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Picturing Perspectives: An Emergent Literacy Approach

Rose Reissman

As children begin to listen to stories in the context of a classroom and start to read on their own as well, it is crucial that they not only mechanically read or even superficially grasp the plots of their first books, but be actively engaged as critical readers, authors, and creators themselves.

Playing with Perspectives

Several years ago as I was joyously sharing Faith Ringgold's *Tar Beach* with a group of first graders seated on the floor around me, I suddenly thought of the Akira Kurosawa classic film *Rashomon*. In that film the same story is retold over and over again by different narrative characters with each retelling the tale from his/her unique perspective. As I looked at the shining faces of my audience, I asked them who else is in the story besides third grader Cassie Louise Lightfoot the eight-year-old narrator who flies over the city? The children quickly listed Cassie's father and mother, Mr. and Mrs. Honey, and BeBe, the baby brother. Then I asked them if there were any other important characters or objects that played a key role in the story.

The children reflected but did not come up with any other key characters or objects, so I literally went through the picture book page by page with them. As we looked together at the pages, other key characters and objects were

identified; among them were the George Washington Bridge, Grandpa, the Union Building, the Ice Cream Factory, Tar Beach, and the Stars.

When we had completed this list of all the key characters in the story, I asked the children to volunteer to "playact" the various characters. One child volunteered to fly as Cassie, while others portrayed the other people, objects, and landmarks identified. Each of our volunteer *Tar Beach* characters stood up. Then as I reread the story, I asked each child to tell the story as his/her character felt it or was it. Our role players shared their narratives as follows:

- The George Washington Bridge told how Cassie always flies over it. The bridge loved the stars and the night. It was proud to be so big and beautiful.
- Mommy had so much fun playing cards with Mr. and Mrs. Honey and Daddy that she didn't notice where Cassie went. Mommy told how she cried during winter when Daddy couldn't find work.
- Mrs. Honey said she slept late, and she and her husband had ice cream every night.
- BeBe, the baby brother, longed to fly with Cassie.
- The Ice Cream Factory told how children loved the ice cream, and it was on the people's tables every night.

- Tar Beach told how it loved the families who came up at night to play. It also loved the smell of peanuts and frying chicken, but it hated the watermelon seeds on its tar.

As each “character” retold the story from his/her perspective, I asked other children to draw the character using the picture in the book. We used a single white sheet from a large experience chart (a flip-over spiral pad-36"x 24") for the student drawings which were placed at the top of the sheet. Underneath each picture I wrote the story of Tar Beach. There were more than ten! Finally, we talked about how each story represented another character's perspective of the basic *Tar Beach* storyline.

When we did our next shared story reading of *Tar Beach*, the students listened for and volunteered to roleplay different characters as the storyteller retold the story. Student artists drew the characters. I recorded their story retellings. At the end of the story hour, we had another galaxy of smaller individual character retellings of the *Tar Beach* plot. Although they had never seen Kurosawa's *Rashomon*, my young readers were modeling his cinematic multi-perspective storytelling style.

Picture Perspectives and Critical Reading

Not only does the Picture Perspectives approach of refocusing, roleplaying, and retelling literally connect oral, pictorial imagery and the written word, but it also promotes critical, reflective, and empathetic reading. For instance, in Mavis Juke's *I'll See You In My Dreams*, told through the single perspective of a young girl saying good-bye to her uncle who is dying, the technique allows the children to focus on the dying uncle, his adult sister, the hospital nurse, Aunt Hannah, and other characters who are at the actual hospital setting. This enables the student reader to begin to understand different perspectives on this tragic but inevitable bereavement in a child's life.

The lessons of friendship beyond, or in spite of, economic, social, and housing backgrounds, highlighted in Rene Escudie's *Paul and Sebastian*,

were enriched and concretized through refocusing and roleplaying Sebastian's mother and Paul's mother's reactions to the boys' friendships. Retelling the story through their mothers' initially antagonistic perspectives first set the students up to applaud Paul and Sebastian's stories of shared fears, adventures, and friendship. Indeed, Paul's and Sebastian's roleplays were greeted with applause, while the mothers' roleplays of initial mutual dislike were booed.

Katherine Orr's authored and illustrated *My Grandpa and the Sea* detailing how a grandfather who is a traditional fisherman in St. Lucia loses his livelihood because technology has depleted his island's supply of fish, generated many different but logical roleplays and retellings. As the young readers “roleplayed and retold” the pictured relationship between Grandpa and his granddaughter Lila, they did not exactly match the particulars of Grandpa's dilemma over the poverty of fish in the sea, but did include Grandpa's sadness, his closeness with his granddaughter, the beached boat *Fancy Lady*, and sea crop garden.

Books like Irene Smalls-Hector's *Jonathan and His Mommy* with vibrant illustrations created by Michael Hays lend themselves to young children getting up and roleplaying the mother and son in the pictures. As they do so, they race, take giant steps and little steps, do ballet movements, and dance to reggae music. After the roleplay, the child roleplayers and class can easily record and retell Irene Small-Hector's story.

When young children become more expert and practiced in the Picturing Perspective's approach, they can be given copies of a work designed to challenge its readers to create stories like David Macauley's *Black and White*. This work contains a number of stories or perhaps only one story which may or may not occur at the same time. The stories definitely include a boy, a train, and cows. Since David Macauley is definitely inviting and engaging his readers in story authoring with “no definite single story” plotline in mind, the work is perfect for welcoming students into the circle of authors and illustrators through refocusing, roleplaying, and retelling.

Over two decades ago when I began teaching, my first principal warned me against relying too heavily on expensive tools or manipulatives to motivate my classes. He said the materials best suited to engage the children in active lifelong literacy should be readily available, and strategies should be easily shared so that young children could not only "do them" in class, but also demonstrate them at home. As I have watched young children use the Picturing Perspective's strategy to refocus, roleplay, and retell, I understand what he meant. The capacity to support young children's initiation into lifelong literacy lies within the illustrations and text of any evocative picture book.

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About the Author

Rose Reissman is president of the New York City Association of Teachers of English and a frequent conference presenter.