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Wordless books: No-risk tools for inclusive middle- grade classrooms

Here is some useful information for teachers who work with students who are either behind in their literacy development or whose primary language is other than standard English.

Although the genre of wordless books is over 50 years old, some of the most beautiful and intricate books have been published in the last 10 years. All are just recently beginning to achieve the recognition they are due. The 1992 Caldecott Medal winner, *Tuesday* by David Wiesner, is evidence of this.

Wiesner commented in an interview (Caroff & Moje, 1992) that he has received numerous letters from students in drama classes, English as a Second Language classes, and creative writing classes who have used his wordless picture book, *Tuesday*. Wiesner identifies one of the most valuable characteristics of wordless books—the endless possibilities for creative interpretations. (For *Tuesday* and all wordless books cited, see Sidebar.)

Educators have recognized the value of wordless books for many years (Larrick, 1976). Virtually every objective in the language arts curriculum at every grade level can be developed and enhanced through the use of wordless books. But too often we think wordless books are only for preschool and kindergarten. In fact their greatest asset seems to be that they ensure successful reading experiences because there are no “right” words.

Wordless books enhance creativity, vocabulary, and language development for readers of all ages, at all stages of cognitive development, and in all content areas. Along with teacher guidance, wordless books can especially benefit linguistically or culturally different readers and struggling readers and writers, as well as the more experienced ones in the middle or junior high school years. Those are crucial years in the development of lifelong readers.

Struggling and reluctant readers

To struggle, or to not easily meet with success, makes anyone reluctant to do something. Struggling and reluctant readers come in all ages and all stages. They usually are caught in the downward spiral of

failure that produces dislike and mistrust. This leads to an avoidance of practice that leads to a lack of development, to further failure, and so on. In order to end this downward spiral and turn it upwards toward success, which leads to pleasure, trust, and further practice, at least one truly successful activity needs to occur. Introducing a wordless book to struggling readers is sometimes a shock to their understanding of what reading is. When these students come to realize that they can “read” a book, even though it has no words of its own, they begin to realize what reading is—and that they can do it!

One such student was Robert, a nonreading 12-year-old, whose mother did not read or write. Robert was shown a wordless book and, after looking at it for a few minutes, was asked his opinion of the story. He sat expressionless until his teacher modeled how she would read the first few pages. Suddenly Robert spoke up, disagreed with the teacher’s interpretation, and provided excellent reasons for his own. Encouraging him to finish reading the story was then a very natural act.

Robert was next asked to read the story into a tape recorder at the publishing table (as suggested by Lindauer, 1988). His story was then typed on the word processor by a volunteer teacher’s aide as Robert watched. Robert enjoyed cutting the sentences into strips and pasting them on photocopies of each page of the story. After adding some color to the photocopied pages, he put a cover on his book and bound the pages with a plastic spiral.

Robert proudly read his book to his mother and any classmate or relative who would listen. In fact, he read it so many times to so many different people that he easily developed automaticity with the over-200-word vocabulary of his story and easily transferred this knowledge to other books during the school year. But most important, Robert now saw himself as a reader and an author. His remarkable success is not an isolated incident.

McGee and Tompkins (1983) described a successful program using wordless books to emphasize prediction strategies and assist readers with word and phrase recognition. Wordless books chosen for this program had structured stories (ones with intricate illustrations to emphasize the story) that

would encourage students to create longer, detailed, and more organized stories. Although McGee and Tompkins described a group of younger students, the creativity stimulated by wordless books encourages older students to look more closely at story details, to carefully consider all story elements, and to more clearly understand how text is organized so that a story develops. The plots of wordless books can be mapped, the characters examined and compared, and the settings analyzed for their significance to the plot or action.

The use of wordless books can encourage reluctant and struggling readers in middle school and junior high to read, develop vocabulary, and make the connection between written and spoken language. Older readers seem to respond to wordless books because they are so visually appealing and because they often involve cleverly developed plots. But best of all, these books seem to counter struggling readers’ tendency to focus on the words to a degree that interferes with their being able to make sense of the story and predict outcomes.

Linguistically and culturally different readers

Wordless books are equally valuable for ESL readers or struggling readers of any age simply because lack of print lends them to any language. The learner can “read” the book in his or her native tongue as a foundation for creativity.

Wordless books seem to act as story frames (Fowler, 1982) for assisting linguistically and culturally different readers to process concepts and for guiding them through the structure of the plot. In addition, the pictures provide students with something to speak, read, and write about. As one teacher has described it, “The pictures stimulate the students to tell the stories in their own words” (Gitelman, 1990, p. 525). In five lessons, Gitelman’s class discussed a book, wrote their version of the story, read their own text, illustrated it, and recorded their story on audiotape. Gitelman concluded that wordless books “stimulate oral communication and foster literacy” (p. 525).

Creating their own book not only provides diverse language learners with the language skills they desperately need, but also gives them a sense of ac-

Wordless books cited

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accomplishment that is so essential to continuing successful literacy development.

One snowy morning not long ago, in an inner-city, multiracial sixth-grade classroom, the teacher shared *The Snowman* by Raymond Briggs. She introduced the story as one man's memory of a time it snowed when he was a little boy. She used an opaque projector to show students the beautiful, dream-like pictures and began by describing what she saw in each frame. After only a couple of pages, she asked if anyone would like to read the next page. Students eagerly volunteered to read each page of the remainder of the book.

The teacher then asked students to work with a friend to write the story as they saw it, and she distributed five paperback copies of the book to be shared. Students worked on their stories for two more class periods, and they kept her busy asking for advice about what to call something they saw in the pictures or what she thought the characters

were doing in a particular frame, to settle a dispute between partners. The teacher witnessed students working together, developing their vocabulary and writing skills, and enjoying the story.

Later in the week, students edited and shared their stories. They were surprised to see how the others' stories differed—some students included dialogue, some saw the story as a dream, others as a real event—and all took pride in their products, even though some were not entirely complete. As a culminating experience, the teacher showed the video of *The Snowman* (also wordless—see Sidebar) and displayed the students' stories in a notebook on the reading table. Later a companion story, *The Self-Made Snowman* by Fernando Krahn, was made available for students who wanted to prolong this successful experience.

Using partners or the buddy system (Swan, 1992) during in-class reading time is a recommended procedure, especially if there are culturally or linguistically different students in the group. Even in bilingual programs, both languages can be developed with the use of wordless books. Pairs of students can discuss and alternately write the story for each page. The teacher should then assist each pair in editing their story. Finally each pair should be encouraged to share their story with the class, in either or both languages, using their sentences taped to photocopied pages, or they might record their text on audiotape for their classmates to hear as they look through the book.

This activity builds social relationships, cooperative learning skills, and expands students' literacy experiences. An excellent follow-up to such a lesson might include allowing students to respond creatively to the book in whatever way they wish—in writing, art, or music. At the conclusion of this process, students will have been exposed to both spoken and written standard English in a nonthreatening way that's also fun (Flatley & Rutland, 1986).

Cross-age tutoring

Wordless books can also be fun and helpful in cross-age tutoring programs. Ellis and Preston (1984) described a cross-age tutoring program in which fifth graders worked with first graders using wordless

books. In a similar program at a local junior high school, eighth graders were paired with first and second graders to provide one-to-one literacy experiences. In years past, the older student had created “Big Books” and helped the younger students to write the text and illustrate their books. This past year, the eighth graders selected wordless books to share with their young partners. The purpose was to encourage the younger readers to create their own stories using complete sentences and to develop their understanding of sequence and content.

This program produced positive academic results for everyone involved. Regardless of the skill or developmental level of the older student, every first and second grader benefited from the individual attention, demonstrating increased competence and confidence; but just as important, the eighth graders developed a greater understanding of the literacy strategies they were teaching and proved themselves to be very dedicated and responsible.

Wordless books used in this way, involving younger children, should have simple story lines, such as *Meow* by Bernie Karlin, *The Mystery of the Giant Footprints* by Krahn, or Tomie DePaola’s *Pancakes for Breakfast*. These simple but beautiful little stories, and others like them, will ensure success for everyone.

Theme units and content areas

Theme units have been found to be most successful with younger readers when wordless books were included in the book choices. But in middle and upper grades, the advantages of wordless books have been virtually overlooked. However, sharing and discussing a wordless book might enhance or even introduce a unit.

A seventh-grade social studies teacher, for example, recently introduced a unit on the Middle Ages by sharing John S. Goodall’s *The Story of a Castle*. The vivid half-page illustrations beautifully display the evolution of lifestyles as well as living quarters, the impact of religion, the ingenuity and hard work of the people, and social relationships during this fascinating period in Europe. Students were instantly hooked into the flavor and fascination of the unit. A companion book by Goodall, *Creepy Castle*, a whimsical look at the daily workings of a castle, also

became a part of this unit, along with many other books at varying levels of reading difficulty. Other books by Goodall, such as *An Edwardian Christmas* and *An Edwardian Summer*, lend themselves equally well to other historical units.

Similarly, a unit on prehistoric times might involve the use of *Time Flies* by Eric Romann, the picture story of a fly who ventures from (or through) a museum of history into the real thing. A unit on comparing fairy tales should include Brinton Turkle’s *Deep in the Forest*, a new twist to the “Three Bears” story, as well as Goodall’s *Little Red Riding Hood*, a vivid rendition of the original tale in the artist’s famous half-page style. Wordless books can beautifully enhance many theme units.

Recently, an eighth-grade English/reading class was introduced to a thematic unit on “The Hows and Whys of Humor,” which the teacher had developed to entice her most reluctant readers and writers. Almost desperate to help her students recognize the significance of plot, characters, and setting, the teacher brought to class a box of wordless books, carefully selected for their clever plots, interesting characters, and recognizable settings, and all depicting humorous situations, events, or characters. She passed them out randomly and simply asked students to look through them to see if they would like to read and study them during their next unit on humor. After a time, the teacher asked her students to trade books until they had each seen two or three different ones.

At first several students voiced complaints: How are we supposed to read them? These stupid books don’t have any words! But soon everyone was chuckling and telling one another which one was “the best!” The teacher then asked if anyone would like to tell the class about his or her favorite book. One girl, Jessica, whose voice had not been heard in class before, stood and read (or retold) Turkle’s *Deep in the Forest* about a little bear who wanders into a house in the woods, eats the soup on the table, tries out the chairs, and so on. Jessica easily and simply compared it to the Goldilocks tale as she showed and explained each page. Everyone was so impressed with her performance that spontaneous applause followed her reading.

The discussion of whether or not this story was "humorous," what humor was, and how authors create humor (through plot, characters, and setting) was more animated than any discussion this class had ever had; everyone seemed to have something to contribute. All agreed that these books were worthy of study and should definitely be a part of their unit on humor.

The teacher's role

When introducing wordless books, the teacher must often model how the pictures tell a story. The teacher takes on the role of coach and collaborator, observing, listening, sometimes interacting with students, and sometimes prompting them with an appropriate question when needed. It is important that the teacher allow the wordless book experience to be nonthreatening. This means allowing students to speak in their natural language without correcting them, and not suggesting what to see or to look for in the stories. Lindauer (1988) wrote:

it is important to allow the child's language to remain intact. It may be tempting to correct such things as grammar and sentence structure as the child invents her story, but resist! Children learn oral language in safe and supportive situations, not when they fear failure or are inhibited by continual corrections....The use of wordless books should be a nonthreatening experience designed by accepting teachers to be successful for all children. (p. 140)

Most of us would agree with Lindauer that we, too, learn "in safe and supportive situations."

Several titles and authors of wordless books have been mentioned here. But the number of wordless books available is surprisingly large and varied. A wonderful resource is a reference book by Richey and Puckett (1992). *Wordless/Almost Wordless Picture Books* has well over 500 subject headings for locating a wordless book to complement your topic or theme (each title has a brief description of plot and characters). Its contents should give the reader a sense of the magnitude and variety of wordless books available for use in theme units, in whole-class or small groups, or even by pairs or individuals; there are enough titles to go around! This reference book or a librarian can assist you in making informed choices about wordless book titles that might be included in your regular program.

Valuable tools

Although the use of wordless books is not new, we must continually revisit, revive, and revise successful practices, especially those that seem to lend themselves well to current classroom situations. Wordless books can provide the stimulus for creative writing and for successful reading. Wordless books have helped struggling readers of all ages and linguistically and culturally different readers. Simply because of their visual appeal and lack of words, these little books ensure successful interaction with text—reading and writing experiences—for middle-grade students. They have been shown to be valuable for developing reading, writing, and oral language with virtually all students who have the proper guidance and encouragement. These attributes make wordless books ideal tools for literacy development in the multileveled, multicultural, multitalented middle-grade classroom.

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