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CHARACTER INTERPRETATION IN PICTUREBOOKS

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Abstract

This qualitative research study explored second graders' use of visual information to understand characters in picturebooks. Students participated in whole class read-alouds of three picturebooks. Immediately following each read-aloud, students were individually interviewed and invited to talk about the visual text in pre-selected illustrations. Findings revealed that the children used pictorial information, including character actions, body posture, and facial expressions, to support their inferences about characters. They also attended to color and line in justifying their insights. However, the children did not tend to some critical pictorial information in interpreting character including pictorial symbols, the position and size of characters in illustrations, and the pictorial device of breaking the frame.



Second Graders' Interpretation of Character in Picturebook Illustrations

Characters in picturebooks often are the most memorable element of stories. Curious George, Frog and Toad, and Peter Rabbit are likely to be remembered long past the primary years and after most book titles have been forgotten. Students often relate to characters by empathizing with them as a way of understanding their actions, intentions, and problems. These character understandings may, in turn, lead children to thematic understandings and even to the development of children's social imagination (Lehr, 1991; Lysaker & Tonge, 2013). While the literary elements of character, setting, plot, and theme can all serve as dynamic tools that enable readers to construct and interpret literary meanings (Lukens & Cline, 1995), character may be a particularly important element in helping children "step into" and "move through" story worlds (Langer, 2011). The importance of character understanding to literary meaning-making has been recognized by many scholars. For example, Martinez and Roser (2005) note that "[c]haracters...are a conduit through which readers enter, move through, and are affected by narratives" (p. 7). Emery (1996) asserts that character states such as feelings, beliefs, and desires are "the glue that ties the story together" (p. 534). Children's understanding of characters may be central to critical interpretation and literary meaning-making.

We know that young children's early literacy experiences tend to be in the context of picturebooks, and in this format stories are told through both visual and verbal texts. While written texts in picturebooks supply important information about characters, the illustrations often provide rich clues. In fact, Hassett and Curwood (2009) maintain that written words are no longer central in many of today's picturebooks, and that illustrations require more attention because they supply information critical to the development of the story.

In recent years, authors and illustrators have more consistently utilized the unique affordances of illustrations with seemingly unrestricted options as more and more picturebooks reveal the complex relationships between written text and the visual text. Consequently, children are compelled to simultaneously employ the use of these two semiotic sign systems in order to discover literature and art expressed in more creative ways.

Given the importance of visual information in today's picturebooks, young children must attend closely to the illustrations and understand the ways that illustrators develop characters. The purpose of this study was to provide an

in-depth description of the kinds of visual information in picturebooks that children utilize in interpreting characters.

Theoretical Framework and Review of Related Literature

In exploring children's use of visual information to understand characters, we employed an interdisciplinary research stance, drawing on both response theory and semiotic theory. Rosenblatt (1978) views reading as a transaction in which readers act upon a text and in turn are guided by the signs and symbols present in the text. When the text is a picturebook, semiotic theory converges with response theory to provide a basis for understanding children's literary meaning-making. Semiotic theory maintains that any sign, verbal or visual, signifies something other than the actual written or visual element itself (Barthes, 1977; de Saussure, 1974; Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006). The reader is never passive but is constantly reflecting on and responding to the signs or symbols present in the verbal and visual text. This transactional process requires readers "...to bring their own answers [and] resolutions to the works, and join forces with the authors/illustrators in creating the scenario, the story, and the interpretations" (Nikolajeva & Scott, 2006, p. 259). Yet for readers to fully respond to the visual signs and symbols in a text requires an understanding of the semiotic codes employed by illustrators. Like Sipe (2008), we believe that a "...semiotic perspective provides a foundation for viewing children's literary understanding of picturebooks" (p. X).

The Nature of Picturebooks

While scholars offer various definitions of the picturebook, at the core of each definition is the recognition that the verbal and visual text work together to tell the story (Nodelman, 1988; Schwarcz & Schwarcz, 1991). The interplay of verbal and visual texts can vary from picturebook to picturebook (and even within a picturebook). For example, illustrations and text sometimes tell parallel stories; while in other instances they may present contradictory information (Agosto, 1999; Nikolajeva & Scott, 2006). The basic nature of the picturebook requires that readers process both sign systems interdependently.

There is not complete agreement among scholars regarding the contributions of visual information to character development in picturebooks. Nikolajeva and Scott (2006) believe that illustrations largely lend themselves to developing external facets of character while words more effectively develop

internal facets. Nonetheless, these scholars note that illustrations can reveal inner character through “poses, gestures, and facial expressions [that] can disclose emotions and attitudes” (p. 82). Moebius (1986) and Nodelman (1988) discuss semiotic codes that have the potential to convey information about character; in particular they note that color and the position of characters on the page are codes that convey important character information. In their investigation of picturebooks for younger and older readers, Martinez and Harmon (2012) found that pictures and text work together in conveying key facets of the inner character including personality traits, motivation, interests, and emotion. They also identified ways in which character information was revealed visually including through pictorial content (e.g., facial expressions, character actions) and through the use of pictorial tools (e.g., color, line, breaking the frame).

Valuing the Visual Text

The importance of the visual sign system cannot be ignored. In fact, Arnheim (1986) argues, “the visual image always dominates the cognitive aspect of experience” (p. 306). In a similar fashion, Sipe (2008) maintained that “visual perception is the sensory equivalent of understanding on the cognitive level” (p.18). Furthermore, Sipe suggested “if the perception of the visual image is not automatic, but learned and formed by experience, [then] ...literary understanding of picturebooks includes learning the conventions and principles of visual art” (p. 19). Working from a semiotic perspective, Moebius (1986) identified clusters of codes that convey meaning in picturebooks: codes of position, perspective, frame, line, and color. An understanding of these codes enables readers of picturebooks to more fully make sense of the visual text.

The Role of Character in Literary Understanding

As we argued earlier, character understanding can play a central role in literary meaning making, and research provides insights into children’s understanding of this literary element. In an interview study of children in first through eighth grades, Martinez, Keehn, Roser, Harmon, and O’Neal (2002) found that younger children attended more to external facets of character while older ones were more attentive to the inner character. Yet in rich instructional contexts, young children also focus on inner facets of characters. For example, Wollman-Bonilla and Werchadlo (1995) found that nearly a quarter of their first grade participants’ journal responses focused on understanding “characters’ thoughts or feelings, either stated or implied in the text” (p. 564). Likewise, in her study of young children’s dramatic responses to literature, Adomat (2012) found

that first graders focused extensively on inner facets of character including character feelings, traits, and motivations.

In his investigations of young children's responses to picturebooks, Sipe (2008) found that kindergarten, first, and second grade students engaged in extensive analysis of the picturebooks read aloud to them, including analysis of the characters they encountered. The children described, evaluated, and made inferences about character actions, focusing on both external and internal facets of character. They also talked about external facets such as appearance, location, and identity of characters and posed questions about characters' relationships with one another. Internal facets of character that the children talked about included feelings, thoughts, and personalities.

Of particular relevance to this investigation is children's use of visual information to understand characters. Sipe (2008) described some of the types of visual information that children in his study used to better understand this literary element. In particular, his participants attended to details of facial expression to fill in gaps in the written text, and they also attended to illustrators' uses of color to convey information about character emotions.

Existing research does reveal that young children utilize visual information to understand characters in picturebooks (Sipe, 2008). However, there have been no systematic analyses of the types of visual information that children draw on to understand this literary element.

As a result, this study explored students' attention to visual information to better understand character. The guiding question of this investigation was: What facets of pictorial information do children use to understand characters in picturebooks?

Method

This study was a qualitative research study conducted in a second grade classroom. The students had story-time as a regular part of their daily schedule.

Participants

The school was located in a rural public school in South Texas. The participants included twelve children, four boys and eight girls. Eight of the children were White and four were Hispanic as per parental self-reported school documents. Six were on free or reduced lunch.

Materials

Three picturebooks were used in the study—*When Sophie Gets Angry—Really, Really Angry* (Bang, 1999), *Leonardo the Terrible Monster* (Willems, 2005), and *Lilly’s Purple Plastic Purse* (Henkes, 1996). Each book was judged to be character-rich with characterization conveyed through the visual text (as well as the verbal text). Summaries of each book are included in Table 1. The classroom teacher reported that she had not read the three books to her students. For each of the picturebooks, we selected three illustrations to use during the interviews. The illustrations were chosen to ensure that character information would be conveyed in a variety of ways in the illustrations used as interview prompts. The various techniques used in the nine illustrations are described in Table 2.

Table 1

Summaries of Picturebooks

Book	Summary
<i>When Sophie Gets Angry—Really, Really Angry</i> by Molly Bang	Sophie is very, very angry. Her sister has snatched her toy gorilla away; their mother has taken her sister’s side, and Sophie has tripped over a toy truck. Feeling like a volcano about to explode, she runs out of the house. Seeing the rocks, trees, and ferns, hearing a bird, and climbing an old beech tree calm her down. Feeling the breeze on her hair and watching the water and the waves help comfort her. Sophie feels better now and goes home where her family welcomes her.
<i>Lilly’s Purple Plastic Purse</i> by Kevin Henkes	Lilly gets in trouble with her beloved teacher, Mr. Slinger, for showing the treasures she has brought to school in her brand new purple plastic purse. When Mr. Slinger takes her purse away, she draws an unkind drawing of her teacher and sneaks it into his book bag. At the end of the day when Mr. Slinger returns the purse, Lilly finds a kind note from Mr. Slinger inside. She feels terrible about her actions. The next day, she finds a way to apologize, and Lilly has a better day.
<i>Leonardo the Terrible Monster</i> by Mo Willems	Leonardo is terrible at being a monster. So one day, he decides to find the perfect victim to scare. After an extensive search, he finds Sam. Leonardo sneaks up on Sam and tries everything to terrify him. When Sam begins to cry, Leonardo is delighted by his success—until Sam reveals the real reasons for his tears. At this point Leonardo makes a big decision—to be a wonderful friend rather than a terrible monster.

Table 2

Descriptions of Illustrations Used as Interview Prompts

Book	Description of Opening	Character Element(s)	Illustrator Device Used
<i>Leonardo the Terrible Monster</i>	Opening 1: A double page spread with Leonardo sitting dejectedly in the lower right corner. The written texts reads "Leonardo was a terrible monster..."	Character feelings	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Facial expression • Positioning of character
<i>Leonardo the Terrible Monster</i>	Opening 12: (right hand page): Leonardo is smugly strutting away from the boy (opposite page). Leonardo does an "arm tuck" and says, "Yes, I did it! ..."	Character feelings	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Character actions • Facial expression
<i>Leonardo the Terrible Monster</i>	Opening 16: The double page spread is a close-up of Leonardo's face. The written text says "Then Leonardo made a very big decision." The word "big" is in red.	Change in character's thoughts	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Size of character • Facial expression
<i>When Sophie Gets Angry-Really, Really Angry</i>	Opening 8: Sophie, outlined by red and looking angry, assumes a fighting stance. A volcano is erupting and spewing the word "EXPLODE". "...And when Sophie gets angry-really, really angry..."	Character feelings	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Color • Line • Body posture • Facial expression • Symbol
<i>When Sophie Gets Angry-Really, Really Angry</i>	Opening 13: Sophie, outlined in orange, is sitting on a huge, white tree trunk and looking towards the water. "She feels the breeze blow her hair. She watches the water and the waves."	Change in character's feelings	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Color • Body posture • Setting
<i>When Sophie Gets Angry-Really, Really Angry</i>	Opening 17: A smiling Sophie, outlined in yellow, is at the door with her hands outstretched to her family. "... Everyone is glad she's home."	Change in character's feelings	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Color • Relationships
<i>Lilly's Purple Plastic Purse</i>	Opening 8: A series of panels illustrate Lilly's feelings and thoughts towards her teacher- from dejection to anger to elation over thinking of a good idea. A light bulb symbolizes Lilly's good idea.	Character feelings and thoughts	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Facial expression • Character actions • Use of line • Use of a symbol
<i>Lilly's Purple Plastic Purse</i>	Opening 10: Lilly feels 'small' as she reads the note from her teacher. There are "broken" musical notes. A series of frames appear at the bottom of the page depicting Lilly becoming increasing smaller.	Change in character's feelings	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Facial expression • Line • Symbol • Change in size
<i>Lilly's Purple Plastic Purse</i>	Opening 16: Lilly is smiling, running, skipping, and leaping out of the page. "Lilly ...flew all the way home, she was so happy..."	Change in character's feelings and thoughts	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Facial expression • Character actions • Breaking the frame

Procedures

The classroom teacher read aloud the three picturebooks to the whole class, reading one book a week over three weeks. She was not given any instructions for the read-alouds except to follow her usual procedures when reading a book to her class. Each read-aloud was audio-taped in order to document any attention to character development that might occur during the read-alouds. An inspection of the transcripts from the read-alouds confirmed that the teacher did not focus any discussion on character during or after the read-aloud. In addition, field notes were taken during the whole class read-alouds by two of the researchers.

Immediately following each read-aloud, student participants were called out of the classroom individually for interviews that were conducted in the school library. One researcher conducted the interview while the second one took field notes. Students were shown each of the three pre-selected illustrations from the target picturebook and asked the following open-ended questions for each illustration, “What is happening?” and “How do you know?” Interview questions did not focus on character. Students were told that there were no wrong answers and were invited to say whatever they wanted about each picture. Each interview was audio-recorded and later transcribed.

Data Analysis

Observational field notes and written transcripts from the audio recordings of the whole class read-alouds were analyzed to determine if attention was focused on character during the read-alouds.

Written transcripts of the student interviews were examined. Student responses were coded in two ways—the *focus* of the response and the *pictorial justification* for the responses. Using constant comparison (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Strauss & Corbin, 1990), initial categories for focus were developed through multiple readings of the transcripts. Two major foci of responses emerged through this process—*characterization* and *character change*. Sub-categories of *characterization* and *character change* that emerged were *character feelings* and *character thoughts* (see Figure 1). Examples of student responses in each sub-category appear in Table 3.

Figure 1

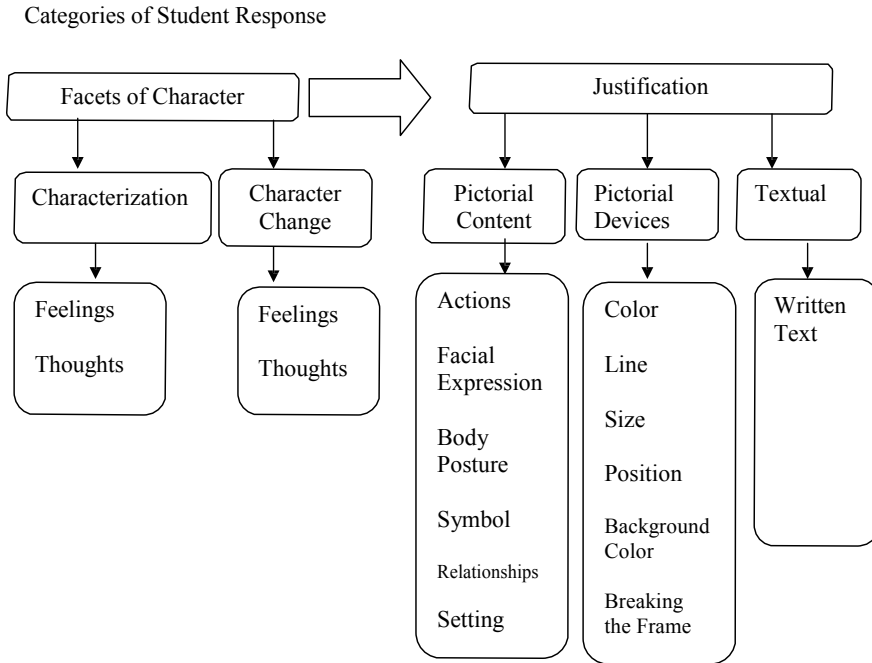


Table 3

Facets of Character: Characterization and Character Change

Characterization	Example
Feelings	“Sophie is sad.”
Thoughts	“Leonardo is happy because he thinks he scared someone!”
Character Change	Example
Feelings	“Sophie is getting angry in this picture ... because there is a volcano...and an explosion here.”
Thoughts	“She has an idea in this one...because she has a light bulb right here [next to her face].”

In addition, to classifying student responses according to focus, responses were also categorized based on the pictorial justification(s) students provided for their observations about characters. Two types of pictorial information were identified that students used in justifying their character interpretations—pictorial content and pictorial devices. We identified the sub-categories of pictorial content and pictorial devices based upon our own analyses of the illustrations used as interview prompts in order to ensure that all the different ways in which the illustrators conveyed character information were represented in our category system. Sub-categories of pictorial content included character actions, facial expression, body posture, setting, relationships, and symbol. Pictorial devices included color, line, size of character, position of character, breaking the frame, and background color (see Figure 1).

Using this category system, interview transcripts were coded independently by each of the researchers. We then came together to discuss and reconcile differences to ensure consistency in coding. It is important to note that while students shared some (few) responses not focused on character, only character-focused responses were analyzed. In addition, in a very few instances, students justified their character observations with references to text; however, these textual justifications were not further analyzed given the focus of this investigation.

Findings

Rather than combining the children's responses across books, we present our findings on a book-by-book basis because the devices used to convey character information visually in the three books differed, sometimes in significant ways.

Leonardo the Terrible Monster

In responding to the three illustrations from the book, *Leonardo the Terrible Monster*, the children primarily talked about what Leonardo was like; 86% of the total responses focused characterization. Of these, the large majority (approximately 73%) focused on Leonardo's feelings. Students talked far less about character change in this story; only 14% of the total responses focused on character change, even though this facet of character was central to the information conveyed in opening 16 of the book (one of the openings used as an interview prompt).

The children were less likely to support their observations about Leonardo's feelings by referring to the illustrator's use of pictorial devices. Those who did so were most likely to refer to the illustrator's use of line in conveying the character's expression. For example, in talking about Leonardo's expression in the first illustration, one child observed, "His eyes are pointing down ... and his mouth is just like straight." While our own analysis of the illustrations identified the code of positionality as being particularly important in conveying character feelings in the illustrations in *Leonardo the Terrible Monster*, none of the children mentioned Leonardo's placement on the page when talking about the illustrations.

While the children talked more about characterization than character change, some did talk about changes in Leonardo's thoughts and feelings. In justifying their observations about character change, they most often referred to Leonardo's facial expressions as seen in the following interview segment:

Shane: He's trying to figure out a hard decision.

Interviewer: Leonardo is trying to make a hard decision right? And how do you know that?

Shane: Because the way his eyes are. Interviewer: And what do his eyes tell you?

Shane: He's having a little trouble with something. Interviewer: Right and what tells you? What are the clues?

Shane: His eyes look a little bit sad and, like he's gonna have to do something really big or he's scared.

Interviewer: So why do you think it's really big? Shane: So you can see his expressions.

For the third illustration, we identified two elements used by the illustrator that conveyed a change in Leonardo's thinking—his facial expression and the marked change in the size of the character's face through the use of the cinematic technique of zooming in. While a number of the children talked about the significance of the character's expression, only one child justified her thinking about character change through a reference to this zooming technique:

Mary: He was making a decision... a big decision.

Interviewer: And what gives you a clue that it's a big decision?

Mary: Because of how they drew his face, everything is big.

When the children were asked to justify their observations about character feelings, they most frequently talked about Sophie's facial expressions and the illustrator's use of color. For example, in reference to the first illustration, one child explained that he knew Sophie was angry because "she['s] pointing her eyes toward her nose and her mouth is angry and her hair is flopping up and down." The children also appeared to be attuned to the ways in which the illustrator used color to convey character feelings in *When Sophie Gets Angry... Really, Really Angry*:

Ciera: ... she's mad and covered in red.

Interviewer: What does red mean?

Ciera: It means that you're super mad.

In opening eight the symbol of a volcano conveys important information about character feelings. The text describes Sophie as "a volcano ready to explore," and the accompanying illustration includes the depiction of the volcano with the word "explode" serving as lava erupting from the volcano. A number of children talked about the significance of this symbol. For example, Caren noted, "She's getting really, really angry in this picture...because there's a volcano over here and there's an explosion."

In our own analysis of *When Sophie Gets Angry... Really, Really Angry*, we identified two additional types of pictorial content that were important in revealing character feelings - depictions of relationships between characters, and the use of setting. Yet the children only infrequently referred to these elements as they justified their insights into the character. In opening 13, setting serves as way of showing that Sophie is beginning to calm down, and one child did note this when she observed, "She's looking at the ocean and trying to relax... She's up in a tree and that's where most people relax sometimes." Also, in talking about opening 17, one child referred to character relationships: "Everyone's happy that she's home... Her mom has a smile, her dad has a smile, and she has a smile. She's happy that she's home too." However, few other children made note of this pictorial information in talking about the character.

Lilly's Purple Plastic Purse

In talking about the three illustrations from *Lilly's Purple Plastic Purse*, 28% of the children's comments focused on character feelings, 68% talked about changes in character feelings, and 4% focused on changes in character thoughts.

When invited to talk about opening ten, many of the students talked about the significance of the series of frames showing Lilly getting smaller and smaller.

Mike: She's getting smaller

Interviewer: Do you think that Lily's really getting smaller? What do you think is happening?

Mike: She's thinking about what happened.

Interviewer: And so what does this mean when the picture shows her getting smaller?

Mike: It means that when you're being mean to somebody it means that you're going as low as them.

Openings eight and ten both contain symbols, and many of the students talked about these. For example, one child talked about the light bulb that appears in opening eight:

Chloe: She has an idea.

Interviewer: How do you know she got an idea?

Chloe: There is a light bulb right here.

Even though three students pointed out the broken musical notes in the second illustration, only one talked about their symbolism:

Quin: The music notes are broken.

Interviewer: So if the music notes are broken what does that tell you

Quin: That she feels bad.

In opening 16, Henkes depicts Lilly joyously leaping out of the frame that encloses the illustration. Only two students talked about this pictorial device:

James: ... she's hopping out of the picture.

Interviewer: She is; look at that! And what does that tell you?

James: That she's really happy.

Discussion

As with all research investigations, there are limitations to this study. There were only twelve participants in the study, and a limited number of illustrations were used as interview prompts. Nonetheless, we believe that the findings provide important insights into the kinds of pictorial information that young children utilize—and do not utilize—in understanding the characters they meet in picturebooks. In particular, the second grade students' interview responses showed that they were attuned to characters' feelings and thoughts, as well as changes in their feelings and thoughts. In explaining their insights into characters, the children appeared to be particularly attentive to three types of pictorial content—character actions, facial expressions, and body posture. The pictorial devices they mentioned most often in explaining insights into characters were color and line.

In the nine illustrations used as interview prompts in this investigation, there were other types of pictorial content and pictorial devices that conveyed important information about characters. These included character relationships, setting, symbols, size, positionality, background color, and breaking the frame. Relatively few responses (and sometimes none at all) focused on these pictorial elements, suggesting that children may not be as familiar with the use of these elements in depicting characters.

Implications

Characters in picturebooks are developed in a variety of ways. Textual information is, of course, important. This textual information includes what the character says, thinks, and does, what other characters say about the character, and what the narrator says about a character. However, in a picturebook, illustrations also play an important part (and sometimes the most important part) in the development of characters through the use of pictorial content and pictorial devices. Elements such as facial expressions, body language, actions and symbols, as well as art elements like color and line and devices such as positionality and breaking the frame are all part of the visual text and may contribute in important ways to the development of character. In fact, sometimes visual information may be the most critical information for students to use when making inferences about character traits, feelings, thoughts, and motives.

This study holds important implications for the use of picturebooks in classrooms. First, teachers must recognize the important ways in which visual text

contributes to the development of characters, and in preparing to share literature with children, teachers must carefully attend to illustrations themselves. The findings of the study suggest that young children are adept at utilizing many of facets of visual information in making inferences about characters, but teachers must give children the time to linger over illustrations in order to mine them for important clues to characters. However, we found that there are some facets of the visual text to which many children are not attuned as they explore characterization and character change in picturebooks, facets such as symbols, positionality, size, and breaking the frame. So it is important that teachers guide children in exploring these important but sometimes subtle devices that often provide important insights into characters.

Too often adults tend to be text bound—even when reading picturebooks. Yet close inspections of picturebooks reveal the rich and varied ways in which the visual text contributes to the development of characters (as well as other aspects of stories). We believe that it is critically important that teachers invite children to delve into illustrations to understand characters and help them extend their understanding of the more subtle devices that illustrators use in developing characters.



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