

# Shades of Meaning

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Comprehension and Interpretation in Middle School

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# Contents

FOREWORD	ix
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS	xvii
1 Imagination	1
2 Reading Workshop: A Place to Cultivate Imagination	6
3 Real Assessments of Reading: Finding a Direction for My Teaching	23
4 Making Reading Matter: Strengthening Our Relationships to Books	37
5 Getting It: Learning to Attend to More of the Text	53
6 Figuring It Out: Making Inferences	65
7 Making More of the Text: Creating Interpretations	83
8 Finding Gray: Developing Justifiable Interpretations	106
9 Turning Hope into Action	127
BIBLIOGRAPHY	135
APPENDIX: SHORT TEXT COLLECTIONS	141
INDEX	145

# Real Assessments of Reading

## Finding a Direction for My Teaching

### Uncovering Reading Secrets

At the start of each school year, I typically ask my students to complete a reading questionnaire meant to uncover the role that reading plays in their lives. At first, I asked them to tell me about the books they loved and when and where they chose to read. While the answers were somewhat helpful, the questionnaires always fell short. They never yielded the kind of information that I could really use to figure out how to teach the kids to read more powerfully.

Recently, I decided to make a change. Instead of asking questions about their general reading lives, I decided to start in a more sensitive place by asking the kids first and foremost, “When do you fake reading and why? That is, when do you act as if you are reading and really aren’t, and when have you said you’ve read a book that you haven’t?” It may sound strange to begin the school year with such negativity. After all, the beginning of the school year is usually spent building community, getting to know each other as readers, and imagining the kind of year we will create together. But this is middle school, and one thing I’ve learned about middle schoolers is that by the time they get here, most of them have mastered faking it—faking reading, faking community building, faking school. If I had any hope of changing that, I knew I needed to start with uncovering their reading secrets.

I introduced the questionnaire with a discussion of honesty in reading workshop. I wanted the kids to understand that in this class, the only right answer was the one inside their heads. They should forget trying to figure out what I wanted them to write and just write what they were thinking. Then I handed out the questionnaires and sent them off to work.

That evening as I read through their responses, I found that by far, most of my ninety students had faked reading at one time or another and many faked on a regular basis. This did not surprise me. Many kids claim to be reading books their teachers have assigned, but in fact aren't. They simply follow along with other students or ask their friends what happened in the assigned chapters just in case the teacher calls on them. Some claim they might fake reading assigned texts if the teacher requires them to read too many pages in too little time. Other times kids fake reading when they feel pressure to read a particular number of books. New York, like some other states, requires that students read twenty-five books per school year. Students chose books that they can and want to read. They read the books during independent reading workshop and at home. Students' completed texts are documented on a book list that is checked periodically during the year and recorded on report cards. Many students, feeling pressure to keep up with reading, put on their lists some books they haven't read. The cleverest of them list books they've read in previous years, just in case their teachers question them.

Additionally, for many kids, the books chosen for whole-class novels are simply too difficult and it is easier to just pretend to follow along with the class and get what they can from class discussions. This is schoolwork, after all. Many feel that all they have to do is get a decent grade. Many of the kids do not see reading as something that has to do with them personally, let alone as a way to imagine what's possible for their lives. Those who do, do not see school reading as something connected to the reading they do in their personal lives.

If I had any chance at pushing out the boundaries of their reading and getting them to reimagine the role reading could play in their lives, I knew I needed to change these attitudes.

## Looking at Reading: An Early Assessment

First, however, rather than make assumptions, I wanted to learn more about what the kids actually did when they had a book in their hands. In years past, I would begin this part of my reading curriculum with an assessment that would allow me to match kids to books they could and wanted to read. But an assessment aimed at helping kids find books they can read independently doesn't really focus my attention on seeing what kids are doing when they are struggling and the ways they compensate when they are confused. So this year, I decided I would add another assessment into the mix. This year I would try to see more of what my kids were doing as they were reading—what it looked like when they could do it and what it looked like when they couldn't.

Looking at research into proficient readers and studying critical literacy helped me come to the following understandings about strong readers:

- ◆ Strong readers can *envision*—they can build the world of a story in their minds (Keene and Zimmerman 1997; Langer 1995; Pearson et al. 1992).
- ◆ Strong readers can *read between the lines*—they can construct not only what literally happens on the page but also see the deeper meaning behind the words. They understand that often the literal words imply more, and they try to ask questions that allow them to unpack the belief systems a text suggests (Bomer and Bomer 2001; Edelsky 1999; Keene and Zimmerman 1997; Langer 1995; Pearson et al. 1992).
- ◆ Strong readers can let a story lead them to *develop big ideas* about the world of the story and, by extension, their own worlds (Bomer and Bomer 2001; Edelsky 1999).

I decided to create a context to see these qualities in action. I did so in order to figure out how the kids in my own classroom read. I wanted to understand what was happening when kids could read all the words on the page

but had no idea what the story was about. What did the reading sound like? What was going on in their minds? I wanted to understand what was happening when kids could understand the plotline of a book but weren't reading between the lines and figuring out the deeper meaning of the text. I wanted to understand how kids were turning their understandings of a text into larger interpretations—into bigger ideas about the world of the text and possibly their own worlds. And I wanted, finally, to get a sense of whether the kids were developing thoughts and opinions about those bigger ideas. Were they simply naming ideas that developed across their books, or were they also able to think about those ideas in relation to their own experiences and understandings?

In order to find out whether or not these processes were happening in their reading, I needed to find just the right story. I was looking for a story that would expose different aspects of reading. M. E. Kerr's "Do You Want My Opinion?" (1985) was just that story. "Do You Want My Opinion?" is a short story included in Donald Gallo's collection *Sixteen: Short Stories by Outstanding Writers for Young Adults*. It is about a world that at first seems very different from ours. In Kerr's world, people regularly kiss and engage in public displays of affection. Young people are encouraged to "stick to lovemaking" and told that "nice kids" don't share their thoughts. Intimacy is defined not as physical affection but as the sharing of thoughts and opinions. Kerr's world helps us see the social norms we create as community constructs and invites us to reconsider our norms by telling a story that turns them on their head.

In the story, John, our protagonist, is desperate to share his opinions of Chinese-American relations, the situation in the Middle East, and a variety of other current issues. Instead he regularly sticks his head under the cold-water faucet. The story begins in the morning just as John is getting ready for school. His father wanders into his room to give him "the lecture," warning him not to get too intimate with Eleanor Rossi. In other words, he shouldn't ask her opinions. John heads down for breakfast wondering when was the last time his parents shared an opinion. He can't imagine they ever shared their thinking, even though he knows, in fact, they have. John walks to school

with Edna O’Leary, and like the others in the school yard, they cuddle each other. Once in the school, he goes into the bathroom for a smoke and while gazing at the drawings of heads on the bathroom wall, he thinks of Lauren Lake and her comments in Thoughts class the week before. Mr. Porter had asked the class for a definition of dreams and Lauren had raised her hand and told of a dream she had had about a world where you could say anything on your mind, but you had to be careful whom you touched. This provoked quite a bit of laughter and nervousness in class—so much so that Mr. Porter ran back and kissed Lauren. John thinks that maybe he’s just like Lauren. He wants to tell people about the books he’s read and what he thinks about history. Nonetheless, he puts the memory out of his head and leaves the bathroom. As he swings through the door, he sees Lauren heading right toward him. He has to do everything he can to stop from blurting out questions about science and literature. But he instead kisses her.

To prepare for this work, I developed a list of ideas that I would use as criteria through which to examine the kids’ reading, and I developed a system for conducting the individual assessments. First, I wanted to confirm for myself that the kids could get every word right and still miss the story, so I asked the kids to read the first page to me out loud. This also helped me understand more about how fluency affects comprehension. Then I wanted to know that they could build the world of the text in their minds, so I asked them to retell the story, focusing on what happened first and then next and so on until the end of the story. I had chosen a text that would require kids to understand that there’s more to a story than what’s literally on the page and that to read well often means to figure out what’s not there. To know more about whether and how this was happening for kids, I asked them to share with me anything they had figured out about the story. Lastly, to get at their emerging sense of interpretation and their ability to develop an interpretation, I asked them to share with me any bigger ideas they thought the story evoked and to consider their own personal opinions of those bigger ideas.

With the text and my criteria in hand, I spent the next two weeks trying to see what I could discover about what my kids were doing as they read.

## “DO YOU WANT MY OPINION?” NOTES

Criteria	Comments
Retells the story fully.  Figures out the story and develops bigger ideas.  Has thoughts and opinions about the bigger ideas.  Reads aloud with fluency and accuracy.	

Each day, after a minilesson on using the library or strategies for developing stamina as a reader, I sent the class off to read and asked a small group of students to read “Do You Want My Opinion?” independently and meet with me individually. Throughout our time together, I documented everything the kids said on a record sheet that outlined the criteria.

## Patterns of Misreading

As the days passed, I became more and more amazed by the patterns I was seeing. Over and over again I watched the kids read and miscue in the same ways. I knew that to name these patterns would be to figure out how to angle my teaching. It’s important to note here that I did not use this research to determine the individual reading abilities of my students. I didn’t try to create levels or categories of readers. It is impossible to determine the reading ability of each student from one classroom reading experience. And while I did discover particular concerns about some kids and decided I would need to do plenty of follow-up work with them, the purpose of my observations was to search for patterns of reading in the group that could direct my whole-class teaching.

## *Pattern 1: Retelling as Recitation*

Many students were able to pack the story into their heads as they read. That is, when asked to retell, they never once looked back at the text and yet were able to accurately recount what happened in the story. At first, I did not think of this as particularly important. After all, reading is not a memory test. But as I watched others struggle with retelling, I realized that the ability to tell the story from memory revealed a kind of engagement with the text that would allow for greater connections and deeper, more insightful interpretations later.

Those who struggled with retelling did so in a small handful of ways. Some had to keep looking back to remind themselves what had happened each step of the way. These readers were mostly able to take their eyes off the page once their memory had returned. Still other readers never took their eyes off the page and, instead of retelling the story, would almost recite the text. That is, as they were “retelling,” they would look at the page and use most of the words found there. It sounded something like the record sheet below:

<b>Actual Text</b>	<b>Retelling That Sounds Like Recitation</b>
<p>The night before last I dreamed that Cynthia Slater asked my opinion of <i>The Catcher in the Rye</i>. Last night I dreamed I told Lauren Lake what I thought of John Lennon’s music, Picasso’s art and Soviet-American relations. It’s getting worse. I’m tired of putting my head under the cold-water faucet. Early this morning my father came into my room and said, “John, are you getting serious with Eleanor Rossi?” (93)</p>	<p>So the night before last he dreamed that Cynthia asked his opinion of <i>Catcher in the Rye</i>. Last night he dreamed he told Lauren about John Lennon’s music, Picasso’s art, and Soviet-American relations. He’s tired of putting his head under the cold-water faucet. Then early in the morning his father came into his room and asked, “Are you getting serious with Eleanor?”</p>

My sense was that this kind of reading revealed something about the way kids were building the world of the text in their minds and holding onto the story as they read. I wondered about the pictures these readers made in their heads. Instead of making a movie that evolved as the story unfolded, my guess was that these readers were seeing a set of tiny details that passed by individually or, maybe they were seeing nothing at all.

### *Pattern 2: Problems with Accumulating the Story*

Kids who retold the story well also did so in the general order that the story unfolded. They recognized that the parts of the story had something to do with one another and that in building the world of the text, they needed to make connections between the parts. Other kids did not accumulate the story in this way. They acted as if the parts of the story had nothing to do with one another.

For example, some kids acted as if the writer kept changing subjects. While these readers did put the story into a correct sequence, they did not seem to connect the parts and show how they built on one another to create a whole text. In this kind of reading, they might say:

First they're talking about dreams he has, then his dad talks to him about a girl he likes, then he goes to school with another girl, then he goes to the bathroom to smoke . . .

Other kids kind of "poked" at the parts of the text. They'd list things that had happened but in no particular order. In this kind of reading, they might say:

He's tired of putting cold water on his head and he had a dream he told Lauren about the music and art, and his dad asked him if he was serious about Eleanor.

Other kids revealed a failure to accumulate the story by simply skipping parts. They acted as if and sometimes even said that some parts were unimportant, as if the writer were simply wasting words on the page. For

example, many readers skipped the part when John goes down to breakfast after his father leaves his room. In this passage, the text takes us into John's thinking as he tries to imagine the last time his parents shared their thoughts.

I don't think they've exchanged an idea in years.

To tell you the truth, I can't imagine them exchanging ideas, ever, though I know they did. She has a collection of letters he wrote to her on every subject from Shakespeare to Bach, and he treasures this little essay she wrote for him when they were engaged, on her feelings about French drama.

All I've ever seen them do is hug and kiss. Maybe they wait until I'm asleep to get into their discussions. Who knows? (94)

Some readers paid attention to this part. I am not suggesting that readers need to pay equal, intense attention to every detail as they read, but I do think they should consider the possibility that hiding in the details might be ideas they've never thought of before. This is not to say that every detail matters, but only that kids should position themselves to consider details before dismissing them. Kids who paid attention to this part of the story used it first to confirm and then to extend notions they were developing about how this story was different from others about teens and puberty and love. Then they used it to think about how kids perceive their parents.

### *Pattern 3: A Failure to Question Inconsistencies and Ironies*

This story turns conventional ideas on their heads. Most kids took pause at details that seemed unconventional to them. What happened after the pauses created a distinction in my mind between different kinds of readers. Some kids noticed something different about the text and simply responded by saying that it was weird. In this kind of reading, they might say:

Wait, the teacher kisses the student? Are they allowed to do that? That's weird.

Other kids asked smart questions to examine these parts and try to make greater sense of them. "Wait," they said, "why are there heads drawn on

the bathroom walls and why do the parents get upset about Thoughts class?” Kids who were asking these kinds of questions were able to use big understandings they had about the world to develop compelling interpretations of the story. They recognized not only that the story was about growing up and schooling and the way kids and parents perceive each other but also that there was a twist in the story. They recognized that unlike in our own society, where physical affection is private and intellectual exploration public, in this society the two were reversed, and they used that understanding to consider the consequences of a world like that and to think about what the text might want us to comprehend about our world.

#### *Pattern 4: Changing the Story to Fit Preconceived Categories*

Many kids in the class tried to apply familiar concepts to the text as a way to place it in a certain category. Sometimes kids would bring their understandings of the genre to their meaning making. These kids recognized the text as containing dystopian elements and used their knowledge of these elements to make sense of the text.

Other kids saw a pattern or idea in the text that was familiar to them in the world and used it to help explain their thinking. This was a smart way to make sense of the text. Some kids, however, used these categories as ends to their thinking. “This is a growing-up story,” they’d say, or “This is a love story.” When kids used this kind of recognition as the beginning of their thinking, it was helpful in developing nuanced interpretations of the text. When kids saw the category as an end, it stifled them and led them to think that every story that fit into the category was the same. They didn’t try to uncover any complexity or uniqueness. In this kind of reading, they might say:

Oh, this is a story about teenagers and the stuff they go through. It’s about teens and love. John likes all these girls, but his dad doesn’t want him to rush into anything.

Students who read this way missed markers that could have helped them see that this text was trying to position them to think differently about the story world and the real world. For example:

- ◆ “Stick to lovemaking,” [John’s dad said to him].
- ◆ On the bathroom wall there are heads drawn with kids’ initials inside.
- ◆ The bathroom wall graffiti says, “Josephine Merrill is a brain! I’d love to know her opinions!”

### *Pattern 5: Seeing Books as an End Rather Than a Beginning*

The last pattern I saw clearly indicated a reading strength as well as a weakness because most kids were able to bring understandings that they had about the world to this text. The fact that they were able to place the text in a category of “stories like that” showed that they had some interpretive skill. The trouble was that they used these categorical ideas to tie the story up neatly. They used them as answers to the story, as ways to end thinking as opposed to ways to open up thinking and connect the story to other texts and their own lives.

The kids seemed to read as if the story didn’t matter, as if it didn’t contain anything that could provoke them or make them think or affect them in any way. Few kids, when asked to comment on what they thought the text was really all about, had anything to say other than, “I agree. Parents and kids are like that.” I knew that I needed not only to teach the kids strategies that would help them make sense of the texts they were reading but also to encourage them to consider that texts had something to offer them, that they could come to care about what they were reading.

## **Making a Plan from the Assessment**

With all of this in mind, and with a clear vision of my belief in helping kids use reading to explore concerns in their lives, I had to make a decision about what direction my teaching would take for the year. I looked through my research to figure out what needed to come early in the year and what I could put off until later. I had noticed that overall, kids seemed so distant from their reading. Because of this and because I knew that developing a stronger relationship to books was fundamental to seeing reading as a way

to build a world, I decided to begin with a unit of study on bringing reading closer. The unit would help kids see themselves in books and use that connection to begin to care about what they were reading. Later, after many more kids saw what was possible through reading, I would take up what I had noticed about their difficulties with reading carefully and thoughtfully.

## Step Back and Reflect

This early assessment not only directed my whole-class teaching for the year but also set the stage for a way of being as a teacher. The process of creating a way to see what my kids were doing as readers and then trying to name patterns of strength and struggle for the purpose of finding teaching points was incredibly useful and one I would use over and over again throughout the year.

In the past, I often had trouble creating minilessons. I'd embark on a unit of study and then struggle with what to teach. Often when I pulled alongside a student for a conference, whatever she was doing felt pretty good to me, so I'd just compliment her and move on. If things were going poorly in my room, I'd blame the workshop format.

I have since learned that when trouble shows its face in my room, I'm lucky. You see, I now view trouble as possibility. I see it as an opportunity to teach, as the content of my lessons. In fact, now I not only hope for trouble but search for it. I constantly try to problematize my kids' work so that I can think about things to teach them. Sometimes it feels like I am complaining about them a lot or focusing only on what they cannot do. But while I try to be sensitive to looking for strengths to build on, I am not afraid to name struggles. It's there that I find my best cues for teaching.

### Think About Your Classroom

- ◆ Create some tools that will allow you to gather general information about your kids' experiences as readers. Your goal is to find out what reading has been like for them. In what ways have they

felt successful? In what ways have they struggled? If you have developed some theories or concerns about the kids right from the start, you might want to develop a questionnaire that asks really tough questions that will immediately address those concerns.

◆ Find a short text that will help you see what it looks like when your kids are reading. (Pick one that is short enough so that students have time to read it and then meet with you in one period.) You probably want to find a text in which the kids will be able to read all the words but will have difficulties understanding the message. You want a text that has multiple layers of meaning so that you can see multiple levels of reading. Often a story that is set either far away or long ago, such as historical fiction, science fiction, or foreign fiction, provides these layers. It should allow the kids to apply what they know and understand about the world to make sense of this situation but also allow them to move beyond their experience and see some differences. The list of short text collections I've provided in the back of this book might be a place to start.

◆ Create a form to record your observations from the kids' reading. Although a checklist is often appealing, you probably want to avoid a checklist because the purpose of your research is to discover and describe what your kids are doing, not just confirm what you already think. A simple chart that will allow you to record their retellings and describe what you notice about the ideas they develop from the story should suffice.

◆ Look for patterns in their reading. Spend time reading over your notes and looking for the ways in which the kids did or did not make sense of the text. What did they do to make sense? What didn't they understand? What got in their way?

◆ Turn your discoveries into curriculum. Try to sort and categorize the ideas you found into units of study. Lay these categories next

to your goals for the year and use them shape the units. That is, include them as subtopics inside the units and develop minilessons out of them. Don't try to teach about everything you've noticed in September. Decide what you need to teach first and hold off on the rest.