

**Using *Mousie, I Will Read to You*
by Rachael Cole and Melissa Crowton
to Introduce Reading Identity
and Foster Reader-Child Shared Reading Time**

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Introduction

Amongst the multitude of children's books that exist, parents and teachers may find it a challenge to select the optimal children's book sometimes. In this article, one particular children's book titled *Mousie, I Will Read to You* by Rachael Cole and Melissa Crowton (2018) will be examined. Although the 40-page book is primarily aimed at young readers from 3 to 7 years old, it also appeals to a younger audience owing to its colourful and beautiful illustrations. The front cover of *Mousie, I Will Read to You* portrays a warm scene: Baby mouse (Mousie) and mama mouse are sitting on a picnic blanket with books strewn across the grass around them, evidently engaged in conversation about the book they are reading. The summary inside the book cover reads “Follows a mama mouse and her baby mouse on the little mouse’s journey to becoming a reader - from infancy to toddlerhood to elementary school and beyond”, indicating a tribute to a child's literacy journey. This article will focus on the importance of shared book reading from an early age, the significance of the quality of shared reading time, and the

importance of building a reading identity inside and outside the classroom. Utilising excerpts from the book, this article will provide some guiding questions which can be applied in the young learners' classroom. It will also show how this book is beneficial to young children's literacy development and how it introduces them to building a reading identity, a highly important factor for language learning later in life.

Keywords: children's literature, picture books, language development, reading identity, shared reading, emergent literacy

The Importance of Shared Book Reading

Shared book reading is an important contributing factor to young children's language and literacy development. A vast amount of research has continuously shown how the frequency of shared reading is associated with children's language development including language growth, reading achievement, and emergent literacy (Britto & Brooks-Gunn, 2001; Bus, van IJzendoorn, & Pellegrini, 1995; Sénéchal, LeFevre, Hudson, & Lawson, 1996; Van Kleeck, Gillam, Hamilton, & McGrath, 1997). Since 1985, reading aloud to children has been hailed as "the single most important activity for building the knowledge required for eventual success in reading" (p. 23) in a report called "Becoming a Nation of Readers" (Anderson, Hiebert, Scott, & Wilkinson, 1985).

This idea is buttressed by further research investigating the quality of shared book reading. Other than reading aloud to a child - a crucial

element of early literacy development (Roberts & Burchinal, 2002) - additional ways have been explored to maximise the effectiveness of shared reading. Good interactions between the reader and child consists of encouraging children to pose questions, to make inferences, to recall information, and to make predictions (Hindman, Connor, Jewkes & Morrison, 2008).

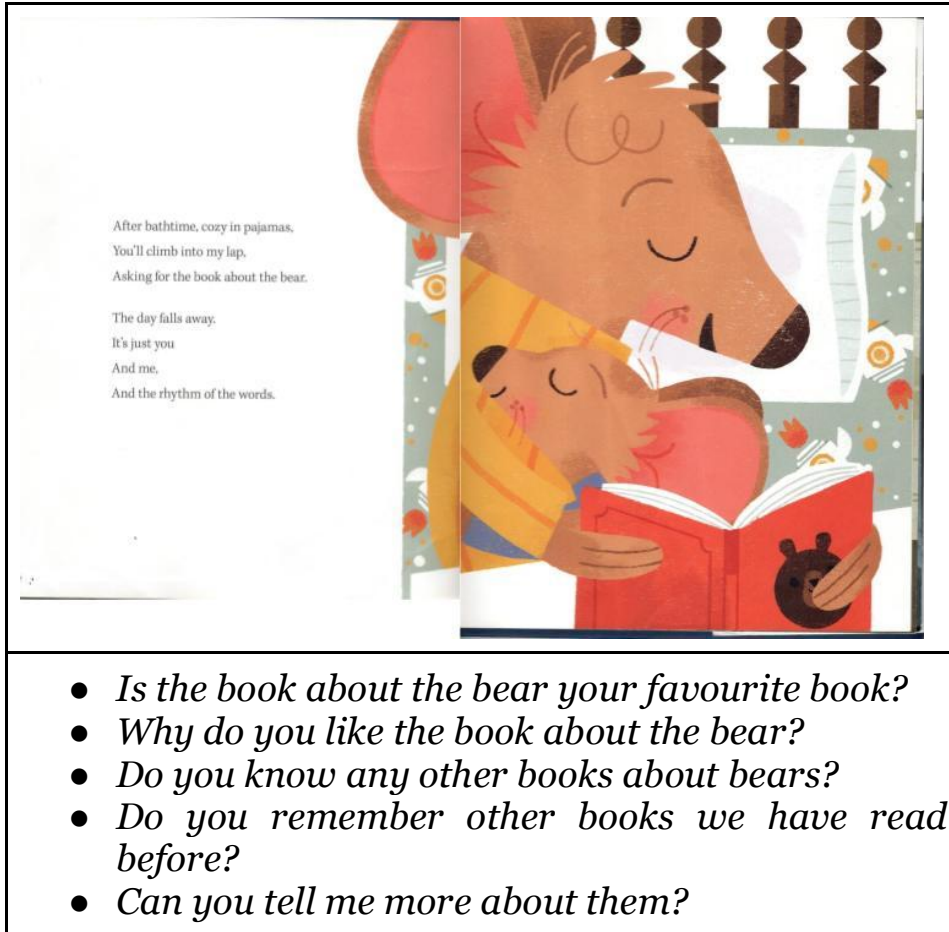
Mousie, I Will Read to You allows many opportunities between the reader and the child to do the above and to have meaningful interactions. For instance:

After bathtime, cozy in pajamas

You'll climb into my lap,

Asking for the book about the bear. (Cole & Crowton, 2018, p. 19)

It is indicated here that *Mousie* has the ability to recall a previously explored book. *Mousie* expresses interest and a desire to revisit “the book about the bear”. The book allows room for parents and teachers to improve the quality of shared reading time by asking questions such as *Do you remember other books we have read before?* and *Why do you like the book about the bear?* This interactive approach of shared reading is referred to as dialogic reading, which involves the teacher or parent asking strategic questions. The teacher or parent has to respond him/herself strategically with the aim of drawing children deeper into the story, delving further into the meaning of the story. Through these probing questions (see Figure 1), children are encouraged to expand their own thinking.



- *Is the book about the bear your favourite book?*
- *Why do you like the book about the bear?*
- *Do you know any other books about bears?*
- *Do you remember other books we have read before?*
- *Can you tell me more about them?*

Figure 1. Example of *dialogic reading* questions

The above is significant as previous studies have shown that helping teachers and parents develop interactive ways to read with children can produce better literacy outcomes (Valdez-Menchaca & Whitehurst, 1992). This is certainly relevant in the classroom as it shows that engaging in conversation in small groups enables children to build relationships while reading. Subsequent research has shown that dialogic reading sessions in small groups of children in the classroom contributed to better story comprehension (Lonigan & Whitehurst, 1998).

Books such as *Mousie, I Will Read to You* or the famous *The Very Hungry Caterpillar* (1994) by Eric Carle which include vibrant and beautiful illustrations could serve as a perfect backdrop for introducing children to literature. But how do picture books enhance children's literacy development?

Although there is a paucity of research on how children use information from illustrations, a study conducted by Early (1991) did demonstrate that solely talking through the beautifully detailed illustrations and disregarding the text had a positive effect on both oral language and literacy development.

More recent studies solidified the power of pictures: Mayer (2005) claimed that the pictures in storybooks helped children's understanding of the story narrative. Building on that, Takacs and Bus (2018) showed that congruent pictures in stories - a picture presented with a matching narrative - significantly contributed to children's comprehension and retellings of stories.

In *Mousie, I Will Read to You*, the text is almost always accompanied by matching illustrations. For instance, the text on page 26 reads:

Years later,
I will find you,
With a flashlight in your room,
Reading a chapter book

to your stuffed animals. (Cole & Crowton, 2018)

This text is accompanied by a detailed illustration matching the narrative. You can see mama mouse standing in the doorway, having found Mousie in his room reading a book. Next to Mousie are his stuffed animals and a flashlight (see Figure 2).



Figure 2. A congruent illustration with the narration

Shared Book Reading in Early Childhood

An article published by *The Japan Times* on July 10, 2013, reported that an increasing number of Japanese parents are eager to have their children start learning English before they even turn one.

Although there is a paucity of research on shared book reading for babies, Claxton and Carr (2004) argue that shared reading is a time of physical closeness between parents and babies. During the shared reading process, values, habits, and attitudes are naturally formed. From a linguistic perspective, Nyland (2000) asserts that shared book reading time with babies renders an opportunity for them to develop positive inclinations towards reading but most importantly, it aids their development of foundational literacy skills - their ability to understand words, sentences, and meaning of what is being read to them - receptive language.

Subtly, the book echoes the idea that starting early is beneficial to a child's language and literacy development. Mousie's mother starts reading to Mousie soon after Mousie is born.

Long before the words make sense, Mousie,

I will read to you

The simplest story

About an acorn that drops to the ground. (Cole & Crowton, 2018, p. 4)

While we are rocking,

I will whisper in you ear

A sentence

About a soft rain coming down. (Cole & Crowton, 2018, p. 6)

Building a Reader Identity

Attaining and developing one's reader identity is an exciting journey, but it can also be a daunting experience and arduous at times. Developing a reader identity does not simply allude to the process of learning to read; it encompasses far more than that.

There are several definitions for the term *reader identity* in the research literature. A definition by Hall (2012) states "Reader identity refers to how capable individuals believe they are in comprehending texts, value they place on reading and their understanding of what it means to be a particular type of reader" (Hall, 2012, p. 369). A simpler and more recent definition refers to reader identity as "understandings about what reading is and whom one is as a reader" (Wagner, 2018, p. 5). Fountas and Pinnell (2001) provided a specific list describing what it means to be a fully-fledged reader: having a plethora of books, reading voluntarily, suggesting books, discussing reading, reflecting on reading and importantly, making connections and thinking critically.

All these definitions show that reader identity is an amalgamation of factors which can be influenced by a variety of aspects and is not an unchanging concept. A reader can have certain beliefs about his or her own reader identity, but this fluctuates and can be shaped over time. It is important for children to think critically, develop their own reader identity as they grow to ultimately become confident and ardent readers.

In the book, Mousie's mother starts off with reading *to* him but this gradually progresses and Mousie's mother starts to read together *with* him:

And while sitting on a bench outside,
You will surprise me by reading a word.
Then two,
Then three. (Cole & Crowton, 2018, p. 23)

Eventually Mousie becomes an independent reader and can read by himself:

I will find you,
With a flashlight in your room,
Reading a chapter book
To your stuffed animals. (Cole & Crowton, 2018, p. 26)

Moreover, mama mouse takes Mousie to the library so he can select his own book. The book provides an opportunity for educators and parents to ask strategic questions to readers, encouraging them to think about their own reader identity (see Figure 3).



- *Have you been to a library before?*
- *What book did you pick at the library?*
- *Why did you choose this book?*
- *Can you tell me what the book is about?*
- *What other books do you like?*
- *Why do you read?*

Figure 3. Example questions to help readers with their reader identity.

Becoming an independent reader in particular can be a challenging experience and a library is an environment conducive to developing a reader identity and the alacrity to reading. And the same can be created inside the classroom: for example creating a library corner filled with an assortment of books from which students can choose what to read and allocating time to read together with students, thus helping them to develop a positive reader identity and to become inveterate readers.

Additionally, Ro and Chen (2014) found that positive attitudes towards reading can significantly influence a child's future performance and motivation in classes with a reading part to them. The parent-child dynamics and events in the story are exactly what one needs to foster a positive attitude towards reading for joy and pleasure. In the book, Mousie's mother uses reading to calm and soothe Mousie:

In the middle of the night,
When your crying fills the room,
I will read you
A poem
About the quietest forest,
Where the only sounds are the crickets,
Whispering sh-Sha sh-Sha
Just for you. (Cole & Crowton, 2018, p. 9)

Conclusion

Mousie, I Will Read to You stands out amongst its peer group of children's picture books not only due to its colourful and beautiful illustrations but also due to the way the book is laid out. A child can unconsciously develop his or her reader identity while following Mousie's literary journey. Additionally, it offers the opportunity for reader and child to create an intimate literary connection. Both of the above are extremely significant to readers language learning journey in life.

Through *Mousie, I will Read to You*, children discover reading as a warm and exciting journey. The book attempts to facilitate the process of children developing that proclivity towards reading in a fun and natural way. *Mousie, I Will Read to You*, will undoubtedly bring literary joy to children and parents.

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