

Already Ready

Nurturing Writers in Preschool and Kindergarten

Katie Wood Ray *and* Matt Glover



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What It Means to Be a Writer



Sean, a four-year-old in preschool, thinks of himself as a writer and an illustrator. If you ask him, he will tell you about himself in that way. He will tell you that he knows lots about animals and likes to write books about them. He will tell you about books he's written in the past, like his last one about lions, and about books he's thinking about writing in the future. He will tell you that when he makes books, he puts in both pictures and words. And perhaps best of all, he will tell you he can read his books to you, if you'd like. Books like this one, for example. Have a look at it first, before you read on and see the text Sean composed for it.

After this book was finished, Sean read it many times to different people in various settings, and each time the text he read was consistent. His reading, complete with dramatic inflection, went like this.

Page One: *Flamingo*. By Sean.

Page Two: Flamingo is looking for food.

Page Three: And then he screamed out, "Watch out termites! I'm going to eat you!"

Page Four: And then he got a big round stomach.

Page Five: And then he spitted them out.

Page Six: And then he was his size again.

Page Seven: The end.

When you first looked at *Flamingo* as a book without knowing Sean's reading of it, it probably didn't hold much meaning for you. Most readers wouldn't even

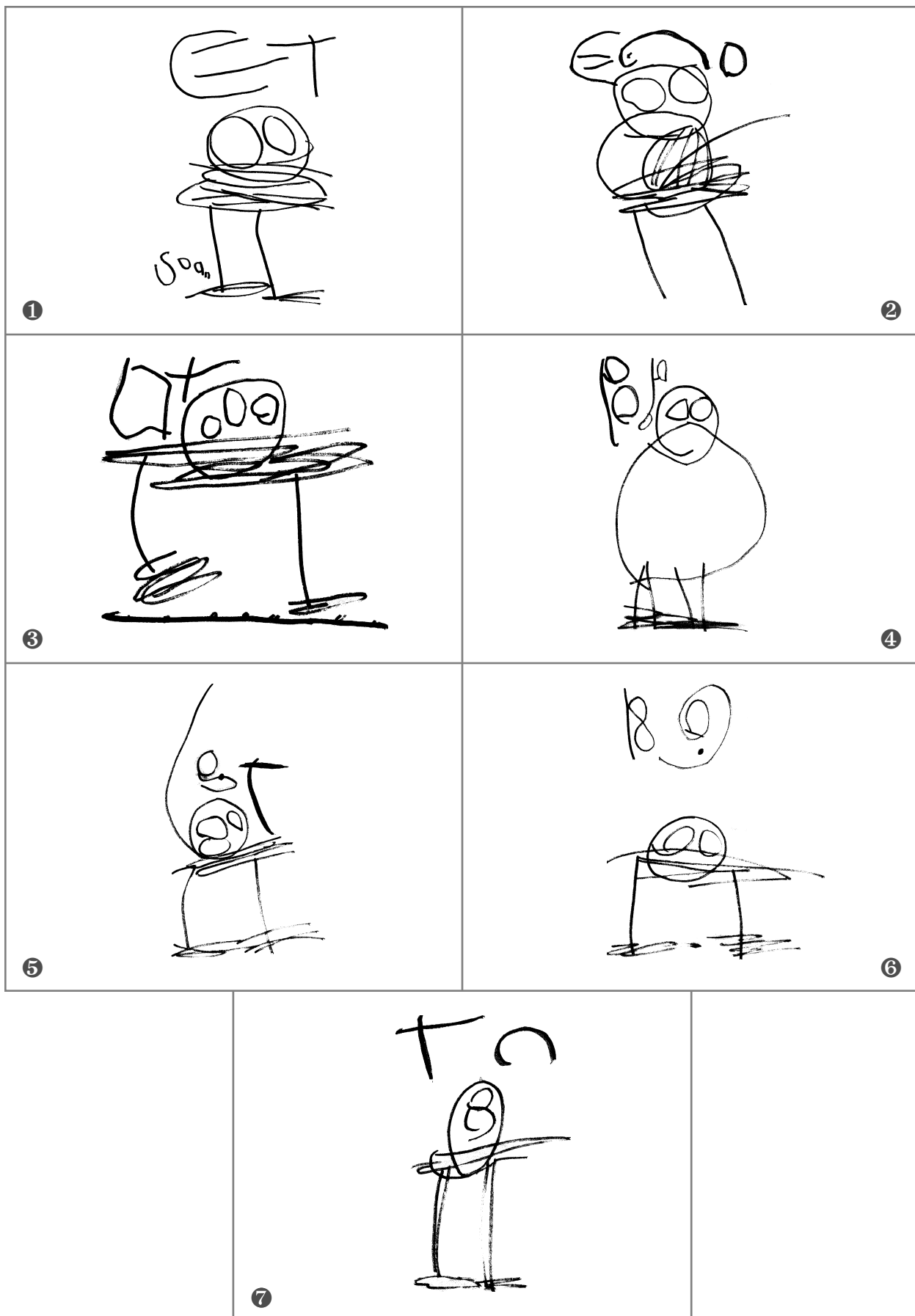


FIG. 1.1 Sean's Book

guess the book is about a flamingo without Sean. But once you've heard his reading and seen the book in color, you realize the character is pink and has awfully long legs. You see those little yellow specks at the bottom of page three and you think, "They do look a lot like termites crawling around on a brown log." You notice the bloating on page four, something you likely missed the first time through, and you realize the flamingo only has a mouth drawn in on the two pages where he must do something with it: scream and spit. And that the yellow trajectory coming out of the flamingo's mouth on page five, well, it looks more like what it's supposed to be as well, once you're in the know.

The illustrations in *Flamingo* clearly match the text Sean read, and this match, along with the consistency of his repeated readings, make it clear that this four-year-old composed his book with very deliberate intention. As he shared the book with different people, Sean answered questions about it with the confidence any author might, further showing how secure he was with the content he composed.

"How did you know flamingos eat termites?" someone asked.

"I saw it on *Animal Planet*," Sean replied.

"And why did he spit them out? Did they not taste good?" another wondered.

"No. He didn't want to be all big like that," Sean explained.

To put it simply, the reason Sean thinks and acts like a writer and illustrator at four is because he spends time doing what writers and illustrators do. He can't help but think of himself that way. People define themselves by the kinds of things they do in life, and Sean is no different. In his preschool classroom, Sean's teachers have made time, space, and materials available so that three- and four-year-old children can do what writers and illustrators do—make books about topics that interest them. But more important, Sean's teachers respond to the books he and other children make in ways that support their identities. They talk with Sean about his work as a writer in just the same way they talk about Eric Carle's work as a writer. Because of this, Sean can't help but think that he's the same kind of person as Carle.

Children's book-making is fueled by the same energy they bring to any activity where they are making things—or making things up—during their dramatic play. And in truth, it is no more surprising that a four-year-old would think of himself as a writer and illustrator than it is that he would think of himself as a fireman or an astronaut. Pieces of rope transform into fire hoses, discarded boxes become spaceships. Children easily believe themselves into being.

Adults, however, are not always so easily swayed. Many will more easily believe Sean is an illustrator than a writer because they have fewer expectations for what it means for him to be an illustrator. His writing identity is a harder sell because his written artifacts don't yet match adult expectations for what someone who knows how to write should be able to do. *Already Ready* is a book

written for adults, and the whole idea behind it is to examine what happens when adults really believe that very young children are writers. Not pretend writers or play writers or even emergent writers—just writers, with no adjectives attached.

This single quote from a classic essay, “Joining the Literacy Club,” by Frank Smith (1988), frames the issue perhaps better than any other:

Members of the literacy club are people who read and write, even the beginners, and the fact that one is not very competent yet is no reason for exclusion or ridicule. A newcomer is the same kind of person as the most proficient club member, except that he or she hasn't yet had much experience. (11)

What happens when adults really believe that a writer like Sean is the *same kind of person* as the most proficient writer, the same kind of person as Eric Carle, just with less experience? How might adults interact differently with Sean if they believed this? And what impact would those interactions have on Sean and his development as a writer?

Smith's point is provocative and clear. There isn't anything Sean or any other child needs to do to get ready for membership in the literacy club. Children are already ready, and the adults around them need to go about the business of helping them gain experience as full-fledged members. To do this, adults must hold two understandings simultaneously: Sean is a writer, and Sean is *four years old*. The two don't cancel each other out; they are equally true at once, and the implications of this are incredibly significant.

Interestingly enough, Sean's teachers have helped him and his classmates understand how they can be both writers and three- and four-year-olds at the same time. The topic comes up often, actually. Sometimes the children express tentativeness about their abilities when it comes to both writing and illustrating. (The most experienced writers are prone to tentativeness too, by the way.) “I don't know how to draw a swing set” or “I don't know how to make words,” they'll say. The adults explain to the children that it's okay not to know how to do everything, reminding them that they are three, or four, so they're not *supposed* to know how to do everything.

The advice to “just do it the best you can” is usually enough to get children trying, and whatever happens to go on the paper is just what the adults were looking for—a good try that results in writing and illustrating. After all, and this is important, the *best you can* is all even the most experienced writers and illustrators can do when they set to the task of writing. Why would a teacher ask anything more, or less, from a preschooler?

Again, two understandings, equally true at once: Sean is a writer, and Sean is four. If his teachers let either one of those identities hold more weight in their thinking about Sean, they run the risk of having developmentally inappropriate expectations for him. And the thing is: developmentally inappropriate expectations can work in two ways. If teachers think too much about the fact that Sean is a writer, a writer just like Eric Carle, they run the risk of pushing him too much and asking him to do things he's just not ready to do. On the other hand, if teachers focus too much on the fact that Sean is four, they run the risk of not helping him realize his full potential as a writer—the risk of not expecting enough. This is just as developmentally inappropriate as expecting too much.

In essence, the question driving all the thinking in this book is: What are the teaching implications of holding these two understandings—Sean is a writer, and Sean is four years old—to be equally true at once? Of course, this equation can be written in other ways; it's not just about the experience that comes with age and maturity. It might be written: "Naomi is a writer, and Naomi doesn't speak much English." Or, "Josh is a writer, and Josh has very special needs." Or even, "Matthew is a writer, but Matthew must pass a writing test." No matter which way an understanding is written, the issue is really the same: How do teachers let students' identities as writers hold equal sway with whatever other identities students might bring with them?

A Context Supportive of Writers

The images of Sean reading and talking about his book *Flamingo* are captivating, and when teachers see them on video, they almost always respond "yes" without hesitation when asked, "Do you believe Sean is a writer?" Similarly, much of the professional literature on the teaching of writing refers to very young children as *writers*. Using the word itself is in fact so common in professional conversations that the idea behind it—what it really means if three- and four-year-old children are writers—seems to have gone somewhat unexamined. Many well-intentioned, widely accepted practices seem to counter the belief that children are writers, and this is true as much for what the practices include as for what they leave out. These practices create contexts in which children are fully supported in being three and four, but perhaps not as supported in being writers.

Now, let's examine the instructional context where Sean is a writer in a pre-school classroom, and along the way, we'll consider how Sean's experiences might be different in a different instructional context where different assumptions are made. Please know that this comparative exercise is one of contrast rather than judgment, and that by drawing it we hope to suggest how a balance

of practice might be possible—supporting children as writers in age-appropriate ways.

In this classroom . . .

Sean is writing.

In another classroom . . .

Sean is not writing. This could be because there's no suggestion or invitation for him to write. Perhaps the adults believe that Sean doesn't need to think about writing until he begins reading, and that other types of engagements are developmentally more appropriate for him. Or, it could be that he is not writing because an adult is taking dictation from him, writing the words in his flamingo book as Sean says them. The belief informing this practice could be that since adults know how to write and children don't, adults should do the writing (until children know how). This practice may also be motivated by a desire to show or teach Sean how writing goes, using his own words as an example, or possibly, the desire to help him capture all the wonderful language he composes to go with his text.

In this classroom . . .

Sean is using writing to make a picture book.

In another classroom . . .

Sean is writing, but he's not making a picture book. Perhaps there are markers and paper scattered around the room where he can write and draw as part of his explorations and dramatic play, making notes and lists and signs as they become relevant. Likely, the belief here is that children should learn to write first in more functional ways before moving on to the thinking process of composition used to make a whole book. In Sean's preschool classroom there are in fact lots of invitations for functional writing, but these are in addition to inviting children to do the work of writers and illustrators, as Sean did in his *Flamingo* book.

In this classroom . . .

Sean goes through a process to make his book, a process he figures out all by himself. He chooses his own idea; decides what will go on each page; makes changes along the way as he rereads and revisits; and, in the end, declares it to be finished.

In another classroom . . .

Sean might be given a topic for writing, likely one that's connected to a class theme, and lots of scaffolding, perhaps a page with spaces for him to draw his own pictures to go with prewritten sentences. This practice seems to make several

assumptions. One is that Sean either is not capable of choosing his own topics for writing, or that he would have little interest in choosing them—that what he’s writing *about* wouldn’t matter that much to him. Another assumption in this practice is that Sean will not be able to figure out how to write something if he’s not first shown how, or that he won’t write it *well* if he’s not shown how—hence, the scaffold for writing that orders the ideas for him. Embedded even more deeply in this practice, perhaps, is a belief that asking young children to figure out how it all should go, to engage in the true process of writing in all its complexity, is asking too much.

In this classroom . . .

Sean uses his understandings about kinds of writing in the world (genre) and an available text structure (the narrative mode) to craft his text. He’s making a book that looks and sounds a lot like those his teachers read to him every day, books written by professional authors.

In another classroom . . .

Sean wouldn’t see his writing as being like other writing in the world, and so there would be little reason for him to make it sound or work like any other books. In this case, Sean might be given a single piece of paper and asked to draw a picture and then write something to go with it. Likely, the belief here is that one sheet of paper is not as overwhelming as writing a whole book. Perhaps an assumption is also made that since Sean’s writing will be so *unlike* the writing in published books, there is no reason to encourage him to write like the authors of those books until he has more experience.

In this classroom . . .

Sean works on writing and illustrating his book for a stretch of time, the multiple pages and the sense that he is making something helping him stay with it and build his stamina for the act of writing.

In another classroom . . .

Sean may do some writing, most likely in one of the contexts mentioned so far (functional writing, single-page composing), but he probably won’t stay with the task for more than a few moments because his sense of what he’s doing with writing is fairly contained. He’s just writing something, not *making* something, as he does for a picture book. The belief here probably is that building stamina is not really an age-appropriate goal for Sean, even though children this young often demonstrate their ability to stay with something in many other contexts they find engaging.

In this classroom . . .

Sean's finished book becomes a fixture in the classroom. Like any well-loved book, he reads it again and again to different audiences. Sean sees that although the activity of writing may have ended, writing itself is not temporal—his efforts have resulted in something that lasts.

In another classroom . . .

Sean writes, but he's not encouraged to save that writing and reread it or use it again. For him, writing becomes one activity in a day filled with activities, all bounded by time. Once they're over, they're over. Most likely the belief here is that functional writing is the most age-appropriate kind of writing for Sean (as mentioned earlier), and with this kind of writing, once it has served its function, the writer doesn't need it anymore. In this context adults might assume that composition—writing that is created to hold meanings that will last over time—is something that will occur once the writer has more experience. After all, Sean's writing doesn't hold much meaning on its own without him there to read it, so it's easy to overlook the value of holding on to it.

In this classroom . . .

Sean's teachers are comfortable with his approximations. They embrace the understanding that his finished book will look like it is written by a four-year-old, and they don't try to make it look like it was finished by a writer with more experience.

In another classroom . . .

Sean might write this same book with all the same intentions, but when he is finished, an adult writes a transcript of his words underneath his writing. Some of the same beliefs that lead adults to take dictation from children are similarly informing this practice, but in this context, the child is encouraged to write it himself first. The need for an adult to transcribe might stem from the belief that children need to see what their writing looks like when it is written conventionally, or it might come from a desire to capture all the rich language of Sean's reading. Often, transcripts are also motivated by a desire for other readers to make sense of Sean's book when he is not present.

Whatever benefits the transcript might bring, if Sean sees an adult's writing as part of *his* process, then the transcript has a message attached to it, whether it's intended or not. The unspoken message is that Sean can try to write on his own, but adults are really the ones who know how to write. This message is reinforced by the fact that adults don't usually redo children's illustrations, only their writing. When one kind of approximation is accepted and not another, the message is clear.

In this classroom . . .

Sean can read his book just fine, and he does, with gusto, again and again. His teachers understand that *Flamingo* doesn't carry nearly as much meaning when Sean is not there to read it, and they accept this. They know that even the most experienced writers can add lots of meaning to their texts if they're there in person to share them.

In another classroom . . .

Sean would be unable to read his own book. A fully dictated or transcribed text of Sean's flamingo book would almost certainly be outside the bounds of his reading development. The words Sean composed are part of his oral vocabulary, but they're not yet in his reading vocabulary. Knowing this, adults might move forward with dictation or transcription because they want Sean's writing to support his development as a reader. Because he knows the text and context of his book, with support, Sean could probably learn to read the words an adult has written in *Flamingo*.

Related to this, if adults define writing as a representation that can hold its meaning when the writer is not there, then dictation and transcription are the only logical options for turning a four-year-old's book into writing. This definition for writing privileges the text itself over the writer's intention to make meaning.

Finally, in this classroom . . .

Sean's teachers value his writing because it supports his development as a writer.

In another classroom . . .

Sean's teachers value his writing because it supports his development as a reader.

With encouragement, many children begin writing before they really know any useful information about the letter-sound system of English. But without a doubt, once children do start making sense of this system and begin using it in their writing, there is nothing better than writing to teach them about how letters make sounds and sounds make words. Sean is just beginning to figure this out. He puts a *t* on page three of his book because he hears it in the word *termite*, and a *b* on page four because he hears it in *big*. Knowing how important knowledge of the letter-sound system is to early reading, it's difficult not to value his writing primarily because it will help him develop so much as a reader.

When writing is valued primarily for how it supports children's reading development, an emphasis on the transcription aspect of it (getting the words down) is inevitable. Practices that support children's growing knowledge of the letter-sound system and accurate transcription are privileged above all others,

and the unspoken but very clear message of this privileging is that there will be time later for other writing development. As odd as it might sound, the belief seems to be that children need to get the writing part down first, and then they can use it to be writers. We'll consider this idea more in later chapters.

To summarize then, let's revisit the essential characteristics of the classroom context in which Sean and other children are supported so that they see themselves as writers. In this context, the children:

- ☉ are writing.
- ☉ are using writing to make picture books.
- ☉ go through a process to make their books.
- ☉ use their understandings about kinds of writing in the world (genre) and available text structures (mode) to craft their texts.
- ☉ work on writing and illustrating their books for stretches of time, building their stamina for the act of writing.
- ☉ see their books become lasting artifacts in the room.
- ☉ have teachers who are comfortable with all their approximations.
- ☉ can read their books.
- ☉ have teachers who value their writing because it supports their development as writers.

If you haven't done so already, notice that not one of these essential characteristics of context mentions any action on the part of the adults in the room. Attitudes, for sure, but not actions. This list almost makes it seem as if a teacher might set up a well-supplied writing center, change a few attitudes, and have children fully engaged in thinking of themselves as writers, just like Sean. What you have on this list, however, is the descriptive *result* of a complex web of teaching practice. This context was created by action, not inaction, and as you move forward in this book, you'll read about the actions of teachers who are working with very young children to support their well-rounded growth as writers.

The practices we document, and the understandings that inform them, have evolved over time through repeated examination. In fact, they continue to evolve as teachers engage in study groups, professional conversations, and lots of trial-and-error efforts with children. Throughout it all, above the din of the collective adult voices trying to figure out which practices make the most sense for young writers, it's difficult not to hear Sean's voice, so full of confidence,

announcing yet another reading of his book: “*Flamingo*. By Sean.” And, of course, Sean’s voice is just one of many ringing forth from inside preschool classrooms, voices that remind us as teachers that despite what we might think of them, young children can easily believe themselves into being writers.

In the sound of these children’s voices, there echoes a number of questions that must be taken seriously by the adults given over to their care. Why? Why does this work matter for young children? What are the educational goals we’re aiming for when we support children as writers at the very beginning of their literacy development? We end this opening chapter with some thoughts about these questions.

What Are the Goals of This Work?

The answers to this question are complex, but they start out simple with responses such as, “Well, why not?” Why wouldn’t we be doing this work with young children when they’ve shown us again and again how capable they are of thinking like writers? The notion that to think as a writer thinks—about process, composition, craft, and more—is developmentally inappropriate for young children just doesn’t hold when you observe them busy at writing in the contexts described earlier. Granted, they think about these things with the experience and complexity of four-year-olds, but that’s all their teachers are asking them to do. So if becoming thoughtful about process, composition, craft, and more is a good educational goal for any writer, then why not these writers?

A more complex answer to this question is that writing may actually be a better way to lead children’s literacy development than reading. As Randy Bomer (2006) explained, a blank page presents children with an *invitation* (to make meaning), while reading presents them with an *expectation* (to figure out someone else’s meaning). When children don’t have much experience in the literacy club, invitations are probably developmentally more appropriate for them than expectations. After all, whatever children do in response to an invitation to write is clearly appropriate for them because they initiated it. And, they can’t get the writing “wrong” because there was no expectation attached to it in the first place.

Even as children gain more experience and begin using the letter–sound system to help them write, their writing development will continue to outpace their reading development for a while. When encouraged to invent spellings as best they can, children will pull from the thousands of words they know orally to help them compose their texts, and many of the words they’ll use are ones they wouldn’t recognize yet if they encountered them spelled conventionally while

reading. It follows that if teachers know how to support children's early writing, this support may actually give children access to richer texts—their own—during their independent reading.

Similarly, in many ways children's writing efforts also support their oral language development. Writing creates a template for talk. Retelling, answering questions about their written texts, sequencing, topic maintenance, extending conversation, and vocabulary development are all key language goals for young children; and each of them can be supported during thoughtful conversations about their writing between teachers and children. In addition, since the conversations are connected to something children have created on their own, they often demonstrate a strong desire to engage in dialogues about their written texts.

A huge goal of this work, then, is the promise and possibility of more fulfilling literate lives for young children. If writing really does open a wider path into the literacy club, then why does Sean need to wait to see himself as a writer when he can reap the benefits of that identity when he's four?

Helping children develop a comfortable familiarity with the whole idea of communicating through text composition—including, but not limited to, writing—is another goal of this work with children because they will grow up in a world filled with text exchanges. Through emails, text and instant messages, websites, blogs, “my spaces,” and constantly evolving similar technologies, literate people in today's society are communicating using multimodal texts in unprecedented numbers (Rowe 1994). “I'll text you” or “I'll email you” has become what “I'll give you a call” was in yesterday's world, and anyone with a message can find a global audience in the time it takes to press a single key on a computer.

Membership in the literacy club, in other words, is changing all the time as communicating through text becomes possible in new formats. If we are to nurture children's earliest membership in this club, then, we believe it should be with our eyes wide open to the reality of what this membership will mean for them. Helping them grow comfortable with composing and communicating ideas through multimodal texts is simply helping them understand what it means to be part of the twenty-first century's literacy club.

Finally, an educational goal that is far-reaching, but perhaps more important than any other, is that writing can help build in children what Peter Johnston (2004) calls a sense of agency—a sense that “if they act, and act strategically, they can accomplish their goals” (29). At its very core, writing is a deliberate act of willfulness and intention. Writers must act strategically, again and again, to fill the blank pages set before them. Just *think* about what it means for Sean to go from a prestapled blank book all the way to reading *Flamingo* to his class and answering questions with the authority of a writer. Just imagine what he must be

learning about his own strategic actions from experiences like this. How could we possibly turn our backs on the significance of this, not just for him as a writer, but for Sean as citizen of the world?

The idea that education should build children's sense of agency—a sense that they are in control of their own destinies—is what brought many of us to this profession in the first place. If seeing themselves as writers can help build that sense for children, that's reason enough for us as teachers to figure out what to do with them *as writers*.



Meet Kyle



Author and Illustrator of Fire Engine

As a three-year-old, Kyle was already reading at a fairly high level and could talk at length on a variety of subjects of interest to him, from music to cooking to making books—he was quite the Renaissance man already. Like many three-year-olds, Kyle loved being silly, giggling, and playing with his friends. Not surprisingly, his fine-motor skills were more typical of a three-year-old and not quite as developed as his language skills.

Kyle loved making books, even though he knew he couldn't yet represent all he wanted in his illustrations. Fortunately, he was very comfortable with his own approximations, and fortunately for his teachers, his approximations helped them see the many things he knew about books, authors, and illustrators.

Kyle certainly understood what it means to read like a writer. One day his teacher read Donald Crews' wonderful book *Freight Train* with the specific intention of looking at the decisions Crews made as the illustrator. The teacher and children looked at how the first several pages showed a track without a train and wondered together why Donald hadn't included the train on these pages. They discussed how the illustrator made the train look like it was going slow on one page and fast on another. They thought about how Crews showed that it was night toward the end. And while the teacher would occasionally mention that children could try these things in their books, she was primarily interested in supporting their habit of noticing.

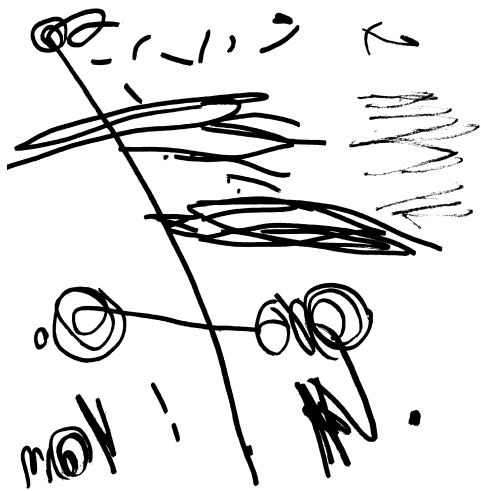
Kyle was obviously listening carefully. He went over to the writing table and began making a book about a fire engine. As he was working on the first page, his teacher asked him about the different parts of a fire truck and where they were in his illustration. Kyle added sirens, ladders, lights, and even the button you push to make the *beep-beep* sound the truck makes when it's backing up. He also took a risk and added a title, *Fire Engine*, with marks at the top of the page that were different from the swirling marks he typically used for writing.

On the next page Kyle asked his teacher, "Do you see any fire trucks on this page?" He eagerly awaited her expected reply.

"Well, no. Is there a truck?" she asked.

"No, the truck isn't there yet," Kyle responded, and then he went back to working on his book, confident his teacher would understand he was trying to be like Donald Crews. The book is rich with details and deep thinking that the illustrations don't convey on their own.

Teachers are well aware of the amazing growth children make over a year, but it is especially apparent with Kyle. A page from a book Kyle made a year later about a trip to Florida follows. Kyle's motor skills are catching up to his writing and oral language skills. What a shame it would have been to wait until this point to begin nurturing his development as a writer.



1

Fire Engine



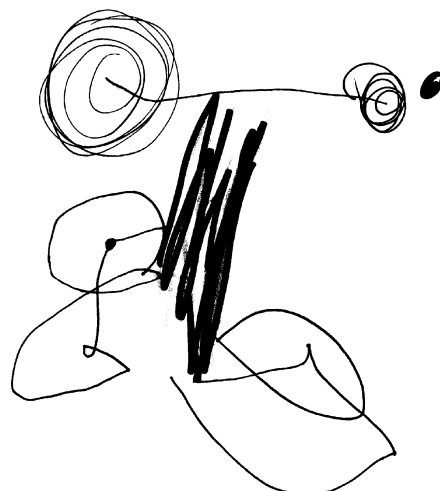
2

"Here's the road. No fire engine yet."



3

"Here's more the road, but still no fire engine."



4

*"Here's the fire engine.
It has a horn that goes beep-beep."*



5

*"The fire engine starts going slow
but then goes really, really fast."*

FIG. 1.2 *Kyle's Book, Fire Engine*

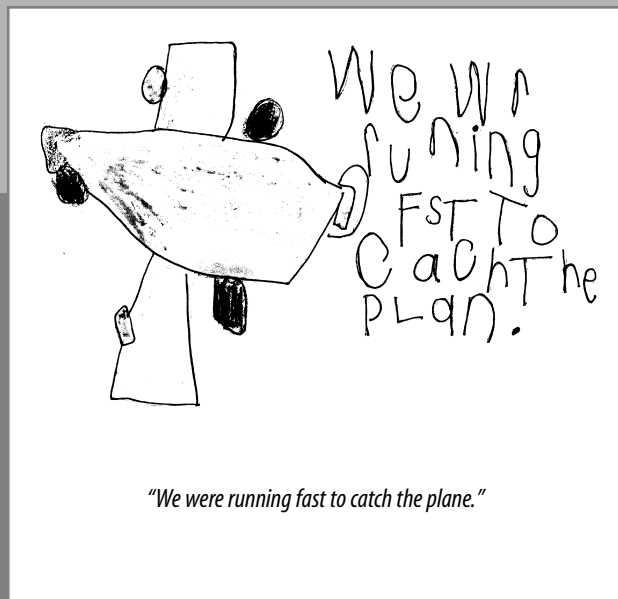


FIG. 1.3 A Page from Kyle's Book About a Trip to Florida



Supporting Young Writers Through Read-Aloud

As Matt is reading Martin Waddell's *Owl Babies* to a group of preschoolers, he stops at one point and rereads a particular page. He asks the children to listen to the language Waddell has used: "Soft and silent she swooped through the trees to Sarah and Percy and Bill." Without belaboring the point, Matt says simply, "I like the way that sounds. 'Soft and silent she swooped through the trees.'" Then, he continues on with the reading. With just a tiny bit of talk inserted into the read-aloud, Matt does some important teaching. He plants seeds of understanding about how writers craft literary language, how readers are drawn to this language, and what this language sounds like in texts.

Later that morning, while Ronak is making a book about different animals, Matt helps him think about how he might make his book more interesting by telling something about each animal rather than just labeling them. Together, they think their way through the pages of the book, adding details, until they get to the last page about a snake (Figure 7.1). On this page, on his own, Ronak composes some Waddell-like text for his book when he reads, "This is a snake and it slithers and slides."

During share time, after Ronak has read his animal book to the other children, Matt gets *Owl Babies* and again reads the page he had reread earlier during read-aloud, and he comments on how much Ronak's writing sounds like Martin Waddell's writing. He also explains how Ronak revised his book to make it sound more like a book, moving from simple labels for each page to labels *and* descriptions.

This complex, connected web of teaching happened in a single day in a preschool classroom across three different predictable contexts: read-aloud, side-by-side work with a child who was writing, and share time. Day after day in each of these contexts, teachers support children's composition development as they

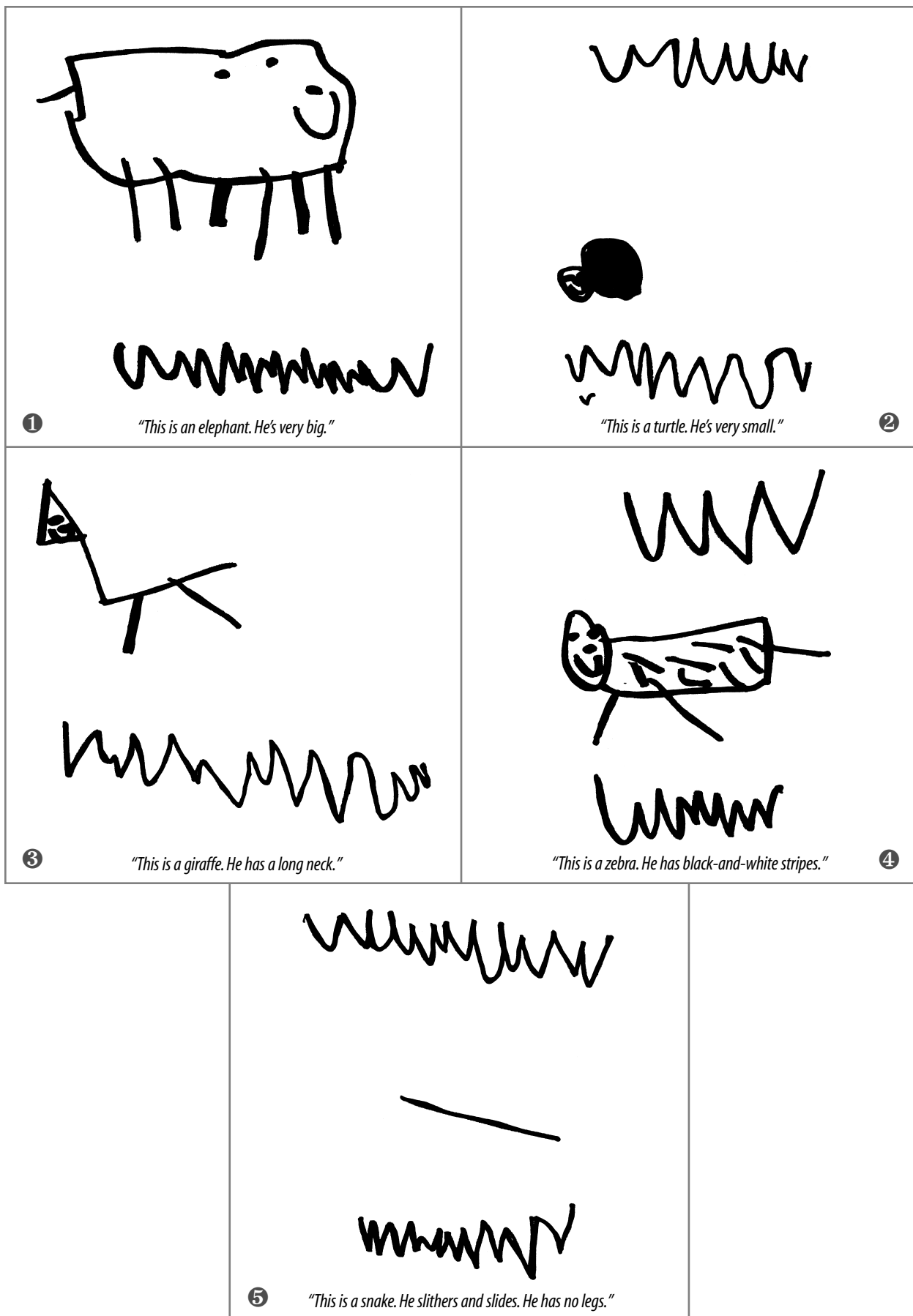


FIG. 7.1 Ronak's Animal Book

use art and writing to make picture books. Teachers understand that children's development is multidimensional (Rowe 1994) and that any act of reading, writing, or sharing has the potential to lead children to multiple new understandings about texts, process, and what it means to be a writer. Think about all the different dimensions of composition development that were supported in just this one line of teaching in a single morning.

As we explained in Chapter 6, all the teaching happens in conversations with children as they read, write and share. The question, of course, is what do teachers and children talk *about* during these conversations? The purpose of this and the following chapters is to explain the kinds of talking and thinking that seem most helpful in supporting young writers. This chapter explores the talk that happens around read-alouds. As you read about this talk, remember that the intention driving it is to nudge children along in their composition development, and because this development is multidimensional, any particular instance of talk is likely to support several different dimensions at once.

Reading Aloud to Support Children as Writers

When adults share books with young children, they engage in one of the most meaningful literacy events in a child's day. Reading aloud is a complex event that involves not just reading and listening but also looking, thinking, and talking as books are shared—children and teachers making meaning together from all the rich meaning found in picture books. Of course, with preschoolers, read-aloud is also likely to be a physically interactive event, as children point and mimic and sometimes roll on the floor with laughter at the book.

With their teacher, a group of children develops a history of thinking and talking about books shared during read-aloud time, and they bring this shared history to each new reading. As a result, the literacy event changes in complexity as books are reread multiple times, as new books by familiar authors are introduced, and as new genres and topics in books are discovered.

By expanding the ways they talk with children about picture books, teachers help young writers build understandings about texts, process, and what it means to be a writer. After all, a picture book as an artifact embodies each of these facets equally: It's a text, someone went through a process to write and illustrate it, and now this person is an author who owns this book in the world. And of course, because a picture book is the same kind of writing artifact children create when they compose, the talking and thinking that happens during read-aloud is the same kind of talking and thinking that happens around children's writing. Near the end of this chapter, we'll return to this idea and consider how the talk moves seamlessly between read-aloud and children's writing.

As teachers share picture books during read-aloud, what kinds of things do they talk about with children? The following list contains five lines of thinking that teachers and children talk about, which we consider in detail in the next sections:

- ☉ The people who make books
- ☉ What makes a picture book, a picture book
- ☉ Different kinds of books
- ☉ Different purposes for books
- ☉ The decisions writers and illustrators make

Talking About the People Who Make Books

The first kind of talk teachers support and encourage is talk that helps children understand that those who make books are everyday people just like them—what we call a “concept of authorship.” To better understand this concept, consider this vignette from a preschool class:

It’s read-aloud time, and the children sitting with Matt can see he has brought *Knuffle Bunny* to read to them. Matt barely gets the title out of his mouth when one of the children speaks up and says, “It’s written by Mo Willems,” identifying the author of this familiar book. And right on the heels of this comment, another child says, “And *Don’t Let the Pigeon Ride the Bus*,” naming another book by this same author.

Knowing and commenting by name—Mo Willems—on the author of a book, *and* on other books he’s written, are sophisticated responses for readers of any age and experience, but they’re particularly telling comments coming from preschoolers. In this case, we also find it significant that this was the *first* thing these children were thinking about when they saw a book—the person who wrote it. We know that for their thinking to have become so seamless that at the mention of a book, they think of the author, these children are in an environment where that kind of thinking is privileged and talking about authors is common, everyday talk. Their teachers understand that the concept of authorship is essential to children’s images of themselves as writers.

Why? Because for young children to understand what it means for them to be writers, they first need to understand what a writer is and what a writer does.

This sounds deceptively simple, but actually it's quite complex. How many children do you know who've ever seen a writer at work? Not just an adult writing something—most of them have seen this—but an adult truly at work *making something* with writing? How many children even realize that work like this happens in the world, thinking only that books come from the store or the library?

To think of it another way, picture all the spontaneous role-playing children do in their dramatic play. The child announces, "I'm the mommy (or the doctor, the puppy, the princess, the fireman, the baby, the teacher, the waiter, etc.)," and then begins to act in the way she's seen, from experience, a mommy acts. Her sense of what it means to "be the mommy" is bounded to what she's seen mothers do. The *being* and *doing*, in other words, are very connected, and it's an easy role for her to play because she knows so much about what mommies do.

Children imagine possibilities for themselves *to be* from the range of possibilities they know exist in the world of being around them. It follows, then, that if children have had no experience with the kinds of people who make things with writing, they're not likely to imagine being writers themselves. Quite simply, they don't know what to do when it's time to "be the writer."

If very young children are to see themselves as writers, then across the year teachers must help them form a foundational understanding about the *being* and *doing* of people who write. Children need to understand that everyday, ordinary people make books by doing everyday, ordinary things—writing words and drawing pictures—and that they can make them too, if they'd like. In other words, it should be just as easy for children to imagine they can be writers as it is for them to imagine they can be mommies and daddies.

Authors and Illustrators as Familiar People

To build the critical concept of authorship, teachers surround read-aloud time with purposeful talk about the people who make books. They make it a habit to read the names of the authors and illustrators of the books they read (and reread) aloud to children. Most of the time, they read the names first, before they even read the titles, as many experienced writers often look first to see who's authored a book because they identify so strongly with authorship:

I have a book for you today that is written by a woman named Diane Adams. She made the words in this book and she's the author. Kevin Luthardt is the illustrator. He made the pictures. The name of their book is Zoom.

Notice that simple definitions for *author* and *illustrator* are embedded in this talk. As teachers continue to talk about books while sharing them, they keep

saying the authors' and illustrators' names as they talk, using them just as if they knew these people in person: "*I love the way Kevin drew this picture of the people on the roller coaster. Look at how he made their faces.*"

Looking at photographs of the people who make books also helps children believe in them as real and familiar, not just names on a jacket cover. Many books have author and illustrator photos in them. Teachers let children look at these and talk about the people they see pictured. For books that don't have photos, teachers sometimes find them on authors' and illustrators' websites, print them, and tape them on the back covers of books.

Connected to this, teachers also read the author and illustrator blurbs on the books' back covers to see what else they can learn about these people, or they find information like this from websites. Wherever it's found, sharing personal information about authors and illustrators with children builds a concept of authorship. On the day recounted earlier when Matt brought *Knuffle Bunny* to read to the children, he also brought a photograph of Mo Willems. The children were very interested to see that Mo wears glasses just like the dad in *Knuffle Bunny*. Matt shared with them another little bit of insider information about Mo: He has a daughter named Trixie just like the Trixie in the book. In the simple act of sharing this, such important teaching happens. Children see an author as a plausibly real person, and they're exposed to a very common way that writers find ideas for writing—they use material from their own lives.

Dedications are personal little communications straight from the books' authors and illustrators. Teachers share dedications with children and wonder together about the lucky people named in them and why they were chosen. Knowing that authors have special people in their lives makes them seem more real because children understand being connected in that way. Of course, many children won't know what a dedication is, but they'll grow into understanding what one is over time the more experiences they have talking and thinking about them. Understanding that authors dedicate books to people for different reasons will also help children understand more about the powerful work writing can do in the world.

On the Importance of Rereading

The talk about authors and illustrators changes over time in ways that help strengthen children's concept of authorship. The first change happens as teachers begin to reread the same books, a highly recommended practice for how it helps support children's emergent reading, and it's just as valuable to them as writers. When teachers read a book to children for the second (or third or fourth or . . .) time, they talk about the author and illustrator like they know them, like they're familiar members of the club of people who write:

Here's that book by Diane Adams again that we liked so much—the one called Zoom—about the roller coaster. And remember the illustrator, Kevin Luthardt, who did such a good job of showing on people's faces whether they liked the roller coaster or not?

Rereading books deepens the concept of authorship in several ways. First, reading books again helps names and personas of authors and illustrators become familiar in the room. Talking about Eric Carle and Phyllis Root and Jon Agee should become as natural as talking about Sam and Shruthi and Miss Jenny (actual people in the room), and the naturalness of this is key to children seeing themselves as being like these authors and illustrators. Related to this, the concept of ownership and its connection to authorship is built as books are read to children multiple times. In other words, after several readings, *Zoom* isn't just a great book about roller coasters, it's also a great *Diane Adams book*.

Rereading also helps very young children understand the permanency of authorship—the idea that Diane Adams will always be the author of this book and her name will always be given in response to the question, “Who wrote this book?” The long-range implications of this understanding are significant. As children grow to be experienced writers, they'll need to understand the permanency of authorship when they put their own writing out into the world. They'll need to understand that their names will always be connected to the pieces of writing they author, and that with this comes responsibility.

Reading Multiple Books by the Same Authors and Illustrators

When children see that most writers and illustrators have published a number of books, their concept of authorship deepens. A stack of books all written and illustrated by Denise Fleming or Janet Stevens helps children understand that writing isn't a one-time event; people continue to write over time, accumulating a body of work that's associated with them as authors. They're not likely to understand this if they are always seeing new books by new authors. Then too, reading multiple books by the same authors and illustrators helps children imagine new possibilities for themselves as writers. Molly, whose book you read in Chapter 5, doesn't have to be a one-book wonder with *How Molly Became a Pirate*. She can write lots of different books that make children smile with delight, just as she wrote her pirate book. Understanding this, she might begin asking herself the same question that propels so many other writers forward, “What will I write next?”

So in addition to rereading favorite books often, teachers read multiple books by the same authors. When sharing a new book by an author whose work they've read before, teachers try to have both books with them for the read-aloud. Before

reading, they spend a few minutes talking about the familiar book, and they refer to the new book in ways that indicate the author's ownership: "This is a new *George Shannon book* that you've never seen before." Over time, the stack of books grows as teachers read more and more books by the same authors.

Talking About What Makes a Picture Book, a Picture Book

The talk around read-aloud is essential to help children understand what it means, exactly, to make a picture book. Stapled blank paper and markers alone don't really help children understand what they are supposed to do in response to an invitation to make books, even though most of them will do *something* if they have paper and markers in front of them and doing something is a good place to start. But over time teachers want children to build a clearer sense of what it means to use these materials to make a book. By looking at picture books with an eye toward making them, teachers help children understand some basic things about what a picture book is and does. In conjunction with read-aloud, teachers point out a few, related essentials:

- ☉ A picture book has both words and illustrations in it.
- ☉ The words and illustrations change from page to page in a picture book (while it's still about the same topic).
- ☉ A picture book is about something, and the writer decides what this will be.
- ☉ A picture book has crafted language in it.

The first two may seem quite obvious, but teachers don't take for granted that children understand them as essential to picture book-making. They talk about these qualities of picture books often and look very specifically at them as they share books, especially early in the year when children are just beginning to make their own books.

The third essential—that picture books are about something and that writers decide what this will be—takes much longer to build as an understanding. Early in the year, teachers focus on helping children simply talk about what a book is about, and they help them see that the whole book is about the same topic. Talking about the topics of books during read-aloud helps children better understand how to answer the question, "What is your book about?" when it's asked as they're writing. Over time, this talk also helps children understand that the books they write should stay focused on a single topic.

Related to the talk about the topic of the book is talk about why the writer might have chosen this. Matt actually talked with Ronic and his classmates about this some during the same read-aloud of *Owl Babies* recounted earlier. After sharing the book, Matt read the author's note explaining that Martin Waddell hatched the idea for this book one day when he was at a market. A little boy had become separated from his mom and was wailing over and over, "I want my mommy."—the same line the youngest owl, Bill, wails throughout *Owl Babies*. As Matt and the children talked about it, he explained: "Martin Waddell got an idea for this book from something that happened to him."

Sometimes in a note the author will explain where the idea for a book originated, as Waddell did in *Owl Babies*, but lots of times teachers must simply wonder about this with children. With a book such as *Sail Away* by Donald Crews, for example, teachers might imagine with children that Crews chose to write and illustrate this book because he really likes to watch sailboats as they move through the water. Whatever comes of this talk about why writers might have chosen their topics, the key is for teachers to turn the ideas into possibilities for children and their writing. That talk might sound like this:

You might get an idea for a book from something you like to watch too, just like Donald Crews did. I know some of you like to watch the birds at our bird feeder. Maybe you could watch them closely and write a book about them.

Notice that with this talk, the teacher has made the idea general and about people *writing about things they like to observe* rather than writing about sailboats. The goal of this kind of talk is to help children think about the different kinds of topics people write about, and the likely reasons they choose to write about them. The chart in Figure 7.2 shows a few examples of books teachers have shared with preschoolers, and the lines of thinking they used to help build general understandings about topic selection.

Finally, by reading aloud teachers help children understand what books *sound* like and to hear the impact of crafted language on the ear. Teachers are careful to use their voices to read books well and, as Matt did when he reread a line from *Owl Babies*, they often call attention to particularly well-crafted passages. Even when the language in a book is meant to sound like someone talking, as it is in *No, David!* by David Shannon, the teacher is careful to attend to punctuation, spacing, and font so it's clear the author has crafted it purposefully to sound like talk. Children are much more likely to write and then read their own books using literary language if they've had lots of experience hearing books and talking with someone about what book language sounds like.

Books to Help Children Understand Topic Selection

- *My Big Brother* by Valorie Fisher: Sometimes people write about something or someone they love, like someone in their family.
- *Trucks: Whizz! Zoom! Rumble!* by Patricia Hubble, illustrated by Megan Halsey: Sometimes people write about something they really like.
- *Night at the Fair* by Donald Crews: Sometimes people write about something they did that they want to remember.
- “Let’s Get a Pup!” *Said Kate*, by Bob Graham: Sometimes people write about something that happened to them.
- *Dig, Dig, Digging* by Margaret Mayo, illustrated by Alex Ayliffe: Sometimes people write about something they know a lot about.
- *Roller Coaster* by Marla Frazee: Sometimes people write about something they like to do.
- *Leonardo the Terrible Monster* by Mo Willems: Sometimes people write about how they’re feeling.
- *Don’t Let the Pigeon Drive the Bus* by Mo Willems: sometimes people write to make other people laugh.
- *Walk On! A Guide for All Babies* by Marla Frazee: Sometimes people write to help other people with something.
- *Beach* by Elisha Cooper: Sometimes people write about a place they like a lot.

FIG. 7.2 **Books to Help Children Understand Topic Selection**

Talking About Different Kinds of Books

In very general ways, teachers help young children begin to understand that there are different kinds of books in the world. One distinction teachers make in their talk around read-aloud is the difference between a book that tells a story and a book that just tells about something (Table 7.1). This distinction marks a basic difference in how texts are organized, either to move through events and changes in time, or to move through a list of ideas. Teachers are

TABLE 7.1 **Books with Stories and Books with Lists**

BOOKS THAT ARE STORIES	BOOKS THAT ARE LISTS
<i>Whistling</i> , Elizabeth Partridge	<i>Parade</i> , Donald Crews
<i>Dream Snow</i> , Eric Carle	<i>Our Granny</i> , Margaret Wilde
<i>Peter's Chair</i> , Ezra Jack Keats	<i>Big Sister, Little Sister</i> , LeUyen Pham
<i>Duck on a Bike</i> , David Shannon	<i>I Like Me!</i> Nancy Carlson
<i>A Splendid Friend Indeed</i> , Suzanne Bloom	<i>I Like It When . . .</i> , Mary Murphy

careful not to call every picture book a story book, because lots and lots of them are not stories.

As children grow to be experienced writers, this distinction will become much more nuanced, but a beginning understanding of the difference between a book that tells a story (story) and a book that tells about something (list) will eventually help young writers organize their books more intentionally.

The story or list distinction was actually the direction of the read-aloud talk Matt planned on the morning he shared *Owl Babies*. The other two lines of thinking—about well-crafted language and where Martin Waddell got the idea for the book—were really more just conversational asides, a kind of talk where lots of good teaching gets embedded.

To make the story–list distinction, Matt brought along another book the children knew well, *Being Friends*, written by Karen Beaumont and illustrated by Joy Allen. After sharing *Owl Babies*, Matt talked a little about how it was a story, and he briefly retold the book so the children could hear what he meant by *story*: “The mom left, they waited for the mom to come back, and she came back.” He then explained that *Being Friends* is not a story, it’s just a book that tells a lot of things about two girls who are friends. “Preschoolers,” he said, “can write either story books or books that tell a lot about something.” This language—“tells a lot about something”—is good to use in conjunction with the word *list* because it defines what might be an abstract idea (a *list* book) for very young children.

Teachers understand that the story–list distinction is complex and abstract, and that it will take lots of experience thinking about the distinction with children before they can really begin to understand it. But teachers also know how important the distinction is to understanding the organization of texts, so they take the long view and simply get started moving children in the direction of this thinking. Along the way, getting the story–list language into the talk around books helps because it’s one of the ways teachers want to talk with children about

the books they are making. In time, “Does your book tell a story or does it tell about something?” will become a familiar question for young writers.

Talking About Different Purposes for Books

Genre, meaning “*form, or kind,*” refers to all the many different kinds of writing in the world written for various purposes. Writers and illustrators use the picture-book format to compose in a wide variety of genres, with everything from memoir to mystery found in this familiar kind of book. All the different kinds of writing in the world (genres) can also be classified very generally as fiction or nonfiction, representing two basic stances to writing. Very simply, the writer of fiction takes the stance, “I’m making this up,” and the writer of nonfiction takes the stance, “I’m *not* making this up.”

For the most part, genre distinctions are too subtle and nuanced to be of much help to very young writers, as is the authorial stance that separates fiction from nonfiction. What is helpful, however, is for children to have a sense that there are different purposes behind the different kinds of writing in the world, and that two of the most common purposes are *entertaining* and *informing*. Without a doubt, this distinction is incredibly fluid because readers are often informed by texts that were written for entertainment, and informational texts are often quite entertaining to read. But despite this, understanding entertaining and informing as basic, distinct purposes for writing is a move in the right direction toward more sophisticated understandings about genre.

Because *entertain* and *inform* are not familiar words to most children, teachers talk about books written just for fun (entertain), and books written to teach people things (inform). All the books mentioned in the teaching vignettes in this chapter so far would be talked about as books written just for fun: *Owl Babies*, *Knuffle Bunny*, and *Being Friends*. But during read-aloud, teachers also share books written to teach people things (see Figure 7.3), and they use the talk around these books to help children see how they have common features:

- 🕒 Table of contents
- 🕒 Labeled pictures
- 🕒 Inset boxes of information or illustration
- 🕒 Close-ups of illustrations
- 🕒 Glossaries or word banks
- 🕒 Maps
- 🕒 How-to steps

Examples of Books That Teach People Things

- *An Egg Is Quiet* by Diane Hutts Aston, illustrated by Sylvia Long
- *Biggest, Fastest, Strongest* by Steve Jenkins
- *My Cake* by Sheila Gore, illustrated by Fiona Pragoff
- *Airport* by Byron Barton
- *Roller Coaster Wild Rides* by A. R. Schaefer and Steve Wren
- *Sophie Skates* by Rachel Isadora
- *I Stink!* by Kate and Jim McMullan
- *Chameleon, Chameleon* by Joy Cowley, photographs by Nic Bishop
- *Bread Comes to Life* by George Levenson, photographs by Shmuel Thaler
- *On Earth* by G. Brian Karas
- *Me and My Amazing Body* by Joanne Sweeney, illustrated by Annette Cable
- *If You Were Born a Kitten* by Marion Dane Bauer, illustrated by JoEllen McAllister Stammen

FIG. 7.3 **Books That Teach People Things**

The goal of helping children distinguish between these two basic purposes for writing is to help them become more intentional when they set out to make books. The distinction between entertaining and informing gives them a decision to make that they wouldn't have made if they didn't understand the different purposes for writing. The books you see in Figures 7.4 and 7.5 were written with two different informative intentions. Zach's book about hermit crabs informs readers about his topic, while Larisa's and McKenzie's coauthored book about pizza informs readers in a how-to, procedural fashion.

Interestingly, both these informative books evolved out of children's play and exploration in the classroom after Matt gave the young writers a suggestive invitation that they might make books about what they were doing. Zach had been holding the class hermit crab before writing his book, and Larisa and McKenzie had recently made real pizzas in class and were making play pizzas out of construction paper on the day they coauthored their book. What is significant, however, is that without the talk around books that helped children

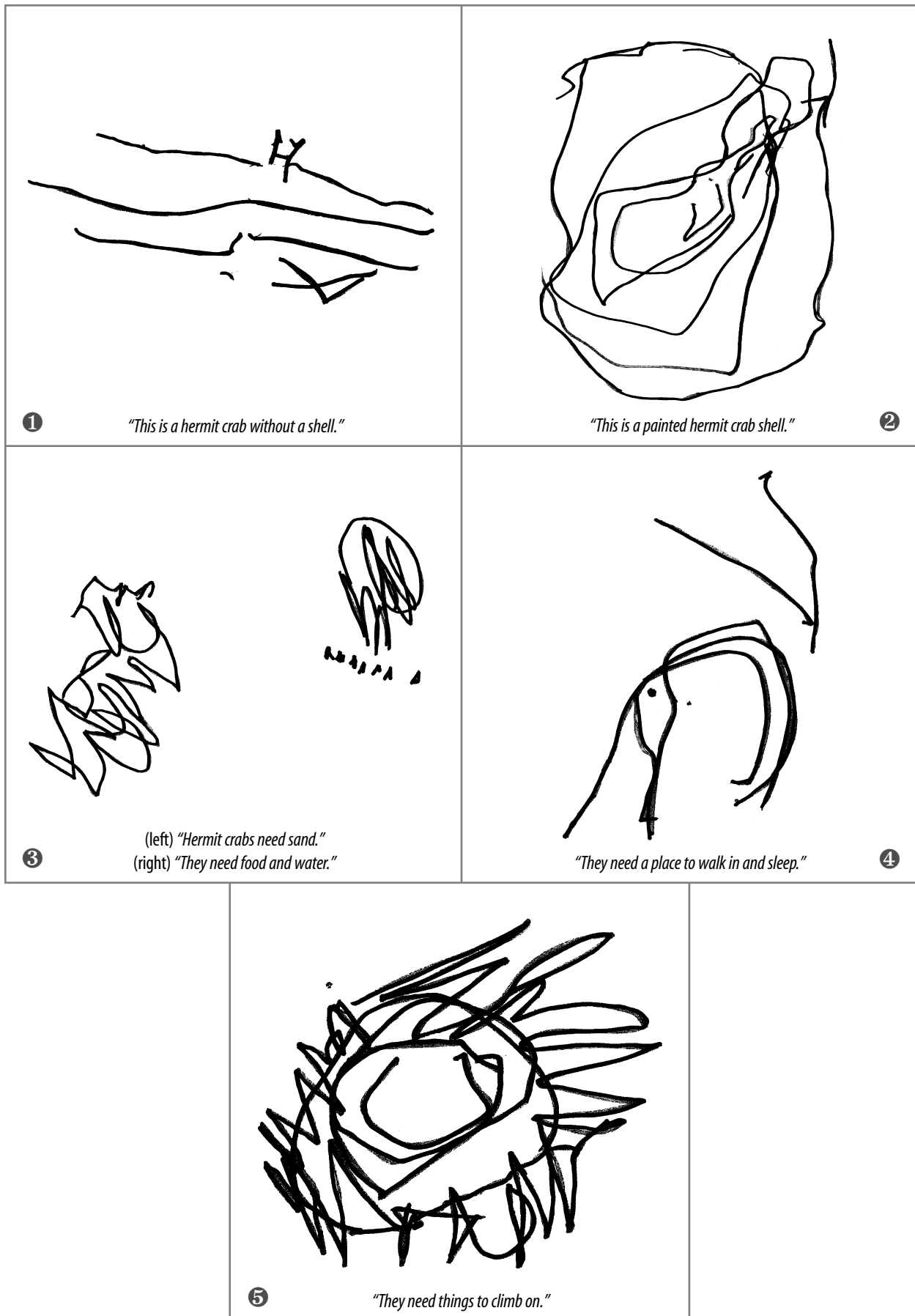


FIG. 7.4 Zach's Book About Hermit Crabs



FIG. 7.5 A Book About Making Pizza by Larisa and McKenzie

understand different purposes for writing, these kinds of books probably would not have been written.

Talking About the Decisions Writers and Illustrators Make

As Matt is reading *Clip-Clop!* by Nicola Smee, a book the children know well and clearly enjoy, he embeds a little talk into his reading on the page where all the animals fall off the horse's back. He says:

Look at what Nicola Smee did on this page. She made this word PLOP really big so I would read it loud, like this, "PLOP!" Isn't that neat how she wrote it that way?

This kind of talk—noticing and naming what writers and illustrators do in their books—is a very common kind of talk that supports young writers in several ways. First, the language of this talk, particularly the verbs of it, help children grow to understand that composing is a continuous process of intentional decision making. Matt says to look at what Nicola Smee *did*—look at how she *made* the word a particular way. The verbs convey a sense of purposefulness, and over time, using verbs like this to describe the decision making of writers and illustrators helps children understand that when they make books, they should be doing things in particular ways and making things with intention.

Second, noticing and naming what writers and illustrators do in their books helps children build a repertoire of possibilities for things they might try in their writing and illustrating—a repertoire of *crafting techniques*. In her book, *Wondrous Words* (1999), Katie defines the craft of writing in this way:

A writer's craft is a particular way of doing something; it's a knowledge a writer has about *how* to do something (25). . . . When you see that a writer has crafted something in a text, you see a particular way of using words that seems deliberate or by design—like something that “didn't just come out that way.” Crafted places in texts are those places where writers do particular things with words that go beyond just choosing the ones they need to get the meaning across. The “special skill or art” to writing is knowing more and more of these “particular things” to do with words. (28)

With this little bit of talk connected to the sharing of a much-loved book, Matt is teaching children something about the craft of writing. Notice that in

this teaching, he not only pointed out that the word is written in large, bold letters, but he also suggested the impact of the decision Nicola Smee made—her crafting makes him read *PLOP* with a loud voice. This is significant because the point of crafting well is to have writing do what it's supposed to do, to have its desired impact. Teachers want to help children notice what writers and illustrators are doing to craft their texts, but they also want to help them understand why they are crafting in particular ways.

Because children are composing with both art and writing, teachers talk about the craft they see in both the illustrations and the words. Anything they notice that might help children make their own books with more intention, teachers might talk about as a book is shared. As an example, let's consider the book *Rattletrap Car*, written by Phyllis Root and illustrated by Jill Barton, each of whom has crafted with clear intention. The book is full of talk possibilities connected to craft, but to help you get a feel for what this kind of talk sounds like, let's consider just two decisions made about the written text and two decisions about the illustrations. In the following list, we write them as they might sound in conversations with children.

Written Text

- ☞ *Listen to how Phyllis Root repeats the word hot on this first page. "Junie was hot. Jakie was hot. Even the baby was hot hot hot." I like how she just says it all those times. I know they must have been really hot!*
- ☞ *Isn't it interesting how Phyllis Root put these words that help us hear what the car must have sounded like? It's like the words are the sounds, not real words, but sounds. Listen, "brum brum, brum brum. Clinkety clankety bing bang pop!"*

Illustrations

- ☞ *Did you notice how Jill Barton put so many animals in her illustrations? On almost every page there are some animals watching the family in their car. Let's see, I see chickens, a pig, birds, sheep, ducks, rabbits. And they're not in the story words at all, these animals. They're just in the pictures. They add so much to look at when we're reading it, don't they?*
- ☞ *Did you notice the look on Poppa's face on this page when the tire goes flat? Look at his eyes and mouth. He looks like, "Oh no!" in that picture doesn't he? I think it's so neat the way Jill Barton showed on his face how he was feeling when his tire went flat. She must have really thought about what he would look like if that happened.*

The key, again, is to talk about what's happening in books as being the result of writers' and illustrators' decisions, and to embed in the talk the impact

these decisions have on readers. Listed next are some common kinds of things teachers draw children's attention to in books because they are the kinds of things they might easily try when making their own books. The list should help you revisit the books you read aloud often to your students and see them with new possibilities in mind.

Written Texts

- 🕒 Print manipulations—bold, italics, and differences in size or shape
- 🕒 Spelling manipulations
- 🕒 Interesting uses of punctuation
- 🕒 Text layout—where the words are in relation to the illustrations
- 🕒 Repetition in a variety of forms (words, phrases, sentences, sentence structures, beginnings and endings)
- 🕒 People or animals talking—dialogue
- 🕒 Sound
- 🕒 Beautiful or interesting language

Illustrations

- 🕒 Perspective—zoomed in or zoomed out
- 🕒 Interesting uses of color
- 🕒 The presence (or absence) of detail
- 🕒 The presence (or absence) of white space in the background
- 🕒 Borders and other graphic features that enhance the illustrations
- 🕒 How the words are matched in the illustrations
- 🕒 How the illustrations show more than the words
- 🕒 Illustration layout—where the illustrations are in relation to the words

Over time, teachers see that this talk leads children to notice more and more of the craft of texts on their own, that it teaches them to read like writers (Ray 1999). After all, if children learn to notice and think about the decisions writers and illustrators have made in their texts, then every act of reading has the potential to help children develop new insights and understandings about how to write well, whether teachers are there to lead this thinking or not.

Managing the Talk That Matters

To summarize, we've explored five different kinds of talk connected to read-aloud that support young writers. Teachers talk about the people who write books; what makes a picture book, a picture book; different kinds of books; different purposes for books; and the decisions writers and illustrators make. That's a lot of talk possibilities, and because every picture book holds so much potential, teachers face two main challenges when it comes to supporting young writers with talk around read-aloud. The first challenge is for teachers to manage their talk with children around books so that it supports without overwhelming them. The second challenge is to help children take the talking and thinking that happens during read-aloud back to their own writing.

Supporting Without Overwhelming

Teachers who use read-aloud as a time to support young children as writers must understand the importance of rereading. There are so many ways to talk about books and so many points to consider during this talk—a single reading would never let teachers harness all the richness. Just the things to talk about as writers and illustrators are extensive, not to mention all the things to talk about as readers. A read-aloud time must match the attention spans of very young children, so teachers use rereading to widen the talk and deepen the thinking around a single book that children enjoy.

In this work with the youngest writers, teachers also understand the impact of small talk over time. They aren't counting on a single comment or explanation to do all the teaching children need to understand a particular line of thinking. Teachers are very comfortable just planting small seeds with talk and moving on. The history of talk over time, and the experience that comes from being engaged in these kinds of conversations, is what helps children build lasting understandings.

Helping Children Take the Talk Back to Their Writing

None of this talk really matters much if it's not helping children develop new understandings about themselves as writers and imagine new possibilities for their book-making. The message of all the talk has to be, "You're writers too!" Children must be helped to see that what they are learning about the work of writers and illustrators applies to them as well. How is this message sent? In several ways.

First, teachers simply say some version of “You’re writers too” often as they talk with children about books. For example, if Matt is showing the children a picture of Nicola Smee and talking about how she made the words and the illustrations in *Clip-Clap!*, he will say, “She’s just like you. You make your words and pictures too.” Or if he is looking with children at how Melanie Hope Greenberg has put words inside lots of signs in the book *Supermarket*, Matt will say, “You could do that in a book too—have signs that say things in them. You could have a stop sign. A McDonald’s sign. A Wal-Mart sign. Any kind of sign you want.”

Second, teachers often bring books children have made with them to the read-aloud time and talk about them in the same way they talk about the read-aloud book. Early in the year as he builds the idea that ordinary people make books by doing everyday, ordinary things, Matt almost always moves the conversation from the book he’s read aloud to a handful of books written by preschoolers. If he’s showing children a book like *Pumpkin Circle* and explaining that George Levenson wrote the book to teach people about pumpkins, he’ll end by showing books written by three- and four-year-olds that teach people about things too. Or if he’s zooming in on a crafting technique—for example, adding talk into a book as Elise Broach does in *Wet Dog!*—Matt will show children how a three- or four-year-old writer has done the same thing in a book. The move from talking about what writers and illustrators have done in their books to talking about what preschoolers do in their books is a familiar one, and over time this move helps children develop new understandings about themselves as writers and imagine new possibilities for their book-making.

Finally, sometimes teachers follow the talking and thinking of read-aloud out into their side-by-side teaching with children who are making books. For example, teachers might encourage children to put their names on books by reminding them of the author names they’ve seen on books, or they might encourage children to have both pictures and words in their books by reminding them that most picture books have both. Any connections teachers can make between what they’re encouraging children to do and what they’ve seen writers and illustrators do helps them imagine this work as possible and also understand why they’re being encouraged to do it—because it’s what writers do!

Connected to this, sometimes teachers refer to read-aloud conversations to help children understand a question they are being asked about their writing. Matt asked Abby once to tell him what her book was about, and she didn’t seem to understand his question very well. Sensing this, Matt reframed the question with a reference to a read-aloud conversation. “Remember how *Owl Babies* was all about the owls and their mommy, and Tessa’s book (another writer in the class) was all about a butterfly and a lady? What’s your book about?” Connecting the question to some familiar talk helped Abby think about it more specifically in the context of her own book-making.

Reading Aloud Across the Year

Over the course of a year, then, teachers use the talk around read-aloud to build so many important understandings about texts, process, and what it means to be a writer. While this talk will certainly be multidimensional in terms of what it helps children understand, teachers will probably want to focus on different big ideas for periods of time during the year, planning these focuses so that they support children as they move forward with their writing. Based on the teaching practices discussed throughout this chapter, here is one possible progression of focus ideas connected to read-aloud that might play out in a preschool classroom.

People make books and you can too.

People make books about many different things (list books).

- ☉ Things they know about
- ☉ People they know
- ☉ Places they know
- ☉ Things they like

People (authors and illustrators) do things purposefully when they make books.

People sometimes make books about things they did or something that happened (personal narrative).

People sometimes write books that teach people about something or how to do something (nonfiction).

In the end, what's important for teachers to remember is that every encounter with a picture book is simply saturated with literacy-learning potential. Creating a well-stocked classroom library, or simply visiting the school or community library often, is perhaps the best investment a teacher can make when it comes to supporting the literate lives of children.



Meet Nicholas

Author and Illustrator of Sea Animals

Nicholas knew a lot about a lot of different things—superheroes, trains, sharks—but those interests didn’t often show up in his writing. In fact, Nicholas could have been described as a reluctant preschool writer. It wasn’t that he wouldn’t make books; making books just wasn’t usually his first choice of the many engaging things to do in his classroom. Gentle invitations or suggestions to make books usually didn’t lead to writing.

Later in the year, Nicholas’ class studied musical instruments, and he and his friends conducted research in many ways. They visited a high school band class to observe and sketch the musicians. People came to their class to play instruments, and they, of course, read many nonfiction books about instruments.

One day Nicholas’ teacher specifically highlighted some of the differences between the nonfiction books they had been reading and the narrative books they had read throughout the year. She then suggested that some of the children might want to make nonfiction books and several shared their ideas for writing topics.

A few started making books about trains, something Nicholas knew about as well. After watching these children busily composing, and with a little nudge from his teacher, Nicholas also wrote a book about trains. He worked on it for about ten minutes; when he was finished, one page showed the wheels, another showed the loud noise trains make, and a third page showed the conductor taking tickets at the station.

Nicholas shared his book with the class and was proud of his accomplishment. As he was getting ready to go outside that morning, Matt asked him what his next book was going to be about. Nicholas instantly replied, “It’s going to be about dolphins and sharks and whales and orcas.” Thus the idea for his book *Sea Animals* was born.

Nicholas started working on this book the next day and worked on it in fifteen-minute spurts for the next several days. He checked out a book from the library so he could look things up, and he used this book to help him think about his own sea animals book. The level of energy and detail evidenced in Nicholas’ book was different from his other writing, including his book about trains. On the last page, notice how he shows the octopus shooting sideways through the water with the tentacles streaming behind.

Sea Animals represents a leap forward in terms of planning, intentionality, and thinking for Nicholas. Perhaps, like lots of other more-experienced writers, Nicholas simply sees himself as more suited to this particular kind of writing—nonfiction—than other kinds. Allowing children to bring their natural interests to writing as they choose their own topics and genres is critical, especially for writers like Nicholas.



1

Sea Animals (writing above, water below)



2

"This is a shark."



3

"This is a different kind of shark."



4

"This is a dolphin."



5

"This is an octopus."



6

"This is anther octopus."



7

"This is a fish."



8

"This is an octopus going fast."

FIG. 7.6 Nicholas' Book, Sea Animals



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