

CHAPTER 19

Teaching Writing with Mentor Texts in Kindergarten

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The kindergarten class opens *The Relatives Came* and locates the last page. Ms. Nunnery reads, “And when they were finally home in Virginia, they crawled into their silent, soft beds and dreamed about the next summer.” Evelyn’s hand quickly shoots up as she exclaims, “Booyah! Cynthia Rylant used ‘finally’ to show the story was ending.”

Evelyn’s enthusiastic reaction is a sign that she feels she is working through and understanding text shoulder-to-shoulder with her teacher and with the author, Cynthia Rylant. She is celebrating Ms. Rylant’s ending as a fellow author.

Since her students are fairly adept at noticing words and phrases used at the ending of several books, Ms. Nunnery takes the opportunity to extend the learning to this same passage. “Yes, Cynthia Rylant showed us that the story was ending by using the word ‘finally,’ but what other words does she use on this page to paint a picture of this final scene?” Children generate “crawled into their silent, soft beds” and “next summer.”

Ms. Nunnery decides to use the idea of “next summer” to model the use of certain words and phrases to signal the end of a story. As a literacy coach, she has been helping the class write their own books during the past few months; now she revises the final page of her book about a summer trip to say, “And when I was finally home in Nashville, I laid my head on my pillow and dreamed of my next trip to New York.” While still on the rug, the kindergartners select one of their own books from personal folders and work to revise its ending.

In this opening vignette, the children were deeply engaged with a book that exemplified a particular writing move—ending a story. As such, it served as a mentor text for the class. Mentor texts are pieces of literature that offer inspiration and guidance for children to try out new strategies, genres, and craft

moves in their own writing. They are models of great writing in any form or genre, including both narrative and informational styles, and can influence children’s writing from kindergarten through grade 8 (Graham, Harris, & Santangelo 2015). In this chapter, we explore what is known about using mentor texts in the early childhood classroom and provide suggestions for how to effectively choose and use them in kindergarten instruction. Finally, we present examples from two kindergarten classrooms to illustrate mentor texts and children’s writing development in action.

Learning from Master Writers

Providing children with good models of written text consistently demonstrates positive effects on their writing quality (Graham, Harris, & Santangelo 2015). Collecting and sharing strong mentor texts is akin to “gathering a multitude of teachers into your classroom” (Heard 2013, 4) as children encounter and reencounter the writing moves made by professional authors, then ask themselves how those moves might serve their own writing (Culham 2014): “How does Mo Willems use dialogue and speech bubbles to make his characters come to life?” “Can I write about my relatives, just like Cynthia Rylant?” Good mentor texts inspire children to try out new writing techniques (descriptive language), writing conventions (dialogue), text genres (narrative), and writing craft moves (print manipulation) as they establish their own identities and skills as writers (Cleaveland 2016). The masters share the tools that apprentice writers then use to construct their own works.

Author Study: Framing Mentor Text Instruction and Materials

One of the first steps in guiding children toward authorship is to conduct author studies. Graves and Murray have both emphasized the importance of teaching children to write as “real writers” do (Graves 1983; Murray 1985, 1989). An author study sets the stage to look deeply into the life and work of an author with the intention of learning from them. Writers have thoughts, ideas, and passions for writing about topics they love or know a lot about. The author study shows the real people, their writing craft, and the themes within their books, creating a relatable concept of authorship (Snyders 2014). Through this, children can see themselves as authors and “take on” the writing moves of the authors they study.



All learners learn best when concepts, language, and skills are related to things they know and care about, and when the new learnings are themselves interconnected in meaningful, coherent ways.

Take the following steps to conduct an author study:

- › Consider a diverse group of authors.
- › Choose an author with multiple texts and, ideally, a digital presence.
- › Gather a set of books written by the author and read them to yourself, paying particular attention to how they can generate reflective, follow-up questions.
- › Study the author’s digital presence with the class (including the author’s biography and photos).

For example, emerging writers can study popular children’s book author Mo Willems. Willems’s website (www.pigeonpresents.com) shares a host of information about his work, including his writing and illustration processes. There, children can learn about each character Willems has created and generate ideas for creatively responding to his texts through art and writing. The website provides photos, biographical information, and a list of Willems’s books. Anyone can email him with questions and comments. Beginning with a study of Willems will help young children understand the concept of authorship as they grasp

the idea that a real person wrote the stories they love to read in class or at home. This concept of authorship lays a foundation of thinking that they too can be authors. Then, after studying Willems’s life with the class, you can begin the work of studying his writing with them.

Selecting Powerful Mentor Texts

After examining an author’s background and work, introduce the specific books you want to use as mentor texts. The most effective mentor texts offer teachers and developing writers ideas for writing about diverse characters, settings, and topics while sparking their creativity. As Kissel (2017, 92) writes, “Strong writers are well-read readers. Strong writing teachers are well-read readers of children’s literature.” Teachers should constantly be on the lookout for texts with interesting craft moves, such as the use of sensory images, figurative language, and examples of strong voice that engage readers with uniqueness and ingenuity. Children’s book award lists are a good place to begin looking for high-quality texts, including the Pura Belpré Award, Coretta Scott King Book Awards, Charlotte Huck Award, and the Schneider Family Book Award. Look for books in which all children can “see themselves, their families, and their communities reflected” and also “learn about peoples, places, arts, sciences, and so on that they would otherwise not encounter” (NAEYC 2020a, 25).

Mentor text selection should also be driven by a teacher’s intended learning outcomes. For example, if you want children to use more action verbs in their writing, look for books with dynamic dialogue and descriptions, pointing out those features during read-alouds and writing activities. It is critical to consider the children’s interests, prior knowledge, and needs, building on “ideas and experiences that have meaning in the children’s lives and are likely to interest them” (NAEYC 2020a, 27). Choose books with diverse authorship and in the children’s home languages where possible.

A potential drawback to mentor texts is the time-consuming nature of selecting and using them. It can be tempting to grab a book and use it in superficial ways, encouraging children to simply imitate an author’s craft without understanding *why* the author used it (Laminack 2017). By contrast, the processes of studying a body of work from an author and returning

to their books again and again enhance the connection between the master and the apprentice, creating a true writing mentorship. Choosing, reading, and analyzing the craft of a mentor text for a lesson could take anywhere from 30 minutes to an hour and a half. (See “Considerations for Selecting Powerful Mentor Texts” on the following page.)

Mentor Texts in the Classroom

Instruction with mentor texts should follow a gradual release of responsibility instructional framework (Duke & Pearson 2002; Pearson & Gallagher 1983; Vygotsky 1978). Here, the teacher moves from explicit instruction (“I do”) to guided instruction that can include intentional interaction among peers (“We do”) to independent student work (“You do”). However, before being employed as an instructional tool, teachers should introduce mentor texts through read-alouds so that children can first listen to, enjoy, and understand the book as a whole (Laminack 2017). During subsequent readings, the children can begin the process of “reading like a writer”—noticing powerful craft, naming it, seeing it modeled by their teacher, and trying it out in their own writing. (Visit NAEYC.org/dap-focus-kindergarten to view steps that guide this process in “Read Like a Writer; Write Like a Writer.”) Helping children read like a writer activates the power of reading-writing reciprocity during literacy instruction and activities. When students can return to the text and view it through a writer’s lens, they can fully immerse themselves in both meaning *and* craft. They can then use this deeper understanding and capability in their own writing.

The gradual release of responsibility instructional framework assumes sufficient time and support exist to shift the cognitive work of writing from teacher to children. (A chart on how to gradually release responsibility during an author study, accessible at NAEYC.org/dap-focus-kindergarten, displays how this process can be divided across multiple days.) Teachers should pay careful attention to children’s current knowledge and skills and the amount of time necessary for each component. In general, teacher-directed mini-lessons should last no more than 15 minutes in a kindergarten classroom. Intentionally allow time and space for approximately 20 minutes of independent or small group writing time after the mini-lesson.

A Study of Mentor Texts in Two Classrooms

For this chapter, we showcase two kindergarten classrooms where the teachers used quality picture books as mentor texts to help young writers envision the authors they might become. In my work with Acorn Elementary School (pseudonym) before becoming a professor, I (Katie Schrod, first author) was guiding my kindergarten class through a study of narrative writing. At another school but working along with me, Ms. Wenz’s class was focused on narrative as well as how-to writing. Each time we used a mentor text, Ms. Wenz and I documented it on an author gallery wall. The cover of each book was copied and, in the style of Vasquez (2004), anchored on the wall to keep an audit trail of the characters and ideas learned from each book. The kindergartners could reference this trail while writing, considering which skills the authors used that they might adopt as their own. When children applied a taught strategy in their writing, Ms. Wenz and I encouraged them to put their work on the wall for their classmates to see. Not only were they sharing, but they were also celebrating the new skills in their writing.

The impact of the mentor texts in these kindergarten classrooms stretched to all facets of the writing process—from finding writing ideas and identifying surface-level features (fonts and thought bubbles) to examining and using more substantive writing skills (theme and voice). Following are examples learned from mentor texts, along with reproductions of some of the children’s writing.

Finding Writing Ideas

Writing is a difficult process, especially when facing the blank page (Schrod et al. 2019). The picture book *The Relatives Came* sparked writing ideas for one reluctant writer, Cory. Typically hesitant when starting a new story, Cory knew exactly what he was going to write about after hearing Rylant’s joyful story of relatives gathering together. With powerful simplicity, he independently wrote, “I have my cousins at my house,” then drew each one of them. Later, while seated in the class author’s chair, he elaborated on his illustration, pointing to each cousin represented and sharing their names and the games they played during their visit.

Considerations for Selecting Powerful Mentor Texts

Katie Wood Ray and Matt Glover (2008) titled their popular writing book *Already Ready*. This sentiment should drive the decision making of teachers as they decide whether their students are ready to take on writing. They are “already ready!” Remember that talking, drawing, and labeling are all developmentally appropriate for young writers. For mentor text resources, check out *The Ultimate Read-Aloud Resource: Making Every Moment Intentional and Instructional With Best Friend Books*, by Lester Laminack (2019), and *Mentor Texts: Teaching Writing Through Children’s Literature, K–6*, by Lynne Dorfman and Rose Cappelli (2017).

	Reflective Thinking	Potential Book Choices
Consider the reader	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Based on what I know about them, will the children in my class enjoy this book? ■ Do I enjoy reading this text as a teacher? ■ Does this book represent the cultures, interests, and experiences of the children in my classroom? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ <i>Jabari Jumps</i>, by Gaia Cornwall (small moment ideas, descriptive writing) ■ <i>Don’t Let the Pigeon Drive the Bus!</i>, by Mo Willems (persuasive writing, movement, dialogue)
Consider the book	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ What genre are children writing in right now? ■ Does this book show a range and variety of features within a particular genre of writing? ■ Can this book be used for multiple purposes; can we return to it again and again? ■ Can I find other texts by this author? ■ Have I selected a range of diverse authors and characters? ■ Does the author have a strong digital footprint? ■ Do I have access to this text? (Digital resources such as the library app Libby can help teachers and students access books for free). If not, do I have a connection to someone who does? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ <i>Dreamers</i>, by Yuyi Morales (illustrations, font changes, translanguaging) ■ <i>Each Kindness</i>, by Jacqueline Woodson, illus. by E.B. Lewis (descriptive language, narrative writing) ■ <i>Owen</i>, by Kevin Henkes (repeating lines, dialogue) ■ <i>My Papi Has a Motorcycle</i>, by Isabel Quintero, illus. by Zeke Peña (vivid language, translanguaging, speech bubbles, narrative) ■ <i>Saturday</i>, by Oge Mora (sequencing, onomatopoeia, small moments)
Consider the overarching author or topic of study and the skills of focus	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ What skills or aspect of writing do I want children working on as writers? Writing ideas? Voice? Leads? Dialogue? Structure? ■ Does this book represent good examples of those writing skills? ■ How does this connect to skills and knowledge already acquired by children? ■ How might this set the stage for future learning? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ <i>The Relatives Came</i>, by Cynthia Rylant, illus. by Stephen Gammell (ideas) ■ <i>Chester</i>, by Mélanie Watt (voice) ■ <i>Bigmama’s</i>, by Donald Crews (leads) ■ <i>Pluto Gets the Call</i>, by Adam Rex, illus. by Laurie Keller (dialogue, speech bubbles) ■ <i>If You Give a Mouse a Cookie</i>, by Laura Numeroff, illus. by Felicia Bond (structure)



Surface-Level Features

Surface-level features include changes in font (typeface, weight, and color) and dialogue that is embedded in illustrations rather than within the narrative text. Examples of each follow:

- › **Font:** The book *Scaredy Squirrel* (by Mélanie Watt) contains many details within the words and layouts on each page. Watt uses font changes as a writing craft to emphasize the range of emotions Scaredy Squirrel is feeling and to encourage reading in an excited voice. For example, when Scaredy Squirrel warns the reader of the dangers of the unknown, Watt writes the word *warning* in all caps, bolded, and with exclamation points. My class read, noticed, and named the writing craft of Watt. Prior to leaving the rug for writing time, I said, “Today and every day you can write bold letters like Mélanie Watt in your writing.”
- › **Speech and thought bubbles:** The picture book *Ralph Tells a Story* (by Abby Hanlon) uses speech and thought bubbles throughout the text as the character Ralph struggles to find his voice as a writer. “Abby Hanlon uses speech bubbles to help bring her characters to life by making them talk,” I told the children. “When you are drawing your picture today, you might want to make your characters talk with speech bubbles.”

Theme

After Ms. Wenz read *The Lorax* (by Dr. Seuss), Corbin was inspired by the book’s environmental theme to write a book titled “How to Keep Trees Alive.” Corbin was clearly inspired by Seuss’s whimsical book, using bright colors for his trees in a way similar to Seuss’s Truffula trees.

Voice

Mo Willems was the focus of an in-depth author study in my (Katie’s) kindergarten class. The students read many of the books in the *Elephant and Piggie* series and in the *Pigeon* book series. Willems is famous for his use of speech bubbles and dialogue: Elephant and Piggie banter back and forth, and the books’ illustrations convey their movement and conversation. Willems also creates memorable and lovable book characters that show up continuously across his series.

After studying Willems and his writing craft moves, 5-year-old Drake was inspired to combine the ideas from Willems’s books into one piece of writing. He illustrated it in the style of Willems, carefully making Pigeon’s wing move to his “new hat,” and he used Willem’s signature dialogue banter in his writing. As Drake was writing, he rehearsed his lines orally as he wrote them down. I commented, “I hear you going back and forth with your characters, making them talk!”

Celebrating Children as Authors Now

Many young writers believe that “one day” they will be able to write, citing “first grade” or “when I am 8 years old,” rather than believing they are writers right now (Schrodt et al. 2019). Writing shoulder-to-shoulder with a mentor can bolster children’s confidence, empowering them to take writing risks, try out new writing moves, and eventually integrate those moves into their own writer’s voice and texts.

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