déja, her parents, and her two younger siblings are homeless, currently staying in a Brooklyn shelter. Her father can’t work, and her exhausted mother is menially employed. As Déja starts fifth grade in a new school, she shields herself from being judged with misdirected bluster and anger, but she’s surprised to find a welcoming teacher and two wonderful friends. A series of class assignments about home, social circles, and relationships eventually lead Déja to discover the tragic events of 9/11 for the very first time—including how the event has been directly affecting her own family ever since. As immediate as 9/11 still feels for many, a whole new generation has come of age in the ensuing 15 years; for those readers Rhodes melds recent history with a timeless narrative celebrating family and friends that both teaches and inspires.


When 11-year-old Azalea and her mother arrive in Paris Junction, Arkansas, her mother barely lasts a few minutes in her gossipy small-town childhood home. In the summer of 1952, Azalea is left behind to help her injured grandmother with her housework and gardening. When Grandma Clark suggests she befriend Billy Wong, the Chinese American great-nephew of the local storeowner, Azalea responds with shock: “Back home, I don’t know any foreigners.” Her grandmother corrects her sternly. “Billy’s not a foreigner.” He’s just new to Paris Junction, having moved from nearby Mississippi because, Grandma explains, “He wasn’t allowed to go to the better school, simply because he’s Chinese.” Billy, a wannabe journalist, turns out to be an ideal companion. Between gardening, adventurous bike rides, and even a midnight act of vandalism, the summer provides pivotal lessons on compassion, race, poverty, genuine friendship, and the unbreakable bonds of family. Scattergood’s (*Glory Be*) third novel earnestly and effectively combines crucial, little-known civil rights history with absorbing storytelling.

Award-winning Sarah Weeks (*So B. It*) and India-born debut author Gita Varadarajan present a poignant, comical cultural exchange in the alternating voices of two fifth-grade boys. Joe Sylvester has been living in the same New Jersey town, going to the same school, and hanging out with the same two buddies most of his life. Until he isn’t. Over the summer, his only friends moved away, which means Joe is starting the new school year alone. Enter Ravi Suryanarayanan, for whom absolutely nothing is the same. He’s recently arrived from India, where he was a star student and athlete. Here, his new teacher misunderstands his fluent English just because he’s lacking a New Jersey accent. Over a single school week, Joe and Ravi overcome many false starts to discover they just might become the best of buddies. Rollicking humor aside, *Save Me a Seat* is an affecting, compassionate reminder to look beyond assumptions and discover true friendship.


As a Muslim Bangladeshi American high school senior, Naeem should be looking forward to graduation, college, and growing independence. Although he’s smart and capable, he’s also easily distracted and willing to hazard his shopowner parents’ ire and disappointment hanging out with risky friends. When an outing goes awry and leads to Naeem’s arrest for a crime he didn’t commit, he’s given two options: face the probability of prison or agree to work with the NYPD spying on his neighbors and friends within his predominantly immigrant Queens community. Marina Budhos, who previously illuminated post-9/11 stereotypes and threats facing South Asian American youths in *Tell Us We’re Home* (2010) and *Ask Me No Questions* (2006), offers an unsettling, riveting thriller that provides no easy
answers as to the good guys and the bad, who’s right and who’s not.


Unless you haven’t read a single word this year, this three-part graphic history will probably be quite familiar: *March: Book Three*—the trilogy’s final installment—deservedly won the 2016 National Book Award for Young People’s Literature. The chronicles of Congressman John Lewis’s pivotal involvement with the Civil Rights Movement concludes here, deftly dovetailed with the inauguration ceremony of the first African American President of the United States. Essential and more timely than ever, *March* should be at the top of every reading list in the new year and beyond.


When Connor’s grandmother dies, she leaves his father a ring, a pair of pilot’s wings, and a letter explaining that the man who raised Connor’s father was actually not his birthparent. With his father paralyzed by depression, Connor takes the two mementoes and the few details available to him and traces his new lineage to the U.S. Air Force, Wilberforce University, and an international DNA map that reveals European, African, and Jewish roots. In award-winning Marilyn Nelson’s revealing afterword, aptly titled “How This Book Came To Be, and Why an Older African American Woman Ended Up Writing as a Young White Man,” she uses history—personal, national, worldwide—to affirm the surprising human interconnections in our very cells and souls.

The 1937 school explosion in New London, Texas remains the deadliest school disaster in U.S. history. With that real-life tragedy as starting point, Ashley Hope Pérez adds greater volatility to race, class, and family dysfunction by introducing a love story between two teens from different worlds in a tiny community where nothing remains hidden for long. Mexican American Naomi, 15, arrives from San Antonio with her younger twin half-siblings to live with the twins’ white father, a born-again Christian too fond of the bottle. She’s ostracized at her segregated school, even as boys objectify her and girls punish her for her outstanding beauty. The twins are first to make friends with Wash, an African American high school senior whose easy, caring manner Naomi can’t ignore. As love grows, danger draws closer, with the most immediate threats at home. Pérez’s latest—the recipient of a 2016 Printz Honor—is wide-eyed testimony to the undeniable best and unrelenting worst of humanity.


In Lambertville, Tennessee, new girl Amanda Hardy immediately turns heads. She’s barely figured out her class schedule before she’s telling a boy interested in her phone number how “really strict” her father is, and elaborating with the time-worn “It’s complicated.” The would-be suitor, Grant, has no idea just how complicated: Amanda—born Andrew—finally has a chance to be the girl she knows she was meant to be. She’s survived relentless bullying, senseless violence, and a suicide attempt to finally, bravely transition to be her true self. Amanda and Grant’s story could be just like any other high school romance—except it isn’t. The challenges facing transgender youth—to their mental health, family bonds and friendships, their very safety—translates to a greater struggle to reach adulthood. Debut novelist Meredith Russo knows—she’s a transgender woman herself. Her narrative is fresh and unique because it’s the story of a transgender teen, but proves universally engaging as a coming-of-age novel of self-discovery and acceptance. On the slowly expanding bookshelves of transgender young adult
titles, Russo’s affecting novel is poised to join previous pioneers including Julie Anne Peters’s *Luna* and Ellen Wittlinger’s *Parrotfish*.


Can 12 hours last a lifetime? Two teens are about to find out. Natasha is a half day from being deported with her family back to Jamaica, a country she barely remembers having lived the last 10 years as a New Yorker. Having just heard the worst news, she’s understandably distracted when she’s pulled away from the path of a swerving car on a Manhattan street by Daniel, a Korean American high school senior who happens to be on the same corner because of a scheduled college interview that’s supposed to determine the rest of his highly successful life. The younger son of immigrant Harlem storeowners, Daniel’s predetermined future as an Ivy League-degreed MD is not at all what he wants. With virtually nothing in common, not to mention the inevitable countdown, Natasha and Daniel are on a collision course toward—well—true love. Nicola Yoon follows her bestselling multicultural debut *Everything, Everything* (now debuting as a movie) with another major hit, proving once again that diverse characters facing diverse situations make good business as well as great reading.

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We Need Diverse Books™ Announces the 2017 Walter Dean Myers Award and Honor Books for Outstanding Children’s Literature, Young Adult Category

(Press release issued January 18, 2017)

The Judging Committee for the We Need Diverse Books™ Walter Award has confirmed selections for the second annual Walter Dean Myers Award for Outstanding Children’s Literature, Young Adult Category. One winner and three honor books have been named.

The Walter Dean Myers Award, also known as “The Walter,” is named for a prolific author of books for children and young adults. Myers (1937-2014) was the third National Ambassador for Young People’s Literature, appointed in 2012, as well as a champion of diversity in children’s and YA books. The mission of The Walter is to honor Myers’ memory and his literary heritage, as well as to celebrate diversity in teen literature.

The winner of the 2017 Walter Award is March: Book Three by Congressman John Lewis, Andrew Aydin, and Nate Powell. The three honorees, in alphabetical order by author, are Watched by Marina Budhos, If I Was Your Girl by Meredith Russo, and The Sun Is Also a Star by Nicola Yoon.


WNDB will be donating a minimum of 2,000 copies of the 2017 Walter Award winner,
March: Book Three, to schools with limited budgets located across the United States.

The Judging Committee reviewed 68 submitted titles published during the 2016 calendar year by diverse authors whose work featured a diverse main character or addressed diversity in a meaningful way. For books by multiple authors (or author-illustrators), at least one of the creators had to be from an underrepresented community. The books covered many genres and included both fiction and nonfiction work.

The 2017 Walter Award Judging Committee participants are co-chairs Kathie Weinberg and Terry Hong, with members Derek Ivie, Shannon Lake, Karen Lemmons, and Nayantara Mhatre.

“Our Committee was privileged to read and review so many exceptional YA titles representing diversity in authors, subject matter, and characters which were candidates for this Award,” said committee co-chair Kathie Weinberg. “We thank the publishers too, who worked with us for this second year to embrace the mission of the Walter Award.”

In 2018 the Walter will be expanded to include middle grade titles in addition to the existing young adult category. Plans to add a picture book category in the future are underway. The co-chairs for the 2018 Judging Committee are Terry Hong and Maria Salvadore. Kathie Weinberg and Terry Hong will assume co-director roles for The Walter Award, overseeing the Walter Judging Committee, coordinating with publishers, generating publicity for the award, and presenting the annual award event.

We Need Diverse Books™ is a 501(c)(3) organization, established in 2014 to address the lack of diverse representation in the children’s publishing industry. The Walter Dean Myers Award is one of the many initiatives funded and/or supported by WNDB™.
Dolly’s Picks: Top Novels from the Dolly Gray Award for Children’s Literature

Rachel Pullan

The desire of adolescents to see a reflection of themselves and their own experience is a common consideration as we explore young adult literature. Novels depicting a wide range of life experiences and backgrounds have emerged in young adult literature in recent years, including books representing diverse abilities.

Every two years since 2000, the Dolly Gray Children’s Literature Award has recognized a young adult novel that authentically portrays at least one character with a developmental disability. This award has made an outstanding contribution to the creation and appreciation of literature depicting individuals who have disabilities such as autism spectrum disorders and Down syndrome.

The award is named for Dolly Gray, a young woman born in 1971 with cerebral palsy. During her short life Dolly was able to experience the world and understand others and herself better through literature. The award was established to motivate authors and publishers to produce books in which children and young adults with developmental disabilities can see characters with perspectives and challenges similar to their own. Another of its goals is to promote greater awareness and understanding of individuals with disabilities and to emphasize the importance of accepting and including them in society.

Dolly’s father affirmed, “All of us know ourselves better for having encountered ourselves in literature, and books offered Dolly something precious. She enjoyed stories available in her time showing figures with whom she could identify. Without powerful and accurate depiction of persons with disabilities, literature itself is diminished.”

The following is a list of notable titles selected from the 2016 submissions. All books submitted were read by a panel of reviewers from a range of backgrounds; each wrote an evaluation for every book based on the award criteria:

➢ The portrayal of the individual with a developmental disability (DD) is well-developed, realistic, strength based
(rather than deficit based), and not stereotypical.

➢ The individual with a DD interacts positively with others, is accepted by other characters, and makes social contributions.

➢ The narrative depicts the individual receiving services appropriate to his/her circumstances and time period promoting self-determination.

➢ The narrative is readable, enjoyable, and of high literary quality.

Reviews based on these criteria were synthesized and the award winner selected in accordance with these responses. Many excellent books were submitted, and although only one could receive the award, those reviewed here are recommended as worthwhile reads.

Rain Reign by Ann M. Martin is the award winner for 2016. The book follows Rose, a fifth-grade girl with high-functioning autism who loves homonyms, and her foundling dog, Rain. Rose’s alcoholic father is generally apathetic about his daughter’s challenges and does not appreciate her many capacities. When a hurricane sweeps through their town in upstate New York, Rain is lost in the storm and Rose must overcome daunting obstacles to find her missing friend.

Readers are attracted by Rose’s quirky voice as well as her courage; they cheer for her through her struggles and triumphs. While her relationship with her father is strained and sometimes painful to follow, Rose also has positive role models in a kind uncle, a patient aide and teacher at school, and new friends in her class. This story was enjoyed by all the reviewers, who found it appropriate for students in middle school or junior high.

Mosquitoland by David Arnold is the story of Mim Malone, who runs away from her father and stepmother in mosquito-infested Missouri to find her mother, who lives in Cleveland and has stopped writing to her. On the way, however, Mim’s adventure takes her to places she never meant to go—from a blink-and-you-miss-it Midwest town to a Cubs game. It also brings her into contact with people she never meant to meet—a sweet old lady with a secret, a “psychotic” convict, a dashingly handsome young man on a mission, and a homeless teenage boy with Down syndrome.

In the end Mim finds that the journey has meant more than the destination and that love can be found in unexpected places.

Walt, the boy with Down syndrome, is charming and endearing from the beginning. Though not the main character, Walt has an important role in the story and in Mim’s personal development, both giving her someone to look after besides herself and teaching her to enjoy life as it comes. Mim and Walt’s story is an amusing and quirky read for lovers of John Green and Rainbow Rowell on the high school level. Those who recommend and read this book should be aware that mature subjects such as sexual assault are touched on briefly but not described, and expletives are interspersed throughout.

The Emperor, C’est Moi is an autobiographical work by Hugo Horiot, a French actor with
high-functioning autism. The book follows Horiot’s life through a series of vignettes that progress chronologically from his toddler days until his introduction to professional acting in his young adult life. Some segments highlighted in the narrative include his childhood fascination with pipes and circles, his complex relationship with his mother, his social experiences in elementary school, his attempt to run for class president, and others, with all the dark and light, the ups and downs, and colors in between.

This book is a beautifully crafted work of literature that frequently reads like poetry. High school readers interested in autism, acting, literature, and art will enjoy Horiot’s mystifying view of the world and of himself.

Girls Like Us by Gail Giles begins with two unlikely roommates, Quincy and Biddy, who are paired after graduating from their high school’s special education program. At first they seem as different as night and day—one forceful and outspoken, the other timid and shy. As time goes on they begin to realize that they are more similar than they had realized. Both have intellectual disabilities, both have had a hard home life, both are glad to be on their own. When a tragic event drives them together, they must look to one another for support as they seek healing and help.

Quincy’s and Biddy’s interwoven voices give texture and complexity to the story as similar events are related by two different personalities. Because this book deals with abuse and rape, it must be approached with sensitivity. Although the subject matter is heavy, the message overall is uplifting: that there is hope after injury, and that there are people who truly do care about “girls like us.”

Fragile Bones by Lorna Schultz Nicholson follows Harrison, a fifteen-year-old teen with autism, who is fascinated with human anatomy, and Anna, a senior with medical school aspirations, who are paired in their school’s Best Buddies program. As the two get to know each other through the program, Harrison has to learn how to interact with others (like not naming all the bones in the body when he gets nervous), and Anna has to learn how to get along with Harrison (such as not wearing high heels, which can damage one’s arches). Through a school year of ups and downs and Grey’s Anatomy, the two look to each other to cope with the world as it comes.

This book alternates between Harrison’s and Anna’s perspectives, giving a multifaceted look at autism as the reader sees Harrison from inside his own head and from Anna’s outsider eyes. The whole narrative is engaging, uplifting, and often humorous. Anna’s efforts to prepare for college and her relationship with the Best Buddies president contribute the feel of a normal high school experience, while Harrison’s feelings give high school a very different spin. Junior high
and high school readers will love this story of life, coping, and friendship.

The Nest by Kenneth Oppel combines reality and fantasy to tell a gripping story with a beautiful message. Steve has his fair share of problems. He has personal mental health struggles of his own, a wasp nest on the eaves of his house, and a baby brother with birth defects who is fighting for life. When a mysterious figure in Steve’s dreams offers to fix not only the baby but also Steve, it seems too good to be true. He only has to say “yes”—but will he? And if he does, where will it lead?

This novel is a stunning introduction for teens to the genre of magical realism. Oppel’s flare for the fantastic shines through in his descriptions of the Wasp Queen and of Steve’s struggles to reconcile reality with the powers invading his life. Readers won’t be able to put this book down, and they will come away with the message that no one is perfect and that, in our own small ways, it’s OK to be broken.

How to Speak Dolphin by Ginny Rorby finds 14-year-old Lilly with some conflicts and challenges. Her half-brother, Adam, has severe autism, and often Lilly is the one who has to care for him. She loves her brother, but at the same time wants her own autonomy.

Lilly’s stepfather, Don, resists traditional therapy and education for Adam. As an oncologist, he is invited to be a consultant regarding a young dolphin, Nori, who has cancer. Adam, who has always loved dolphins, is allowed to swim with Nori as a therapy animal.

At first Lilly is thrilled, but when a new friend helps her understand the problems of dolphins in captivity, Lilly is conflicted. Should she help Nori escape? Or should she leave the situation alone to avoid interfering with Adam’s treatment?

While humorous and entertaining, this book is filled with compelling conflicts and real life issues, from unconventional therapies to teenage friendships. Lilly’s voice is realistic and engaging, and her story, especially her relationships with her brother, her stepfather, and her friend Zoe, are endearing. Intermediate readers will enjoy this story.

For more information on the Dolly Gray Children’s Literature Award, please visit www.dollygrayaward.com

For more information on the Division on Autism and Developmental Disabilities of the Council for Exceptional Children, which sponsors this award, please visit http://daddcec.org/
Rachel is a recent graduate from Brigham Young University’s English Education program with a minor in Theater Arts Studies, and is an avid reader. She worked as an assistant for the Dolly Gray Children’s Literature Award and is currently serving an LDS mission in Bismarck, North Dakota.
Teaching Idea

Things to Do to Synthesize Content Knowledge and Creative Writing

Laura Purdie Salas

Abstract
The author of many books of poetry for children, Laura Purdie Salas travels throughout the country teaching school classes and other groups to write poetry. Many of these children have given very little thought to poetry and definitely have not thought of themselves as poets. Ms. Salas shares one of her favorite poetic forms for children, the “things to do” poem. It is simple enough for very young children, yet has the flexibility and potential to allow the older ones to explore more in depth with ideas and creative expression. Detailed instructions for teachers and several examples are included.

I love to write poetry with students when I visit schools, and one of my favorite poetic forms is “things to do.” In it, the poet writes a poem about a topic, and the poem reads as a to-do list for that thing. Here’s a first draft example.

Things to Do If You Are Dandelion Fluff
Re – e – e – a – c – c – h toward sky
Wave in the breeze
High-five trees
Hold hands with soil and
Don’t
Let
Go

Here are some student examples:

Things to Do if You Are a Knitting Needle With 1st graders at Hugo Elementary School (White Bear Lake, MN)

Wear a shiny silver coat
Play with your twin to make mittens
Dream of knitting a perfect sweater

Things to Do if You Are a Ship With mixed-grade elementary school group (Stewartville, MN)

Wear striped cloth and wooden shoes
Dance in swerves to the music of the waves
Hope for sailors to steer you
Fly across the water
I have written things to do poems with kindergartners through adults, on topics from magnets to airplanes to Hawaii. The form is easy to learn and is adaptable to any age student. Here’s how to write a group things to do poem.

1. Share a few things to do poems as mentor texts.

2. Ask students what they notice. Depending on the students, we discuss the action word at the beginning of each line, the use of figurative language/personification, the list form of the poem, the absence of rhyme, etc.

3. Announce the topic, which can be a thing or a place or a process. It is easier to start with a non-living topic for your first attempt.

4. If possible, display an up-close visually appealing image of the topic.

5. Brainstorm some facts. “Tell me something you know or notice about this [pictured] ship.” These might include the parts of a thing, the steps of a process, sensory details, etc.

Here’s a “ship” example:

- water
- sails
- cloth
- deck
- wood
- floats
- carries things
- carries people
- gets from one place to another
- ocean
- pirates
- sailors
- wind for sails
- storms are scary

6. Tell students the group will use some of these facts, but not all of them, in the poem. I share If You Were the Moon, which started as a things to do poem. We talk about how a line can inform (the moon’s gravity causes earth’s tides) in a creative, poetic way (“play tug-of-war with the ocean”).

7. Give students the first word of each line, and call on volunteers to finish lines. I start with wear.

8. Prompt as needed. If I give hide as a word, I ask, “What would a ship hide from? Or what might a ship hide inside itself?” Students have seen diamond hearts inside mountains and BOOM inside fireworks.

9. Progress through the poem using verbs unrelated to the topic. In a ship poem, sail would likely get “Sail across the ocean.” True, but boring. In a bee poem, sail might inspire “Sail across the summer meadow.”

10. Finish up with an emotional verb, like wish or dream. Kids often synthesize the facts they know into really lovely last lines. Or not—because you never know with poetry! But that’s ok. It’s a process.

It’s up to you how much to emphasize facts. While I was writing magnet poems with first graders, a student offered “dance on the ceiling” but the teacher wanted facts in every line. We celebrated ceiling dancing and brainstormed how to add a fact. We wrote, “Dance on a metal ceiling with a paper clip partner.”

Things to do poems are deceptively simple. They require students to be able to explain a topic clearly and also to convert it into metaphor. It’s advanced-level thinking, but
the kids see it as fun and challenging. My favorite benefit is that students who don’t see themselves as writers, let alone poets, often discover their inner creative writers.

**Resources**

*Falling Down the Page* is an anthology of list poems edited by Georgia Heard; in it Elaine Magliaro’s “Things to Do if You Are a Pencil” is one of my favorite mentor text poems to share with students.

More examples I have written with students are on my blog at laurasalas.com/blog. Just type in “things to do if” in the search box.

*If You Were the Moon*, my poetry/science mashup picture book, started out as *Things to Do if You Are the Moon*. Learn more at laurasalas.com/moon.

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*Former teacher Laura Purdie Salas has written more than 125 books for kids, including the Can Be . . . series (Bank Street Best Books, IRA Teachers’ Choice), BookSpeak! (Minnesota Book Award, NCTE Notable), and If You Were the Moon. Laura shares inspiration and practical tips with educators about poetry, nonfiction, and more. Visit Laura at laurasalas.com.*
Abstract

Brief, efficient reviews share tools and apps that offer a variety of creative and motivating writing experiences for students in K-Grade 8. The author gives examples of ways these apps can be applied with science and social studies, as well as in reading, writing, and multimedia experiences. Students integrate visual arts, music, and drama as they use these apps, and they develop communication skills as they prepare projects for dissemination.

Are you looking for some innovative technology tools to incorporate student writing or written reflection in your classroom? If you are, these tools and apps may enhance the learning experiences for your K-8 students. Even if you are just beginning to increase your technology use, you could integrate one or more of these tools to support active and authentic writing, and other curricular areas as well.

**Book Creator**
https://bookcreator.com/

All children enjoy making books, and this open-ended, creative storytelling app is available for any device for $2.49 to $4.99. Students choose the format they want to use and then select photographs, find clipart, or draw their own illustrations. Using the step-by-step directions provided, students add text, music, video, or voice.

This cross-curricular app could be used in any discipline. Students could create a reading journal or a writer’s notebook and add to it throughout the year. For science, students could keep a science notebook to collect notes from observations as well as information from different sources. The most popular use of this app is in writer’s workshop where students create and publish books. Teachers have found that students revise their writing more if they have an audience, and these books can be published in iBooks or uploaded to social media to give them that opportunity.

**Explain Everything**
https://explaineverything.com/

As the title states, students can explain anything and everything with this app. The versatile interactive whiteboard can share children’s knowledge or build their understanding. Students use visuals, animations, videos, and narration about any topic or subject matter.

Students might write and illustrate a story on the whiteboard and read it aloud with the video display. Or they could write a summary of a historical event and add onscreen drawings, import photos and movies, and then add audio. After writing a nonfiction
piece, students could complete a summative assessment explaining the text features and text structure of this genre. Explain Everything is an amazing tool for creating interactive and engaging multimedia presentations with many options available.

**Make Beliefs Comic**  
https://www.makebeliefscomix.com/  
This exciting comic strip tool can help kids build creative comic strips. Students choose their characters, background colors, and speech balloons, and then they write the text. This free user-friendly tool, available on the internet, is appropriate for all ages. The comic characters are diverse, including people of color, animals, and a child in a wheelchair. Students could retell a story by creating a narrative comic, including the beginning, middle, and end. In addition, students could write a reflection to something they have read, using three simple images and text. The comics can be emailed or posted on social media.

**My Story**  
http://mystoryapp.org/  
This book-making tool and storytelling app is the easiest for PreK-3 students. Children can type or write their text, then illustrate using the paintbrush and drawing tools. For students who would prefer to use clip art or stamps, these options are available, as well as resources for finding images from the internet to enhance a story. A final option is for students to audio record and narrate their story. The video can be exported to social media or the internet. Only $3.99, this app is extraordinarily easy to use as it empowers young children to write.

**Popplet**  
https://popplet.com  
This free graphic organizer is an excellent tool for brainstorming and planning a piece of writing. Popplet helps students think and learn visually by organizing thoughts, ideas, images, facts, and more. They can insert words, sentences, drawings, videos, photographs, and URL links. For example, when writing a personal narrative students could create a popplet for each memory they recall related to their story. Young children could plan a beginning, middle, and end in this tool. Older students could use Popplet like a story map and plan the rising action, climax, and resolution. Children find this tool fascinating and very easy to use.

**Puppet Pals**  
There are two versions of this app, Puppet Pals 2 and Puppet Pals HD, applicable for primary to older students. This app helps students create and record their own animated short videos. For example, students could create a puppet show to retell a book or discuss what they have learned after an inquiry unit. First, they need to use pencil and paper to story board and write a script. Then they can take photos of their characters or use the caricatures available in the app. They can either use real-life backgrounds or choose from the many settings available in the app. Children can change the characters’ size and move them around in different directions, just like puppets. Finally, students record the voice over and then export their puppet shows to a class website.

**Skitch**  
https://evernote.com/skitch/  
This app is free for any device and is very simple to use. With Skitch, children can communicate visually about what they are learning, then label and annotate with words, doodles, arrows, or stickers. For example, students could take a photograph of a mealworm that they are studying in science, then label the parts of the mealworm and discuss on the photograph what they learned about mealworms. Or during a class field trip a couple of students could take photographs, and then class members could write sentences on each photo as they reflect on the experience. Additionally, when the teacher
sees students revising in their writer’s notebooks, she might take photographs of their writing. Students could then label on the photo what kind of revising they accomplished and how this helped their writing.

**Sticky**

These digital sticky notes are free and available for any device. As with the actual paper sticky notes, students can keep track of their thinking as they read a book by creating these notes on their chrome book or iPad and saving them in a folder with the book title.

While listening to a read aloud, students could write down their predictions, questions, or connections on digital sticky notes and share them with their table group.

Perhaps at the close of a mini lesson on opinion writing, students could quickly write on a sticky note the difference between facts and opinions. The classroom teacher could check these notes to determine students’ understanding. Since there is only room for one sentence, students feel empowered, not intimidated, by writing.

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Deanna Day teaches literacy and technology courses for Washington State University, Vancouver. She believes in taking small steps in enhancing our classrooms with technology. All teachers can incorporate technology where it makes sense.
Teaching Idea

Using Popular Culture to Get Students Hooked on Reading and Writing

Janet L. Losser
Courtney Johnson

Abstract

Rather than struggling against their elementary students’ obsession with a game that had become a popular cultural phenomenon, the authors, who were participants on the same teaching team, decided to adapt the game as part of the writing curriculum in their classrooms. The results were amazing as writing became intensely motivating for the students. This teaching tip is an excerpt from a longer, more detailed article.

Children today need creative teachers who respect their interests outside of school and are willing to acknowledge them in the classroom in ways that might be related to academic gain. We decided to invite an extremely popular aspect of our students’ culture into our classrooms.

Janet, who was teaching while completing her doctoral degree, summarizes the basic orientation behind our idea, along with some of the theoretical justification that guided us as we put it into practice.

Janet’s Explanation

Mimi Chenfeld (2000) wrote,

When I see today’s children poring over Poke’mon and Digimon characters—recognizing every name and picture, using words like “evolve,” “transformation,” and “weaknesses”—when I see their fascination (or obsession), I wonder if we’re not missing important connections. Can we find a place to use and respect this knowledge in our classrooms and curricula? (p. 8)

Courtney and I decided to try out Ms. Chenfield’s idea. We found that the writing programs of our classes came to life when we valued and applied in our classes what our students held seriously in their lives: Poke’mon cards, interaction, and stories.

*Johnsonmon* became an important part of
Courtney’s class, and Lofgranmon* became an obsession in mine. Almost two decades later, the Poke’mon craze continues. We offer our teaching tip for others who might want to try Poke’mon or another game of the students’ popular culture in their own classrooms.

Simply stated, popular culture is what is popular with particular groups of people. It allows certain people to relate to each other through its unique symbols and meanings conveyed constantly through the media. In a more complex definition Mukerji and Schudson (1991) explained that popular culture refers to “the beliefs and practices, and the objects through which they are organized, that are widely shared among a population” (p. 3).

There are many reasons why inviting popular culture into the classroom can be a promising strategy for teachers. First, to build on students’ schema teachers have to pay attention to what motivates the group. Considering what is important to the students and including it in the classroom gives them power over their learning as it validates their interests. Lewis (1998) asserted that if teachers choose to ignore students’ outside interests, these interests will edge into our schools anyway.

Second, inviting popular culture into the classroom, rather than attempting to exclude it, has the potential for creating higher quality experiences for students. Delpit (1986) felt that conversations at school become richer when the texts students experience in their world outside of the school are invited in so the classroom becomes a “meeting place” where learning can occur. Finally, student ownership in the curriculum is invaluable, and using it to support the curriculum gives students a sense they have some control over their learning.

Courtney Johnson shares her adventure when Poke’mon became Johnsonmon in her classroom.

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* Lofgran was Janet’s maiden name.

Courtney’s Story

My students’ faces lit up when I mentioned the name Poke’mon. The Poke’mon name seemed cool, but how does the cultural phenomenon work? I was not in the know and I knew it. I asked my students about trading Poke’mon cards and was bombarded by what seemed to be a foreign language.

• “You have Poke’mon cards, and you try to get all the surprise boxes.”

• “The way you get all the surprise boxes is by fainting all the other Poke’mons.”

• “Different cards have different hit points and damages.”

• “You have to have energy in order to do damage.”

This new lingo left my head spinning.

I wasn’t sure I could catch the Poke’mon fever that had infected my students. Did I want to? Was there enough potential in the Poke’mon craze to add value to my classroom? How could I possibly fit more into my curriculum? The idea of using the Poke’mon popular culture intrigued me, so I took a plunge into the unknown. I became the student, and my students taught me what I needed to know about Poke’mon.

Gradually I gained confidence that I could play the game. I went Poke’mon shopping and was surprised to find out how much the cards cost—$10.00 per deck! I couldn’t afford the multiple decks I needed. I returned to my classroom empty handed and shared the problem with my students. Since we still wanted to participate in some way, we discussed the possibility of making our own cards. Together we came up with the name of Johnsonmon. My classroom was on fire with excitement as we began the creative process.

Students began by designing their own cards. I found an inexpensive scrapbook software program that allowed me to recreate students’ designs on my computer at home. After a few attempts at designing the cards, I
was able to create some Johnsonmon cards that looked very similar to the Poke’mon cards. Our class was beginning to create our own popular culture, not merely tap into another.

Before long, students were clamoring to collect and trade the Johnsonmon cards. Meanwhile, Poke’mon cards were creating a problem at our school. Many unfair trades were taking place with experienced traders taking advantage of the inexperienced traders. Parents were upset, and teachers took issue with the socioeconomic aspects of the “haves and have nots.” The student council was asked to come up with a solution to the problem, and they made the decision to ban Poke’mon completely. My students did not seem to mind; in fact they jumped up and down saying, “We have Johnsonmon! We have Johnsonmon!” They were proud of their designs and loved their cards. I realized they were ready to write about the Johnsonmon characters that were so important to them.

For prewriting exercises, the students placed their Johnsonmon cards on their desks and studied the characters. They discussed possible story ideas with peers and explored the option of including other Johnsonmon characters in their stories. The energy level in the class was high as they wrote, revised, edited, and prepared their stories for publication.

When the class finished designing their cards, a trading frenzy began. Soon students were bartering for more cards and couldn’t get enough. When they couldn’t obtain the cards they wanted through a trade, they asked me if they could earn that card by doing extra work. It was incredible. These kids were motivated to work. The next several days provided intense workshop opportunities where students didn’t want to stop writing. I was amazed as I watched them trade additional cards. Not only did they want the cards, they wanted the stories written by their peers that gave more detail about each of the characters. They were driven to read.

The following weeks provided rich opportunities for mini-lessons to support their writing. Were the stories organized? Had they chosen chronological order, cause/effect, problem/solution, compare/contrast? Were their stories clear and concise? Not only were they learning how to write, they were learning key literacy strategies. In addition, they were writing for a real audience—their peers—and their stories had to be good.

After the book was published, the students didn’t want to stop. They wanted to write more and include other Johnsonmon characters in their stories. They worked together, threading the intricate details of each Johnsonmon character into a class story that included every student’s character. They were determined not to leave anyone out.

Obviously the Johnsonmon project was not only a motivational tool for writing, but a powerful force for developing class unity. My students and I grew closer to one another through our writing. They treated me with respect because I valued what they valued. As I read and reread their stories, I became more informed about what an attack was, how trainers worked, and how a defending Johnsonmon held up in battle. I was in the know and could talk the common language with my students. I often called them by their Johnsonmon names. Their smiles suggested they liked it when I did.

References


Janet Losser has been in education for over 27 years. Currently she is an associate professor in the Department of Teacher Education at Brigham Young University. Janet is a liaison with the BYU-Public School Partnership, which allows her opportunities to work in the public schools as well as at the university. Early in her career Janet was a classroom teacher in Grades 4, 5, and 6. She currently serves as president-elect on the Utah Council International Reading Association Board.

Courtney Johnson has been involved in education for over 20 years and has taught Grades 4-12. She is currently an elementary school principal, but will soon be transitioning to open a new high school. Courtney co-founded an aviation-based residential treatment center for at-risk secondary students and was responsible for the educational component. She loves to write and has authored and co-authored over a dozen books. My Troll Patrol is her most recent project, for which she has written several books in a children’s book series that teaches pro-social skills.