Title: Wordless Picture Books May Aid Reading Comprehension

Fact: What happens inside the brain when children “read” a wordless picture book? Without text to guide them, children must use their own creativity to interpret and make sense of the pictures they are viewing (Crawford & Hade 2001). Ironically, when children undergo this sense-making process, they use some of the same reading strategies needed for deciphering print-based texts: reliance on prior knowledge and experiences, attention to intertextual cues, reliance upon story language and rituals, multiple perspective-taking, and demonstration of active/playful behavior. In the Crawford and Hade study, which examined three children (ages 4, 5, and 8), subjects were asked to choose and look through a wordless picture book, then to describe the story they were “reading,” and share their impressions.

In a related study, Paris and van Kraayenoord (1998) examined the strategies that children use to gain understanding of wordless picture books and concluded that making sense of the pictures may enhance reading comprehension and meaning-making skills needed later. Flatley and Rutland (1986) also suggest that wordless picture books can enhance reading and motivational skills in children with language problems.

Cognitive scientists know that making sense out of what we see is essential to the reading process and that meaning making involves various parts of the brain. For example, when meaning is gleaned during reading, brain-imaging scans show greater activity in the left frontal lobe (the thinking, planning region of the brain), in the temporal lobe (sensory and language area), and in the parietal lobe (reading, writing, and language).

Research by Rose (1991) suggests that viewing and interpreting pictures and artwork, especially of an abstract nature, forces the brain to mentally dissect and reassemble the picture to give it meaning and a sense of wholeness. This process activates additional cerebral regions such as the occipital lobe, which controls vision and spatial/geometric recognition. Stimulation of these brain areas is known to enhance perception and learning.

Action Steps:

- As a respite from reading text, use wordless picture books with your students to enhance creative expression, sense-making strategies, and overall reading skills.

- Encourage parents to expose their preschoolers to wordless picture books on a regular basis.
When using picture books, prime young readers’ imaginations by asking them the following questions: What do these pictures mean to you? What do you think is happening in the story? What might this character be thinking/feeling?


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