

# Using postmodern picture books to support upper primary students' text analyst skills

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## ABSTRACT

*This article examines how Year 6 students engaged with a postmodern picture book in an Australian classroom to develop knowledge and skills for critical analysis of texts. One aspect of being critically literate is to question the purpose and function of texts, realised through the knowledge and skills of the text analyst role (Freebody & Luke, 1990; Luke 2012b). Using a small-scale, case study approach, this research study examined the extent to which a postmodern picture book, exhibiting a device of multi-stranded narratives, supported students of differing reading levels to develop text analyst practices. Findings suggest that such postmodern picture books could support students to develop text analyst practices, while the practise of some knowledge and skills was more prolific than others, and students across the group did not demonstrate the same depth of understanding of the text analyst role. The study adds to growing research about the uses of postmodern picture books for building students' enjoyment of literature, tolerance for ambiguity, comprehension of complex narratives and critical literacy.*

## Introduction

Picture books are instrumental for children's development of reading practices, with these artistic literary texts offering unique opportunities to explore inherent interactions between the visual and verbal modes of meaning (Wolfenbarger & Sipe, 2007). Picture books that subvert traditional expectations of linear narrative structures, employing devices that highlight the text's fictional nature, have been categorised as *postmodern picture books* (Pantaleo & Sipe, 2008). Such devices are *metafiction*, which include disruptions of time and space relationships across a story, multiple narrators and/or narratives, and narrators and characters that directly address the reader (Pantaleo, 2014 a, b).

Much research asserts that to be literate, readers need a critical orientation by understanding texts as ideological constructions that position them as readers (Anstey, 2002; Luke, 2012b; Vasquez, 2017). Within this study, critical literacy is explored in terms of the knowledge and skills of the text analyst role, one of four reader resources defined by Freebody & Luke's

*Four Resources Model* (Freebody & Luke, 1990; Luke, 2012b; Luke & Freebody 1999). While the resources can be conceived of as a 'family of practices' (Luke & Freebody, 1999, p. 6), the text analyst role, as informed by the *Australian Curriculum: English* (henceforth AC:E), was the focus for this study.

Picture books provide readers of all ages the opportunity to engage with the features of literature (Wolfenbarger & Sipe, 2007), as well as the visual and multimodal elements present in such texts (Evans, 2009; Pantaleo, 2012; Turner, 2014). Postmodern picture books, with their playful subversion of linear narratives (Nikolajeva, 2010) layered meanings, penchant for parody and self-reference (Sipe & Pantaleo, 2008), as well as the presentation of varied narrators and points of view (Serafini, 2005), provide opportunities for critical reflection along with enjoyable and rich aesthetic experiences.

Postmodern picture books often prompt readers to develop agency in their reading, encouraging reflection on the nature of the text and its forms and structures

(Arizpe et al., 2008; Pantaleo, 2008). There are a range of studies that focus on how students engage with metafictional devices in these books, where elements such as the artwork (Arizpe et al., 2008), narrative structure (Pantaleo, 2010), character representations and challenging topics (Evans, 2015) are explored. This work resonates with a key facet of being critically literate, where a reader has the ability to step back in order to 'view language, texts, and their discourse structures as principal means for representing and reshaping possible worlds' (Luke, 2014, p. 27). Whilst the field of research has explored how children can interact with postmodern picture books to enjoy actively interpreting meaning, there is arguably less research about how such texts might be used to develop aspects of critical literacy, as informed by the text analyst role (Anstey, 2008; Exley & Dooley, 2015; Papen, 2020; Serafini, 2005).

This article examines the responses of four Year 6 students Ben, Cate, May and Tara (all pseudonyms) to a postmodern picture book reading, group discussion, written annotations and a final multimodal text response task. This study was completed as part of an honours program, which is an additional study program for high achieving students as part of their final year in the Bachelor of Education degree.

### ***Critical literacy and the postmodern picture book***

Postmodern picture books, by their very nature, tend to defy clear definition (Allan, 2012), utilising a range of literary strategies and metafictional devices (Pantaleo, 2014a; Sipe & Pantaleo, 2008; Watson, 2004). Such texts are intriguing for readers, as they puzzle over the possible intentional choices of Rosie the hen in the seminal postmodern text *Rosie's Walk* (Hutchins, 1968), characters acting as both readers and authors of the book being read in Emily Gravett's *Mouse's Big Book of Fear* (Gravett, 2007), and the various loquacious narrators who address the reader in books like *The Stinky Cheese Man and Other Fairly Stupid Tales* (Scieszka & Smith, 1993) and Mo Willem's *Don't Let the Pigeon Drive the Bus!* (2003). The metafictional device of a story drawing attention to itself as an object is now common in recent books like Andy Lee's *Do Not Open This Book* (Lee & McKenzie, 2016), Melanie Watt's *Chester* series (2008; 2009) and David Ezra Stein's *Interrupting Chicken* (Stein, 2010).

Pantaleo (2014a) argues that 'the common elements of the various [metafictional] devices is their power to distance readers from text...positioning readers in more active interpretive roles' (p. 326). Such active roles may come in many forms such as critical thinking and

varied interpretations. In Pantaleo's study (2014b), students explored *The Wolf's Story: What Really Happened to Little Red Riding Hood* (Forward & Cohen, 2005), where they engaged in 'discriminating, logical reasoning, creating interpretations, inferring meanings, judging, and assessing' (p. 21) about the visual and narrative meanings in the story. Other studies have explored breaking the fourth wall (Ritone & Kurkjian, 2018), indeterminate plot and titles (Daugaard & Johansen, 2014), and the role of framing in shaping reader responses (Smith, 2009).

While critical thinking is an essential skill for interrogating postmodern texts, it differs to critical literacy. Vasquez et al. (2019) define critical thinking as flowing from the Enlightenment's focus on logic and reasoning. Their discussion of the term *critical* in critical literacy develops around an analysis of power and social inequality. Tracing the historical roots of the term, including Paulo Freire's work on critical consciousness in terms of class struggle (Morrell, 2008), they detail past and present practices of critical literacy around the globe, and its various instantiations. Central to their argument is that texts and practices are never neutral and can be interrogated and challenged. This means that 'the world, as text, can be read from a critical literacy perspective, especially given that what constitutes a text continues to change' (Vasquez et al., 2019, p. 301).

The changing textual landscape is evident in the new directions that critical literacy is being used, including Comber and Nixon's (2014) work on place-based learning, areas of digital technologies (Marsh, 2016), as well as critical ways of engaging with multimodal texts (Callow, 2017). Postmodern picture books as multimodal texts, whether print or digital versions, thus continue to be a key resource for using critical literacy as a lens or frame in the classroom. As Vasquez et al. (2019) remind us, 'Texts work to have us think about and believe certain things in specific ways, and as such they work to position readers in certain ways.' (p. 306). A critical literacy lens doesn't negate the pleasure of reading a postmodern picture book but may add another layer that deepens the reader's experience and social awareness.

As noted in the introduction, critical literacy in this project was explored in terms of the knowledge and skills of the text analyst role. Freebody & Luke's (1990) *Four Resources Model* conceives the *text analyst role* as one of four interdependent roles adopted by a successful reader. Serafini reconceptualized the model in order to consider the role of multimodal texts, proposing 'four resources or social practices for reading-viewing multi-modal texts' (Serafini, 2012, p.

150), where the reader/viewer is a navigator, interpreter, designer and interrogator. This reworking, adopted in the study of graphic novels (Meyer & Jiménez, 2017) and with informational texts (Moses, 2015), further supports research into how the reader critically analyses and interrogates multimodal texts such as postmodern picture books.

While reading picture books involves an interaction of reader roles, Freebody (2012) argues that 'each single resource is necessary but not sufficient, that each resource requires explicit teaching for the bulk of youngsters, and that, in fluent practice, these resources become effortlessly orchestrated' (p. 13). Whilst acknowledging that the development of text analyst skills is shaped by the interplay with the other three reader roles, there are specific knowledge and skills, as Freebody suggests, that can be learned and practised by readers as they engage with the text analyst role as part of their literacy development. Building text-analyst skills includes interrogating the positioning of the reader in relation to a text, analysing the author's possible intentions, identifying voices included in a text and points of view, and recognising opportunities for texts to be redesigned to transform meaning (Comber & Nixon, 2014; Luke, 2012b; Luke & Freebody, 1999). Such skills support the reader to conceive that certain worldviews are inherent within all texts – an essential understanding for becoming critically literate (Janks, 2010).

A number of studies and professional publications have explored critical literacy, focussing on the text analyst role, whilst acknowledging that the other reader roles are also active (Comber & Nixon, 2014; Janks, 2013; Jones, 2013; Papen, 2020). Exley et al. (2014) explored how one early years teacher, with government pressure to adopt a narrower assessment focussed curriculum, infused her teaching with 'text analysis skills' (p. 61) with overt critical discussion about texts. Rush examined how middle years students' comprehension and critical responses to popular culture texts were developed in tutoring sessions, noting the tutor's crucial role in scaffolding the text analyst role (Rush, 2004). With these studies in mind, the next section considers research that has focussed on the use of postmodern picture books with primary aged students, using varied critical approaches.

### *Engaging with postmodern picture books*

The nature of postmodern picture books invites engagement and reflection. Studies from Canada and the USA show that six to twelve year-olds can engage with metafictional devices to interpret, hypothesise, infer and make connections as they construct ideas about

storylines (Pantaleo, 2005; Serafini, 2005; Sipe & Brightman, 2009). Other researchers have found that postmodern picture books were enthusiastically received by primary students when the meaning construction process was scaffolded by the teacher and/or peers (Anstey, 2002; Serafini, 2005). Acknowledging the importance of studies which explore students' engagement and understanding of the metafictional nature of postmodern picture books provides a rich foundation for considering how critical literacy and the text analyst role, as presented in this article, might also be investigated.

Research in primary school settings suggests that as students recognise authorial choice and influence in texts, they can also begin to take a critical stance when interpreting postmodern picture books. Flores-Koulish and Smith-D'Arezzo's (2016) work with small groups of second and fourth-grade students in an American public school used David Wiesner's (2001) *The Three Pigs*, which parodies the original fairy tale by relocating the pigs to other familiar tales. The researchers reported that both groups could connect the use of 'stories within stories' with the author's agency and ability to appropriate stories. Similarly, Swaggerty (2009) explored how eight American fourth-graders navigated postmodern picture books including *The Three Pigs* (Wiesner, 2001), and found that students frequently referred to intertextual references and stories within stories to interpret meaning. While the focus was critical awareness about metafictional devices, these studies show the possibility for similar studies where critical literacy practices, which entail 'a reasoned approach to identifying author bias' (Luke, 2012b, p. 6), would complement the metafictional analysis.

A range of studies that explore how students engage with the complex features of postmodern picture books also demonstrate the possibility for examining how the development of the text analyst role might advance this body of work. Pantaleo's (2005) nine-week study incorporated whole-class instruction and questioning during small group read-alouds of various postmodern picture books with first grade students in Canada. Pantaleo found that students could engage with the general indeterminacy of meaning within these books to fill story gaps and recognise multiple interpretations. In later work, Pantaleo (2007a, 2010), across an eleven- and ten-week study respectively, interviewed third, fourth and fifth-grade students about their own metafictional texts. She found that they frequently adopted the content and structure of postmodern picture books previously read in class, such as the fifth-grade students incorporating the device of polyphony, while the third and fourth-graders consistently used intertextuality

and characters directly addressing the reader and/or narrator to generate humorous and playful stories.

Adopting a similar research approach, Pantaleo (2007b) discovered that more than three-quarters of 58 fifth-grade students, exploring four seemingly unrelated stories told through separate frames in *Black and White* (Macaulay, 1990), could discuss Macaulay's choice to manipulate time and space relations. Students articulated the importance of searching the illustrations to enjoy the book's meaning. As was the intent, both studies emphasised students' development of a critical, analytical stance in terms of the 'pleasure of non-conformity' (Pantaleo, 2005, p. 31). Both studies showed the complexity of the students' responses, which also suggests that similar work with postmodern texts may support a range of text analyst responses as well.

Building on Pantaleo's work with *Black and White*, we wondered about students' capacities to connect the author's possible intentions with their revised ideological understandings of story-telling. For example, this might have involved students in interrogating the author's purpose for using different perspectives, as in *Black and White*, seeing if they identified and questioned what the author wanted them to think, and if they could develop their own opinion about the message(s) embedded in the text. Turner (2014) examined how six third and six fifth-grade Australian primary school students critically reflected upon their worldviews when reading a selection of postmodern picture books. Turner found that students constructed meanings from the collection of metafictional devices pertinent to each picture book to spark debates about social issues, including disempowered groups in society and surveillance. Turner's probing questions did not focus upon how and why students' frequent noticing of specific metafictional devices, which had been tallied during the study, contributed to their worldviews. The questioning of these worldviews related to the text's construction and therefore, the author's positioning of them as readers, which could provide another avenue to consider a more explicit focus on the text analyst role.

From the literature reviewed, we argue that postmodern picture books provide a range of opportunities to explore engaging and complex features and roles. However, there appears to be more limited studies investigating how students understand the relationships between authorial choices and underlying messages perceived to be embedded in postmodern texts that they read and compose. This study aimed to explore how, and to what extent, the development of upper primary students' text analyst skills can be supported by engaging with postmodern picture books.

### *Theoretical framing*

This study is framed by a socio-cultural perspective on literacy, informed by social conceptualizations of the way language represents culture (Halliday, 1978) and how language is used in particular kinds of social events and interactions, with a critical awareness of equity and power relationships (Street, 2001). As described below, the social setting for this study took place as part of a classroom community, where a small group read, discussed and engaged in text creation across four sessions, led by the researcher. A socio-cultural perspective complements the reading of postmodern picture books using a critical literacy lens (Pantaleo, 2014b, 2015) as it recognises that readers learn particular ways of reading in school as well as in other social contexts. As Kress argues, 'readers socialised in the traditional forms of the page ... are those who have social power now' (Kress, 2003, p. 159). However, the disrupting nature of metafictional devices and the opportunity to discuss other interpretations with a small group of peers recognises and may offer a different social context and way of reading. The text analyst role reflects Luke and Freebody's conceptions of socio-cultural perspectives and critical literacy, with a focus on the importance of how different modes make meaning and the ways these can be interpreted, discussed and challenged (Freebody, 2007; Luke, 2014). Similarly, the focus on metafictional devices in postmodern picture books draws on the analysis and frameworks in this field (Sipe & Pantaleo, 2008; Wolfenbarger & Sipe, 2007), as well as the recognition that picture books are multimodal texts, where the visual and verbal, both independent and combined, work to create possible meanings (Serafini, 2012).

This study focuses upon the metafictional device of 'multi-stranded narratives', meaning a story is 'constructed of two or more narrative strands differentiated by shifts in temporal or spatial relationships, and/or shifts in narrative point of view' (McCallum, 1996, p. 406). Multi-stranded narratives reflect the narrative complexity of modern television shows and films that require the viewer to contend with multiple threads embedded within an overarching story (Johnson, 2005). Pantaleo (2010) asserts that children need to read/view, discuss and create texts in school that embody the evolving modes of communication in their world.

To support the negotiation of the multi-faceted natures of the text analyst role and metafiction within postmodern picture books, the following research questions were considered:

- How do upper primary students engage with a postmodern picture book that exhibits

multi-stranded narratives to understand the constructedness of texts?

- To what extent does exploration of a postmodern picture book exhibiting multi-stranded narratives develop particular text analyst skills in the upper primary years?

### *Research design*

This study adopted a qualitative methodological approach, reflecting studies within the field that emphasise students' responses to postmodern picture books (Flores-Koulish & Smith-D'Arezzo, 2016; Pantaleo, 2005, 2007a; Serafini, 2005; Swaggerty, 2009). A small-scale instrumental case study was conducted, as a small group of upper primary students in a large metropolitan Australian city, and their interpretations of a picture book, defined the study (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). *Black and White* by David Macaulay (1990), thought to be 'an incredibly complex metafictional picturebook' (Pantaleo, 2007b, p. 46) that supports readers to 'cope with the unexpected in both format and text structure, and consider multiple meanings' (Anstey, 2002, p. 456) was selected as the focus text. This complex picture book is comprised of double page spreads that are divided into quadrants to tell four seemingly unrelated stories. The stories follow a boy on a train, parents in a strange mood, commuters waiting for a delayed train and a criminal's escape. As the reader is lured into believing that the stories connect, a final image displaying human hands lifting the train station problematizes the realism of the narratives. As such, the selection of *Black and White*, a seminal postmodern text, and the focus of a range of studies (Pantaleo, 2007b; Sipe & Pantaleo, 2008) reflects the intent of the study to examine how students might deploy text analyst responses to engage with a text that readily fractures the traditional linear narrative structure.

### *The research context*

The study was limited in size and scope by the requirements of the honours program, which has a limited time frame for data collection and analysis across a 12 week semester. The study involved four Year Six students (11 year olds), Cate, May, Tara and Ben (three female and one male), from a class at a public suburban primary school. The study used convenience sampling, with the inclusion criteria stipulating that students be working towards mainstream Year 6 English syllabus outcomes (Years 5 and 6 are defined as Stage 3 in the state syllabus) (New South Wales Education Standards Authority [NESA], 2012). The Year 6 state English syllabus reflects the national English curriculum that guides teaching and learning in all schools. A key element in

the AC:E (Australian Curriculum and Reporting Authority [ACARA], 2016) is the inclusion of a critical dimension of English. This critical approach is described by Freebody as covering 'a range of positions and practices to do with the analysis of texts in terms of their potential philosophical, political or ideological assumptions and content' (National Curriculum Board [NCB], 2008 p. 8). For example, it specifies outcomes in the upper primary years asking students to:

- 'Recognise that ideas in literary texts can be conveyed from different viewpoints' (ACELT1610) (ACARA, 2016, p. 70),
- 'Analyse strategies authors use to influence readers' (ACELY1801) (ACARA, 2016, p. 82)
- 'Compare the ways that language and images are used to create character, and to influence emotions and opinions in different types of texts' (ACELT1621) (ACARA, 2016, p. 88)

Having these outcomes in the syllabus already provided a contextual setting for exploring the role of text analyst in this classroom.

Students were considered after providing written consent themselves, as well as written consent from their parent/guardian. Participants were then selected based upon the class teacher's knowledge of their literacy learning, allowing students working towards different syllabus outcome stages to be recruited. The first author, Natasha, was a participant observer across the four sessions in the data collection process, which took place in the first half of the school year. Being a visitor to the classroom involved developing a rapport with the students over the sessions, as well as creating an environment conducive to discussion. It is acknowledged that any participant observer will have an influence on the research context and shared interactions (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

Each student was working towards different levels of reading in terms of the Year 6 English syllabus outcomes, based on the teacher's professional judgement and assessment of the students. Cate had demonstrated high levels of inference during comprehension activities and was deemed to be working beyond Year 6 level towards upper Stage 4 English syllabus reading outcomes by her teacher. Ben was beginning to work beyond a Stage 3 level, with a great capacity to notice and connect details and subtleties in texts. Tara worked at a Stage 3 level according to her teacher, with May still working towards this goal. According to the teacher, May often required strong support and scaffolding to interpret texts beyond the literal level.

The study incorporated three tasks and a final semi-structured interview with each student, across four

sessions, each conducted by the first author, Natasha. These sessions were each 30 to 40 minutes in length, taking place in a space adjoining the students' classroom. They involved participating in small group read-alouds, writing sticky note annotations and drawing to redesign a double page spread (see Appendix A). An emphasis on the text analyst role (Freebody & Luke, 1990) supported the study's focus upon how students could demonstrate aspects of critical literacy through observable knowledge and skills. Given that the Australian Curriculum: English outcomes, outlined above, informed the classroom program, the tasks provided opportunities to demonstrate these aspects of text analyst skills. The researcher did not explicitly teach the skills or concepts but provided the text and context for students to explore and demonstrate them.

To review multi-stranded narratives, students briefly explored *Voices in the Park* by Anthony Browne (1998), a postmodern picture book reflecting four people's viewpoints whilst visiting a park. The researcher read aloud the words on a page of the text, and made comments using the sentence stems of 'I notice...' and 'I'm wondering...' to model reflection about each viewpoint. This process supported the researcher to model thinking aloud and explicate multi-stranded narratives. *Voices in the Park* has been acknowledged as a text exhibiting the metafictional device multi-stranded narratives, used in previous studies of the field (Serafini, 2005) to explore student engagement with postmodern picture books. The decision to model thinking aloud in the context of a text displaying multi-stranded narratives recognises that for children to build critical literacy they must 'develop a meta-awareness and a meta-language for what they can already do' (Comber, 2001, p. 171). The first session continued with students reading and thinking aloud about *Black and White* in a small group interactive read-aloud. This was the first reading of the text for all students. During this interactive read-aloud, students were asked to turn to a certain page of the text and to read it aloud in any way they wished, without any prompting from the researcher as to the order in which they were to attend to the quadrants. Students could comment on anything they noticed or wondered about whilst they read, as was modelled by the researcher with *Voices in the Park*. Furthermore, the students used each other's remarks to expand upon their own interpretive comments. This method was informed by studies within the field, which supports the explication of meaning construction as students listen to others, reflect and expand upon their interpretive comments (Pantaleo, 2005, 2007b). The researcher occasionally posed probing questions to 'provid[e] expansions on the children's comments'

(Pantaleo, 2005, p. 22) to clarify what they could do. The researcher asked these questions to clarify and build a deeper understanding of the student's comments. As such, the probing questions began with words such as 'Why...' or 'What do you mean by...?' to ascertain the intended meaning behind some remarks from the participants, rather than lead the discussion. The researcher also guided the orderliness of discussion as the students became animated and frequently expanded upon each other's interpretive comments.

Students were each given a copy of *Black and White* to read independently between the first and second sessions, as repeated readings support children to make more insightful comments compared to single readings (Morrow, 1988 as cited in Pantaleo, 2005). To encourage students to think aloud, they were given sticky notes to place in the book to comment on illustrations and words that guided their interpretations as they read the text independently between the first and second sessions (Farrell et al., 2010). The second session then saw students discuss their annotations as a small group. This session followed a similar structure to the previous interactive read-aloud session, except this time students used the written remarks on their sticky notes to guide their comments about their noticings and wonderings.

During the third session, students redesigned a double spread of *Black and White*, each creating a multimodal composition that portrayed the criminal, who had been excluded from the page (see Appendix A). This task allowed exploration of if/how students conceptualised an alternative viewpoint, also recognising that critical literacy involves facility with tools for text construction (Janks, 2010). Students then individually told the researcher about their text, clarifying intentions for their work.

In the final session, students were individually interviewed, using semi-structured interviews to gain insight into the knowledge and skills they had demonstrated and developed. The interview questions (see Appendix C) were founded upon theoretical understandings of the text analyst role (Freebody & Luke, 1990; Harris et al., 2006) and questions from studies in the field (Flores-Koulish & Smith-D'Arezzo, 2016; Mantei & Kervin, 2015). Group read-alouds and interviews were audio-taped and transcribed (see Appendix B for sample transcription), which informed the researcher's analysis and triangulation of data (Flick, 2009).

Data analysis was conducted by a system of topic coding. As transcriptions from group discussions and individual interviews were initially read and re-read, with open coding, involving making notes about the topic or focus of students' comments, revealing multiple

themes within students' contributions (Miles & Huberman, 1994). Data was tabulated to compare and contrast contributions from each student as they read the picture book and answered interview questions individually. Once data that was relevant to the theoretical framework, or text analyst knowledge and skills, was noted, a process of axial or pattern coding was employed to interconnect data (Punch & Oancea, 2014). The themes were colour-coded to be synthesised into categories that answered the research questions, capturing students' engagement with the book and practice of different text analyst knowledge and skills. The themes were cross-referenced to students' drawings in terms of character inclusions and page design choices, along with students' discussion of their pictures to pinpoint similarities and/or differences in participants' text analyst knowledge and skills.

### ***Engaging with Black and White***

The following section discusses the findings, based on the themes generated during the analysis of the data, including the analysis of the students' drawings. These themes included affective engagement with the story, varied comprehension of multiple narratives and ways of reading, varied interpretation of page design, awareness of authorial choices, points of view and connecting authorial choices and ideological meanings.

### ***Enjoyment of the multi-stranded narrative***

Across the first two sessions of the study, all four students participated in collectively deconstructing the focus text, *Black and White*. This picture book seemingly contains four separate stories across each double spread: a story titled *Seeing Things* follows a boy on a train, the second story titled *Problem Parents* sees two parents in a playful mood, *A Waiting Game* shows commuters waiting for a train, and *Udder Chaos* is an unfolding story of a robber and cows. Students expressed enjoyment in a range of ways, including excitement, amusement and confusion, as they noticed details in the text and shared interpretations. From laughing at a robber stealing a choir member's book, to articulating light bulb moments about the story's happenings, such pleasure during the reading process is exemplified by Tara spontaneously exclaiming:

TARA: It's such a good book!

RESEARCHER: Why?

TARA: There's four different books and you just have to read all four, but then when you start to go through the book they connect more and more!

The pleasure that recurred throughout students' read-aloud comments and semi-structured interviews was often linked to discovering and enjoying the metafictional nature of the story and its multiple strands. Ben and Cate enjoyed hunting for small details in illustrations to make meaning, with Cate explaining 'I liked all the little surprises you could find everywhere and how you could sort of explore and discover stuff'. Meanwhile, May and Tara related their enjoyment of the book to their overall discovery of how the narratives connected in the end, with Tara stating 'It was fun to be able to find out what happens at the end and figure out how they all connect.'

### ***Readers as active participants in making meaning***

All students actively engaged in making meaning as they interpreted and hypothesized about the multi-stranded narratives, although some were more prolific as well as being self-reflective about how the book shaped their own ideas about reading. Active participation was evidenced in a variety of ways, such as showing interest in the book, contributing to discussions and related tasks. During interactive read-alouds, the researcher frequently prompted May for her insights, who sometimes responded by rewording peers' comments. Furthermore, May placed the fewest number of sticky notes of the group. May explained during the final interview that, 'At first I was confused and I didn't understand... At first I thought all these pictures were connected because they're characters.' In contrast, Ben contributed the most in conversation and had more than double the number of sticky notes written by May. During the first interactive read-aloud, by the second double spread Ben volunteered:

BEN: So each page, each quarter of the book represents a part of the story because it's the same, like the same type in each one. The top left one is watercolour, the bottom left one is cartoon...

During the study's third session, students created a 'fifth box' to add to the thirteenth double spread. Students could choose any size or shape frame, colours, words and images to depict a character that was excluded from this double page: the criminal (see Appendix A). Ben and May's drawings synthesised what they felt to be the entire story's happenings, blending characters and objects from the different narratives into one illustration. Alternatively, Cate and Tara's drawings explored a perceived gap in the storyline concerning the criminal's movements. Tara explained how she arrived at her intention for her picture:

TARA: I think, like Ben said how he thought the train was going closer and closer, like getting closer and closer to the cow, I thought that he [the criminal] might be riding away from the train, so the cows don't get killed.

Elaborating upon a gap in the storyline could influence students' intentions for their drawing. Tara had assigned a sense of selflessness to the criminal previously unexplored in the focus text, exploring interpretations beyond the criminal being cheeky or deceptive. Despite their varied comprehension of the narrative, during their interviews all students individually reported that they enjoyed the book and would recommend it to other children. Explaining why they felt the book could help children become better readers, Ben, Cate and Tara showed a level of self-reflection when they referred to opportunities to take control of how they read and/or to think creatively and imaginatively.

### *Noticing the constructed nature of the visual features*

Across the initial shared reading, their own home reading and subsequent meeting, students examined ways in which the text was constructed through visual features. This included the framing of the narratives, colour schemes, page layout, and size of characters and happenings depicted in illustrations. Analysis of transcripts from each session showed that students attended to the written text accompanying some narratives, though far less frequently than the visual features. This was echoed in their own drawings, where no student chose to include written text.

As students began deconstructing each double spread during the first read-aloud session, all students referred to the unorthodox nature of the illustrations, namely the colour schemes and organisation of four separate images:

BEN: In this one, Problem Parents, the parents are trying to make the dog white instead of black. It appears that he was black before.

CATE: And the splashes are going onto this lady's clothes.

MAY: The newspaper has all white too. What he's reading. The black's missing.

TARA: And then like, this one, [points to *Udder Chaos*] is like the first page. He's hanging down the page and trying to escape.

CATE: Maybe he's climbing through the book.

The existence of a constructed story world encouraged students to move beyond merely identifying visual

features, increasingly discussing how the book's unusual construction influenced their interpretations. Cate initiated interpretation after Tara identified the criminal (from *Udder Chaos*) 'hanging down the page.' Cate explored the meaning behind this fractured framing of the narratives to imply the character as being outside the book or story world. As students continued their group reading, Ben attempted to convince the group that each illustration or 'part' on the first double spread had been a title page, so they should not read left-to-right, top-to-bottom but 'go through and only read that part of the book and don't look at any of the other parts.' Nonetheless, Cate, May and Tara decided to read each whole page.

The constructedness of the focus text appeared to influence how students authored their own drawings. Each student chose not to include written text in their illustration, with Ben explaining that 'I felt like in most of the book it didn't have any writing.' Cate used gold colours in her pictured train like the focus text, justifying her decision by stating 'It keeps it the same, like, flowing on.' While the students noticed, replicated and thus accepted compositional decisions made by the author, this flowed from their understanding and discussion about David Macaulay's choices as they read and discussed the book together. Arguably, a conscious appropriation of his ideas is evidence of the text analyst role.

### *Awareness of authorial choices and points of view*

The open-endedness of students' interpretations regarding how to read and understand the book sparked comments about the actual act of constructing the text. As they read the second double spread, May questioned the author's construction: 'Why is he, like, the author, why is he just showing in this picture cows and a robber? He doesn't tell us what's actually happening.' Explaining his decision to navigate the book differently to the others, Ben commented that 'The authors made it no right way to read the book.' Only after the idea of the narratives being connected was well-established did students, with different levels of commentary, examine point of view by the second group reading. Discussing his choice to link two narratives, *Problem Parents* and *Udder Chaos*, with the comment 'The same eye' on his sticky note, Ben explained:

BEN: So this [points to the eye in *Udder Chaos*], the dog, actually represents all the cows... you can see from here that the dog and the cow have a resemblance...the dog goes in



Figure 1 – Title page from *Black and White* (Macauley, 1990)



front of the train and stops it and this is like the station [points to the toy station in *Problem Parents*] where the parents are waiting. This is sort of the mastermind of it all where the boy's controlling everything and it's all his imagination.

Ben reimagined a narrative from the point of view of the dog, instead of presuming the eye to belong to a cow like the other students. Ben discussed how point of view influenced his understandings, conjecting all the narratives were a product of the imagination of the boy from *Problem Parents*. Cate disagreed with Ben's ideas about who was represented, and to explain why this discrepancy existed Tara responded 'I feel like that's kind of the point of the book, so everyone sees different things and can use their imagination to read this book'. Tara justified how the text combined multiple perspectives to leave the story open-ended for readers.

Cate considered how a specific voice shaped text construction on one occasion. With prompting about

who 'they' were when Cate mentioned the parents by saying 'they're telling us about...', Cate initiated a discussion with Tara, showing awareness of whose voices may have been represented in the narrative:

CATE: Well, because it's called *Problem Parents* and the parents wouldn't really admit that they've done problems, so it wouldn't be the parents then.

TARA: I don't know maybe the daughter looks like a teenager, and the boy looks a bit younger. So the boy might just go with it because he's the younger kid and he doesn't really care but usually teenagers they kind of get a little more, out there, so maybe that's why she's the one telling the story in the comic one.

Interestingly, despite her comments above, Tara thought that everyone's views were valued equally in *Black and White*. After changing her mind, Cate was the only student to suggest they may not have been equal.

### *Connecting authorial choices and ideological meanings*

During the shared readings and final interviews, all students referred to the author as they discussed text construction. Ben and Cate frequently considered how the author's decisions influenced the overall purpose of the book and their thoughts as readers. May made little attempt to relate any specific observations to a conscious authorial decision. Tara made some comments about the implicit messages from the text, but frequently used the comments of Ben and/or Cate to make contributions. For example, Ben noticed a colour choice in *Seeing Things*, which Tara then added to:

BEN: In the middle they've [the author has] added colour right and said *Seeing Things*. So maybe they're saying don't just see white, like see other things... So the reader should look.

TARA: Oh, we are seeing things! We have to see lots of things. That's probably why it says it contains more than one story.

Ben applied his observations of colour choice to conject that the author wanted readers to look closely to see the happenings. Once this meaning construction process was scaffolded for Tara, she linked comprehension of the multiple narratives with the need to notice details.

The pattern of identifying a specific authorial choice and then linking it to the book's purpose or ideological messages, was consistently used by Ben and Cate to make meaning during discussion. Interpreting what the written text might contribute to the narrative on the fourth double spread, Cate proposed that it only moderately helped, explaining 'I feel like he's [the author's] just trying to show you how things from different places or different ways can join together to make something really good'. Cate believed the illustrations were more important for *showing*, rather than telling the reader that multiple perspectives can offer different insights – an idea reaffirmed through her interview comments. She felt the author wanted people to 'think for themselves rather than the author feeding them the information'. Ben similarly thought the author wanted to empower the reader, relating this argument to his observation of the 'Warning' on the opening page:

BEN: I think the author has left it for the reader to interpret and any way they want. They could think that each of these stories is one and their own. But then they could think all these stories are somehow intertwined. It's sort of multiple choice. You can choose out of the

two ways, or maybe more.

Questions from the post-reading, individual interviews (see Appendix C) gave students the explicit opportunity to articulate any perceived messages from the text. Ben and Cate responded without referring to the storyline, with Ben stating:

BEN: I think he wants them to think about when they see something, just to, I guess, appreciate it because...he's not just writing a story and that's that.... He's turned it into something different instead of just doing the traditional story writing.

Contrastingly, May and Tara did not think outside the story world to synthesise ideological understandings. May commented 'He wants you to think about that all this was just a little toy someone was grabbing, that children were playing with it.'

### *Discussion of findings*

Growing research has revealed that postmodern picture books can be enjoyed by children and used to expand their conceptions of narrative structures, the author's role and critical thinking skills (Flores-Koulish & Smith-D'Arezzo, 2016; Pantaleo, 2007a, 2010; Swagerty, 2009). The findings from this study suggest that engaging with the postmodern picture book *Black and White*, exhibiting a device of multi-stranded narratives, not only supported students to enjoy and explore the features of the text, but also supported some in demonstrating text analyst practices.

All students expressed pleasure in connecting and making meaning from the fractured narrative strands within *Black and White*. While enjoyment of literature is valuable in and of itself, Pantaleo (2005) and (2007b) found that students' enjoyment was essential for them to participate in constructing meaning from ambiguous postmodern picture books. In fact, the ambiguity and metafictional features appeared to invite engagement and pleasure, where each student expressed some form of awakening when discussing reasons for their enjoyment of the book. Wolfenbarger and Sipe's metaphor of the postmodern picture book as a playground, with readers 'playing on various pieces of playground equipment' is apt here, with students showing their pleasure as they played and explored (Wolfenbarger & Sipe, 2007, p. 275).

The findings also suggested another form of awakening as students made connections across the narratives as well as to role of the author. Ben, Cate and Tara referred to opportunities to take control of how they read and to think creatively and imaginatively, which

was reflected in their discussions about the book. Such findings are consistent with the literature (Pantaleo, 2005; Serafini, 2005; Sipe & Brightman, 2009) as well as the postmodern features of unusual page design, which prompted rich discussion and differing opinions. Pantaleo (2005) found that collaborative discussion to co-construct understanding of a postmodern picture book can support students to be open to alternative interpretations. Ben, Cate and Tara were all very active in the read-aloud discussions, while May was less vocal. While the ambiguity of the book seemed to puzzle her at times, May perhaps was beginning her journey with these new concepts, when she began to question the author's choices, saying 'He doesn't tell us what's actually happening.'

If, as Luke (2014) argued, a dimension of being critically literate is being able to step back to view texts and language as ways of representing the world, each of the students demonstrated this at varying levels of complexity, from awareness of different viewpoints, to exploring strategies that authors may use to influence readers using language and images, key outcomes from the AC:E (ACARA, 2016). However, awareness of authorial choices also appeared to influence students in moving beyond the story world to consider how points of view and voices were shaped, acting as a pathway to some text analyst practices. Ben and Cate disagreed on whose points of view were represented in each story, while Tara's commentary on the ambiguous nature of the narratives being 'the point of the book' was telling, as to recognise the existence of multiple interpretations is to identify that texts can reflect different meanings for different readers, a text analyst skill (Dias, 2010).

An important idea of understanding voice is that texts include some people's voices over others, empowering and disempowering certain perspectives (Turner, 2014). Cate and Tara explored whose voices were empowered and disempowered in the text when they discussed *Problem Parents*, though the comments did not extend to people or points of view excluded from the book altogether. Tara acted upon Cate's comment to interrogate the reliability of the teenager's voice relative to other characters, using her background understandings of younger children being less trustworthy. In terms of their own drawings and represented voices, students either chose to only take on the perspective articulated by the researcher (that of the criminal's), or to embed the criminal within an overall summary of the narrative events. Again, students did not extend their visual compositions to incorporate people or points of view excluded from the original text.

The aesthetic quality or layout of the visual and written text appeared to conceal the interplay of voice

and power from the other students. May referred to the presence of 'four equal boxes', with Tara commenting 'that everyone had an equal bit of talking'. This study's findings perhaps reiterate Pantaleo's (2007b) work that shows students more readily comprehend the aesthetic effects of design rather than the role of voice and power in text construction. The students' own drawings allowed them to represent the criminal's voice, where Cate and Tara chose to fill a perceived gap in the story, with Tara showing the criminal had a moral dimension to his actions.

While all students referred to the author as they discussed text construction, to deeply engage with text analyst practices is to connect authorial choices with the text's ideological meanings (Luke, 2012b; Luke & Freebody, 1999). Ben and Cate were most consistent in making these connections, supporting Tara with their discussion. This complements other research findings that children can successfully respond to postmodern picture books when the cognition of the metafiction is facilitated (Anstey, 2002; Serafini, 2005). However, neither Anstey (2002) or Serafini (2005) focused purely upon a student as the initiator of this scaffolding process, as was the case here, where these upper primary students engaged with multi-stranded narratives to understand the constructedness of texts with limited teacher scaffolding.

Articulating the influence of authorial intention upon the text appeared to be an area of understanding that greatly reflected each student's teacher-reported reading skill prior to the study. Ben and Cate, as students who could infer and make connections in texts beyond the Stage 3 syllabus reading outcomes, could synthesise the purpose for the text by critically analysing the relationship between the author and the text's construction. With discussion prompts from Ben and Cate, Tara could begin to make comments about the author's design choices and their impact upon the reader's role to generate meaning. May struggled to move beyond the literal or superficial level of the text to access the more deeply embedded idea of an authorial intention. As such, this particular text analyst practice appeared to be very much influenced by the students' prior knowledge and skills and use of inferential strategies to synthesise meaning.

While *Black and White* is just one example of a postmodern picture book exhibiting multi-stranded narratives, it still reveals ideas for how such metafictional texts can be utilised in the primary classroom. The same students who could connect the author's choices of colour and design with ideological messages within *Black and White* could more successfully apply their text analyst knowledge, discussing the function of texts

beyond this book. These same students were also reported as having more developed inferential strategies in reading comprehension activities prior to the study. Building upon previous research, teachers need to scaffold the meaning-making process to support and extend all students to successfully comprehend postmodern picture books (Anstey, 2002; Serafini, 2005).

This case study sought to explore how upper primary students engaged with a postmodern picture book incorporating the multi-stranded narrative device, and to what extent students could develop their text analyst knowledge and skills. A limitation of this approach is that the findings are bound within a small-scale case study, unable to be generalised for all populations of upper primary students. Despite this, the findings suggest that a multi-stranded postmodern picture book can be used to assist students to develop a range of text analyst knowledge and skills in the upper primary classroom.

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### Appendix A: Students' pictorial responses

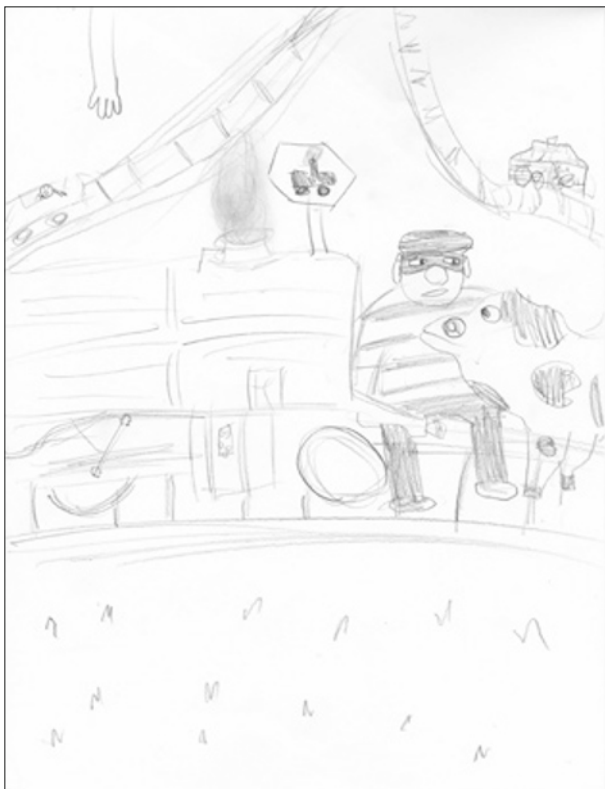


Figure 1. Ben



Figure 2. Cate



Figure 3. May



Figure 4. Tara

### Appendix B – Sample transcription of interactive group read-aloud

BEN: Can I just say, notice how, back on the second page. Notice how he's playing with a train set here?

TARA: Oh there are so many connections!

CATE: The cow udders look like hands because they're like fingers. And there's a choir there and they're all singing and they're all reading black books and then their sort of like, and cow udders are hands and like, oh, so confusing!

MAY: So this bit shows the cows because, well the guy was hiding with them. And then it shows the train. So these two pages are connecting because it's showing the cows and the guy in the picture. That's his hat.

CATE: Oh there's a squirrel on the roof! Look on the page before it's on the chimney.

INTERVIEWER: Oh yeah!

TARA: Why? So random.

CATE: I don't know, maybe it just wanted to move. Or wait, wait maybe the author wanted to show that it's after –

MAY: Like things are changing.

CATE: Oh, that guy's holding his hat so he can go over there.

TARA: Also, I think I said this before, the newspapers in the comic one now has black on it and at the start it was just white.

INTERVIEWER: Why?

TARA: I don't know. I just wanted to say in this picture there's like one guy who's pretending to hold a book but he's still singing but he's not actually holding a book.

CATE: *Laughs.* Wait I think he's the prisoner!

INTERVIEWER: That's odd.

TARA: Oh yeah!

BEN: Wait I think I know why the author does these things –

TARA: One guy and two people have no faces.

CATE: He stole his book!

BEN: Those, those are udders!

CATE: He stole his book! He's so red.

TARA: What is happening?

CATE: The prisoner stole his book! (Laughing)

BEN: Ok, so, I think, I mean, that I'm not really so sure about. Maybe he's like that because, perhaps, he got like, notice how his like uniform is gone and his face is really red and his eyes are like open and he looks really confused. He looks like he just got attacked and so that means, so this dude, the robber, because obviously he wasn't wearing it before, but now he has a white uniform on. That must mean he stole it from that dude. You know, have you seen Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy?

## Appendix C – Semi-Structured Interview Questions

### Deconstructing students' compositions:

1. Tell me about your text.
2. Tell me about the things you like in your picture.
3. What do you want the reader to understand about *Black and White* from your picture?
4. Exploring students' text analyst skills:
5. Tell me what you enjoyed about reading *Black and White*.
6. Why do you think Macaulay divided the stories into four boxes in *Black and White*?
7. What does Macaulay want people who read *Black and White* to think about? Do you agree or disagree with Macaulay's opinion?
8. Do you think all authors write texts with the intention of influencing the reader?
9. Do you think it is important to look at different views of an event, or just one? Why?
10. Do you think that texts value everyone's views equally?
11. Do you think that this book can help children become better readers? Why or why not?

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