

Independent Reading Project: Synthesis Paper

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### **Part 1: Finding the Books**

When I initially sat down to select books for my Independent Reading Project, a lot of thoughts came to mind. I wanted to select books that I could potentially design lessons from and share with my fourth grade students. I wanted to select books that I would enjoy reading and find personal fulfillment in. I wanted to select books that would push my thinking and allow me to apply concepts from class. After careful consideration and consulting several sources, I selected 15 picture books and five chapter books, varied in genre and approximate reading level, diverse in content and coming from diverse authors, all published between 2008 and 2013.

I used a variety of sources throughout my book search. I was lucky to get in touch with a librarian in my local library network that is a professional in selecting children's literature, and she was able to guide me in the right direction for many of the books I ended up using. I also referred to the GoodReads website for more recommendations, specifically by searching lists that applied to what I was looking for. I used the GoodReads "Most Anticipated Picture Books of 2013" list, the "2013 Mock Caldecott" list, the "Children's Nonfiction 2013" list, the "Best Nonfiction Picture Books" list, and the "Children's Best Poetry Books" list. I have always been interested in the "New York Times Sunday Book Review" so naturally I used this as a source as well. Lastly, an author of children's nonfiction picture books that I have always been interested in, Sandra Markle, has her own blog which I referenced during my search.

Having a discussion and taking book recommendations from a professional in children's literature was very helpful and probably the most helpful source in my search. I asked questions such as, "What are your recommendations and why? What do you know about this author and has he/she written any other books? What reading level would you consider this book? What is

your professional opinion about this book?” She was very knowledgeable and provided me with many options.

When considering my identity for the purpose of this project, and the role that it played in my book selection process, I saw myself in several of ways. This also relates to purpose, reading for pleasure versus reading for pedagogy. First of all, as an educator of children, as this is my main reason for taking this course and completing this project. As a teacher, and for pedagogical purposes, I selected books I may consider using in my classroom with my own students. Rather than choosing books with only my own interests in mind, I considered the learning needs, content standards, and interests of fourth grade students.

Next, I saw myself as a children’s literature enthusiast in my own personal life. Aside from teaching, I am a babysitter and an aunt to a four-year old girl. I certainly think that these identities impacted my text selections. I chose books that reflected some of my interest such as nature, dancing, history, and technology. I also considered books that my young niece would like, which drew me to “girly” and “cutesy” pictures. When thinking about this, a quote from Hintz and Tribunella (2013) resonated with me; they explain, “Children’s literature has a long history of viewing boys and girls as distinct audiences and contributing to their gendered socialization” (p. 388). While at the library, it was oftentimes very clear to me which books were directed towards young boys and which towards young girls, and I seemed to be drawn to the “girly” books, which makes sense. For example, I chose the book *Chloe* by Peter McCarty, for a personal reading satisfaction purpose and to share with my niece. I was drawn to the cover, with cute little bunnies, that look similar to the small toy Maileg brand bunnies my niece adores and plays with. Hintz and Tribunella (2013) explain, “Many children’s toys are specifically coded as either for boys or for girls” (p. 387) and this relates to why I may have been

subconsciously drawn to this particular book cover. It is interesting that “Much of children’s culture, from toys and games to television programs and novels, contributes to the gendering and sexualization of children, and many of our notions and values regarding gender and sexuality get worked out through and around children and their bodies” (Hintz & Tribunella, 2013, p. 387). I definitely saw that my gender identity also played a role in selecting the books that I did.

This assignment had very specific guidelines for the books we selected, limiting my selection. In a way, these strict guidelines were helpful, because I was almost overwhelmed with the amount of options when it comes to selecting children’s and adolescent books, and I was able to eliminate many options, most commonly based on the publishing year, as it had to be 2003 or later. The strict guidelines also in a way made the book selection more difficult, as the books had to fit a specific criteria and the book list overall had to be balanced considering many factors.

Through the use of these rich and informative sources, and my own ideas and interests, I was able to construct a book list, complete with a variety of strong literature selections, fitting the required criteria, and I was ready to begin my reading adventure.

## **Part 2: Synthesis**

Quickly into my reading adventure, I was surprised with just how many connections I was able to make across texts and concepts from the course and how much more I was already understanding about children’s literature. As I delved deeper into the books and stories, this continued, and throughout my reading adventures I was thinking deeply about theories and concepts of children’s literature, resulting in a synthesis of my understandings and connections.

Gender roles were certainly represented across many of the texts that I selected, in many different ways. Hintz and Tribunella (2013) explain, “Gender also involves identity. One not

only enacts a particular set of behaviors perceived as masculine or feminine but also thinks of oneself as having a gendered identity such as a man, woman, or transgender” (p. 391). This idea was clearly illustrated in *Knit Your Bit: A World War I Story*. We meet Mikey, a young boy, who is trying to be helpful and brave while his father is away at war. Mikey finds out that one thing he can do to help is knit clothing for the soldiers. Mikey replies with, “No way! Boys don’t knit!” and “knitting is for girls” (Hopkinson, 2013). When Mikey and some of his friends do decide to knit and attend the Knitting Bee, his friend mentions that they are the only boys there and says, “I sure hope we don’t get laughed outta here” (Hopkinson, 2013). It is clear that Mikey and his young boy friends have a “gendered identity” and realize that some tasks are generally meant for females and some for males.

In several of my selections, the main characters go on some type of adventure. Specifically, in *Laundry Day* (Manning, 2012), a young boy goes on a search to find the owner of a red piece of cloth that a bird brings down to him from a laundry rope hanging above. In *Doug Unplugged* (Yaccarino, 2013), a young boy goes on an adventure to learn about the city. In Falwell’s (2011) *Pond Babies*, a young boy goes on an adventure looking at animals. In Alexander’s (2012) *Goblin Secrets*, a boy Rowie goes on an adventure to search for his brother Rowan who has gone missing. *Hero on a Bicycle* (Hughes, 2012) is the story of Paolo, a thirteen-year old boy that goes on adventures every night by riding his bike around during World War I. Notice the theme, in all of the adventure stories, a boy is involved. In their chapter on genders and sexualities, Hintz and Tribunella (2013) explain that adventure fiction is a “genre that usually featured boys” (p. 396) and that books written for boys provide opportunities for “adventure” and “exploration” (p. 394). This content from the course textbook is clearly supported by some of the books I read. Also along the lines of adventure, I can apply the course

concept of adventure fiction. Hintz and Tribunella (2013) explain, “since childhood and adolescence also involve the experience of learning about and exploring the wilder world, we find too that children’s literature frequently turns to adventure, which foregrounds discovery and travel” (p. 194). These books with boys going on adventures are examples of what Hintz and Tribunella explain in regards to adventure fiction.

In the book *Toys in Space*, the pictures show us a young boy playing with his toys in a blanket and the toys are clearly illustrated and explained in the text as well. I found it interesting that one of the toys is a doll, and another one of the toys is a pink horse wearing a floral apron. Hintz and Tribunella explain, “Many children’s toys are specifically coded as either for boys or for girls” (p. 387). I would consider those two of the toys to be more coded for girls than boys, and perhaps the author is trying to tell children that it is okay to have interests in toys that may not necessary be “coded” for their biological sex. Another book that can be addressed here is Stephanie Greene’s (2013) *Princess Posey and the New First Grader*; it is clearly “coded” for girls, as the cover includes illustrations of girls, glitter, and flowers, and throughout the book we read about “rows and rows of ruffles,” pink tutus, and long hair. With some books is it more obvious than others whether they are “coded” for boys or for girls.

Along with gender roles, I also saw sexuality to be represented. Hintz and Tribunella (2013) explain, ““Sexuality” is thus a way to bring together under one term 1) certain “sexual” practices or acts which may or may not be genital, 2) the biology and physiology of sex/gender and arousal/pleasure, 3) ways of perceiving or conceiving of desire and pleasure, and 4) ways of naming oneself and others in terms of particular and available identities” (p. 406). In *Seahorses*, Curtis walks us through the process of two seahorses mating, using very interesting language, that is in a way expressing pleasure and desire, almost sexual language, clearly explaining that a

sexual practice is occurring. Curtis (2012) writes, “dancing, they circle each other,” “His fins become very dark brown as he waltzes around her to music only they can hear,” “face each other,” “drift together for hours, their curly tails tenderly entwined” then the seahorse is pregnant and he “keeps the eggs tucked safely inside his pouch as his babies grow.” Less explicit references to sexuality come from books that have both mothers, fathers, and children. The result of sexual activity can result in reproduction and a child, and the following books exemplified this: *Doug Unplugged*, *Chole*, *Giant Dance Party*, and *Chamelia*. In Spinelli’s (2013) *Hokey Pokey*, Jack is growing up, and with that comes developing feelings for a girl, Jubilee and perhaps interest in sex and sexuality. In one scene, Jack gets hit with pinecone grenades during a game and plays dead. As he lays playing dead, he hears Jubilee’s voice and “Little kids calling: “Kiss him! Kiss him!”” (Spinelli, 2013). All of a sudden, Jack wonders, “What’s happening?” and “He smells her, hears her breathing. She’s close. Very close.” and “She’s sitting on him! Straddling his chest, squeezing his sipdrop of breath. She’s tickling under his arms, his ribs. Now he feels her hair in his face, her ponytail faintly brushing like mosquitoes” (Spinelli, 2013). This scene and the vivid description that is meant to be connected to the reader’s senses reflect sexuality and those feelings developing in an adolescent.

The books I selected help me understand that books and stories teach positive lessons and general themes to young readers. In *Knit Your Bit: A World War I Story*, Mikey learns how he can help soldiers by knitting socks, and his sister Ellie helps him learn how to knit, and young readers walk away with a general idea of helping others and helping others is important. In *Extra Yarn*, Annabelle uses her endless box of yarn to knit sweaters for many, many people and animals and gives them away. When a selfish archduke offers her two-million dollars for this box of yarn, Annabelle refuses, and so he steals it. The yarn is not in the box when the archduke

opens it, and pictures show that the yarn returns itself to Annabelle without the box. This is showing young readers that giving is a good thing, it is wrong to be selfish, and if you are, you may not get what you want in the end. In Greene's (2013) *Princess Posey and the New First Grader*, a conflict erupts when the new girl, Grace, tells Posey that she has "cow lips." Posey is offended and upset, but after seeking to understand and talking it out, she realizes that Grace meant to tell Posey she has "cow licks" in her hair, just like her, and that they have something in common. After talking with each other and the teacher, Posey forgives Grace and they are good friends. This teaches young readers that conflicts and misunderstandings occur, and one must seek to understand and use conflict resolution, as well as forgiveness. Also, toward the end of the book, Posey commits to helping Grace become a better reader, again, teaching the lesson of helping others and sharing your strengths. Throughout the book, we learn that in the girls' classroom, there are different levels of reading, green dots, yellow dots, and red dots, and the students know that these represent how well each student reads. This exposes children to the idea of competition, and accepting that everyone has different strengths and weaknesses.

Another lesson and general theme that came up in many of the selections had to do with differences and acceptance. In some books, such as *Chamelia* and *Woolbur*, the characters recognize that they are different and they are very proud and open about that. For example, in *Chamelia*, Long (2011) writes, "Most chameleons like to blend in. But not Chamelia. When others zig... Chamelia zags." In *Woolbur*, Helakoski (2008) writes that Wilbur says things such as, "I don't want to stand still with the sheep, I ran with the dogs instead" and every time it is pointed out to Woolbur that he is doing something differently than the other sheep he responds with, "Isn't it great?" On the contrary, some of the stories show the idea of differences and acceptance differently, and they are presented as stories where acceptance of one's differences is



gained. For example, in *Exclamation Mark*, Rosenthal (2013) shares the story of an exclamation mark that realizes he is different from all of the periods, and he wants to run away. Then, he meets a question mark, who is also different, and in the end he appreciates his differences and individual talents, which include adding expression to sentences, and he is off to “make his mark” as he feels like he has “discovered a world of endless possibilities and he “broke free” (Rosenthal, 2013). In *The Favorite Daughter*, Say (2013) shares a story about a young Japanese blonde girl, that does not right away accept her Japanese heritage and name Yuriko, and actually renames herself with the “American” name Michelle to be like the other girls. As the story unfolds, this changes, and in the end, she accepts who she is, and her Japanese name Yuriko. Overall, whether one accepts and embraces their differences and uniqueness right away, or if it takes something to happen for them to accept and embrace who they are, in the end, one should and this is a very common lesson and general theme for young readers.

One of my greatest takeaways from the class was the idea of illustrated books versus picture books. This was something I had never known before about children’s literature and some of the books I selected helped me better understand this idea related to children’s literature. Hintz and Tribunella (2013) differentiate between true picturebooks and illustrated books. They explain that unlike in an illustrated book, where the story can be told and understood with or without the pictures, a picturebook depends on the pictures to tell the story. This book is an example of a picturebook, the story cannot be told without the pictures. The text alone does not tell or show who the characters are, who is speaking, and what is happening in the story. Throughout my reading, I noticed that some of the picture books depended on the illustrations more than others to tell the story. For example, Manning’s (2012) *Laundry Day* depends greatly on the illustrations in the book to tell the story, without them it would be impossible. Also, if

one only read the text on the cover of Bird's (2013) *Giant Dance Party*, they would most likely predict that the book is about a very large (giant) dance party. However, the cover was illustrated with a large, furry blue "giant" and that helps the reader construct a more accurate prediction about what the book will be about; rather than a very big dance party with a lot of people, it is about a dance party that involved fictional giants. Throughout this course I gained a deeper understanding of the importance of the illustrations in books.

At the beginning of the course, we learned about different models of childhood. Hintz and Tribunella (2013) explain, "In the modern age, a number of competing models or conceptualizations of children and childhood circulate that affect how children are treated and perceived and how children live and perceive themselves" (p. 15). One of those models, that I found to be most present in many of the book selections I read, would be "the developing child." To understand this model, Hintz and Tribunella (2013) explain, "Many models of childhood include a sense in which the child is radically Other to the adult, rather than existing along a continuum with people of different ages. One model that does seem to suggest a continuum is that of the developing child" (p. 25). This model suggests that over time, children are learning and living through experiences to slowly mature and prepare them for adulthood. Several of the books I read reflect this model of childhood. For example, a poem in Vanderwater's (2013) *Forest Has a Song*, talks about an owl's first flight. The owl explains, "Mommy, I'm scared to be this high, All owls are scared on their first try, My tail feathers feel so tingly with fear" and "Look, Mom! I made it! Wow! I can fly!" and the mother replies, "I knew you could. You were born for the sky" (Vanderwater, 2013). An owl is showing experience and learning, and progress towards something that an adult, his mother, knows how to do. In Markle's (2012) *Waiting for Ice*, a polar bear, barely ten months old loses her mother. Throughout the book, the

polar bear is experiencing hardships such as hunger and hunting as a result of global warming and learning along the way. Markle (2012) writes, “Polar bear cubs usually stay with their mothers two to three years. But this cub is already alone- on her own.” The last page reads, “To grow up, she’ll have to learn to hunt on the Arctic Ocean using ice floes as resting places. And that is exactly what she will do” (Markle, 2012.) Again, this is a strong example of the developing child model, as we see a young polar bear learn and prepare to grow up. In Yaccarino’s *Doug Unplugged*, we are introduced to a young robot and “Each morning his parents plug him in to fill him up with lots and lots of facts” (Yaccarino, 2013). Throughout the book, Doug goes on an adventure that teaches him all about the city. He “unplugs” himself and experiences things first hand, rather than through his downloading, and his learning is evident when Yaccarino (2013) writes, “Right away he learned...”, “But he discovered...” and “Doug found...” When he returns from his adventure, he concludes with “the little boy ran to his mother and father” and “he wanted to tell them everything he had learned today” (Yaccarino, 2013). Again, the child is seen as “developing,” and using experiences to grow a little bit more with every learning opportunity. Spinelli’s (2013) *Hokey Pokey* can also serve as an example of a book representing the developing child, as Jack lives in a fantasy place with no adults where life is all about fun and play, and starts to grow up and notice changes, as he is transitioning from a child to an adolescent. Jack is experiencing thoughts for the first time that he has never had before. During a game, Jack thinks to himself, “Till no it’s been child’s play” and while riding his bike, he is thinking about the girl he likes, and when he sees a flower he gets off his bike and we read, “He’s never done such a thing before” and “Something in him wants to pick it, perhaps give it” (Spinelli, 2013). Jack is experiencing things and feelings for the first time, showing he is little by little changing and maturing, as the developing child model suggests.

Two of the chapter books I read, Alexander's (2012) *Goblin Secrets* and Balliett's (2013) *Hold Fast*, although very different, one a fantasy book and the other a work of realistic fiction, both revolve around two youngsters that are on a journey to find a family member. In *Goblin Secrets*, Rowie is out to find his older brother Rowan that disappeared. At first, Rowie is in denial that his brother is missing. Alexander (2012) writes, "Days and weeks went by without any word. He's still hiding, Rowie told himself, over and over again." After he had been gone for a couple of months, Rowie searches for his brother and along the way he speaks fondly of him; Alexander (2012) writes, "He missed Rowan. But he didn't know where Rowan might be, and he didn't know where to start looking" and "He always gave his younger brother the larger piece." Balliett's (2013) story shares some of the same aspects. At first, the mother Summer, younger brother Jubie, and Early are feeling very upset with the father Dashel's disappearance, "In the confusion left behind, the three Pearls found themselves in a wailing of worries, a wall of wails, a worry of walls" (Balliett, 2013). After a journey of searching for father Dash, the family was reunited, and Balliett (2013) writes, "The past few weeks had felt like years to this family. Ice seemed to have frozen time, and a beat of threes had hidden four, until today." In both stories, youngsters set out to find missing family members.

I am very grateful for the opportunities that the Independent Reading Project guided me through. As a result of this project, I have gained a deeper understanding of children's and adolescent literature and course concepts and I have developed an even greater passion and appreciation for children's and adolescent literature and the talented, creative, educated people involved in the entire process of creating these books.

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