

# The (Untold) Drama of the Turning Page: The Role of Page Breaks in Understanding Picture Books

Katrina Emily Bartow Jacobs<sup>1</sup>

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**Abstract** While scholars have recognized the importance of page breaks in both the construction and comprehension of narrative within picture books, there has previously been limited research that focused directly on how children discuss and make sense of these spaces in the text. Yet, because of their nature as dramatic gaps in the narrative, page breaks offer unique and exciting opportunities to understand how children make meaning of picture books (Sipe in *Storytime: young children's literary understanding in the classroom*, Teachers College Press, New York, 2008). This study explores how explicitly inviting young children to discuss page breaks offers insights into how these spaces function within the children's readings. Drawing on transcribed audio-recordings of a series of read-aloud sessions held with a group of children ages five to eight, the analysis focused on coding themes within the children's talk around page breaks in picture books. Specifically, the children referenced the role of page breaks as aesthetic choices; the utilization of page breaks to comprehend word/picture relationships; and the negotiation of these gaps in the story as they worked construct a cohesive understanding of the narrative. Overall, the data represents the rich possibilities for educators to include explicit talk around page breaks during picture book read-alouds as a pathway toward better understanding children's sense-making of these texts.

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Katrina Bartow Jacobs, Ph.D., is a Visiting Assistant Professor at the University of Pittsburgh in Language, Literacy, and Culture in the Department of Instruction and Learning. She earned her Ph.D. in Reading/Writing/Literacy at the University of Pennsylvania. She is a former teacher of first and fourth grade. Her research interests focus on the role of literature in the classroom, literacy teacher education, and the impact of high-stakes assessments on how teachers design and implement literacy curriculum and pedagogy.

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✉ Katrina Emily Bartow Jacobs  
kbjacobs@pitt.edu

<sup>1</sup> Department of Instruction & Learning, University of Pittsburgh, 5106 WWPH, 230 S. Bouquet Street, Pittsburgh, PA 15260, USA

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## Introduction

A group of children, ages five to eight, clustered together on a rug, are participating in a read-aloud of *The Knight and the Dragon* by Tomie DePaola (1980). Following the questioning of the adult reader/researcher, they work together to discuss the ways that page breaks influence their understandings of the narrative:

Jon: Like (turns page back) here it was the knight, (turns back), here it was the dragon, (turns back), and here it was the knight again. Each page is like, is like a turn.

Eddie: Well, I don't think it's really taking turns. I think they're doing it at the same time, but they're in different places, so they need to be on different pages.

Bill: Yeah. See, they're *both* getting ready, but because the author wanted to put in detail, in the pictures, he made them on different pages.

Lily: And see, (flips to page with knight making weapons) it says "meanwhile" here. And, (flips to original opening) it says "meanwhile" on this page too. So, it's like the same meanwhile.

Reader/Researcher: The same meanwhile?

Lily: Like, the same time. (Meeting 3).

This vignette demonstrates how children—even very young children—actively utilize words, pictures, and other textual elements in their developing comprehension of picture books. For this study, I recorded conversations that I had with a group of six children about four different picture books, focusing each time on how they navigated the page breaks in the texts. Because page breaks in picture books function as dramatic gaps in the reading process, they create an excellent opportunity for researchers and teachers to better understand the ways children make meaning from story picture books. Although only some of the children in the study were able to decode the words, they all had meaningful, insightful, and complex perceptions of how page breaks influenced their sense-making about the texts. The transcripts of these conversations reveal some of the complex interactions that occur between text and reader, especially the ways in which page breaks create spaces for readers to use existing knowledge to fill in gaps and develop interpretations.

While the analysis of these read-alouds offers insights into the specific ways these children made sense of page breaks, I also want to situate this work in the larger field of research on picture books, particularly the emerging area of work related to page breaks specifically. The study of picture books covers a broad range of topics, including but not limited to the picture book as an art object; the word–picture relationship; the role of peritextual elements; and the ways children make meaning, both intra- and inter-textually with the book (Nodelman, 1988; Kiefer, 1995; Sipe, 1998a). Yet relatively little research has focused on the role of the page break in the understanding of the picture book. While many authors make mention of the page break, perhaps most notably Barbara Bader's allusion to the "drama of

the turning page” (1976, p. 1, which is referenced in the title of this paper), it is only more recently that page breaks have been specifically highlighted as a unique and important textual element of picture books (Sipe, 1998b, 2008; Matulka, 2008; Sipe and Brightman, 2009; Low, 2012).

Part of what makes the page break a particularly interesting textual element is that it is defined by absence; the picture book page break is a crucial part of the narrative—what Margaret Mackey (1998) referred to as moments “more definite in announcing surprises. Furthermore, the page turn takes time, builds in obligatory pauses in the reading” (p. 10). While scholars have used both “page turn” and “page break” to address this element (Mackey, 1998; Sipe, 1998a, 2008), I use the term “page break” in order to highlight the “rift in the narrative” that makes this moment so compelling (Sipe, 2008, p. 243). While the action of turning is a critical, even symbiotic, aspect of the moment, I use “page break” to reference the planned quality of its role in the text and the critical role that this planned moment of absence plays.

By necessity, the page break represents a gap in the text—something that has been left unsaid, which must be filled in by the reader. However, the particulars of what has been left out often leave room for interpretation. This ambiguity requires the reader to negotiate the space in order to create a continuous narrative, providing “the opportunity ... to bring into play our own faculty for establishing connections – for filling in the gaps left by the text itself” (Iser, 1972, p. 285). In this way, page breaks are both an absence and a critical presence within the text. Thus, the page break invites the reader into the story as he/she becomes responsible for helping to make sense of the narrative.

It is important to note here, however, that not all page breaks function equally. For example, in Maurice Sendak's *Where the Wild Things Are* (1963), the pictures gradually grow in size until, in a heightened moment, the walls of Max's room literally melt away—in both the words and in the loss of a frame around the visual image. The page break at this moment—when the walls melt away—is a more pivotal one in the story, as is evidenced by the shifts in the illustrations. For these reasons, it is important to always consider the page break in relation to the word/picture relationships that exist in picture books. Therefore, while I argue that all page breaks are significant in their narrative role, it is also imperative to note that they may function differently, with greater or less impact on the overall narrative, in different texts and at different points in a story. Some may highlight central and pivotal moments, while others may softly push the story ahead.

Unlike some other textual elements, the page break (unless it is meta-fictionally called attention to, as is the case in some modern and postmodern picture books) is only visible to most readers of traditional picture story books once attention is explicitly brought to this aspect of the reading process. Indeed, the page break can be viewed as a sort of liminal space (Turner, 1969) for the reader, a moment in the narrative where the audience is simultaneously being pushed outward by the temporal and spatial divide from one opening to the next, and pulled into a more active role in the making of meaning. It is a moment of uncertainty, one that the reader must evaluate for him/herself. But the liminality of the page break functions on another level as well; it becomes a moment that must be addressed in the comprehension of the narrative as a whole. During the moment of unknowing,

readers must both anticipate what will come next, recognize where these predictions go astray, and prepare to connect new information with what has already been revealed. The data from this study, which I will discuss in detail below, illustrates the multiple ways that young children attended to these elements of comprehension through their discussion around page breaks.

## Defining the Page Break and Its Role in Picture Books

Literature on page breaks and their role within picture books often focuses on the importance of the page break as an aesthetic choice. Due to the nature of how picture books are created, in eight-page increments, it is important to bear in mind that—unlike most novels—the page break represents a significant choice by the author/illustrator. In Lawrence Sipe's article "Learning the Language of Picture-books," he offers the following definition of the page break:

The picturebook is carefully planned as a series of facing pages ... When we turn from one opening to another, there is a brief cessation of the action. These gaps are also carefully planned, and are known as *page breaks* (emphasis original). The reader/viewer is invited to make inferences about what happens in the page break from one opening to another (1998a, p. 72).

Even in this relatively concise definition, Sipe twice emphasizes the importance of the planned nature of the page breaks, as well as the work required by the reader. Indeed, the very limited scope of the picture book demands that all of its parts be treated with thoughtful respect during the making of the work. Similar to poetry, where the limited length and impact of word choice requires a careful consideration of every word, the high-quality story picture book makes precise use of every element of the book.

In addition, the picture book creator must tell an interesting and well-paced story. Page breaks play a significant role in keeping the story moving forward. On each page "something must happen to move the story along. ... If too much happens in one segment, however, it can throw off the pace of the story" (Horning, 1997, p. 99). Each page must balance between the need to add information and the need to keep the reader moving forward with the narrative; the page break itself becomes part of the narrative design and arc. The page break functions as a temporary pause within the text—an aspect that, returning to Bader's reference to "drama," creates a moment of tension for the reader. Building on the metaphor of endpages as curtains rising or falling before or after a drama (Hillenbrand, cited in Sipe, 2001), the page break works as a turning or transformative moment within the dramatic unfolding of the text.

Reflecting on this moment of tension, of push-and-pull within the narrative, from a reader response framework (Rosenblatt, 1978; Brooks and Browne, 2012), page breaks can signify a moment in the picture book reading process where readers are more actively invited to bring themselves into the text. The reader physically decides when to turn the page, whether to flip forward or back (even if the narrative encourages one forward), or whether to shut the book entirely. And, while the page break may be more or less heightened—with more or less time/space/context/

perspective changing between openings—a perceptible shift occurs that the reader must address. Sipe writes that page breaks “might be a powerful site for investigating children’s cognitive integration of texts and pictures, as well as their ability to make high-level and subtle inferences” (2008, p. 244). The study described in this paper takes up Sipe’s invitation by demonstrating how children, once encouraged to focus on page breaks, used this space to make sophisticated interpretations, both about the narrative and about the intentional choices of the author/illustrator in the creation of the text. Perhaps most powerfully, the children used these moments of textual ambiguity to bring their knowledge, their experiences, and their comprehension strategies to play as they made sense of the texts. These findings give us insights not only into the research and theory surrounding picture books, but also into the ways that teachers can utilize picture books to support children’s developing comprehension of texts and to better assess the ways in which children are working to construct meaning.

## Methodology

The data from which this article draws comes from a series of four read-aloud sessions with a group of six children: five in kindergarten, ages five and six, and one older girl (age eight) who was the sibling of one of the other participants (Table 1).

The group met four times; each time we focused on one text during a discussion that lasted between 35 and 50 minutes. The read-alouds took place at Eddie’s home in the afternoon after school. I knew Eddie and his sister Mel personally, and their family helped me recruit other interested children and parents from their elementary school into the study. Books included *Don’t Let the Pigeon Drive the Bus* by Mo Willems (2003), *The Knight and the Dragon* by Tomie DePaola (1980), *Where the*

**Table 1** Participant chart

Name	Age	Gender	Parent-identified reading ability <sup>a</sup>
Bill	5	Male	“Doesn’t decode much yet, but very involved when we read at home.”
Eddie	5 [Mel’s brother]	Male	“Strong reader. Started reading on his own at age four. Loves books.”
Jon	6	Male	“Loves books, especially those with action. He’s really starting to pick up books on his own.”
Lily	5	Female	“Lily doesn’t read on her own yet, but loves to be read to. She prefers books that are more realistic.”
Mel	8 [Eddie’s sister]	Female	“A voracious reader. Has loved books since kindergarten – that’s why she wants to join you!”
Matt	5	Male	“Not really a reader yet. Sometimes really engaged, but sometimes seems checked out when we read together.”

All names, other than mine, are pseudonyms

<sup>a</sup> As part of their consent form, parents were asked: “How would you describe your child as a reader?” It was an intentionally open-ended question that elicited both reading level information and information about the child’s feelings toward reading and him/herself as a reader

*Wild Things Are* by Maurice Sendak (1963), and *Tuesday* by David Wiesner (1991). These books were chosen because all of them had a single author/illustrator, all of whom had been recognized through Caldecott awards and other merits as exceptional picture book authors. They were also chosen with a deliberate effort to engage in a range of picture books, from the nearly wordless story in *Tuesday* to the longer written narrative of *The Knight and the Dragon*.

The children participated in these read-alouds communally, during which they were explicitly asked to make comments and ask questions without raising their hands (a novel concept to all of them based on their school experiences<sup>1</sup>). Following Sipe and Brightman's (2006) protocol, which itself builds from a reader response framework (Rosenblatt, 1978), children were asked to engage in the text conversationally—an invitation that they took up enthusiastically as they made connections between themselves and the text, between various picture books, and between the pages themselves. At certain times, the children were asked to specifically comment on page breaks: "What do you think happened between that page and this one?" Both in response to these invitations, and spontaneously, the participants had a lot to say about page breaks, often taking the book literally into their own hands as they flipped back and forth providing rationale for a particular interpretation or narrative understanding.

The read-aloud sessions were audio-recorded and then transcribed verbatim.<sup>2</sup> As the data below highlights, the children's responses to page breaks covered a number of elements related to the design, construction, and comprehension of picture books. This data helps illuminate the importance of thinking about the various ways that readers respond to these gaps, including the role of page breaks as an aesthetic choice made by the author/illustrator, the role of the page break as a mediator of the word–picture relationship, and the role of page breaks as a moment of indeterminacy that must be negotiated by the reader in order to construct a seamless narrative.

## Findings and Analysis

In the development of a picture book narrative, page breaks must be carefully considered so that the reader/viewer does not disengage completely from the text. For most traditional story picture books, the responsibility of the author/illustrator is to create an apparently continuous narrative. Therefore, the question of where these gaps or pauses take place, and how much is left unsaid, must be carefully considered. As Kathleen Horning (1997) has suggested, something needs to occur between pages, or the narrative will be unable to move forward. Yet if too much is left unstated, there is the possibility that the reader/viewer will be unable to negotiate the jump between openings. One of the major aesthetic considerations,

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<sup>1</sup> When I asked how read-alouds were handled in their school setting, the children reported that "we just listen, and then, you know, sometimes we write or draw about it. Or sometimes the teacher asks a question to see if we know the right answer" (Eddie, Meeting 1).

<sup>2</sup> The study described here was approved by Human Subject Review, and all of the parents provided consent for their children to participate. The children were also made aware of the research and the fact that they were being audio-recorded.

then, of the page break is exactly what should go unsaid—how large a leap can occur between pages without disturbing the “aesthetic coherence [of] the entire book” (Higonnet, 1990, as cited in Sipe and McGuire, 2006).

When I first met with the children, I took a little bit of time to describe what I meant by page breaks. During this conversation, I emphasized the fact that page breaks are not just random because all of the elements in a story picture book are carefully planned by the author/illustrator. After I finished explaining how picture books are made, Bill offered the following comment:

Bill: It's like, well, yeah. Like, spaces don't just happen. You have to put them there. Like, when I read comics, it's not like—well, some kids think that the lines are just there, and the comic writer has to just fill them. But like, they have to decide what goes here and what goes there.

Eddie: Yeah, but, um, sometimes the boxes are already drawn on the paper.

Bill: Well, yeah, but you still gotta decide what goes in each box! (Meeting 1)

In this exchange, Bill and Eddie seemed to be reflecting on the nature of the page break as an aesthetic choice. They both recognized that the “box” exists on some fundamental level, but they also were discussing how the author's decisions to “fill” those boxes are an element as well. David Low (2012) has described the importance of these “gutterances” in comics, arguing that these spaces are critical in the overall articulation of story. Joseph Sanders (2013) discusses the important similarities and differences in form and in the process of reading that must be considered when analyzing comics and picture books. While I appreciate these distinctions and their importance, in this brief exchange the children were utilizing their understanding of comics in order to theorize the purpose of the page break within a picture book. Linking them in this way evidences both the inherent importance of page breaks, and the children's understanding of their deliberate placement and purpose.

Another point where the participants took up the idea of the page break as an aesthetic choice was during the reading of our last book, *Where the Wild Things Are*. We had been discussing what the mother might have said to Max, the protagonist, when she sent him to his room at the start of the book. As I turned to the next opening, where the forest begins to grow in Max's room, the children had the following conversation:

Eddie: Ok, ok, like—now we've stepped into fantasy world.

Researcher/Reader: What do you mean?

Eddie: Well, that couldn't really happen.

Lily: Yes it could. My brother once didn't get dinner. Well, he got some dinner, but no dessert, because he wouldn't eat the vegetable.

Matt: Well, yeah, *that* part could happen, but not this. Trees don't grow in rooms.

Eddie: That's why I said we stepped *into* fantasy.

Mel: Oh, I get what Eddie's saying. He's saying like on *this page* (flips back one page), we were in the real world, but on *this page* (flips back), like the scenery change makes it fantasy. (Meeting 4)

Here the children are negotiating not only the role of the page break as an aesthetic choice in terms of individual narrative, but also linking it to their conceptualization of genre. Of particular interest is Mel's description of the “scenery change.” In thinking about the dramatic nature of the page break referenced above, here it can



be thought of functioning almost as the darkening of the stage between acts. In this discussion, Mel uses a similar metaphor for understanding the shift that occurred between the pages. While Max is still in some ways in the same space (his room), a fundamental change in the “scenery” points the text in a new direction. Eddie and Mel recognize that this turn in the text has occurred. Their conversation about the page break can be seen as an attempt to understand how that shift has been made clear to us, the readers, through a break in the action that draws attention to a change in the images. This attention demonstrates the importance of considering the role of the page break in how readers negotiate word/image relationships; Here, while the words seem realistic (at least to Lily), the pictures point to something else in the story.

One of the most distinctive features of the picture book is how visual, verbal, and physical sign systems function in relation to one another. Perry Nodelman (1988) suggests that the pictures and verbal text serve as limitations to one another, with the words working to focus our attention on particular elements of the pictures, and vice versa. Barbara Kiefer (1995), citing Barbara Cooney, expands on the metaphor of the string of pearls, where “the pearls represent the illustrations, and the string represents the printed text. The string is not an object of beauty on its own, but the necklace cannot exist without the string” (p. 6). Sipe (1998b) offers the concept of a synergistic relationship between pictures and words, where the reader/viewer must transmediate or relate the two sign systems synergistically in order to fully understand the text.

Yet any consideration of the word–picture relationship is complicated by the event of the page break, for the simple reason that the word–picture relationship highlighted above at some point reaches a point of stasis; at that point something must occur so that the narrative can advance. In other words, at some point a reader must come to an understanding of the narrative up to that moment, which prompts her/him to turn the page and discover new information. In this way, the page break reflects a moment of change within the story, as well as a heightened pause. This pause, by necessity, refers to both the words and the pictures, as the new opening offers new information to the reader—always after at least a slight narrative rift. The page break complicates the ways in which readers shift from words to pictures and back again. Because of its inherent nature as a momentary pause, the page break functions to interrupt or mediate the text’s oscillating flow. Indeed, Sipe describes how “each new page opening presents us with a new set of words and new illustrations to factor into our construction of meaning” (1998b, p. 106).

This leaves questions regarding the role that the page break plays in how the reader comes to form an idea of a continuous narrative; in other words, how the reader negotiates both the word–picture relationship and the page breaks in order to come to coherent idea of what the text, as a whole, “is about.” It is important to bear in mind that, while I believe all picture book reading events make use of similar navigation techniques, each reading will be unique, as it still demands the individual’s personal interpretation of each element. Joseph Sutliff Sanders (2013), working to theorize the distinctions between comics and picture books, argues that we should focus on who “chaperones” the words—arguing that the performative and nuanced ways that picture books are often read aloud by adults to children can narrow or direct the ways that children make meaning of the picture–word relationship. He writes:



It is important to keep in mind that the words do not have *total* power over the images, and it is similarly significant that the speaker of the words does not have *total* power over the words, their meaning, or how that meaning will be interpreted by the listener, but the procedure of restricting meaning is nonetheless a procedure defined by power (p. 64).

While I dispute Sanders' argument that picture books inherently presume an adult reader to a child, particularly given the picture books designed for older children, there is no doubt that this structure is a common one in classrooms—and was true for this study. This adult guidance often relates to how words, pictures, and physical aspects of the book are comprehended as a whole. Thus, while meaning-making is individual, it is also collaborative and guided, particularly in classroom read-alouds.

This collaborative and guided meaning-making process became clear during analysis of the data collected across various readings. For example, as we began reading *Don't Let the Pigeon Drive the Bus*, the role of the page break as a mediator of word–picture relationships came into play early in our discussion. We had just turned from the opening where the bus driver is instructing the reader to stop the pigeon to the opening where the pigeon says, “I thought he'd never leave.” At this point, the following conversation occurred:

Eddie: (before the page turn). He's walking away. And the pigeon's coming.

Reader/Researcher: Now I want you think about what happens between the pages. (turns page) **I thought he'd never leave.**

Bill: He gets on the bus.

Reader/Researcher: The pigeon?

Bill: No, the bus driver! And drove away.

Reader/Researcher: Okay, the bus driver got on the bus and drove away. Anything else?

Eddie: Well, before I said the pigeon was coming, but now I think he's being sneaky.

Reader/Researcher: What makes you think that?

Eddie: 'Cause. Look, when he left...(flips page back)

Bill: Yeah, see, like, he's peaking around the page.

Eddie: Yeah, but, I didn't know that the pigeon even saw the bus driver until the next page, (flips page forward) when he said this. I thought he was just coming.

Lily: Then why would the bus driver say not to let him drive the bus?

Eddie: Well, maybe the pigeon had been there before. I just didn't think the pigeon was listening. I thought he was just coming in. (Meeting 2)

In this exchange, the discussion demonstrates how the page break has altered Eddie's interpretation of the previous opening. Prior to turning the page, Eddie has come to some conclusions about the word–picture relationship on that individual opening. Having come to an interpretation, he is ready for the turning of the page. At this point, however, new information comes to light. Specifically, the new word–picture relationship makes Eddie question his previous interpretation. If the pigeon is now saying that he thought “he'd never leave,” then that implies premeditation on the part of the pigeon. It would no longer make sense within the narrative for the pigeon to have not noticed the bus driver on the first page. Consequently, Eddie shifts his

interpretation of the previous opening to incorporate this new information and continue the sense of a seamless narrative. During our conversation focused on page breaks these thoughts were actively articulated, which points to the importance of discussing the nature of page breaks explicitly in classroom contexts where picture books are used. Given that this was the first time I had asked this question of the children, it is interesting how immediately Eddie reflects on his own interpretation. The fact that this question was so quickly taken up by the participants suggests that this navigation of the page breaks is a commonly-occurring element of making meaning of the text that children readily discuss once given the opportunity.

Interestingly, a similar interaction occurred between the opening where the pigeon first speaks and the following pages. This time, however, I did not preface the conversation with an explicit invitation to discuss page breaks:

(The book is open to the pages where the pigeon says, "I thought he'd never leave.")

Reader/Researcher: Who is the pigeon talking to?

Lily: Himself.

Reader/Researcher: Himself.

Jon: Yeah. 'Cause, well, there's nobody else there.

Reader/Researcher: Interesting. (turns page) **Hey, can I drive the bus?**

Bill: Wait. Hmmm. Wait, that doesn't make sense.

Eddie: Yes it does. He wants to drive the bus.

Bill: No, I mean, you don't ask questions to yourself.

Jon: Well, you can. If you're playing make believe, or something.

Bill: No, not like this question.

Reader/Researcher: What do you mean?

Bill: Well, on *this* page, (flips back) Lily said he was talking to himself.

Lily: He is.

Bill: Then who is he asking the question to?

Eddie: The guy the bus driver was talking to.

Matt: Who was that, again? (flips back to opening with bus driver).

Reader/Researcher: **Can you watch the bus?**

Bill: Hey, guys, maybe it's us.

Lily: Well, maybe. (flips to third opening) I guess we're the only ones here. (Meeting 2)

Again, Bill's confusion or question seems to arise from a disconnect between the previously understood opening and the new information being presented. In an effort to explain his thinking, he turns back to the previous page, and uses it as evidence as he explains his question. It is important to note that the students readily understood the importance of looking forward and backward in order to support their ideas. At no point is the decision to flip back in the text questioned by the other students. This playfulness and physical interaction is also encouraged by Willem's meta-fictive style, which deliberately invites the reader into the text in ways that picture books traditionally do not. In some ways it is unsurprising that Lily and Jon presume an in-text conversation, given that this is the norm of most books. What is salient for this paper is how the children utilized the page break as a way to make sense of Willem's disruption of traditional story picture book narratives.

Bill's question, and his use of the previous page, begins a group reflection on the entire story thus far in the text. In response to Bill's question, Eddie offers the idea that the addressee is the same person who was mentioned on the first page by the bus driver. Jon then takes this up by flipping back to reconsider who was mentioned on that first page. Using this information, Bill then offers a suggestion, that we, the readers, are the ones being spoken to in this story. Lily then moves forward, back to the page we were initially reading when the conversation began, to confirm this possibility. Indeed, without an understanding of this moment, when the readers are brought into the text, Willem's book would lose its charm and coherence. At every step of this brief but important conversation, the page break mediated the word–picture relationship, demanding a careful rereading and reconsideration in order to form a sense of the narrative that encompassed all the available information.

The act of flipping back and forth described above suggests moments of uncertainty, or ambiguity, within the developing narrative that the children attended to in their efforts to make sense of the story more holistically. The position of page breaks within the story—simultaneously functioning as an element of the narrative and as a cessation of the text—illustrates a unique set of characteristics to the page break. This disturbance of story flow represents an interval, or liminal space (Turner, 1969), where the reader is simultaneously both in and outside of the narrative. Victor Turner notes that there is a

Certain ambiguity in the phrase 'interval between two successive events or acts,' for such intervals may, in many societies, be culturally detached from natural or logical sequentiality and formed into a domain governed by anti-temporality (1982, p. 243).

The picture book, with its double-sign system, physical layout, and internal conflict over temporal and spatial concerns, is a distinct framework from which to consider this question of “time between time.” The narrative must, in order for comprehension to take place, continue through the moment of turning the page. But, at the same time, the page break represents—to return to a point made earlier—the *absence* of information. Therefore, there is the potential for a breakdown of the “logical sequentiality” of the story during these breaks. It becomes the responsibility of the reader to navigate these atemporal moments within the picture book reading event.

As a marker of liminal space, the page break represents a move away from the author/illustrator-driven narrative. While the author/illustrator certainly has control over where and when the page breaks will fall within the narrative, ultimately the power and responsibility to navigate these breaks falls on the shoulders of the reader/viewer. As such, the page breaks can function to provide the reader a space to engage in a “writerly” read (Barthes, 1977), in that they demand the reader insert him/herself into the formation of the narrative. Without active participation and willingness on the part of the reader/viewer, the goal of the continuous narrative, the “aesthetic whole” cannot be achieved.

Yet, because of the oscillating, multifarious, and personal nature of interpretation and meaning-making, the precise navigation of the page break will never be quite the same for each reader. Indeed, this fact holds true even when considering re-readings by the same audience, because the page break inherently represents a point of

uncertainty within the text. While textual ambiguity can and does occur throughout the picture book, the page break—by nature of its very being—necessarily represents what Wolfgang Iser refers to as “elements of indeterminacy, the gaps in the text” (1972, p. 288). While not directly referring to page breaks, but rather to general ambiguities within text, Iser’s concept offers a theoretical framework for thinking about this element vis-à-vis narrative comprehension. It is perhaps through this lens, as a moment of textual ambiguity, that the page break offers its most useful entry-point into understanding how children make meaning from story picture books.

Without these moments of uncertainty, of which the page break is a regular and frequent one, the reader would not have the capacity to bring themselves into the work; the page break affords the reader with a necessary space to connect with the text. This ambiguity can relate to any number of topics or issues raised by the text, ranging from questions of how much time has elapsed in the “time between time” of the page break, to what actions have come to pass between openings, to more theoretical questions of morality, inter- and intratextuality, plot and character development, etc. While the author may sometimes provide a “hook” to help the audience navigate this in-between space—such as including the text “the next morning” or “at 10:00 pm that evening” on the following opening, or altering only one small detail in the illustration—the reader/viewer always has to grapple with what has been unsaid, and why. And, while not all page breaks are equal in terms of their uncertainty, or the vastness of the gap/ambiguity left between pages, they all require some level of engagement and filling-in on the part of a reader.

One clear example of this kind of cognitive response to the page break came during our reading of *The Knight and the Dragon* (dePaola, 1980)—the conversation I sampled in the opening vignette but will expand on here. The first half of the book switches between the dragon and the knight as they prepare themselves for the fight. At the point of the read-aloud, we had just finished reading the page where the knight is making himself weapons for the fight.

Reader/Researcher: (turns page) **Meanwhile, back at the cave...** So what’s happening here?

Lily: He starts really weak, and he’s trying to get, trying to get fire started.

Reader/Researcher: Mmm, so what happened between these pages?

Eddie: See, see, now it’s the dragon’s turn to get ready again.

Lily: Yeah. But he can’t hold stuff, ‘cause his arms are too small, so he just has to use his tail and get mean and blow fire, and stuff.

Jon: So, so if they’re fighting, why are the knight and the dragon taking turns?

Bill: Huh?

Jon: Like (turns page back) here it was the knight, (turns back), here it was the dragon, (turns back), and here it was the knight again. Each page is like, is like a turn.

Eddie: Well, I don’t think it’s really taking turns. I think they’re doing it at the same time, but they’re in different places, so they need to be on different pages.

Bill: Yeah. See, they’re *both* getting ready, but because the author wanted to put in detail, in the pictures, he made them on different pages.

Lily: And see, (flips to page with knight making weapons) it says “meanwhile” here. And, (flips to original opening) it says “meanwhile” on this page too. So, it’s like the same meanwhile.

Reader/Researcher: The same meanwhile?

Lily: Like, the same time. (Meeting 3)

In this section, the children negotiate some confusion surrounding the role of the page breaks within the narrative. Jon points out the emerging pattern, and interprets this as “taking turns.” But he is also confused by this message. Why, if they are in a fight, are they taking turns? Eddie offers a different interpretation—that the page break signifies a movement in space, but not in time. Lily tries to confirm this interpretation by pointing out the use of the same word, “meanwhile,” on two of the pages.

In this instance, the children are actively and collectively negotiating with the page break, trying to interpret how it can be worked into the narrative as a whole. Jon's question shows his recognition of the use of pattern in this text; almost every page about the knight has a pairing, in word and illustration, with a page about the dragon. By analyzing why the author might have set up the narrative in this style, the children need to take into consideration the reasons for the breaks in the narrative, and what they might signify about shifts in time or space. Through their discussion, it is evident that they are attempting to understand both the plot of the story on an action-level, and on a deeper, more complicated motivation-level. Jon's question was not about the action of the story, but why it was being presented in that particular fashion.

As the children's conversation points out, there are many ways to “read” the page break. Jon initially saw the page break as reflecting an ethical idea, that of taking turns. It is unsurprising that, for a 5-year-old reader, the notion of turn-taking would be an important one, with implications of kindness and fair play. Yet the book also stated that these two were getting ready for a fight. This tension might have led to Jon's initial confusion: why are they taking turns if they are going to fight?

Eddie and Lily, on the other hand, offered a different “read” of the page break and the pattern of the text. Instead of “taking turns,” the page break acted more like a shift in location. As Eddie put in, “they're in different places, so they need to be on different pages.” In this understanding of how the page break functions within this text, the issue is one of spatial reality. If they are in different places, then they need different pages to show their actions. In this reading, focused on the illustrations, the page break represents the *opposite* of taking-turns; it signifies synchronicity. Lily utilizes the text, specifically the repetition of the word “meanwhile,” to illustrate this point and to highlight the temporal relationships of the two openings. Hence, the same narrative, in the same reading, led to distinct, if not conflicting, understandings of the story—all of which related to how the children “filled in” the gaps left by the page breaks.

In fact, Bill can be seen to offer a third interpretation, that of artistic merit. His comment, that the author wanted room to draw detailed illustrations, points to a more practical and aesthetic consideration. Although he never states it directly, Bill seems to be disagreeing with Eddie and Lily that a change in location necessitates a change of page.<sup>3</sup> Instead, he recognizes the shift in location as an issue, but an artistic one. Bill's comment seems to imply the following logic: the page is the size it is, and to fit both characters on the same page would mean to have less room for

<sup>3</sup> Although this issue did not come up again in our reading, it is interesting to note that – as the fight draws nearer – dePaola does show both characters on the same page, each in a different location, but taking part in similar actions.

each drawing, and therefore less detail. All three of these interpretations make sense within the text. The author/illustrator never explicitly explains why he chose to follow this pattern, so it is up to the readers to interpret this choice, and to use this understanding as they make meaning of the text as a whole.

A conversation that occurred during our reading of the nearly wordless picture book *Tuesday* (Wiesner, 1991) again highlights the role of the page break in navigating textual ambiguity. We had reached the opening where the dog is chasing the flying frog:

Reader/Researcher: Okay, so what's happening here?

Jon: Ahhh! He's being chased by doggy!

Bill: I think this is what's happening. I think he was going this way, then he put on the brakes, because the dog is coming at him.

Lily: Yeah.

Eddie: Yeah. See, here, you can his nose.

Reader/Researcher: Mmm, good noticing. Ready? (**turns page to opening that shows dog running the other way with a line of frogs behind it**)

All: (laughing)

Reader/Researcher: What happens between here (flips back) and here? (flips forward)

Eddie: I think, I think they scared him away.

Bill: Yeah. They're heading this way, and he right there. So they make a giant line out of their bodies, and chase him away.

Reader/Researcher: They chase him away. Mel, what do you think?

Mel: Well, mine's sort of different, but I think they made friends with the dog and they're helping him escape.

Reader/Researcher: Oh, so you think this is a friendly picture. Interesting.

Lily: But the dog looks kinda scared, like his eyes are all like this (widens her eyes), and he's going like this (pants quickly).

Mel: But that's what dogs do when they play. I remember once that we went to the dog park, and the dogs, like, chased each other around, for fun. Like, they might have looked scared, but they were doing it for fun. Like, taking turns chasing.

Bill: But this isn't another dog. It's a bunch of flying frogs. Dogs don't like weird things. Mine doesn't like thunder. It scares him, and he runs around. (Meeting 4) In this moment, Mel and Bill put forth conflicting interpretations of what has happened between the pages. In addition, the group laughter suggests that the children responded to the humorous drama of the moment, understanding the idea that something had changed. While both Mel and Bill agreed on the sudden change in direction, both physical and mood-wise, their understandings are based both on the text itself, and on their own experiences in their lives. During our conversation, we never came to an agreement on this issue. After a bit more debate, Mel said, "well, there's no way to know for sure, so let's just go and see what happens." The page break is a location for textual ambiguity because the particular assumptions and interpretations of the "unsaid" will depend on each reader's individual perspective.

Indeed, it is the ambiguous nature of the page break that makes it such a powerful tool for understanding how children make meaning of texts. In the above instance, both Bill and Mel had reasons for their understandings, and both believed firmly that

they had fully comprehended the text. And, in truth, there *is* no way to know which interpretation is “more correct,” if that concept even applies to this text. Both Bill and Mel had valid arguments, and were able to back up their ideas with evidence from both the text and their own life experiences. In this instance, the page break was one area within the highly ambiguous text that invited the reader into the text, and demanded that the reader formulate an idea of how one opening related to the next—moving toward a more nuanced understanding of children’s ability to demonstrate comprehension of complex texts.

## Conclusions and Implications for Research and Teaching

Any attempt to bridge the gaps posed by the page breaks involves addressing previously resolved indeterminacies, but also acknowledging new issues or confusions that arise. While certainly not the only arena for ambiguity in texts, the page break simultaneously acts as a challenge to the process of understanding the text as a continuous narrative, and as a space where the reader/viewer can bring his or her personal ideas and background to making of meaning. As such, the page breaks invite the reader/viewer to utilize his/her previously formed schemata (Rumelhart, 1981) of both narrative texts in general and this particular picture book in order to navigate these gaps. Indeed, it not only invites the reader to insert his or herself into the text, it demands this action of readers in order for the text to be understood as a whole. As with all acts of reading, any understanding of the story picture book must be couched within what the reader already knows, and how this information colors his/her interpretation of the current text.

As the children’s conversations demonstrate, despite their lack of earlier experiences with this kind of book talk, the willingness and sophistication with which they engaged in discussion of page breaks points to the inherent importance of these textual elements in the act of comprehending the picture book as a complete narrative. The children’s eagerness relates to Sipe’s work (1998a, 2008) that highlights both the interest and capacity of children to be active makers of meaning during read-alouds. The children’s ability to both answer questions about page breaks and debate with one another regarding their interpretations suggests the significance of page breaks in the comprehension process, an importance aspect for teachers and researchers to consider. For researchers, this study speaks to the ways in which formal and physical aspects of the story picture book should and can be attended to in naturalistic environments, just as the relationships of words and pictures have been studied for decades. By positioning these physical aspects—endpages, layout, design, and page breaks—as part of the meaning-making process, we can gain new insights about how children draw on these various linguistic and technical aspects and relate them to one another in the comprehension processes.

Regarding implications for teachers, particularly those in early childhood or early elementary settings, this research demonstrates first and foremost the amazing potential of young children to engage in thoughtful meaning-making of picture books, even before they are able to decode the words on their own. It speaks not only to the importance of using high-quality children’s literature in the classroom,



but also of the central importance of providing times when children are read to and invited to bring their own ideas to the conversation. In addition, this research points to the particular affordances of discussions that focus on page breaks; not only do these conversations allow children to become more familiar with the technical aspects of picture books, but they also provide a unique opportunity for teachers to delve into the particular ways in which children are bringing themselves to the texts.

Furthermore, given that these moments involve the “filling in” of what’s been left out, they seem to be particularly effective at capturing differing opinions that children can negotiate and approach collaboratively. Thus, read-alouds that focus on page breaks and how children navigate ambiguity in texts can offer teachers informal ways of assessing children’s comprehension strategies and can simultaneously helping children attend to the importance of close reading with an eye toward details in the words, pictures, and layout of the text. Finally, I believe strongly that all children, but particularly young children, inherently learn best from play and creativity. In these conversations, children can enjoy the playfulness that can be part of “figuring out” what got left out of the book; highlighting page breaks, as a part of communal read-alouds of picture storybooks, can be a powerful early invitation for children to engage in the particular pleasure of reading and responding to texts.

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