

Chapter 5. Supporting Literacy Learning in the Early Childhood Classroom

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“Reading should not be presented to children as a chore, a duty. It should be offered as a gift.” –
Kate DiCamillo



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This chapter discusses approaches for promoting young children’s literacy learning in classrooms. Shared reading is one such practice. This chapter will begin by presenting the dialogic and Whole Book approaches as strategies for shared reading. The dialogic reading approach, originally developed by Lonigan & Whitehurst (1998), is a research-supported strategy for shared reading in early childhood classrooms. The Whole Book Approach of Lambert (2015), used at the Eric Carle Museum, enriches the dialogic approach by encouraging investigation of the designs and para-text aspects of books as well as the text and illustrations.

Selecting appropriate texts for developing readers and writers is an important part of instructional decision-making. Hence, the second part of this chapter will discuss quality picturebooks for supporting literacy learning in the early childhood classroom. Children’s interests as well as their reading levels should be important factors to consider in selecting picturebooks for instruction, guided reading, and independent reading in the classroom. Running Records (Clay, 2017) will be explained as an assessment process for determining the appropriate text levels for individual children in the classroom.

The third part of this chapter will discuss other educational materials to be added in print-rich learning environments in the classroom. While there are so many methods and materials for early literacy classrooms, this chapter only discusses

Learning Objectives

- Describe Dialogic Reading. (InTASC Standard #4)
- Create a read aloud lesson plan for a picturebook using CROWD prompts. (InTASC Standard #7)
- Describe the Whole Book Approach. (InTASC Standard #4)
- Analyze a picturebook using the Whole Book Approach. (InTASC Standard #4)
- Select quality picturebooks for a child considering the child’s interests and reading ability. (InTASC Standard #2)
- Identify educational materials that can enrich children’s reading experiences. (InTASC Standard #8)

several of them. Knowledge and insights gained in this chapter can help readers find some other creative methods and materials to enrich their children's literacy learning.

Dialogic reading



One or more interactive elements has been excluded from this version of the text. You can view them online here: <https://iastate.pressbooks.pub/teachingearlyliteracy/?p=281#oembed-1>

[Download Dialogic Reading Video Transcript \[DOC\]](#)

There are good readers and poor readers. How do we know if our child is a good reader? When our child says the words in the text accurately? When they can read fast (with automaticity)? When they read like they speak in a regular conversation (with appropriate prosody)? While these indicators might give us confidence that our child is a competent reader, some doubts may still linger. Do we really know that our child is understanding the text when they say the words correctly? Many times, we wait until our child finishes saying the last word of a portion of text; then we ask about what they read. Then the child will briefly retell a couple of sentences as a summary of the text. We ask some probing questions to prompt them to elaborate about some details. This still might not convince us that our child made deep meaning out of the text.

Good readers check whether they understand what they read. They do it not only after reading but also while reading. When a sentence makes little sense, or if they get distracted, they reread it. When they are unsure of the meaning of a certain word, they look at the context to figure it out. They go back and search for information that they need in order to make sense of the current portion of text.

Good readers might do these comprehension checks silently in their brain, whether they are reading silently or aloud. Perhaps none of it is articulated. While the accuracy and speed of your child's oral reading can give you an idea if they are a struggling or advanced reader, it is hard to determine their level of comprehension (Dougherty Stahl et al., 2019).

CROWD

Teachers regularly think aloud when instructing students, not only for reading but also for other subjects such as math and science. When they read aloud with the children, they do it interactively. The CROWD prompts designed by Lonigan and Whitehurst (1998) are a useful strategy that can guide you in thinking aloud during reading by having a conversation about a book with your children, especially when they are young. C is for Completion, R for Recall, O for Open-ended questions, W for Wh questions, and D for Distancing.

Completion prompts

A **completion prompt** is when you ask your child to complete the blank parts of sentences. You read sentences aloud, leaving one or two words blank for your child to say. To be able to do it, an emergent reader child needs to be able to decode the word(s) or take a guess from the context. The illustrations are helpful when the child is just beginning to decode words. If the word to complete is the name of something in an illustration, your child can examine the illustration for a clue. In *The Very Hungry Caterpillar*, written and illustrated by Eric Carle (1969), an egg is lying on a leaf, as seen in the pages below. The illustration portrays the description very clearly. You can read the sentence “In the light of the moon a little egg lay on a ...” with rising pitch at the end that exhibits your anticipation of hearing their reading of the final word “leaf.”

This is a friendly and welcoming way for you to introduce your child to reading if your child hasn't yet had formal instruction. Choose completion words intentionally. As mentioned before, a word that can be guessed from the illustration is a good candidate. Words that appear in the title or are repeated throughout the book are other good candidates. These words are mostly ones that are keys for comprehending the story. Rather than choosing random words, choose ones from the content that is essential for comprehension. “On Friday, he ate through five oranges but he was still...” in *The Very Hungry Caterpillar* would be a good example for word completion, because the blank is a key word that is important for comprehending the story. The word hungry, which goes in the blank, appears in the title and is repeated throughout the book. Although decoding the two-syllable word in an isolated context could be daunting to beginning readers, when it is in the title and repeated on multiple pages of the book, your child will find it fun and easy to come up with the word. Another candidate for a completion word is one that rhymes with another before it. Also, sight words, simple CVC words, and target vocabulary words that your child has already learned would be good completion words.

Recall prompts

Recall prompts check if the children are comprehending and remembering the story. For instance, in Laura Vaccaro Seeger’s (2015) book titled *I Used to be Afraid*, the main character talks about what she used to be afraid of. If you use the things she says as recall prompts, your children will mention spiders, shadows, the dark, making a mistake, change, being alone, and the like, which they will remember from the pages you have read together.

Completion words and recall prompts focus more on literal comprehension than inferential comprehension. Literal prompts are concerned about the information that is explicitly available in the text. Usually there is one right answer for a literal prompt. Many adults ask their children about a name, size, color, or the shape of an object on a page, which are literal prompts. For instance, on one of the pages of *I Used to be Afraid*, “What color is the shadow on this page?” would be a good literal prompt focusing on the color of an object. While many adults use this type of prompt, literal prompts are insufficient to assist your children in fully comprehending what’s going on in the story and developing higher-order thinking. **Inferential prompts** are recommended for this purpose. These prompts ask the children to take a guess about what will happen based on the information given in the text. A question like “Why do you think this girl is not afraid of shadows anymore?” can help your child make a connection between the illustration they see on the page and shadows. Making an inference, a child might say, “She thought that shadows were monsters before. Now she thinks that she can play with the shadows making hearts or something. A heart shape is not scary.” Inferential prompts are more open-ended than closed-ended, so they can elicit multiple reasonable answers.

Open-ended questions

Open-ended questions aim to help your child give an answer of more than one word, in contrast to closed-ended questions, that call for a yes or no. A question like “Where do you think the freight train went after this page?” at the end of the book *Freight Train* by Donald Crews (2003) would be truly open-ended. There is no correct answer to this question. Therefore, your child can come up with a creative answer. It is important to design open-ended questions that can support your child’s comprehension of the book. For instance, the wordless picturebook titled *Truck* by Donald Crews (1997) does not tell a story but only shows one by its illustrations. The main element of the story is a red truck that travels through cities and the countryside. On the page where the back door of the truck is slightly open, you can spot several boxes of bikes. You can ask an open-ended question like “Where do you think the cargo of this truck will

be unloaded?” Your child has to study the illustration carefully and comprehend it to give a relevant response such as a store that sells bikes.

Wh questions

“Wh” questions are used to help children focus on story details. These are questions beginning with the word When, Where, Who, What, Why, or perhaps How. Conversations about what the characters are thinking or the “where” of the story can be initiated with prompts that ask for these details. Say for example, “What do you think Swimmy might be thinking on this page?” when you read *Swimmy* by Leo Lionni (2017). Say “What do you think the train is passing by?” when you read *Freight Train* by Donald Crews (2003). Then listen carefully to what your child says so you can take the conversation deeper. When your child responds, ask why they think so.

Wh questions can also include inferential prompts that support your child’s comprehension of the story. When you read *Inch by Inch* by Leo Lionni (2018), the inchworm is threatened by a nightingale. You can ask, “What do you think the inchworm will do to save his life?” Your child needs to understand the concept of measuring, while still being creative, to respond to your prompt.

Distancing questions

The purpose of distancing questions is to give your child an opportunity to make connections between the story and their own life experiences, so they will grasp a message they can take away from the book. For instance, when you read *Dear Zoo* by Rod Campbell (2019) aloud with your child, you can ask, “What animals did we see when we visited the zoo?” Meanwhile, Eric Carle’s (1969) *The Very Hungry Caterpillar* provides a good context for a conversation about a stomachache. When you are talking with your child about the book, you can refer to their own stomachaches, thereby providing a personal point of reference for the vocabulary word. This conversation will confirm whether your child understands the word. Other words used for stomachache can be mentioned to build a semantic network for growing your child’s future vocabulary.

The CROWD prompts are useful facilitators for interactive read-alouds with your children. It is possible you are concerned that the frequent interruptions from dialogic reading will interfere with the children’s comprehension of the story. While it is impossible to totally avoid some

deviations from the story, using the CROWD prompts can make the dialogic reading experience more effective and efficient.

Learning Activities



An interactive H5P element has been excluded from this version of the text. You can view it online here:

<https://iastate.pressbooks.pub/teachingearlyliteracy/?p=281#h5p-23>

Dialogic reading with the Whole Book Approach

Dialogic reading can be deepened with the **Whole Book Approach** (Lambert, 2015), as explained in this section, as this approach helps us to dialogically explore the design of the book as well as the text and the illustrations. The Eric Carle Museum proudly introduces their Whole Book Approach for reading picturebooks with children. The museum curates and exhibits children's picturebooks, emphasizing the quality of the illustrations. Thus, in their library the order of the books is based on the illustrator's last name. This is different from the majority of other children's libraries, which sort by the author's last name. Megan Dowd Lambert, who has worked with the Eric Carle Museum for almost twenty years, published a book titled *Reading Picture Books with Children: How to Shake Up Storytime and Get Kids Talking about What They See*. This book clearly presents the Eric Carle Museum's Whole Book Approach, which is an approach that helps us appreciate the illustrations and design quality of picturebooks as well as their story.

The Whole Book Approach emphasizes interactive reading aloud during reading times. Instead of reading aloud to children, Lambert (2015) explains that we should read aloud with them. In this way you invite your child into an active conversation with you about the text, illustrations, and design of the book. The Whole Book Approach guides you to pay attention to the jacket, cover, trim size, endpapers, front matter, and typography of the picturebook that you read with your child(ren). In addition, this approach says that it is worth mentioning even the barcode location of a well-designed picturebook.

Soh's two children grew up with Eric Carle books. She read *The Very Hungry Caterpillar* over and over to both of her children from when they were born. One day her first-grade child Jimmy was reading *The Very Quiet Cricket* (Carle, 2021). Soh and Jimmy had not yet talked about the author or illustrator of the book, as it was a quick reading time after breakfast while he was waiting for everyone else to get ready for school or work. Almost at the end of the book, he asked, "Wait a minute, was the author of this book Eric Carle?" Soh asked him, "Oh, you think the author of this book was Eric Carle?" Jimmy said, "Yes, the illustrations look similar to Eric Carle's (1969) *The Very Hungry Caterpillar*. And the title sounds similar, too: *The Very Something Something*."

As a matter of fact, *The Very Quiet Cricket* was a leveled-book version, adapted from Eric Carle's (1997) original one. To make it look similar to the other books in the series, the page orientation had been changed from landscape to portrait. Also, the font sizes were much bigger than in the original. Because of these changes, the written text grabs your child's attention more than the illustrations or book design. These are things you can talk about with your child. Lambert writes about the landscape orientation of *The Very Hungry Caterpillar* below:

"Eric Carle's (1969) famed *The Very Hungry Caterpillar* adopts a landscape orientation because this shape best echoes the form of the caterpillar itself. Furthermore, the horizontal shape of the book bespeaks the page-to-page journey of the caterpillar as it makes its way through the foods lined up on the successive pages. It's a small leap for children to realize that most picture books about journeys adopt the landscape orientation because of the horizontal form's visual implication of movement through time and space in conjunction with the page turns." (Lambert, 2015, p.6)

The Very Quiet Cricket is similar to *The Very Hungry Caterpillar* in terms of Cricket's journey. Cricket keeps moving forward (to the right in the book's design), encountering various insects. He could not make any sound for a while. Finally, when he meets a female cricket at the end of the story, he is able to chirp naturally. The portrait orientation of this leveled-book version loses the effect of inviting readers to come along on Cricket's journey. Meanwhile, the leveled-book version added some scientific information about crickets that the original version did not have, targeting older children. Jimmy said he preferred the leveled book because he "figured out that only male crickets can chirp" at the end of the book.

Jon Muth's (2002) *The Three Questions* contains a deep message. This book might be somewhat difficult for preschoolers and kindergarteners to fully grasp the meaning of. On the Scholastic Book Wizard page, the Guided Reading Level of this book is M, meaning it is at the 2nd-grade instructional level for children in the United States. This book is based a Tolstoy's short

story called “Three Questions.” The original story is based on a certain king’s three axiological questions: 1) Who are the right people to listen to? 2) Who should be avoided? and 3) What is the most important thing to do? Jon Muth tweaked this story, replacing the king with a boy called Nikolai, who asks three similar questions: 1) What is the best time to do things? 2) Who is the most important person? and 3) What is the right thing to do?

This book has a message that an adult can also appreciate, because it provides guidance that is valuable for adults and children. Tolstoy explains the correct answers to his questions below:

“Remember that there is only one important time and it is Now. The present moment is the only time over which we have dominion. The most important person is always the person with whom you are, who is right before you, for who knows if you will have dealings with any other person in the future? The most important pursuit is making that person, the one standing at your side, happy, for that alone is the pursuit of life.”

The quality of the book is not just found in its message. The aesthetic quality of the illustrations and design of the book are worthy of deep analysis. The peaceful watercolors used in these illustrations create a contemplative atmosphere that leads us to ponder the three essential questions of Nikolai and his friends.

Muth (2002) changes the sizes of characters on some pages. For instance, Pushkin the dog is smaller than Gogol the monkey on one page; then Pushkin becomes bigger than Gogol on the next page. This is when Pushkin points out that a coconut is about to fall on Gogol’s head! Talk about this with your child by sharing what you noticed: “Oh, I just noticed that Pushkin became bigger than Gogol on this page. On the last page, Gogol was bigger. Why do you think the illustrator drew them different sizes like this?”

Speaking about size, different sizes of words create special meanings. As Laura Vaccaro Seeger (2015) said, “The great thing is that kids know that the bigger the word is the louder their voices should be, and vice versa.” When a character says “Sorry” with a small font size located in a tiny word bubble, readers feel the apology is sincere (Lambert, 2015, pp. 44-45). Moreover, the typography can create other effects such as a soundtrack and darkness:

“Jerry Pinkney’s nearly wordless Caldecott Medal winner, *The Lion & the Mouse*, incorporates various intraiconic, onomatopoeic sounds (owl hoots, the sounds of a jeep driving through the African savannah, and, of course, squeaking mice and a lion’s roar). This creates a text that functions something like a soundtrack, which allows readers to immerse themselves in the setting he’s created.” (Lambert, 2015, p. 47)

Play and the Whole Book Approach

Playfulness with books is another important aspect of the Whole Book Approach. There are many books that invite your child to play, with cut-out holes, embossed objects, blinking lights, or maybe real sound effects. These features encourage you to interact with your child while reading. Research has found that children's language development is strongly associated with their caregiver's or teacher's use of pretenses and engagement in play with them (Gest et al., 2006; Kontos, 1999; Meacham et al., 2014). Books can be considered to be a type of toy (Roskos, 2021). Pretend that your finger is the very hungry caterpillar eating through the holes in the food in Eric Carle's book. Make a heart with your child's hand and yours on the page where the protagonist makes a big heart shadow with her hands in Laura Vaccaro Seeger's (2015) book *I Used to be Afraid*. Encourage your child to feel the embossed cobweb and spider with their fingers in *The Very Busy Spider* by Eric Carle. Count all the pigs you can find on a page of Anthony Browne's *Piggybook*.

The Whole Book Approach involves your aesthetic appreciation of the book that you read aloud with your child, as it emphasizes the illustrations and book-design features in addition to the story. However, the bottom line is to engage your child in interactive and playful reading, observing many features beyond the written text. By doing so, you are educating your child to wholly comprehend the book created by the author, illustrator, and publisher.

Using quality picturebooks and readers

While the Whole Book Approach can be applied to any reading moments in classrooms, choosing quality picturebooks can ensure many conversation topics for dialogic reading with children. Consider choosing picturebooks with notable awards for children's books, as they involve many experts in the fields as judges. The Randolph Caldecott Medal and Theodor Seuss Geisel Award are arguably the most notable awards that parents of young children look for if they are interested in enhancing their children's reading through quality picturebooks.

The Caldecott Medal

The Caldecott Medal is well-known as an indicator of quality picturebooks published in the United States. The medal is given annually to the picturebook with the most distinguished illustrations, and others may be selected for the Honor level. The illustration-focused selection

criteria for the Caldecott Award include these: artistic technique; pictorial interpretation of the story, theme, or concept; appropriateness of the illustration style to the story, theme, or concept; delineation of plot, theme, characters, setting, mood, or information through the pictures; and excellence of presentation for a child audience. It may be noted that this award does not focus on the pedagogical intent (Association for Library Service to Children, 2020), although the high-quality illustrations and illustration-text connection as recognized by the Caldecott Medal can be useful for young children’s learning. Neither is popularity a part of the selection criteria, although the Caldecott-Medal books and Honor books tend to become popular.

Many illustrators have won the Caldecott Award multiple times. David Wiesner, who illustrated *Flotsam*, *The Three Pigs*, and *Art & Max*, won the Medal three times and the Honor designation three times as well. Jerry Pinkney, who illustrated *The Lion & the Mouse* and *Noah’s Ark*, is also a six-time Caldecott winner (one Medal and five Honor Awards). Jerry Pinkney’s son Brian Pinkney won two Honor Awards. Therefore, the Pinkneys together have won eight Caldecott Awards, but Maurice Sendak, the legendary author-illustrator who created *Where the Wild Things Are*, won eight Caldecott Awards by himself!

A notable illustrator with two recent Medals is Sophie Blackall. Her latest one was awarded in 2019 for *Hello Lighthouse*; in 2016 she won it for *Finding Winnie: The True Story of the World’s Most Famous Bear*. The quality of these two books, with detailed micro-illustrations, has something to do with Blackall’s arduous research work. They are aesthetically pleasing to adults and children. *Hello Lighthouse* is classified as historical fiction, while *Finding Winnie* is nonfiction, based on real history. To write *Hello Lighthouse*, Blackall “visited several (lighthouses), climbing spiral staircases, poring over (lighthouse) keepers; logbooks, and gazing happily out lantern room windows” (Blackall, 2018). It took her one year to complete the illustrations for *Finding Winnie*, because she did extensive research about the period from the time a baby bear was named “Winnie” by Captain Harry Colebourn to the time Winnie was donated to the London Zoo, and grew to be the beloved Winnie the Pooh of children’s books. Blackall spent a whole week just drawing a precise map of the London Zoo for the pages of *Finding Winnie* (Rich, 2016). In terms of style, Blackall chose Chinese watercolors in both books to depict the nostalgic stories with delicate, warm, and luminous illustrations.

The Geisel Award

The Geisel Award uses Dr. Seuss’s last name. Therefore, it honors Dr. Seuss’s works, which have long been enjoyed by beginning readers. The Geisel Award is “given annually to the author(s)

and illustrator(s) of the most distinguished American book for beginning readers published in English in the United States during the preceding year” (Association for Library Service to Children, 2019). This award is not as widely known by parents as the Caldecott Award, perhaps due to its shorter history. The first Geisel Award was announced in 2006. As it focuses on the aspect of helping young children learn to decode, it could naturally make you think of the types of children’s books that appear as leveled books, basal readers, and simple readers.

Beginning readers with excellent plots, sensibility, and rhythm that can be helpful for young children’s reading experiences become candidates for the Geisel Award. While the target age for the Caldecott Medal is up to fourteen, the Geisel Award focuses on pre-K through grade 2, when the children usually begin formal reading instruction. Although the text quality is primary among the selection criteria, quality illustrations that “function as keys or clues to the text” (Association for Library Service to Children, 2020) are required. The detailed selection criteria shown below reveal how the text quality is designed to motivate the children and advance their reading ability:

“Subject matter must be intriguing enough to motivate the child to read... New words should be added slowly enough to make learning them a positive experience. Words should be repeated to ensure knowledge retention. Sentences must be simple and straightforward... The illustrations must demonstrate the story being told. The book creates a successful reading experience, from start to finish. The plot advances from one page to the next and creates a ‘page-turning’ dynamic.” (Association for Library Service to Children, 2020)

Mo Willems’s (2013) *A Big Guy Took My Ball*, which received a 2014 Geisel Honor Award, exhibits all of these criteria. The book starts with a small number of words per page (fewer than 5 on most). There are only 5 pages with more than 10 words among the total of 57 pages. Some of the lengthier pages are followed by ones with fewer or no words, encouraging a “page-turning” dynamic. The word “big,” which appears in the title, appears 20 times among the total of 205 running words in the book. If some variants of the word, such as “bigger” and “biggy” are included, there are 23 appearances of this word, 10% of the total running words. This repetition helps children remember how to read it. If your students are in the very beginning stage of learning to read, they can be invited to sound out only this word during your read-aloud with them. In addition, the repetition of this word in different font sizes can be considered a rhythmic component of the story, which can stimulate your children to change their voices when they read it. The author-illustrator Mo Willems has three Caldecott Honor and seven

Geisel Honor Awards. Although *A Big Guy Took My Ball* was not recognized by Caldecott, it still conveys quality illustrations that can delight your children.

Again, beginning readers are still considered picturebooks. Not too different from the Caldecott selection criteria, the Geisel Award emphasizes connections between the text and illustrations. Therefore, as you can imagine, there are picturebooks that are recognized by both awards. Laura Vaccaro Seeger's (2007) *First the Egg* won the Honor designation by both Caldecott and Geisel in 2008. This concept book artistically delineates the concept of transformation in nature by joining story and pictures together in the examples of the chicken, frog, flower, butterfly, and human. Vivid primary colors are textured meticulously and skillfully in Seeger's oil-on-canvas illustrations. On every other page is a die-cut to make you and your children curious about what comes between the seed and flower or the caterpillar and butterfly. When you read the book, you will gradually learn that when you see a new thing, it will become something else once you turn the page, like from an egg to a chicken. From the caterpillar page, you anticipate that it will become a butterfly; but you still have curiosity regarding what will be in between. The small caterpillar-shaped die-cut will be part of something that is on the verso page when you turn it over. It is still exciting to guess, although you know you will see a butterfly on the recto page. The in-between stages of transformation, such as a sprout or a chick, are not narrated but only illustrated, which invites your and your children's input. In fact, the text and pictures are equally necessary for the readers to understand the transformational process. The Whole Book Approach introduced earlier informs you about how to fully appreciate picturebooks by looking at both the text and illustrations.

A further comment about the text of *First the Egg* – it reads like a poem with a somewhat structured format. In terms of how the words flow, “first the XXX, then the XXXX” is repeated seven times throughout the book, which makes seven interesting sound clusters, most of which have seven syllables. A syllable count of the entire book yields the pattern 7-7-7-11-7-7-7. This does not follow any traditional poetic format, such as limerick, haiku, or sonnet. However, the rhythm in this book will really sound like a song to you and your children. You might want to add a melody and make it a real song with them.

There are more illustrators who have achieved both the Caldecott and Geisel Awards. In addition to the aforementioned ones, a Caldecott Medal awardee named Jon Klassen won a Geisel Honor with his *I Want My Hat Back*; and Grace Lin, a Caldecott Honor awardee, also won a Geisel Honor with her *Ling & Ting: Not Exactly the Same!* If your children have started their formal instruction, you might want to pay attention to these author-illustrators for a while.

Considering children's interests and reading ability when selecting picturebooks

The previous section talked about quality picturebooks by looking at the Caldecott, Geisel, and Pura Belpré children's literature awards. The selection criteria for these awards are similar to what many children's literature scholars advise for choosing picturebooks. They suggest picturebooks that use precise vocabulary, figurative vocabulary, dialogues, and rhythmic language. If the text explains in too much detail or sounds preachy, it should raise a red flag. The illustrations should be able to establish the setting, define and develop the characters, establish moods, reinforce the written text, provide differing viewpoints, extend and develop the plot, and provide interesting subplots and details aside from the main storyline. Unique styles and creative use of visual elements such as lines, shapes, colors, textures, and composition are also important things to consider in recognizing a well-illustrated book (Young et al., 2019).

Now you know what makes a quality picturebook. The next question could be whether your child will be able to read the book independently or need some adult guidance. Is the book too difficult or too easy? For this question, a conversation about children's **reading levels** and **leveled books** will be useful to us. Because of caregivers' questions regarding their children's reading ability, publishers curate or develop leveled-book series, organizing picturebooks by text difficulty. These series are convenient for instructing children to read. However, packaged readers are insufficient in themselves to fully prepare your children to read because they limit the readers' choices and access to complex texts. In addition, collections of readers do not necessarily emphasize quality illustrations. Luckily, these days there are online resources that provide the reading levels of high-quality picturebooks. If you are curious about the level of a certain book, websites such as [Scholastic Book Wizard](#) and [Lexile](#) will be useful to you.

Reading level guidelines

While there are several different leveling systems, the Guided Reading Level System from A to Z (or Z2) is one of the most frequently used ones in the United States. Levels A to D are for kindergarteners, E to J for 1st graders, and K to L for 2nd graders, although there are some variations in these ranges based on children's individual differences, or the opinions of publishers or scholars.

The Lexile system is another well-known book-leveling system. By using Lexile's Quick Book Search, you can find the Lexile measure of the text difficulty of a book you are interested in. For

instance, if you look up a book titled *Dishy-Washy* by Joy Cowley (1997), you will see 220L for the Lexile rating. Joy Cowley is a New Zealand author who has written an abundance of books for children. She has her own beginning reader series. As she is a beloved children’s book author, it is possible that your home library already has many books by her. Lexile measures between 160L and 310L are similar to Levels D and E of the Guided Reading Level System in terms of difficulty. These are suitable for late kindergarten to early 1st grade, although your actual decision should depend on the child’s reading ability.

There are many book-level-correlation charts that you can find by online searches. The Guided Reading Level and Lexile almost always appear in them. Here is an abbreviated chart for children from pre-K to 2nd grade:

Grade	Guided Reading	Lexile
K	A	BR70L-10L
K	B-C	BR404-160L
K-1st	D-E	160L-310L
1st	F-G	300L-450L
1st	J	430L-530L
2nd	K	510L-620L
2nd	L	530L-810L
2nd	M	530L-850L

In the above table, “BR” in a code denotes “Beginning Reader.” In addition, “AD” is another code attached to some Lexile measures that you may want to know about. It denotes “Adult Directed.” This code is affixed to a book if it is best shared as an adult-led read-aloud. An example of this is Eric Carle’s (2021) *The Very Quiet Cricket*, whose Lexile code is AD490L. Finding the number 490L in the above table, you can determine that your children can independently read and understand this book at around 1st grade. However, “the content may be geared towards younger children,” and the Lexile website says this book is appropriate for ages 3-5 (MetaMetrics, 2020). According to the Scholastic Book Wizard, the Guided Reading Level of this book is J, and the appropriate grade levels are indicated to be PreK-K and 1st-2nd (Scholastic Inc., 2020). In reality, this book is read to younger children in many U.S. families. The small board-book format of this book is considered to be especially suited for babies’ hands in the U.S. culture. It does not mean that your children should not read this book during first

grade. As a matter of fact, the font size of *The Very Quiet Cricket* is much bigger in the reader's version than the original version because the text is the primary focus when your children are learning to read.

You might want to have some conversations with your classroom children regarding the differences between the original version and the reader's version. For one thing, the reader's version is in portrait orientation, whereas the original is in landscape. The reader's version does not have the chirping sounds that your children can actually hear with the board-book version. However, the reader's version contains more information regarding crickets, which can help your children make connections between this fiction story and factual information about crickets' sounds. For instance, Soh's son Jimmy was glad to learn something new when he read the reader's version in first grade: female crickets are unable to chirp; only male crickets chirp.

Knowing a picturebook's Guided Reading Level or Lexile level is not the end of the matter, as you have to match the picturebook with your child's reading ability. If your child is making more than one error in every ten words when they read a book orally, it may be too hard. That is a reading accuracy of roughly 90% or below. On the other hand, if they are missing one or fewer in twenty words, it is a text they can read independently. This means an accuracy of roughly 95% or above. As they progress, choosing text levels they can read with between 90 and 95% accuracy, and providing your guidance, is a good rule of thumb. *Running Records* (Clay, 2017), a reading-assessment guide, can assist this process.

Administration and use of running records

Running Records is a method for analyzing children's reading performance during their oral reading, systematically documenting their reading accuracy, miscues, self-corrections, and reading strategies. You can select any text consisting of 100 running words or so (100-200 words) to administer Running Records. Usually authentic texts with cohesive stories or informational texts are recommended. Ask the child to read orally, then start coding how the child reads each word. While there is an official Running Records form provided in Clay's (2017) book for you to fill out, you can just quickly grab an empty sheet of paper to start coding during the child's oral reading. Make a coding mark for each word as the child reads it and make a return swift after each line of text. If a word is read correctly, simply write it with a check mark (✓). Miscues such as substitutions and omissions are marked over the word with a horizontal line between. For instance, if the child says horse for house (substitution), write horse over the line and house below it:

horse
house

If the child does not say anything for house (omission), mark a dash over the line and house below it:

—
house

If the child inserts a word that is not there (insertion), write it over the line and a dash below:

house
—

Self-correction is not considered an error. Whether you initially marked a word for substitution, omission, or insertion, simply add /SC after the marking for it. For instance, if the child says chicken for hen, but then corrects it, write /SC after the error code:

chicken/SC
hen

Repetition is not considered an error either. Just draw a line above the repeated segment and put an R. For multiple repetitions, a numerical superscript can be used. If you end up telling the

word to the child for an omitted or substituted word, mark a T for Told on the bottom next to the word. The example below means that the child said again for across and you corrected the child's miscue:

Again
Across/T

For each miscue, you determine what type of cues that the child used from among semantic (meaning-related), syntactic (grammatical), and graphic (graphophonic, not illustration) cues. This will be valuable information that can assist you in making instructional decisions for the child. After the child's oral reading and your marking are complete, you calculate the accuracy rate, error rate, and self-correction rate using the numbers of total running words (RW) and errors (E). The formula for calculating the accuracy rate is $100 - (E/RW \times 100)$. If the total running words were 152 and there were 18 errors, the accuracy rate is 88.16%. This means that the child is making more than one error in every ten words. The text that the child read is frustrating. You might want to suggest an easier text. In addition, the self-correction rate is the ratio of self-corrections to the total number of errors and self-corrections $[SC/(E+SC)]$. This indicates the degree to which the child is monitoring his/her reading. All the information you gain from Running Records can be used for text choices as well as monitoring progress because you can administer Running Records with each child as often as time permits.

Reading levels are a guide, not a rule

You should not be too strict about book levels. Your children's interests should be an important factor in choosing book topics as well. Your children's interests can often override their reading level, because they will be motivated to read more when they want to know what they are reading about. To tell a story from Soh's husband's childhood, his interest in sports helped him develop his reading ability. Although he is currently a literacy professor who reads and writes about children's reading and writing all the time, during his primary grades he struggled with reading. However, he and his father enjoyed watching football games together, he recollects. In his hometown of Canton, Ohio, the Pro Football Hall of Fame town, even high-school football games were a big deal. He started reading sports magazines to learn all about his favorite players and games. Those magazines were not published for beginning readers. He was eventually able to read them easily, while still in primary school, which helped make him an advanced reader. An implication from this story is that we do not need to discourage our children when they

choose to read picturebooks or other texts about topics they are interested in, even though the text difficulty is above their reading ability at the moment.

Make regular trips to a bookstore or a library with your children and have book-choice conversations. In doing so, you can get to know their interests. Not only topics, but genres, authors, illustrators, and even particular illustration styles can be things you ponder together in choosing the books they like to read.

Learning Activities



An interactive H5P element has been excluded from this version of the text. You can view it online here:
<https://iastate.pressbooks.pub/teachingearlyliteracy/?p=281#h5p-20>



An interactive H5P element has been excluded from this version of the text. You can view it online here:
<https://iastate.pressbooks.pub/teachingearlyliteracy/?p=281#h5p-40>

Enriching reading with other educational materials

Choosing a theme for a unit is popular in many classrooms and families as a means of making the children’s reading experiences more integrated and educational. This approach selects related picturebooks to read for a week or a month. Transportation is a frequently adopted topic. Taking this approach, you might curate picturebooks about transportation so your children can learn and think more deeply about this topic for a while. Popular nursery rhymes and folk songs such as “Down by the Station” and “The Wheels on the Bus” can be sung, of which picturebook versions can be acquired. You might do an author-illustrator study on Donald Crews or Byron Barton, whose works include many different forms of transportation. In addition, many transportation toys such as replica cars, trucks, airplanes, riding toys, and trains with tracks can be provided side by side with the picturebooks.

Providing real objects relevant to picturebooks creates ostensive learning environments, which are optimal contexts for learning vocabulary. Ostensive learning environments allow you to point to real objects that your children can experience with their senses (Pence Turbull & Justice, 2017). While picturebooks provide visual information about vocabulary words that you are trying to teach, if you juxtapose real objects with the illustrations, there is a much higher chance that your children will retain the words.

A reading experience with *Hooray for Birds!* by Lucy Cousins (2018) could be enriched by going bird watching with your children. If there is a tree that you can see through your classroom window where many different birds visit, you can point to those birds and have some fun conversations with your children, making connections between the book and the birds you see.

“What is the yellow and gray bird with black on its head? Do you hear it sing fee-bee? That’s my favorite bird.”

“Oh, I know. A black-capped chickadee! We saw black-capped chickadees in *Hooray for Birds!* Do female black-capped chickadees make that sound too? Female crickets don’t make chirping sounds. Only male crickets do.”

This comment was prompted by our previous reading of an information page added to the reader version of *The Very Quiet Cricket* by Eric Carle. After this conversation, Soh’s son Jimmy and Soh did some research about the songs that male and female black-capped chickadees sing. They found that both genders sing the fee-bee song, although females rarely sing louder than males (Goodwin & Podos, 2013). “Males ... sing the fee-bee song, primarily during the breeding season, when they use it to protect territory and to attract females” (Weisman & Ratcliffe, 2004, p. 536). This story of self-motivated research on black-capped chickadees shows an inquiry-based approach that many science educators endorse (Ansberry & Morgan, 2010).

Questions that your children bring up can be an effective medium for integrating and enriching the reading experience. When your children read a book, they might murmur something out loud. It might be a sign that they are pondering or inquiring about something that they read. Be a good listener and support your children’s inquiry-based learning. You might be able to remind them of some books that you read with them before. It is possible that you can find some other books or online resources that your children can get their answers from. Children’s questions often indicate their interests, suggesting future choices for books.

Puzzles and board games

There are many other types of educational materials related to the topic chosen for a thematic unit, such as puzzles and board games. Children see puzzles and board games as play and fun. This doesn't necessarily mean that reading picturebooks is not playful. I mean that even reluctant beginning readers can see reading-related puzzles and board games as play, and incorporating them will enrich the children's reading experiences.

Many puzzles use illustrations from popular picturebooks. Among them, puzzles using illustrations from Leo Lionni's (2017) *Swimmy*, Maurice Sendak's *Where the Wild Things Are*, and Eric Carle's *The Very Hungry Caterpillar* were our family's favorites. Floor puzzles easily engage all of a classroom's children.

Some puzzles are made from just one word. These puzzle pieces can be broken into phonemes and graphemes to teach phonics. Many industrious teachers create their own puzzles using illustrations from the picturebooks that they read with their children. These teacher-created materials can be useful for particular purposes such as vocabulary instruction, phonics instruction, and play that enriches the overall integrated learning about the chosen topic.

Board games are another type of educational materials frequently used with young children. There are many board games that use the themes, characters, and/or illustrations of popular picturebooks. A board game named Let's Feed the Very Hungry Caterpillar is an example. Eric Carle's (1969) popular *The Very Hungry Caterpillar* supplied its motif. Incorporating the familiar illustrations, the game is designed to teach basic concepts such as counting, days of the week, and the butterfly's life cycle, as put forward in the picturebook. The playing pieces, in the shape of the Very Hungry Caterpillar, go around the board from fruit to fruit. When a piece "stops to eat," it collects a butterfly puzzle piece. Each player has a butterfly puzzle like the illustration in Eric Carle's book. The first player to collect all five pieces wins the game.

Your children can be encouraged to develop their own original toys and educational materials inspired by the picturebooks that they read. Comprehension of the picturebooks goes deeper during this process. You can actually purchase books, puzzles, and board games that are blank (Barebooks.com). While children can make them from scratch using construction paper or miscellaneous materials found at home or purchased, the commercially sold blank books, puzzles, and board games make final products that are more professional looking and durable. No matter what materials you use, the design process is equally significant in engaging you and your children in multiple rich conversations about the story of the picturebook.

Puppets, figurines, and other toys

Last but not least, puppets, figurines, stuffed animals, and dolls for your children’s imaginative play can enrich their language and literacy learning. If they are characters from the children’s favorite picturebooks, they can retell parts of the stories they read while they are pretending. Merchandized puppets, figurines, stuffed animals, and dolls from many picturebooks are available for purchase, although you can also create them with your classroom children. Using them is an effective way to help children retain sophisticated vocabulary words and sentences from the picturebooks, which supports their language and literacy development.

In early childhood classrooms, teachers often invite the children to participate in teacher-guided role plays, using stories from picturebooks. Children can certainly play without adult guidance, and their play can be very complex and sophisticated, providing a significant context for learning. However, adult-guided play ensures the use of advanced words and sentences, as well as literary elements such as plot, setting, and characters. The adult can assume different roles, such as play leader, co-player, stage manager, director, and onlooker (Enz & Christie, 1993; Roskos & Neuman, 1993). Costumes of characters from picturebooks are another prop that adds a new dimension of richness to your classroom library. By wearing costumes, your children can more deeply understand and empathize with the characters.

Music as an educational resource

Music can be another effective way to support young children’s literacy learning.

Give it your all.

Give it your all.

At Christmas we give,

So give it your all.

Every now and then, Soh finds herself singing the refrain from *Pete the Cat Saves Christmas* (story and song by Eric Litwin, illustrations by James Dean), especially around Christmas time. The melody and words that were meant for young children stuck with her too. Soh realizes that she is humming the song while driving without any music in the car. It is associated with a pleasant feeling as she hears her son Jimmy’s somewhat husky singing voice in her mind. This song has warmed Soh’s heart for many years since she first heard it.

Jimmy was not much into reading when he first started kindergarten. His reading level was far

below his older sister Sabina's at that age. He was not able to read the beginner-level books independently, which was not surprising, because neither Soh nor her husband had given him any formal reading instruction. (They hadn't taught Sabina either, but she was still able to read the beginner-level books independently when she first started kindergarten.) Jimmy was the youngest child in his kindergarten classroom, which worried Soh even more. She recalls that the question of whether Jimmy would be successful in his first year of school never left her mind during his first semester in kindergarten. As reading is one of the primary accomplishments that kindergarteners are supposed to achieve in U.S. schools, Soh strove to increase Jimmy's interest in it. Around Christmas time, she purchased the *Pete the Cat Saves Christmas* book with a song CD from the Scholastic Book Fair. She started playing the CD in her minivan, where she usually played songs and stories for the kids. Soh had many CDs for Jimmy and Sabina, because she felt that playing the music and stories while they were driving made them feel her love. While both children loved the song, Jimmy's excitement about all the Pete the Cat books knew no bounds. When other people asked about his favorite books, he answered without hesitation, "I love Pete the Cat books!"

Another catchy refrain from Pete the Cat was "I'm rocking in my school shoes," from *Pete the Cat: Rocking in My School Shoes* (story and song by Eric Litwin, illustrations by James Dean). The story depicts all the fun things that Pete the Cat does in his school: reading, eating, playing, singing, painting, adding, and writing. Jimmy collected all the Pete the Cat books and adored them. *Pete the Cat and His Four Groovy Buttons* triggered Jimmy's curiosity about the meaning of the word groovy. After learning the word, Jimmy and Soh had fun moments giggling about his groovy "outie" belly button. *Pete the Cat and His Four Groovy Buttons* is a Geisel Honor Book, which means that it is recognized as being a high-quality reader that can help children develop their decoding ability. Jimmy loved repeating "My buttons, my buttons, my four groovy buttons. My buttons, my buttons, my four groovy buttons" from the song. When he was reading the book independently, he still sang those lines just like on the CD. This relates to what research suggests regarding fluency development (Rasinski, 2014).

Thanks in large part to the Pete the Cat series, Jimmy has developed a very positive feeling about school in general. Last night, during our bed-time conversation, Jimmy told me that he loves school. He added that he loves reading, math, and playing football with his buddies. *Pete the Cat: Rocking in My School Shoes* is relatable to Jimmy's school life. It's not necessarily Jimmy's shoes, but his everyday accomplishments that have helped him feel good about school; but the contribution of the Pete the Cat songs to Jimmy's positive attitude about school is undeniable.

Research on the use of music when teaching literacy

There are many research studies that favor the use of songs in literacy education. Montgomery & Smith (2014) found that song-based picturebooks can provide children with increased opportunities for repetition with authentic episodes of rhyming, alliteration, and onomatopoeia. Many researchers (e.g., Peynircioğlu et al., 2008; Rainey & Larsen, 2002; Wolfe & Hom, 1993) encourage the use of familiar melodies as aids in recalling text. Phonological awareness, which is an important foundation for later reading development, is defined as sensitivity to the phonological structure of words (Torgesen et al., 1994). One activity performed to increase phonological awareness is to sing a song. Because of the many reasons written above, songs are frequently used in foreign-language teaching (Batdi & Semerci, 2012; Şevik, 2012; Şevik, 2011).

Meanwhile, there is some controversy in the professional literature over the use of music as a part of reading instruction. For example, one seminal study on reading instruction warned about the use of music tapes as follows:

“In tape-assisted reading, students read along in their books as they hear a fluent reader read the book on an audiotape. For tape-assisted reading, you need a book at a student’s independent reading level and a tape recording of the book read by a fluent reader at about 80-100 words per minute. The tape should not have effects or music.” (Armbruster et al., 2003, p.24)

However, this warning is for a very particular context designed for fluency building. Therefore, it should not discourage the use of songs and music for other contexts of reading instruction. Again, using songs is beneficial for helping children learn to decode, particularly through developing the following skills: rhyming (Bolduc, 2009; Dege & Schwarzer, 2011; Herrera et al., 2011), syllable segmentation (Bolduc, 2009; Dege & Schwarzer, 2011; Gromko, 2005; Overy et al., 2003), onset/rime practice (Herrera et al., 2011), blending (Dege & Schwarzer, 2011), and phonemic awareness (Bolduc, 2009; Gromko, 2005; Overy et al., 2003).

There is a reason in this section for citing all of these research studies to support the use of songs in reading development. As music is often taken for granted by laymen, a discussion about music may not sound convincing or may just sound preachy. I wanted to emphasize that using songs to develop reading ability is research based. Getting back now to this article being an everyday conversation with parents, let me say that songs really help us build positive relationships with our children because reading and singing together enhances our engagement with them (Montgomery, 2012). Music has the ability to communicate social and affective

information as it creates a feeling of “being together in time” (Overy & Molnar-Szakacs, 2009, p. 499). Certainly for me, music creates a feeling of being together with my children in time, which motivates me to communicate more with them. This also promotes more communication among us in general, which supports our children’s language development.

Reflection Questions

- What can you do to facilitate interactive read-alouds with young children?
- How will you select books for a child who is reluctant to read?
- Which method of teaching early literacy was most memorable to you when you were observing other teachers?

Key Takeaways

- CROWD prompts are useful facilitators for interactive read-alouds with children.
- The Whole Book Approach asks that you engage with children in interactive and playful reading, observing many features beyond the written text.
- Picturebooks can be selected based on awards and recognition received, or thematic ties to learning goals.
- Questions that children verbalize can be used to guide inquiry-based learning. Prompt children to connect information from one book to another you have read together.

Resources for teacher educators

- [Dialogic Reading: An Effective Way to Read Aloud with Young Children](#)
- [Dialogic Reading: Having a Conversation About Books](#)
- [Running Record Assessment Tips \(Reading A-Z\)](#)
- [25 Activities for Reading and Writing Fun](#)
- [Make it Meaningful: Emergent Literacy in the Kindergarten Years \[PDF\]](#)

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