

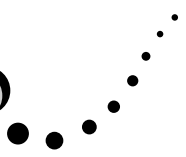
Getting the big idea: A neglected goal for reading comprehension

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American children, according to national surveys, seem to have well-developed basic literacy skills. But they falter when it comes to critical or “thoughtful” literacy (National Center for Education Statistics, 2004). Given the amount of time and attention paid to basic literacy—especially under the aegis of the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (2002)—perhaps we shouldn’t

be surprised by these findings. Indeed, a small study I recently undertook in a rural upstate New York school district suggested that engaging children in “big ideas” is not a common practice. Of 126 teaching or learning episodes observed in K–6 classrooms over a 3-day period, only 4 involved exposing children to or discussing big ideas with them. In most instances, I could not easily have



imagined students being engaged in big ideas, either because the teaching or learning activity was focused on something quite specific, like decoding or writing mechanics (where big-idea discussions would not have been appropriate), or because the topic under discussion didn't easily lend itself to big ideas (e.g., having students talk about what they did over the weekend). In other words, I not only observed very few instances where students were engaged in big ideas but also very few in which they easily could have been. In this article, I suggest that it's time to focus again on big ideas.

What exactly are big ideas and why teach them?

I define a big idea as the main point of a book, magazine article, argument, or film; the moral of a story or the underlying theme of a novel; what an author, poet, speaker, or artist is really trying to communicate; and, finally, the life lessons and deeper understandings a reader, listener, or viewer takes from a text, a work of art, or a performance. In reading, big ideas are associated with whole texts, not parts of them. They are not the same as the main idea of a sentence or paragraph.

One reason to teach U.S. students about big ideas is because they aren't strong in critical literacy. But there are more profound reasons: Understanding big ideas is critical to full participation in work, life, and democracy—especially in the era of the 30-second “in-depth” analysis. For example, the media seem to avoid complex topics. As I write this article, the United States is debating the future of Social Security—surely a big idea—but what do adults, let alone young workers who will be most affected by changes to it, actually know about the issue? As the media become more focused on the trivial, educators need to become more focused on the substantial.

Understanding big ideas also serves children well in many states' English language arts assessments, especially at the high school level. (In my state, New York, questions on the statewide English Regents assessment demand critical analysis and evaluation of big ideas.)

Finally, readers, listeners, and viewers can enter “text” at multiple levels (it is not necessary, as Bloom [1956] suggested, that text must be entered

at literal levels before it can be engaged at higher levels). Encouraging children to focus on the big ideas of a text promotes understanding of not only big ideas but also smaller details. In fact, stronger readers routinely use their knowledge of the big ideas to work through and understand the text at sentence and paragraph levels.

Big ideas reveal themselves in different ways. In some cases, they stare the reader in the face. For example, in Cowcher's *Antarctica* (1991), a non-fiction book about the delicate balance between penguins, birds, seals, and humans in Antarctica, the big idea is explicit in the final pages:

The penguins and the seals have always shared their world with ancient enemies, the skuas and the leopard seals. But these new arrivals [referring to humans] are more dangerous. The seals and penguins cannot tell yet whether they will share or destroy their beautiful Antarctica.... (unpaged)

Fables, especially, wear their big ideas on their sleeves. Some even repeat their big idea at the end of the fable:

The Crow and the Pitcher (Aesop)

A Crow, half-dead with thirst, came upon a pitcher that had once been full of water; but when the Crow put its beak into the mouth of the pitcher he found that only very little water was left in it and that he could not reach far enough down to get at it. He tried, and he tried, but at last had to give up in despair. Then a thought came to him, and he took a pebble and dropped it into the pitcher. Then he took another pebble and dropped that into the pitcher. Then he took another pebble and dropped that into the pitcher. Then he took another pebble and dropped that into the pitcher. Then he took another pebble and dropped that into the pitcher. Then he took another pebble and dropped that into the pitcher. At last, at last, he saw the water mount up near him, and after casting in a few more pebbles he was able to quench his thirst and save his life. Little by little does the trick.

In most good children's literature, big ideas lie under the surface of the text, revealing themselves indirectly. For example, Trapani's (1998) retelling of *The Itsy Bitsy Spider* recounts the four episodes in which Itsy Bitsy tries, in vain, to climb up the water spout, the kitchen wall, and the yellow pail, but finally climbs a maple tree where she successfully spins her web. Nowhere does Trapani explicitly state the big idea “if at first you don't succeed,

try, try again,” but that’s the unmistakable big idea to which each episode inexorably contributes.

The big ideas of some books are even less transparent—perhaps their authors never really intended them to have big ideas. A good example is Morris’s (1993) nonfiction book *Hats, Hats, Hats*, which presents photographs of hats with simple captions (e.g., “Work Hats,” “Play Hats”). But as you read this book, you are drawn into big ideas about how different kinds of hats serve different purposes in different situations and especially in different cultures.

Further toward the more obscure end of this scale are texts that present big ideas in opaque ways. For me, despite repeated attempts (on my own, and with expert guidance) to understand Ritchie’s exhibit “Proposition Player” (Massachusetts Museum of Modern Art, 2004), I am still hopelessly out of my depth. School children in the middle and upper grades struggle repeatedly with big-idea poems—many of the same ones (e.g., Keats, Wordsworth, Milton) with which I struggled as a child growing up in England.

How should we teach big ideas?

We need to engage children with big ideas in a variety of ways. We need to infuse big ideas into daily conversation. We need to read fiction, nonfiction, and poetry that express big ideas. We need to have children experience big ideas in a variety of media (art, sculpture, architecture, drama, film) both receptively and expressively. It’s hard to understand or discuss big ideas in material that has precious few of them, or in the “content-less” confines of what Schmoker (2001) called the “Crayola curriculum” in which students spend countless hours coloring worksheets. While they are valuable for other purposes, series books (e.g., Famous Five, Boxcar Children, Encyclopedia Brown) are not good sources for big ideas. Nor is “cutesy” poetry. Instead, we should select books and other materials that have what Peterson and Eeds (1990) called “multiple layers of meaning.” Their favorite example of a multilayered book was *Tuck Everlasting* (Babbit, 1975). It wouldn’t be difficult to select others from the hundreds published each year: the work of Betsy Byars, Cynthia Rylant, Jane Yolen, Gary Paulsen, Eloise Greenfield, and Eve Bunting

come immediately to mind. To start with, we should choose fiction, nonfiction, and poetry in which the big ideas are fairly simple and easily accessible. These books need to be read to and with children, and they should be made available for children to read on their own.

We should model, teach, and have children practice strategies for accessing and understanding big ideas. To begin with, modeling might simply consist of telling children what the big idea of a book is before starting to read it aloud. Before reading Trapani’s (1998) *The Itsy Bitsy Spider*, a teacher could say,

Have you ever heard of the expression “If at first you don’t succeed, try, try again?” Well, this is a story about a spider who at first didn’t succeed, but she tried and tried again. Let’s read and find out....

Later, a teacher could explain to children how he or she figured out the big idea of a story or poem. Later still, the teacher might teach children techniques like asking questions or making text-to-self, text-to-world, or text-to-text connections (Keene & Zimmerman, 1997) and show them how to use these techniques independently. Socratic seminars (Adler, 1982; Ball & Brewer, 1996) also provide excellent instructional strategies for teaching students to access, grapple with, and understand big ideas

One interesting way to build children’s understanding of big ideas is to use multiple texts and build understanding within and across them. Here’s an example, using two of Kuskin’s (1998) poems from her anthology *The Sky Is Always in the Sky* (1998). A teacher might start by sharing “A Bug Sat in a Silver Flower” (p. 29). It’s a poem about a little bug thinking “silver thoughts” who is suddenly eaten by a bigger bug. Asking the children what big ideas came to them as they heard or read the poem would probably elicit notions about the food chain: In nature, bigger bugs routinely eat smaller bugs, and smaller bugs in turn eat even smaller ones. They might also raise the point that in nature, not surviving is often a matter of chance—being in the wrong place at the wrong time. I see this daily in the summer at my pond, as the blue heron picks off the goldfish and small bass I so carefully stock. As with Kuskin’s smaller bugs, the heron is simply doing to my fish what my fish are doing to smaller creatures like flies or larvae.

Next, the teacher might share another of Kuskin's poems from the same anthology, "Buggity-Buggity Bug" (p. 26). This particular bug was "wandering aimlessly" when all of a sudden, it too met its end, but this time under the shoe of a human being. The teacher can initiate a discussion about the big ideas of this poem. Children can come up with similar ideas as for the first discussion—the notion of being in the wrong place at the wrong time. Some children might latch onto the seemingly careless and thoughtless act of the shoes in relation to the unsuspecting bug underfoot.

Finally, the teacher can ask about the big ideas of the two poems combined. Children might see the difference between what happens to a small bug as part of the food chain as opposed to what happens to some of them as a result of human intervention (intentional or not). In this case, of course, it looks unintentional—careless at worst. But the discussion could easily lead to intentional acts of destruction of bugs by humans, as in the case of pesticides used around the home or garden. What's interesting is how there are big ideas associated with each of the poems individually, but additional ones emerge when the two poems are discussed together.

It always surprises and disappoints me that while so much really good literature is read to children in the early grades, the discussions that take place around this literature so frequently focus on trivial aspects of the books rather than their big ideas. A good example is *Chrysanthemum* (Henkes, 1991), a book about a mouse of the same name who gets teased mercilessly when she goes to school for the first time. The most frequent follow-up activity I see in early primary classrooms involves children doing projects on their names. But *Chrysanthemum* really isn't a book about names, it's a wonderful illustration of the proverb "Don't judge a book by its cover," or the need for children not to be swayed by the opinions of others. It isn't that researching children's names is a bad idea, it's missing the opportunity to broaden and deepen children's understanding of big ideas.

Without such opportunities for critical thought, many children will not develop these understandings, which may not hurt them much during the elementary grades, but will come back to haunt them in secondary school as the conceptual density of material across all subject areas increases.

As teachers, we should be able, by the middle of first grade, to simply pose the question, So, what's the big idea? and have children engage in a discussion of *Chrysanthemum* (Henkes, 1991), or a nonfiction book about recycling, or one of Karla Kuskin's poems about bugs, that engages the big ideas of these works. But we also, as Brown (1991) suggested, ought to be holding regular conversations in classrooms about big ideas in general—conversations about current events, history, science, art, music, politics, environment, and so on—so that children can build up knowledge about these topics, appreciate their importance, and use the knowledge to inform and strengthen their understanding of everything they read, hear, or view.

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