Young children and Radical Change characteristics in picture books

Picture books with Radical Change characteristics can extend children’s understandings of how stories “work” and can provide rich and enjoyable reading experiences.

So the wolf huffed and he puffed and blew in the first pig’s house, right? Wrong. In David Wiesner’s The Three Pigs (2001), the wolf blows the first little porker right out of the story. Once the other two pigs exit the traditional tale, the trio begins the real adventure. Characters leaving their stories, multiple visual and verbal narratives and perspectives, nonlinear stories, unresolved endings, unconventional spatial arrangement of text, and onomatopoeic word illustrations are just a few of the characteristics appearing with greater frequency in contemporary literature for children and youth.

Dresang (1999) believed contemporary children’s and young adult literature “are changing in step with positive changes in the digital world” (p. 14). She used the term Radical Change to describe a conceptual framework or theory for understanding, appreciating, and evaluating the types of significant changes in current children’s and young adult literature. As well as describing several of Dresang’s Radical Change characteristics, in this article I use transcript excerpts from small-group interactive read-aloud sessions (Barrentine, 1996) with grade 1 children to illustrate their understandings of and responses to the Radical Change characteristics in The Three Pigs (Wiesner, 2001) and A Day at Damp Camp (Lyon, 1996). I also discuss the possibilities for language, literacy, and literary development afforded by picture books with Radical Change characteristics.

Radical Change

Dresang’s (1999) Radical Change framework identified three types of fundamental change in contemporary literature for children and youth: changing forms and formats, changing perspectives, and changing boundaries. Type One Radical Change, changing forms and formats, incorporates one or more of the following characteristics: “graphics in new forms and formats, words and pictures reaching new levels of synergy, nonlinear organization and format, nonsequential organization and format, [and] multiple layers of meaning [and] interactive formats” (p. 19). Type Two Radical Change, changing perspectives, includes “multiple perspectives, visual and verbal, previously unheard voices, [and] youth who speak for themselves” (p. 24). Books that incorporate the third type, changing boundaries, incorporate characteristics such as “subjects previously hidden, settings previously overlooked, characters portrayed in new complex ways, new types of communities, [and] unresolved endings” (p. 26). Neither the three types of Radical Change nor the characteristics of each type are mutually exclusive. Many books contain more than one type of Radical Change, and there is a synergistic relationship among these multiple characteristics. Dresang also noted that the reader’s perspective should be taken into account when considering the exact subcategory of each type of Radical Change.

Several of Dresang’s (1999) Radical Change characteristics have been evident in literature for children and youth for many years, and she identified selections of children’s and young adult
literature from the late 1960s and early 1970s that exhibit Radical Change characteristics. Furthermore, as discussed elsewhere (Pantaleo, 2002, 2004a, 2004b), several of the characteristics of the first and second types of Radical Change, changing forms and formats and changing perspectives respectively, are called metafictive devices (Goldstone, 1998; Trites, 1994).

Type One Radical Change—Changing forms and formats

Graphics in new forms and formats. Dresang (1999) used the term graphic to refer to a “digitally-influenced book...if it is visually unusual or outstanding” (p. 82). For example, color may be used to communicate meanings or to “take the place of words” (p. 82). “Pictures, maps, or graphs [can] play a predominant part in a book that might be expected to have mostly words” (p. 82), and the design or placement of words on a page can represent sounds or transmit meaning. Text superimposed on an illustration can also “appear simultaneously as both words and picture” (p. 82). Dresang noted as well that a book does not need to have color or illustrations to be categorized as graphic. However, something in the book must be “visually striking” (p. 83).

Words and pictures reaching new levels of synergy. Several individuals have developed categories to describe the various text and image interactions in picture books (Nikolajeva & Scott, 2001). Sipe (1998) used the term synergy to describe the relationship between text and illustration. Synergism is defined as “the simultaneous action of separate agencies, which, together, have greater total effect than the sum of their individual effects” (Guralnik, 1976, p. 1444). In many contemporary picture books, the synergism between text and illustrations is becoming more sophisticated.

Nonlinear and nonsequential organization and format. The European and North American linear narrative structure of beginning, middle, and end is one discursive structure (McCabe, 1997). The plot trajectory in many contemporary picture books is not direct or straight. Disruptions or interruptions create a nonsequential format in which one event does not follow another in a chronological, causal, or logical order.

Multiple layers of meaning. A multilayered reading experience is created by the use of a number of literary devices including time switches and stories within stories. According to Dresang (1999), “two aspects distinguish these techniques as Radical Change: the nonlinearity and the complexity with which they are employed” (p. 116).

Interactive formats. Picture books have always required readers to be interactive as they move back and forth between the visual and verbal text. However, “radically changed forms and formats demand a greater degree of attentiveness and interaction...children must decide whether to ‘point and click’ here or there with their eyes and their minds” (Dresang, 1999, p. 114). The nature of many texts with Radical Change characteristics requires readers to make complex decisions about whether to continue with the “main” narrative or visual text or to pursue another textual or illustrative path. One example of an interactive format is the inclusion of parallel stories. The second narrative may be told entirely through illustrations (e.g., Something From Nothing, Gilman, 1992), or the parallel stories may be told with words. Other interactive formats include authors inserting a voice (or voices) that comment on the story and texts requiring the reading of more than one set of words (e.g., speech bubbles).

Type Two Radical Change—Changing perspectives

Multiple perspectives, visual and verbal. According to Dresang (1999), multiple perspectives can be evidenced through multiple voices in one book, many voices in many books, one character who speaks from a range of life stances, or pictures. Picture books can include multiple visual perspectives as well. Prior to the digital age, most picture books were illustrated with midrange illustrations. In many contemporary picture books readers view scenes from below, above, “to the side or the midst of the action” (p. 139).

I use the above Radical Change characteristics as a framework to discuss grade 1 students’ oral responses to and interpretations of two picture
books with changing forms, formats, and perspectives. A description of the study that involved the grade 1 children follows.

The study

I recently completed a study that explored young children's responses to and interpretations of eight picture books. The research site was a grades K–7 elementary school located in a predominantly commercial area of a city in western British Columbia, Canada. The inner-city school's approximately 155 students come from lower socioeconomic class families. Prior to beginning the study on September 23, 2002, I spent time in the grade 1 research classroom in order to develop a rapport with the children.

All but 1 of the 9 boys and 11 girls in the teacher's grade 1 class received parental or guardian consent to participate in the study. For 2 of the 19 participants, English was not the language spoken at home. Three children, 1 boy and 2 girls, were of First Nations (Native American) ancestry. One boy was from Romania, 1 girl was from Uruguay, 1 girl was of African Canadian ethnicity, and 13 children were from European Canadian families. With the exception of 2 boys, who were functioning significantly below grade-level provincial standards in both reading and writing, the teacher believed that most of the students' literacy skills were within the average range for beginning grade 1. Three children in the classroom, who demonstrated significant delays in speech and language, received weekly in-school therapy from a speech and language pathologist.

The collection of data

During the nine-week study, the grade 1 children listened to me read the following eight picture books: Willy the Dreamer (Browne, 1997), Something From Nothing (Gilmam, 1992), Tuesday (Wiesner, 1991), The Three Pigs (Wiesner, 2001), The True Story of the Three Little Pigs (Scieszka, 1989), Shortcut (Macaulay, 1995), Voices in the Park (Browne, 1998), and A Day at Damp Camp (Lyon, 1996). The children participated in small-group and whole-class interactive read-aloud sessions. For the small-group read-aloud sessions, the students were organized into heterogeneous groups of three or four students, and group membership changed for each picture book.

Once a week, for approximately 25 minutes, the children were pulled out of regular classroom activities to participate in the small-group read-aloud sessions that occurred in a vacant room in the school. The students were encouraged to talk to one another or to me at any point during the small-group read-aloud sessions. As well as providing expansions on the children's comments and articulating topic-continuing replies, I asked various types of questions (e.g., imaginative, affective, analytical, and reflective) during the sessions that encouraged student consideration and discussion of unexplored textual and illustrative aspects. Subsequent to reading the story to each small group, I reread the book to the entire class, and, again, student participation was encouraged. During the whole-class read-aloud sessions, the teacher took field notes, recording students' comments, facial expressions, and body language. All read-aloud sessions were audiotaped. As with each book used in the study, there were six read-aloud sessions, five small-group and one whole-class, resulting in the production of approximately 200 minutes of audiotape.

Following each whole-class read-aloud session, the children were asked to visually represent their responses to the picture book. The teacher and I reminded the students to think about what they were feeling, thinking, wondering, questioning, or imagining as they listened to and talked about the story before they began their pictures. Because the study took place at the beginning of the school year, the children dictated their accompanying sentences to either the teacher or me. We did not want the children's articulations to be constrained by their writing abilities.

In this article I discuss only some of the Radical Change characteristics of two of the eight picture books due to manuscript length restrictions. I read the transcripts of the small-group discussions of The Three Pigs (Wiesner, 2001) and A Day at Damp Camp (Lyon, 1996) several times, searching for examples that both reflected and illustrated the children's responses to and interpretations of the various Radical Change characteristics described previously. Although a sample of student interactions is presented later, the excerpts, which are taken from only the small-group read-aloud sessions (and thus the children's first experience with the book), are representative of the children's conversations. All student names are pseudonyms.
The Three Pigs

On the title page of *The Three Pigs* (Wiesner, 2001) readers view three pigs: one carrying straw, one carrying sticks, and a third hauling a cart of bricks. The first two pages of the book resemble traditional versions of the story; the pigs set out to seek their fortune, and each builds a house. However, when Weisner's wolf “huffs and puffs” and attempts to blow down the straw house, the force causes the first pig to tumble out of the storyboard and exclaim, “Hey! He blew me right out of the story!” The text of the original story continues, but there is no pig “in the story” for the wolf to devour. The first pig finds the storyboard with the second pig in his stick house and tells him, “It’s safe out here.” The second pig walks out of his storyboard, and he, too, avoids consumption by the wolf. The third pig also exits the story, and the adventure begins. As well as constructing and taking flight on a paper airplane, the three pigs explore other storyboards, including “Hey Diddle Diddle” and a medieval tale about a dragon and a knight. The cat from “Hey Diddle Diddle” and the dragon from the medieval story join the trio, and they proceed on their adventure together. Finally, the pigs decide to return “home” with their new friends and “pick up” the original tale (i.e., the storyboards) just as the wolf threatens to blow down the brick house. Imagine the wolf’s surprise when the dragon pokes his head out of the third pig’s door! Letters go askew when the dragon’s head bumps some of the words in the text. The pigs collect letters and end the tale with “And they all lived happily ever after.”

Radical Change characteristics

Wiesner’s *The Three Pigs*, winner of the 2002 Randolph Caldecott Medal, exhibits all of the characteristics of Type One Radical Change, changing forms and formats, and the multiple visual and verbal perspectives of Type Two Radical Change, changing perspectives. The following discussion focuses on four synergistic Radical Change characteristics: graphics in new forms and formats, words and pictures reaching new levels of synergy, nonlinear and nonsequential organization and format, and interactive format.

Wiesner transmits meaning by the design and placement of words on the pages. He uses four different fonts and several sizes of text in the book. One font is used for the original tale. A second font is introduced when the first pig gets blown out of the story on the third page. A third font is used for the nursery rhyme, and a fourth typographic style is used for the dragon and knight tale. The text format also changes once the pigs exit the original story and speech balloons are used to convey their articulations. These balloons are part of the illustrations, but they also form the text. The children called them “word clouds,” “thinking bubbles,” and “those thinking things.” They often pointed at specific balloons for me to read (i.e., interactive format). Two children, Sebastian and Cassandra, used speech balloons in their visual responses.

Near the end of the book, the dragon collides with the text when he sticks his head out of the door of the third pig’s brick house. The children explained how “the words came apart” when the dragon knocked them with his horns.” Letters go awry, and the pigs and the dragon collect several of them to form the words in the last sentence: “And they all lived happily ever after.”

Bishop: They’re putting the words on.
Teacher (T): Look it, that’s right. They’ve got a basket here. What are they collecting?
Bishop: Letters.
T: Now why are they collecting the letters?
Anita: To get them back in order.
T: To get them back in order.
Blaine: We can’t just stick in a, b, c, d...we need words.

The text and illustrations in Wiesner’s picture book reach new levels of synergy. When the three pigs exit the original story and enter the other stories, their skin texture becomes fuzzy and lifelike, their eyes become realistic (note that each pig has different eye color—green, blue, and brown), and their characters change as well. Readers must “read the illustrations” to notice these transformations because no words in the text describe the changes. The coloring and texture of the pigs’ skin also changes when they go into new contexts. When they enter “Hey Diddle Diddle” and the dragon story, the pigs are depicted in the same illustrative style as used in each narrative world (e.g., in the medieval tale the pigs have no color). The following two excerpts are typical of the children’s remarks about the transformations.

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"Hey! He blew me right out of the story!"

So what happened to this pig?

Kirstin: He blew right out of the story and now he has to go back in.

T: The wolf blew so hard, right, Kirstin, that he blew the pig right out of the storyboard. Those are called storyboards. And what happened to him, Dom? Look at his skin now, what's happening?

Dom: It's getting hairier.

T: That's right, it's like it's got hair on it, but in the book....

Russell: He doesn't.

T: That's right. Why?

Russell: Because he's a fairy tale.

T: And out here?

Russell: He's real and he has hair.

Kirstin: Hey, look at what I noticed. Right there, there's no hair [points to part of pig still in storyboard] and on the rest of him [points to part of pig out of storyboard] there's hair.

T: Because what has happened?

Kirstin: His feet are in the page, but the rest isn't.

T: He's pulling in....

Hannah: Hey! Ba, ba, black sheep.

T: Good guess.

Sebastian: Hey little, little the cat in the fiddle.

Jeffrey: The cow jumped over the moon.

T: See you can read!

All: The little dog laughed to see such sport, and the dish ran away with the spoon.

T: Very good. So what have they pulled in? What do you call this?

Natalie: A new story.

T: Exactly, they pulled in a new story. This is a nursery rhyme. "Hey diddle diddle, the cat and the fiddle, the cow jumped over the moon. The little dog laughed to see such sport, and the dish ran away with the spoon." Now what happened to the pigs? Look it. They're going in this story, and what's happening to them?

Hannah: They're getting fake.

T: They're getting fake. What were you saying, Sebastian?

Sebastian: They're turning into cartoons.

T: That's right. Look at what happened.
Furthermore, the grade 1 students knew that the pigs had to construct an ending to their story.

T: So what does he mean, "Let's go home"?
Bishop: Let's go home and take a rest.
T: OK. What's home for them? Patty?
Patty: Inside here [points to the storyboards].
T: Inside. They have to get back into the story.
Anita: Because they had a nice adventure, and that's enough adventure for today.
T: [laughs] That's enough adventure for today. Let's see. So this pig says, "Good idea, we just have to pick these up." So what's he saying? What do they have to pick up?
Patty: The frames.
T: And do what?
Bishop: And put them back together.

The Three Pigs contains pictures within pictures and stories within stories. Indeed, there are multiple narratives in both text and illustrations. The book itself provides a different perspective of the traditional story of "The Three Little Pigs." The children understood that Wiesner's rendition was an alternative version. At the beginning of every small-group read-aloud session when the children looked at the book's dust jacket, they informed me of the probable trajectory of events of the story. The following excerpt was typical of the small-group predictions.

Marnie: It might be about the three little pigs who make the houses.
T: And what do they make their houses out of?
Andrea: Bricks, straw, and sticks.
T: And what happened in that story?
Marnie: They all...the little brothers come to the one who make the brick house.
T: Why did they go to the brick house?
Marnie: Because they'll be eaten.
T: By whom?
Andrea: The wolf!
T: Well, let's see if this is the same story.

The picture book not only includes multiple visual perspectives (e.g., the storyboards and other stories), but Wiesner portrays various points of view in the illustrations. Readers observe the action from a number of viewpoints—front, side, underneath, behind (when the pigs are flying on the paper airplane), and bird's-eye. The children liked the bird's-eye view illustration of the characters looking at the brick house. Pender remarked, "They're looking at it upside downly." Anita observed, "Hey, they're stepping on the book."

A Day at Damp Camp

In A Day at Damp Camp (Lyon, 1996), the author uses 27 pairs of rhyming words like "damp camp" and "mud flood" to tell the story of a summer camp adventure and the developing friendship of two girls. Essentially, the narrative is told through the illustrations. The double-page spreads with text have six words and three rectangles nested inside one another, evoking the multilayered appearance of hypertext Web links. The illustrations inside each rectangle are connected to an event or an activity (e.g., hiking, creating crafts, putting up tents), and the two rhyming words inside each rectangular frame describe the illustration in some way.

Radical Change characteristics

Graphics in new forms and formats, nonlinear and nonsequential organization and format, multiple layers of meaning, interactive format, and multiple visual perspectives are the Radical Change characteristics featured in the following discussion.

With respect to graphics in new forms and formats, A Day at Damp Camp is visually unusual and striking due to the three nested rectangles. Blane made the following observation after viewing the first double-page spread in the book: "There's one picture frame there, and then another one there, and then another there!" In another group, the children commented on the illustrative format on the dust jacket.

T: Do you notice anything that's unusual about these three pictures?
Cassandra: They're different.
T: Yes, that's right, each one is different.
Cassandra: They're all different. They're all glued.
T: They're glued together? What does it look like around the outside?
Teresa: Frames.
T: That's right. You've got this frame, and then?
Teresa: That frame and then the picture.
A SAMPLE OF PICTURE BOOKS EXHIBITING RADICAL CHANGE CHARACTERISTICS


(continued)
They do, and what’s the counselor doing? This is the person who’s in charge of the girls [points to the counselor]. What’s she doing? Why is she going like this? [I imitate counselor’s pose in the illustration.]

Jeffrey: Because of the snakes.

Theo: Because all of the girls were running away.

T: Do you think they should be afraid of this little snake? [Conversation continues about this particular frame.]

T: Now which one do you want to do next?

Hannah: This one.

Theo: I want to do this one.

T: OK, we’ve got a tie. Two want to do the outside one, and two want to do the next one.

When the children did not direct me to read specific frames, I varied the order of location of text when reading the pair of rhyming words. Often the grade 1 students first talked about the illustrations before asking about the words. The children’s focus on the illustrations was understandable because predominantly the visual text, not the written text, tells the story(ies).

T: OK, so let’s see what else they do during their day at camp. [I turn the page.]

Pender: Hike.

T: That’s right, they go hiking.

Pender: Hup, two, three, four.

Dom: Hup, two, three, four.

T: Look at these girls.

Sue: They’re tired.

T: How do you know they’re tired?

Sue: Because they’re going like this [pants with her tongue out].

T: They’re hot from the hike.

Katie: They’re hot because of the sun.

The students noticed how two double-page spreads in A Day at Damp Camp have neither frames nor words. They commented that there were “no words,” that “it’s just all one picture,” and they “don’t have any picture frames.” The children generated their own words for these two illustrations. Some pairs of words rhymed, such as “staying laying” for the first illustration and “flash dash” for the last double-page spread; other pairs did not rhyme, or they rhymed but were nonsensical. The following excerpt is about the last frameless and wordless double-page spread.

Katie: They don’t have three squares.

T: Right, it doesn’t have three pictures. It just has one like...?

Katie: The hill one.

T: That’s right, so what could we put for words for this one?

Pender: The end.

T: [laughs] That makes sense. Remember, the two words need to rhyme.

Dom: Night flight.

T: Night flight—that’s a good one.

Sue: Night sight.

T: Night sight. Good.

Katie: Going to the bathroom.

T: Bathroom...?

Sue: Cathroom.

All: [Laugh]

Katie: Going to?

T: Going...?

Katie: Going to the bathroom.

T: Right, but it has to rhyme.

Dom: Bathroom washroom.

Pender: Washroom froshroom.

All: [Laugh]

Multiple benefits

As is evident from the transcript excerpts, the grade 1 children thoroughly enjoyed the picture books exhibiting radical change characteristics in picture books.
books; they were cognitively and affectively engaged throughout the small-group (and whole-class) read-aloud sessions. My read-aloud experiences with this group of grade 1 students, who had little, if any, prior experience talking about picture books with Radical Change characteristics, demonstrated that young "children can handle quite sophisticated visual and narrative devices" (Goldstone, 1998, p. 51).

The Radical Change characteristics in The Three Pigs and A Day at Damp Camp illustrate the connectivity and interactivity described in Dresang's (1999) Radical Change theory. According to Dresang, connectivity and interactivity refer to both reader and book. The changing forms and formats of many picture books, such as the two discussed in this article, require readers to make connections between the hypertext-like links in the books, as well as to make connections among multiple perspectives, narratives, and layers of meaning. Connectivity also refers to the increased sense of community created by these books, because the forms and formats encourage sharing among readers. Several researchers have noted the multiple benefits of using an interactive format when reading aloud to children (Barrentine, 1996; Copenhaver, 2001; Sipe, 2000; Wasik & Bond, 2001).

The types of interactions that occurred during the interactive read-aloud sessions influenced the students' repertoires of literary and life experiences (Rosenblatt, 1981). The children's intertextual histories were constantly changing as they listened to, talked about, and visually responded to each picture book. The changes in each child's linguistic-experiential reservoir (Rosenblatt, 1994) subsequently influenced the next small-group and whole-class read-aloud sessions, and again these social experiences shaped individual thinking (i.e., social constructivism). The students' shared intertextual histories were most evident as the study progressed; the children frequently made connections to previously read picture books during the small-group and whole-class read-aloud sessions and, as reported by the teacher, during varying times throughout the day.

Although most classroom teachers do not have the opportunity to participate in small-group read-aloud sessions like those described in this article, teachers can engage in whole-class interactive read-aloud sessions. Research on effective reading instruction found that effective teachers engaged in an interactive style that encouraged active student involvement (Taylor, Peterson, Pearson, & Rodriguez, 2002) and "posed more 'open' questions, to which multiple responses' were appropriate (Allington, 2002, p. 744). Furthermore, Radical Change texts are ideal for rereading to children because the polysemous texts afford multiple opportunities for meaning making and interpretation. In my research, I found that the grade 1 students eagerly anticipated the rereading of the picture books; their enthusiasm for and confidence in their "knowledge" about the books were most evident during the whole-class, to be consistent read-aloud sessions.

The multiplicity in picture books like those used in this study increases students' interaction with the texts. These types of texts demand a more active, involved reading. Readers make choices as they read and, as is evident in the transcript excerpts, transact with the verbal and visual texts in various nonsequential ways. Interactivity also refers to readers exploring different levels of meanings and creating or expanding on portions of the story in both the visual and verbal texts (Dresang, 1999). Indeed, the Radical Change characteristics in The Three Pigs and A Day at Damp Camp give agency to readers. During the interactive read-aloud sessions, the students drew inferences, made interpretations, generated hypotheses, and created possibilities. The children also made intratextual connections (identified links to earlier episodes, phrases, actions, illustrations, and characters within the same text) and intertextual connections (identified associations between texts or illustrations and cultural knowledge and artifacts) during the picture book read-aloud sessions.

Although readers should always be actively involved in the construction of meaning during the reading event (Rosenblatt, 1978), texts such as those used in the study require a greater degree of reader participation in the creation of meaning. Picture books with Radical Change characteristics provide opportunities for readers to develop their abilities in comprehending text inferentially and critically. Although picture books have always required readers to fill in gaps and generate predictions on multiple levels as readers must move back and forth between text and illustrations, picture books with Radical Change characteristics demand a higher level of sophistication and complexity with
respect to gap-filling (Iser, 1978) and predicting. In addition to providing pleasurable aesthetic reading experiences, these types of books can teach critical-thinking skills, visual-literacy skills, and interpretive strategies. In addition, books with Radical Change characteristics can provide certain types of “reading lessons” (Meek, 1988) about the construction of narratives by authors and about the role of readers. The picture books I used extended the students’ repertoires of story schemata and introduced a variety of narrative, discursive, and illustrative devices. The children’s literary understanding about the ways that stories “work” was extended. Indeed, picture books with Radical Change characteristics can provide children (and adolescents and adults) with rich and enjoyable reading experiences.

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