Pairing picture books and creative arts to build literacy and community

It’s the first week of school, and a huddle of nervous 3-, 4-, and 5-year-olds in an urban Head Start classroom eagerly look on as Ms. Moore begins to share Jez Alborough’s book, *Hug*.

Several pages in, Ms. Moore, exclaims, “Oh, no! Look at Bobo’s face. How do you think he is feeling?”

“Sad,” ventures Travis.

“Scared,” exclaims Lashae.

“He misses his mommy,” pipes in Ivory.

Alejandra glances over to the door where Tio is standing, tears rolling down his face. Ms. Carter, the assistant teacher, stands beside him, gently rubbing his back.

Alejandra says quietly, “I think Tio misses his mommy too.” Tio looks at Alejandra.

Ms. Moore replies, “I think you might be right, Alejandra. Maybe he knows just how Bobo feels.” Tio nods.

Ms. Moore continues, “Maybe we can help Tio today. When he feels ready, he can come join us.”

Alejandra responds, “Maybe Tio wants to hold Bobo?”

Ms. Moore hands her the stuffed animal that looks like the *Hug* book character, and as Alejandra gives it to Tio, he takes a few tentative steps toward the group.

Ms. Moore smiles and continues with the story about how Bobo’s forest friends help him find his mommy. By the end of the story, Tio is standing by the storytime carpet and his new classmates welcome him to sit down.

These children are taking first steps at building their classroom community, all with the help of a meaningful and just right picture book.

Building a foundation for literacy with children’s picture books

This experience with my Head Start preschoolers (whose names have been changed) was the first of many meaningful encounters we had around beautifully crafted picture books. According to
Schickedanz and Collins (2013), careful selection of age-appropriate books, combined with thoughtfully planned story sharing and multiple readings, can help children develop literacy understandings around conventions of print, phonological awareness (www.readingrockets.org/helping/target/phonological), comprehension, and vocabulary.

Further, we build classroom community and a shared interest in making meaning with words and print when we use books that connect with children’s own experiences and interests. In my Head Start classroom, we shared books with themes the students were experiencing, like missing a family member, wanting a pet, or celebrating Fiesta (a San Antonio tradition). We also found stories that made us laugh, songs that made us dance, and information texts (Duke 2003) that made us curious to know more. We soon started writing down topics of interest and quickly discovered we needed more books.

If you want to build your own collection of children’s literature, you might begin by looking for used books at garage sales, discount bookshops, and your local Friends of the Library book sales. Further, consider checking out books from your local library. This will enable you to fill your classroom with books from many genres (Matulka 2008), including:

- storybooks (fairy tales, traditional tales, funny stories, and multicultural stories, for example),
- rhymes/poetry (such as Mother Goose, animal rhymes, and folk rhymes),
- nonfiction books on classroom themes (animals, families, transportation, and community helpers, for example),
- science and math concept books (clouds, weather, magnets, color, and numbers)
- information texts—that is, nonfiction materials such as handouts and charts without a story line or characters that enable readers to find information quickly (Steve Jenkins’ Eye to Eye, Gail Gibbons’ Dinosaur Discoveries, and Byron Barton’s Boats, for example)
- song books (Jose Luis Orozco, Ruth Crawford Seeger, Ella Jenkins, and others),
- favorite authors (such as Eric Carle, Lois Ehlert, Kevin Henkes, Yuyi Morales, and Ashley Bryan), and
- series books (such as Mo Willems’ Elephant and Piggy books).

Building a collection of excellent books can take some searching, but there are book lists and online resources to help you get started. The Texas Library Association shares the 2x2 Reading List each year—a collection of 20 books, carefully selected by librarians and teachers for children ages 2 through second grade.

The American Library Association gives several awards for children’s picture books, including the following:
- the Caldecott Medal for distinguished U.S. picture books,
- the Pura Belpré Medal for outstanding Latino/Latina authors/illustrators celebrating Latino culture,
- the Coretta Scott King Medal for outstanding African American authors/illustrators
celebrating African American culture and universal human values, and
- the Sibert Medal for distinguished informational books.

In addition, lists of notable books are published each year by the Children’s Literature Assembly, American Library Association, and The New York Times. (See the reference list at the end of this article for links to these lists.)

Pairing books and creative arts

Gathering a collection of quality books is a first step toward developing children’s literacy and building community. But even with only a handful of quality books, teachers can deepen children’s understandings of themselves and their world, especially when the books are paired with creative arts activities such as drama, play, art, and music.

One strategy is to use books as a springboard for dramatic play and dramatic response. Dramatic responses children can try include mime, choral response, tableaux (that is, motionless children recreate a scene from a story), and story re-enactment. (See Roser, Martinez and Carrell Moore 2015). You can also add story-related props to the dramatic play area and the block area, and even have book-related props available to children outside (Rowe 2007).

In addition, consider connecting books with related songs and music, and providing story-related art materials for further exploration (Martinez, Cheney, and Teale 1991). Tucking some puppets and stuffed animals into the classroom library provides children opportunities to practice emergent reading with furry friends.

Books and creative arts activities

Several specific examples of pairing books and activities are described below, by age group.

**Infants and toddlers**

**Book:** Look, Look! by Peter Linenthal. This book has simple black-and-white images that capture babies’ attention. The sparse text adds just enough language to support babies’ curiosity.

**Music:** Pair this book with songs that echo the content of the book, such as “You Are My Sunshine,” “Twinkle, Twinkle Little Star,” and the song/rhyme “Soft Kitty Warm Kitty.”

**Text connections:** Pair with a similarly designed book, such as Black on White by Tana Hoban.

**Book:** Pretty Brown Face by Andrea Davis Pinkney and Brian Pinkney. In this story, a dad helps his little boy get ready for the day. The final page contains a little mirror in which readers can see themselves.

**Dramatic play:** Attach a mirror to the wall at just the height for babies to see their reflections during tummy time or as they crawl. Mirror play offers children opportunities to engage in dramatic play with their reflections. In “Mirrors: Playing with reflections,” Louise Parks offers several mirror activities in an earlier issue of Texas Child Care Quarterly. (See Volume 39, No. 2).

**Music:** Include hand and toe rhymes/tickles that connect with some of the content in the book.
Possibilities include “Clap, Clap, Clap Your Hands” and “This Little Piggy.”

**Preschool**

**Book:** *Little Night* by Yuyi Morales. In this book, Mother Sky helps Little Night take a bath, fix her hair, and prepare for what she does while the rest of us sleep. This book is also in Spanish, titled *Nochecita.*

**Outdoor time:** Allow children to explore with different sized wands and tools for making bubbles.

**Sensory table:** Add a tiny bit of water, washcloths, a little bit of bar soap (or an empty soap bottle), towels, and water-friendly baby dolls that would allow children to bathe the babies. You might include paint smocks to protect clothes.

**Music area:** Provide CDs of favorite lullabies and songs of the moon and stars. You might even ask family members to record family lullabies, songs, or rhymes on a tablet or MP3 player so the children can hear voices of their family and friends’ families.

**Book:** *Max Found Two Sticks* by Brian Pinkney. This book tells the story of a little boy who finds two sticks and explores the sounds they make all around his neighborhood.

**Music instruments:** Provide different sized boxes, cardboard, cans, jingle bells, string, shells, beans, and other found objects to allow children to construct their own handmade musical instruments.

**Rhythm sticks:** Tap the rhythm with favorite CD music that has a simple beat. Teach children to rest the ends of the sticks on their shoulders before the music starts playing and again when the music stops. Explore the different sounds made when you tap the sticks on different objects—hand drums, carpet, cans, and fabric.

**Book:** *Owl Babies* by Martin Waddell and Patrick Benson. Three baby owls huddle together in the night, missing their mother. To their great relief, she returns and comforts them.

**Book area:** Provide stuffed owls and other birds in the book area and encourage children to read this story (and others) to their owl and bird friends. In addition, add library books about owls, other local birds, and even other nocturnal animals.

**Choral response:** This book has a familiar refrain that repeats on many pages, as baby owl Bill exclaims, “I want my mommy!” When you get to that portion of the story each time, ask the children to help you voice Bill’s part. This often elicits repeated readings.

**Art area:** Provide materials children can use to create nests. You might offer little twigs, string, yarn, shredded paper, or even play dough. (You could also make the dough together as part of a cooking activity). Include a couple of laminated photos of different kinds of nests and invite children to explore how they might construct a nest.

**Kindergarten and first grade**

**Book:** *Weeds Find a Way* by Cindy Jensen-Elliott and Carolyn Fisher. This information book tells about weeds and how they persist all around us. It includes information about some of the features they have that help them survive.

**Outdoor time:** Go on a nature
walk and have children observe and take photos (with digital tablets or digital cameras) of local weeds in your area. In the classroom, have a few carefully selected samples and hand lenses (magnifying glass or even handheld USB digital microscopes) to examine the specimens more closely. Provide paper and colored pencils so children can draw their own representations of the plants in individual or a class science journal.

Gardening: Connect with local horticulturalists or garden center experts to learn more about weeds and wildflowers local to your area. Work on individual or group projects to learn more about native plants and grasses and the animals and insects that depend upon them. The Wildflower Center www.wildflower.org/plants/ and the Poison Control Center http://webpoisoncontrol.org/?gclid=CM7tysr6oswCFZeEaQoddxgN1A can help you determine whether the local weeds and wildflowers are safe for children.

Text sets: Group several versions of a familiar tale and examine the similarities, differences, and points of view from the different versions. Matulka (2008) offers many suggestions for ways to begin analyzing children’s picture books and use them as a springboard for reading and writing. Read through several versions and pick the ones that are the right fit for your group of students. One possibility is Little Red Riding Hood.
- Red Riding Hood retold by James Marshall
- Little Red Riding Hood by Trina Schart Hyman
- Little Red Riding Hood by Jerry Pinkney
- Little Red Cowboy Hat by Susan Lowell
- Little Red Riding Hood: A New Fangled Prairie Tale by Lisa Campbell Ernst
- Lon Po Po: A Red Riding Hood Story from China by Ed Wood

Picture books in your classroom
Teachers can find many beautifully illustrated picture books on themes of interest to children, such as pumpkins, soccer, and parades, for example. Using imagination and common materials, teachers can pair the books with creative activities in drama, music, art and other areas in the classroom, expanding literacy and building community.

References


Online book list sources

American Library Association
Pura Belpré Medal: www.ala.org/alsc/awardsgrants/bookmedia/belpremedal.
Caldecott Medal: www.ala.org/alsc/awardsgrants/bookmedia/caldecottmedal/caldecottmedal.
Children's Literature Assembly Notable Books: www.childrensliteratureassembly.org/notables.html.

Sibert Medal: www.ala.org/alsc/awardsgrants/bookmedia/sibertmedal.
Texas 2x2 Booklist: www.txla.org/groups/2x2-current.

About the author

Holly Carrell Moore, Ph.D., is an assistant professor of early child development and education at Texas Woman’s University in Denton. She spent 16 years teaching in public and private early childhood and elementary schools, serving in a variety of roles, including music teacher, pre-kindergarten librarian, and early childhood teacher.