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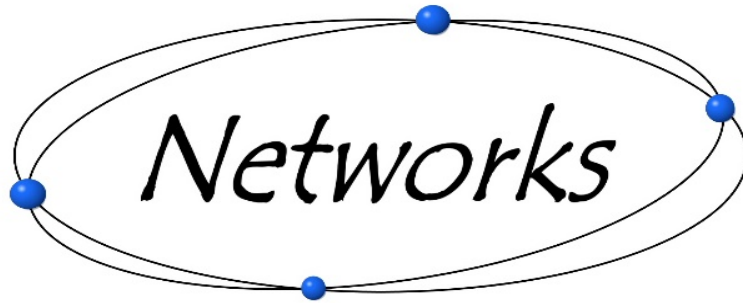
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Abstract

Fifth graders responded to a video of a picturebook, *The Red Tree* by Shaun Tan. They had not experienced explicit instruction in visual literacy and their responses served as a foundation for basic understanding of their analysis. We learned that they focused on four major areas: emotional aspects; visual qualities, summaries of the story; and a text focus. They understood the character's emotions and were able to interpret many of Tan's images.

It's as if the author is quietly saying to you, "What do you make of this?" and then leaving you to your own devices. (Tan, 2011, n.p.)

Tan's words speak to the importance of interpretation of text, image, video, or the combination of any of these media sources, and he guides readers/viewers to consider the multiple ways into interpretation, particularly text created with visual image. He, further, brings attention to the shifting perspectives surrounding traditional views of literacy (reading and writing) to an incorporation of new literacies (Sanders & Albers, 2010).

His work is most often grounded in the visual with limited text support. For instance, *The Red Tree* (2010) is a visual story of a young girl seeking life's meaning. It was originally created as a picturebook but it has been reimagined as a video or film. In each of these formats, viewers are expected to create meaning either from viewing the images in the book or in viewing the video with sound and other visual, filmmaking elements added.

Current literacy practices embrace knowing, seeing, and feeling because of engagement with textual, visual, or digital experiences. This fundamental reinterpretation of what it means to be literate is being integrated into schools throughout the world, as students engage with multimodal texts (Scheibe & Rogow, 2012). These shifts in understanding literacy show up within the Common Core State Standards. For example, in the majority of U.S. states, fifth graders are expected to: CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.5.7- Analyze

how visual and multimedia elements contribute to the meaning, tone, or beauty of a text (Common Core State Standards Initiative, 2017). This redefinition of literacy affords equal importance to printed and visual texts. Although the importance of visual interpretation has been recognized (Kress & Van Leeuwen, 1996), teachers have continued to give preference to printed text (Hassett, 2006), a form with which they are more familiar.

We, a teacher and university partner, developed an exploratory inquiry where we wanted to discover the nuances of what students knew about film interpretation without formal instruction (Eisner, 1991). Would they use print-based interpretation, visual analysis, or some combination? Rather than attempting to discover how students interpreted film after extended instruction; we wanted to gain an understanding of their initial interpretations so we could build upon existing knowledge to reframe literacy instruction.

Multimodal Opportunities

In classrooms, teachers make decisions about what students read, how they read, and ways they are expected to interpret their reading (Galda & Beach, 2001). Teachers can bring in visual representations through picturebooks and media, allowing students to interpret and value both. They too, in concert with their students, learn about the language and visual expectations required to comprehend and understand image. For instance, they learn to use the language of line, value, space, and movement (Martens, Martens, Doyle, Loomis, & Aghalarov, 2012).

Several academic associations have written position statements to support and nudge teachers to expand their teaching to include multimodal literacies. For example, the National Council of Teachers of English (2005) created a position statement that included the following statement: "It is the interplay of meaning-making systems (alphabetic, oral, visual, etc.) that teachers and students should strive to study and produce. Multiple ways of knowing also include art, music, movement, and drama, which should not be considered curricular luxuries" (p. 1).

Serafini (2010) argues that a shift from traditional text to multimodal opportunities requires a change in how teachers work with students. For students to understand visual components, they must analyze the ways images make meaning. Therefore, students must add to the text-based reading strategies that they have accumulated, as these strategies are ineffective in analyzing images. Serafini suggests that readers and viewers of multimodal texts must understand the perceptual, structural, and ideological perspectives that contribute to image.

Including image suggests other classroom changes. For example, Pantaleo (2010; 2012) writes about the need for time for students to slow down perceptions so they can move beyond noticing images to an understanding of the images. Nikolajeva (2013) concurs in that she believes images contribute to emotional understanding. Students identify basic emotions like joy or fear by studying characters' faces and expressions. Additionally, students engage in embedded mind reading where they interpret complex relationships and emotions such as how a character feels and what other characters think. Image allows for development of emotional intelligence and aesthetic appreciation of image.

As a multimodal medium, film is a newer addition to classrooms, whereas picturebooks have been traditionally a part of classrooms (Howells & Negreiros, 2012). Film has not always been treated as a text to be explored by students in serious ways; rather, it was often thought of as something to be enjoyed – a show - often a reward (Apkon, 2013).

When exploring visual media students consider color, line, texture, perspective, shape, lighting, and composition (Author, 2011; Rose, 2012). For example, students interpret color and how it affects the mood of the characters or they explore how angular lines create tension. In addition to these visual elements, students explore features of film which include: framing; shot distance; focus of shots; angle of shots; point-of-view; light; and panning (Duncum, 2013; Rose, 2012). Beyond these features, there is also music that enhances emotional response within a film.

These findings influenced our work with fifth grade students. We were curious as to what students' might focus on within a video interpretation. We wondered what they might think and how we could build from their initial interpretations to develop more complex understandings.

The Red Tree

We purposely chose a complex video without clear interpretation, allowing space for varied responses. We selected a film translation of *The Red Tree* (http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PrmMFFpKxgw) by Shaun Tan. This version is easy to get as it is on YouTube and is free for teachers.

Tan suggests that authors leave readers or viewers spaces for interpretation no matter how young the reader/viewer might be (Ling, 2013; Tan, 2011). Tan wants readers/viewers to make sense of the varied images and minimal text in his work so that they act as co-constructors of the art. He isn't exaggerating in this expectation, as anyone who has explored his work, and in particular his reliance on image, knows that it takes serious perusing to interpret (Hunter, 2011). Interestingly, Tan says that he is never really clear about the meanings of his paintings or stories; rather, "that's how I know if they are any good. The question of meaning must remain open" (n.p.).

Tan suggests his picturebook, *The Red Tree* (Tan, 2010) is "more or less about depression" (2011, n.p.). He explains further that he was inspired to create this picturebook because of children's artwork that often included emotion, such as storms or monsters. Using this inspiration, he created a book sharing depression, loneliness, and sadness that were best revealed in images.

The video of his picturebook has images moving, like a girl entering a scene, but the image is not changed from the picturebook representation. For example, the girls' legs do not move as she enters the scene. However, the creator of this translation guides the viewer's focus through panning. In one image, the focus is on a tear on her face and then moves to the whole illustration. Additionally, there are pauses between scenes and the words from the text are rotated in several screen shots. The final addition is the music that is somber and slow-paced.

What We Did

We asked fifth graders to view the film of *The Red Tree* from beginning to end and to write after viewing. We just asked, "Please write about your interpretations of this film." Following this direction, we moved away from students so they could write about their interpretations without our distracting them. Our goal was to describe how these students understood the meanings within this film through their written interpretations. Importantly, these students represented other students who have not routinely experienced film, the interpretation of it, and the complexity and nuance required for this interpretation. They have certainly deciphered the meaning of image through their exposure to images in social media, on television, and in movies. Although this interpretation is implicit as they are not directly aware of how the image has been created to garner certain interpretations. Therefore, these students serve as a window to other, similarly naïve, student interpreters of film and help teachers be aware of what they implicitly understand about film and where explicit instruction might benefit students in developing more sophisticated understandings.

To better understand these students' interpretations, we share an overview of the students and the literacy practices of the classroom. Becky taught language arts to two fifth grades and we included all 53 students for this exploration. The students were enrolled in a public elementary school where students came from homes that are considered high SES to low SES. The students within these classrooms varied from above grade level readers to below. Becky's literacy instruction engaged students in literature circles, small group instruction, read alouds, independent reading, and writing throughout each day. Daily, students provided oral and written interpretations of their reading and were comfortable with writing responses.

We collected all of the written responses and then analyzed each one to determine students' interpretations. If, within a response, a student commented on multiple aspects of the film, we considered each comment as a unique contribution. For instance, if a student wrote that the film was about depression and the color red was important, then this response was parceled into the emotion and visual interpretation categories. Therefore, some responses resulted in multiple tallies in various categories while others only gained a single tally as it addressed only one element.

How Students Understood

Most students wrote quietly for about 15 minutes. We learned that overall, they focused on four major areas: Emotional aspects; visual qualities; summaries of the story; and text focus. Within this section, we offer representative examples of students' interpretations.

Emotional Aspects

The majority of students (37) commented about emotions. They were very aware of the girl's sadness and depression. They noted the change in her emotions at the end of the film. One student wrote:

> This video was sad and bleak at the beginning. I first thought it was about a girl who was very different and that's why she was sad, but later I realized it was about any girl who was lonely and sad.

This snippet from her response demonstrated her ability to detect the girl's emotions, try to interpret why she felt this way, and then to reconsider her original interpretation. Her response was also multimodal as she included a visual image of the girl (one of only two students to include drawing), showcasing the tear on her face and the red tree and how it represented a change in emotion (see Figure 1).
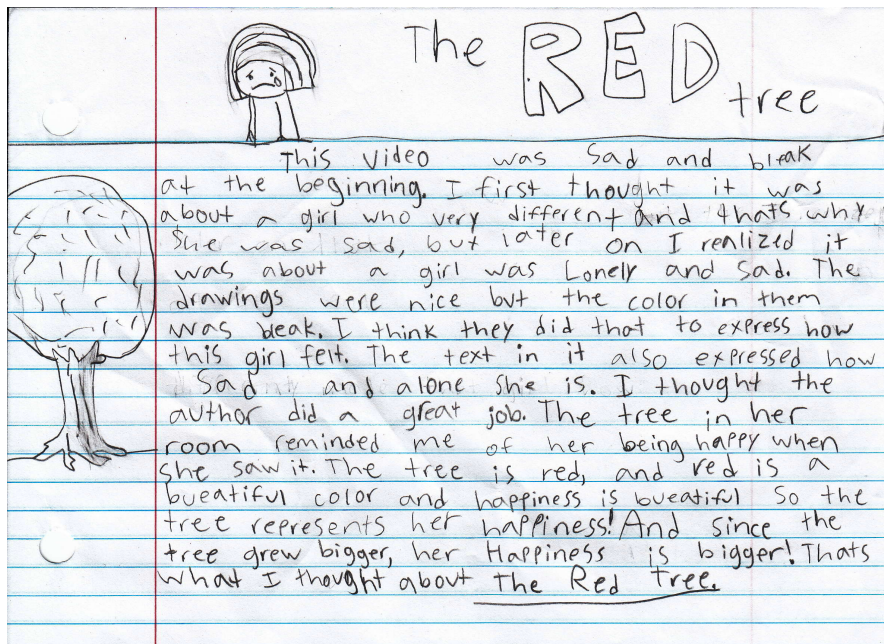

Figure 1 Sample of a Multimodal Response

Another student interpreted the girl's feelings. She wrote:

> What I thought about *The Red Tree* was that the world was coming down around the little girl. When you watch it, it makes you feel remorse and sadness because it seems like the world and wonderful things were passing her by. Nothing was right for her. She felt like the world was not accepting her. The world pretty much made her feel like she had no power as if she had no say in her life. At the turning point she walked into her bedroom and found the red tree that represented hope.

This response is very complex as the student interpreted the feelings of the girl and the effect on the viewer. Additionally, the writer moves beyond an identification of feelings to an interpretation that further explains the girl's lack of agency in changing her place in the world. Moreover, the student acknowledges the metaphor of the red tree in signifying hope coming to her life. This student moves beyond just noticing the emotions conveyed to a critical interpretation of the girl's emotions and to interpreting visual metaphors like the tree.

Although Tan leaves space for interpretation in his work, these students narrowed in on its emotional quality. They easily identified emotions such as sadness, depression, and remorse that Tan acknowledges as the essential meaning in this work.

Visual Qualities

Within the responses, 35 students focused on visual aspects and then explained the meaning of these visual elements. For example, one student wrote, "The red tree reminded me of her being happy when she saw it." Most of the visual responses targeted colors, shadows, and the red tree.

Colors

Students interpreted the colors used by Tan for they knew that the color palette choices were purposeful. For instance, one student wrote: "I think this video was sad because the colors were mainly black and white. The red tree made her happy." For this student, the change in colors, with the addition of red, cued the resulting swing in emotion.

Similarly, students recognized the dark colors as connected to depression and sadness. One student wrote, "I saw a girl who was keeping tallies of what will happen. She was depressed since it was black and grey."

For many students, color was the key to understanding emotional qualities shared in the film. Black, grey, and white were considered somber colors, while bright colors like red were interpreted as hopeful.

Shadows

Students saw the shadows as an essential part of this work. One student wrote, "When watching the film I was thinking that "poor little girl. She looked so sad without having anyone to play with or have fun. She was in the shadows and couldn't get out."

For this student, the shadows took on almost a human element in that they wouldn't release the girl from their oppression. Shadows were an element that represented how stuck the child was in her depression. Students understood that the shadows were in control and the girl had little to no agency to move beyond their power.

The Red Tree

Students realized the red tree was a significant motif, symbolizing the girl's emotional shift. Most students wrote about the tree's significance and offered possibilities for interpretation. One student wrote:

> It told about a red tree to make your dreams come true. Follow your dreams and don't ever look back because you never know what can be found. What was the red tree's purpose? Was it good luck? Was it a sign? Or was it a dream?

We found this response particularly interesting, as this student was comfortable with not having a convergent interpretation of the red tree. He was open to a multitude of possibilities.

Other students wrote:

- I was thinking what does the red tree have to do with it. Then I thought maybe it was good luck. Then when she saw the tree stress came off and the heavy weight lifted off her shoulders. But I think the tree wasn't a real tree, it was just a symbol.

- I think the red tree symbolizes her happiness and whenever she was happy it grew and when she was not happy it did not grow.

These responses indicate that students understood that the tree was symbolic. They knew that the red tree was not a physical tree in her room; rather, it represented a motif showcasing her internal, emotional transformation.

Summaries of the Story

Nineteen students stayed close to the film and wrote summaries of it. The following response represents the summaries:

What I saw was a girl who was keeping tallies of what will happen. She was very depressed since it was black and grey. Then she waited and waited until a red tree was in her room, then something happened and she was happy.

Although summary is not thought of as a sophisticated way of responding, students complicated their summaries. For instance, they shared the journey, but they also included emotion and how colors showed her emotions. It seemed impossible for students to stay grounded in cognitive interpretations; emotional aspects always slipped in.

Text Focus

The text is minimal in this story; however, in the film version, the text often moves into the film, making it more noticeable. For instance, the words "sometimes the day begins with nothing to look forward to" are in the center of the screen shot. Twelve students wrote about the text. For instance, one student wrote about her confusion with the words. She wrote: "I was confused when it said, 'the darkness overcomes you.' I didn't understand what these words on the screen mean. I could read them but what did they have to do with the girl?"

As students wrote about the film, they often included words or phrases from it. It was common to see "darkness overcomes you" or "the day began with nothing to look forward to." Students who included these words or phrases were connecting the powerful visual representation of the textual as an important element within the film.

Empathetic Response

Several responses suggested that students had also felt depression and connected with the girl. One student wrote, "I think it was a good film because I've been like that - depressed. You just have to be patient for cool and wondrous stuff to come to you." Another student wrote, "This film made me think about my worries and what I can do to solve them. I think that this film sends a message to not let your worries get you down and to use your imagination to feel better."

These responses indicate the connections students had with the main character and her emotional journey. They suggest that fifth graders have experienced similar feelings,

like depression. They also offer how students were engaged in making meaning from the film in an abstract sense for they considered thematic interpretations that focused on fitting in and creating a meaningful life. Table 1 shares additional responses for the majority of areas for additional perusing.

Table 1 Additional Student Responses

Type of Response	Example
Emotional Responses	In the video, I saw a little girl that didn't know what she was doing and she didn't have anything to do. She looked lonely and depressed.
	This is about a sad girl who runs away for a long time and travels across the world. She misses her family and she was scared and lonely. Then after a very long time, she comes home, and finds it a different place where she can be happy.
	A little girl had nothing to do and she was sad, quiet, and lonely. She had no friends and no one to help with her problems. I think she lost hope.
	This is a story about a girl who wakes up with nothing to look forward to. She is sad and the author refers her sadness to different things on each page. Like on one page is a giant fish that casts darkness on her.
Visual Responses (Color, shadows, and the red tree)	She was sad at the beginning because there were dismal colors, her frown showed she was sad.
	I think she was happy at the end because the tree was red and red is a color of happiness.
	Her happiness made the red tree grow.
	I think red symbolized her happiness and she went from sad to happy.
	I think the girl was sad because the video was black and gray.
	She had a dark cloud of darkness over her head and no one cared about her.
Summary	I saw a girl having a bad day and then at the end she saw a tree and she was happier.
	A girl is having a bad day in her imagination.
Text	While she waits, darkness overcomes her.
	You wake up with nothing to do.
Empathetic	I think the video was kind of about how bad things happen, and if you wait, things are going to get worse, so if you do something about it, things are going to change and

	everything will end up how it is supposed to be.
	I saw how horrible it would be to have nothing, just a cloud of darkness over your head. No friends, nothing to do. It must be hard to change all of that.
	I think it was about life, because it talked about good things and bad things. Stuff that people wouldn't understand. I feel that way sometimes. Maybe the girl was alone and no one believed in her or believed in the things she believed in.

What We Learned

The first thing we took away was the seriousness that students brought to an interpretation of film. They were puzzled with the content as was shown in their responses, but they knew that image and color were important. They responded to the emotional quality of this film that is concurrent with the suggestions seen in the work of Pantaleo (2012) and Nikolojeva (2013). For example, Nikolojeva wrote: "When reading images, we are looking for recognizable external tokens of emotions, because this is how we use theory of mind in real life" (p. 251). Moreover, students embraced an aesthetic stance, as they were active in interpreting Tan's images and welcomed the ambiguity offered by them (Wolf, 2004).

Secondly, as Tan (2011) suggested, these students were taken with the positive results of this narrative. Almost every student commented on the changes in the girl's disposition when she encounters the red tree. Moreover, the students were not troubled by the openness of this narrative as they each found ways to respond to it and to create meaning which were often conflicted in interpretation.

Third, while Serafini (2010) and Rose (2012) suggest the importance of understanding visual and film elements, most students were not familiar with their importance to interpreting the film. Color was mentioned but no other elements made it to the students' writing. They were not aware of the importance of panning or pausing in the film and how it highlighted certain ideas. However, they did notice the results of panning and pausing when they included the text in their responses. Perhaps, most interesting, no student commented about the music and how it corresponded to the feelings of depression.

Overall, we learned about the quality of the responses of the students. They got it – they created meaning from the film and were aware of the symbolic nature of the girl's shift in emotion. We learned that to enhance their experience, we could provide lessons in visual and film elements so they begin to notice these features and later, move to conceptualizing their importance. We think these lessons would be best if the classroom teacher and art teacher collaborated with students so that both students and teachers could learn from each other. We also believe it would be important for students to view the film multiple times to enhance meaning. Although classrooms have time constraints, to fully understand the subtleties of film, it requires additional viewings for multimodal understanding. Perhaps, with the addition of laptops and tablets, teachers might afford students the opportunity for multiple exposures to a film for more complex understanding. For instance,

they might discover an understanding of the intertwining of music, text, and image; thus, experiencing multimodal ways of knowing.

Finally, we encourage teachers to risk exploring film with students, even if they are insecure about these explorations. As shown in the fifth graders' responses, there is more than a cognitive response offered which is often the foundation of classroom-based literacy responses. When students and teachers move within multimodal texts, shifts are made to where the power of the visual is explored, and its emotional qualities are appreciated. Finally, we discovered that adding visual interpretation of film was not very difficult. Becky just needed to provide the space for such interpretation. And although we only had the students write in response to the film, we are now curious as to what students might do when offered an opportunity to draw in response.

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