Using the picture book *Thank You, Mr. Falker* to understand struggling readers

Debby Zambo

Using picture books with preservice teachers in teacher education courses allows instructors to make theory come alive. When these teachers have their own classrooms, they can extend the practice with adolescents.

*Imagine this scene.* A college instructor is standing in front of 38 preservice secondary teachers enrolled in an educational psychology course, reading the picture book *Thank You, Mr. Falker* by Patricia Polacco (1998b). All eyes and ears are on the instructor, and there is silence in the room. After examining each illustration and reading each page, the instructor poses questions to spark discussion about the main character, Trisha, who is a struggling reader. The students’ replies indicate that they are connecting the story to what they have read in their college textbook and to their experiences in their internship classrooms. For example, after reading a page about Trisha, one student reports that the course text talks about the importance of differentiated instruction, while another comments on the self-esteem of the students he works with in the “low” reading group.

Now imagine that these students have graduated and are teachers reading *Thank You, Mr. Falker* to the adolescents in their classrooms. After they read each page, they pause and talk with their students about Trisha, her struggles, and her feelings. This sparks a lively discussion and allows them, as neophyte teachers, to use what they learned in their educational psychology course to help the students in their rooms. For example, after they read about Eric bullying Trisha, they talk about aggression, bullies, and victims. During this discussion, their students’ replies indicate that they are connecting Trisha’s story to the struggling readers that they know. One student reports that she experienced bullying when she was younger because she struggled to read. Another comments on how mean students are to his friends in the remedial class. To help the quiet, reserved students relate events from the book to their personal lives, the class members write journal entries about a time when they felt like Trisha.

These scenes reveal the power that picture books afford when professors use them in their college classroom and when teachers, in turn, use them in theirs. At the college level, picture books scaffold the learning of theories. Learning theories is important because teachers begin to understand adolescents and the cognitive, social, and emotional changes and challenges that they face. Teachers who understand theory develop new ways of thinking and possess better problem-solving skills (Killion & Tondem, 1991). However, the value of picture books for preservice teachers extends beyond the college classroom into internships and future classrooms as well. When...
preservice teachers have classrooms of their own, they can use picture books to remember theory and relate it to the adolescents they teach.

**Documented use of picture books in classrooms and textbooks**

Wilhelm (1997) stated that picture books are motivating to older students because they speak directly to the concerns of adolescents and young adults. Picture books have intrinsic appeal, and instructors can use them with a variety of learners to teach a variety of concepts and skills (Neal & Moore, 1992; Routman, 1994). Koc and Buzzelli (2004) used picture books with well-defined dilemmas, powerful plots, lively characters, and clear and logical consequences to advance their young students’ moral reasoning skills. They did so by discussing characters’ actions in the context of moral issues like fairness and human rights. Smallwood (1992) reported that picture books helped her adult English-language learners because the stories were contextually whole and their illustrations visually depicted vocabulary that students needed to know. Smallwood stated that because of their captivating story lines, beautiful illustrations, and mature themes, picture books have universal appeal. Juchartz (2004) used the works of Dr. Seuss and Shel Silverstein in his community college courses composed of students with minimal reading skills. Juchartz used these stories to scaffold the learning of complex concepts and help his students connect complex literature to their lives. He reported no complaints from any of his students on his choice of texts.

Writers of textbooks also use children’s literature to illustrate concepts and ideas. For example, the National Research Council (2000) cited Leo Lionni’s (1970) *Fish Is Fish* to illustrate Piaget’s (1970) ideas of assimilation, or how people fit new information into what they already know. Charlesworth’s (2000) child development text used Beverly Cleary’s character Ramona to illustrate Piaget’s preoperational and concrete operational stages by presenting scenarios of Ramona at ages 4, 5, and 8 (Cleary, 1955, 1968, 1981). Additionally, the teacher’s edition of Santrock (2003) used Barbara Cooney’s (1982) *Miss Rumphius* to spark discussion about adolescent thinking and idealistic views. From these examples, it is evident that using children’s literature with readers of all ages is informative, motivating, and appealing. Teachers can use children’s literature to scaffold learning and develop reasoning skills. Stories contextualize concepts, and pictures illustrate vocabulary and ideas.

**The cognitive value of picture books: Stories and illustrations**

Picture books are fun, interesting, and motivating because they contain art and text in tandem. The stories in picture books help develop new ways of thinking because we gain insight on problem solving from strategies characters use. Stories nourish our mind and are a natural, nonthreatening way to learn (Pinker, 1997). As humans, we enjoy listening to narrative tales, and many of us naturally create stories to convey and pass on what we know. Teachers often tell stories about their experiences in the classroom, and students learn from the stories that they share.

Stories are a natural way to learn, but professors often forget this and lecture on theories outside the context of any story. Theory learned without story becomes lifeless and abstract (Gillespie, 1992). Teachers also find themselves lecturing students about various topics. This method of instruction often turns adolescents off to what is being said. Placing ideas or lessons in the context of a story allows teachers to make their point without lecturing, challenge current ideas, and advance students’ reasoning skills (Koc & Buzzelli, 2004). When teachers ask open-ended questions, allow students to express their ideas, and do various activities to get students involved, they nurture development in a nonauthoritarian way (Damon, 1988).
Picture books allow students to live vicariously through characters instead of experiencing the situation themselves (Evans, 1998; Wilhelm, 1997). Stories help students learn about various people who are different and gain insight about issues of importance for them (Alsup, 2003). This point was made many years ago by Rosenblatt (1938) when she wrote, “As the student shares through literacy the emotions and aspirations of other human beings he can gain heightened sensitivity to the needs and problems of those remote from him in temperament, in space, or in social environment” (p. 261). This idea extends to students who struggle to read because they are often remote from other learners in space and social status. Students who struggle in school need understanding to help them cope with their emotions and achieve their aspirations. Use of stories can assist them in becoming more empathetic and educated human beings (Alsup, 2003).

In addition to the value of story, picture books also provide a visual representation of children’s behaviors and experiences. The pictures in a picture book help unlock situations, emotions, and behaviors with a simple stroke of the pen. The illustrations in picture books depict the facial expressions, emotional reactions, and body posture of characters, and these visuals allow preservice teachers to create an image of what theories look like as they are being lived. Visual literacy, or the ability to read pictures and the message in them, is a vital skill but one many students fail to obtain (Evans, 1998). Another value of illustrations is that they can help adolescents learn to read body language and facial expressions. This is important because adolescents who cannot read intentionality from actions and body language are likely to interpret behaviors as negative even when they are not (Berk, 2002). Using pictures and text simultaneously, or coding information visually and verbally, helps learners better understand and retain information. Dual-coding information increases the likelihood of recall because there are both visual and verbal trace modalities (Paivio, 1991; Sadoski & Paivio, 2001). The pictures in picture books serve as a visual cue for emotions and abstract theories, and the story helps place theory in the context of children’s lives. These benefits make picture books a valuable teaching tool.

In this article, I present the picture book Thank You, Mr. Falker by Patricia Polacco (1998) as one example to illustrate the power that picture books afford. The topics I present for this book are by no means exhaustive but are typically found in the curricula of reading education, child development, and educational psychology courses and are issues that are of concern in many classrooms today. In this article, I describe the story, the illustrations, and how I elicit discussion with the preservice teachers in my courses. I then go on to describe how teachers of adolescents can, in turn, use this book with the students in their classrooms to enhance domains of knowledge and social and moral reasoning skills. As instructors and teachers, you do not have to discuss every topic for each page that I present but should pick, choose, and modify ideas to fit your needs and those of your students. Also, be aware that working with adolescents will likely be very different from working with adults.

Preservice teachers in college classrooms are more willing to discuss how they feel because time and age have given them distance and a broader perspective about the issues. Adolescents, on the other hand, are likely to be living these experiences and dealing with the emotions that are involved. Because they are so close to the issues, adolescents may be reluctant to openly express their experiences, thoughts, and emotions. Be sure to handle all topics with discretion so students do not feel singled out or targeted.

To assist you in doing this I present non-threatening activities you can use along with, or in place of, class discussions. Some of these can be used while the story is being read, but many are intended to be follow-up responses. Also remember that when you engage adolescents in discussion, you should use open-ended questions and general requests. Do not ask an unremitting series of questions, and always allow plenty of time for
students to give their replies. Key to using picture books in any classroom is a solid understanding of students, theory, and pedagogy.

**Thank You, Mr. Falker**

*Thank You, Mr. Falker* is a story about a young girl named Trisha who is a struggling reader. In reality, Trisha is Patricia Polacco, the author and illustrator of the book. The book is an autobiographical account and Polacco’s song of thanks to teachers like Mr. Falker. *Thank You, Mr. Falker* begins with an illustration of Trisha and her Grandpa pouring honey on a book. Performing this family tradition helps Trisha and her brother value reading. The story relates that Tricia tastes the honey and comments on how sweet it is. The family then chants, “Yes, and so is knowledge, but knowledge is like the bee that made that sweet honey, you have to chase it through the pages of a book.”

After I read the first page, the preservice teachers in my class and I reflect on the message Trisha’s family is sending to her about reading. As part of our discussion, I bring in theory from reading and development. For example, I note that Trisha’s family is telling her that reading is vital to knowledge and that it is good to pursue knowledge through a book, a common theme echoed in many homes today. Parents believe that reading is something children need and a domain they should work hard to master (Rasinski & Padak, 2000). Vygotsky (1978) noted that reading is an important cultural tool that parents give to children: a tool that enhances their cognitive growth.

Teachers of adolescents can use this page to enrich the curriculum of social studies and reading by having students reflect on their family traditions that involve books. Students can discuss favorite books read to them when they were younger or favorite stories or poems read by their families on holidays. To expand on this discussion, students can draw or write about how their families use literacy in traditions and celebrations. Ideas include songs they sing, favorite recipes they bake, or the writing of letters and cards. If students experience difficulty coming up with their own ideas, they can research how various cultures use literacy in their celebrations. They can examine songs of celebration or stories and poems read at special times. Another book that connects to this idea is *The Wednesday Surprise* by Eve Bunting (1989). This story tells of how a granddaughter helps her grandmother learn to read so she can read to her son on his birthday.

The next page of the story shows Trisha drawing a picture with three of her classmates nearby. Trisha is smiling proudly and being admired for her artistic skills. At this point, she still likes school because she can draw and no reading is involved. One might speculate that Trisha is drawing a picture for a book because the story reveals that Trisha loves books. Her mother, who is a schoolteacher, reads to her every night; her red-haired brother shares his schoolbooks with her; and her grandparents read to her when she visits them on their farm. Reading to Trisha is another example of how her family is modeling and encouraging her emergent literacy skills. Trisha is 5 and in kindergarten with the dream of learning how to read. However, by the end of her kindergarten year Trisha is not reading. Trisha holds on to her dream because of her brother’s words of encouragement, “In first grade you’ll learn to read.”

After I read this page my students and I discuss how Trisha is learning to value reading and the reinforcement she is receiving to pursue this goal. As we discuss this, I infuse theory from reading and psychology into our conversation. At age 5, Trisha loves books because she has access to them, is read to, and is encouraged for her emerging literacy skills. Trisha has good early literacy experiences because positive role models demonstrate the importance of reading and encourage her to learn. Bandura’s (1977, 1997) social cognitive theory explained the influence those early experiences have in terms of behavior and cognitive factors. When children observe others, they form ideas about their behavior and adopt these behaviors themselves (Zimmerman & Schunk, 2002). In the context of reading, this means that when...
children see their parents and family members read, they are more likely to value and display this skill (Rasinski & Fredricks, 1989). Trisha wants to become a reader because she has role models who read and encourage her to learn. Many children like Trisha come to school excited and eager to learn, and reading is one domain that they often hope to master. Unfortunately for students who struggle, the kindergarten experience does not help to fulfill their dream.

Teachers of adolescents can link these pages to history and current affairs. Students can investigate the history of reading from early cave paintings to our modern information age. Students can then create a record of their personal reading history with a timeline or yearbook. This would include their reading experiences from earliest memories to their present age. When they do this, be sure to have them include people who influence them and the places and times they read. As they create their projects, a discussion about the influence of the media and advertising on reading choices and the popularity and status of reading certain books can take place. You can also discuss how movie versions of stories compare to real text. Adolescents today have many role models and sources for information, and to them reading sometimes seems dull. A story you can read to reinforce the value of reading in this fast world is *The Bee Tree* by Patricia Polacco (1998a). This story is about a girl named Mary Ellen who becomes tired of reading and longs for adventure instead. She sets out with her Grampa to find the bee tree and, thanks to his insight, comes to realize that adventure, wisdom, and knowledge don’t always need to come from excitement but can be pursued through the pages of a book.

After students complete these activities, it would be good to set up a buddy-reading system so that they can become positive role models for younger children. Going into another classroom and reading to younger students or reading to siblings at home would boost the self-esteem of struggling readers and help them and others see them in a more positive light. Once students are successful doing this, they can add their new experience and perspective to their timeline or yearbook.

Before I read the next page in the story, I show my students the picture and ask them to “read” what it says. Trisha is sitting at her desk staring at a book with a frown on her face and body language that reveals her frustration. It is at this point that I introduce the importance of visual literacy, or the ability to read pictures to gain understanding, and connect that to reading children’s faces and body language in real life (Evans, 1998). I ask my students to read the picture and describe the emotions Trisha displays. We then go on to read the story to discover if their guesses were correct. The story reveals that Trisha looks this way because she is now in first grade and has made little progress in learning how to read. She is upset with reading because she tries so hard to learn letters and words but sees only wiggling shapes on the page. When Trisha is asked to read out loud, her classmates laugh because she mispronounces words and always get assistance from her teacher. Even though she is only in first grade, Trisha is very aware that the other children can sound out letters and words. It is in first grade that Trisha begins to feel “different” and “dumb.”

It is at this point that I ask my students to think about what children at this age are like emotionally, socially, and cognitively, and I present theory from development and psychology. Children in first grade are sensitive beings who love to help, need approval, and find failure to be a very difficult thing. Wanting to be near, offering to help, and displaying tears of disappointment are common at this age (Lenski & Nierstheimer, 2004). Tears come because children develop greater cognitive sophistication, which makes social comparisons possible. Moreover, with the lessening of egocentrism and the development of perspective taking, children acquire the ability to imagine what others think of them (Marshall, 1994). One might argue that children of this age have reached the Piagetian stage of reciprocity.
and cooperation; they learn to consider others’ views and, as a result, become more self-conscious (Piaget, 1970).

Trisha entered school expecting to learn to read but soon discovered it to be a daunting task she could not achieve. I ask my students to consider how Trisha’s experiences are affecting her self-efficacy, or belief in her ability to succeed, and her self-esteem, or the global feelings she has about herself. Trisha does not understand what is happening to her, and she does not realize that her condition is not her fault. Trisha is experiencing suffering and humiliation because of her inability to read out loud. My students and I brainstorm ways to involve struggling readers in classroom reading activities that will help them avoid embarrassment and humiliation. My students usually say that children who struggle to read should have time to preview and practice the text they will be required to read. They then go on to talk about strategies they have seen their mentor teachers use, such as repeated reading, choral reading, and Readers Theatre.

We then discuss how struggling readers in embarrassing or unconquerable situations often give up on themselves and become victims of learned helplessness. I explain that learned helplessness is a condition in which children perceive themselves unable to overcome failure and, as a result, come to believe that they cannot control or improve their situation (Seligman, 1975; Witkowski, 1997). Children create working models of the self, and, if failure becomes part of their model, feelings of inadequacy are reinforced. I tell my students about the research of Valtin and Naegele (2001), who found that reading and writing failures cause not only academic failure but also psychological distress (low self-esteem, poor self-concept, frustration, anxiety) and behavioral difficulties (aggression, psychosomatic symptoms) as well. My students and I then discuss how Trisha’s low self-efficacy may cause her self-esteem to suffer as well because self-efficacy creates the basis for one’s self-esteem (Bandura, 1997). Covington (1999) proposed that self-esteem is a basic need of all humans and that in our society, school-age children’s self-worth depends upon academic success. Trisha has internalized the value of reading, and her self-esteem is hurt because she is struggling to achieve this valued skill. Positive self-esteem is important to all children, particularly struggling readers.

Teachers working with adolescents will want to show the picture and discuss what Trisha’s body language says before they read the page. You may need to scaffold students’ thinking as they “read” the picture, but your efforts will assist them in learning how to look at others to see how they feel (Evans, 1998). Reading intentionality from actions and body language is a valuable skill many adolescents lack (Berk, 2002). You then can go on to read the story and see if their guesses match. When you discuss the story, you do not have to report theory or use technical terminology; instead, your goal should be to help students discover the value of the message in the pages. You can ask students to consider how Trisha’s experiences are affecting her beliefs about herself. Students can re-create the scene on this page and role-play Trisha, her classmates, and her teacher. Questions about emotions and behaviors might be a good place to start.

After the enactment, students can brainstorm ways to help peers who struggle to read avoid embarrassment and humiliation, as well as ways to involve them in their social groups. Posting these ideas in the classroom can serve as a reminder. Reading Mr. Peabody’s Apples (Madonna, 2003) would also be a good idea because students who are different often become the focus of rumors. This book illustrates how rumors hurt feelings and, once spread, are difficult to erase. Rumors and unkind actions wound self-concepts, and when this occurs students do not feel good about themselves. Students need to understand that when this happens it will take time and patience to help peers feel comfortable and part of the class. Emphasizing cooperative groups and eliminating competition are strategies to use. Working cooperatively assists adolescents in
developing their emotional intelligence, moral reasoning, and conflict resolution skills (Webb & Farivar, 1994).

The next page of the story shows Trisha walking with her Gramma and talking to her about her differences. Her Gramma tells Trisha that “To be different is the miracle of life” and she reassures Trisha that she is the “smartest, quickest, dearest thing ever.” The picture and story reveal that Trisha feels safe in her Gramma’s arms and that reading does not matter so much when she is there. After we read this page, my students and I discuss how important a family is in helping children develop resiliency. Children who have warm, nurturing relationships with others develop and maintain skills that help them deal with stress (Masten, 2001). Resilient children can live through adversity, deprivation, and cruelty because of the protective factors in their lives; very often, that protective factor is one adult, like Trisha’s Gramma, who cares (Bernard, 1991).

Resiliency develops when children know someone believes in them and will always be there for them. Trisha’s Gramma is building resiliency in Trisha with her reassurance and belief. She is helping Trisha understand that being different is not always bad; being different can also mean one is unique.

With another turn of the page, we learn that both of Trisha’s grandparents have passed away, and with their passing, school becomes just plain torture for her. To make matters worse, we learn that Trisha is moving to California, a long way from the family farm in Michigan. Trisha does not want to move but begins to think that, if she does, things might be different because the teachers and students would not know that she is “dumb” and cannot read. After reading this page, my students and I discuss how children feel when they move. I tell them that research shows that moving is a major stressor in children’s lives and that moving to another state or town often results in a drop in self-esteem (Simmons & Blyth, 1987). For Trisha, whose self-esteem was already low, moving is devastating. Trisha has recently lost two people she loved, moved far from the comfort of the family farm, and had her dream that things would be better shattered. She continues to stumble over words, and the children in her new school, just as in her old one, make fun of her and call her names. It is at this point that my students and I discuss Eric Erikson’s (1968, 1980) stages of psychosocial development. We usually agree that Trisha is in the initiative versus guilt stage and that school is an important focus for her. We talk about how children at this stage must deal with the demands of school and become competent. If they do not, they may develop a sense of inferiority, failure, and incompetence.

Teachers can use these pages to build resiliency by discussing challenges in the lives of adolescents. Trisha has to cope with moving, and many students in schools today face this change. Having students create a character diary Trisha might have kept during her move can reinforce writing skills. Students can brainstorm ways to help new students who come to their school feel accepted and ways to help students in remedial classes feel comfortable and welcome. There are other books about being different that teachers can use. I Can Hear the Sun (Polacco, 1996) is about a homeless boy named Fondo and Stephanie Michele, a caregiver of geese, who helps him find his way home. Looking After Louis (Ely, 2004) contains an upbeat look at mainstreaming told from the perspective of a little girl who sits next to Louis, an autistic boy. The book concludes with information from a child clinical psychologist who offers insight on autism and mainstreaming students with special needs. Another book that deals with differences is Mr. Worry: A Story About OCD (Niner, 2004). In this book, illustrations and story tell about a young boy who is trying to overcome the terrors of obsessive–compulsive disorder (OCD). Mr. Worry contains straightforward information about the setbacks that individuals with OCD face and the progress they can make. Each of these books portrays differences that likely cause stress in some children’s lives. This would be a good time to have students discuss stress in their lives and positive ways to
relieve it. Incorporating a few minutes of relaxation with music and quiet time would benefit any adolescent in today’s world.

The next page of Thank You, Mr. Falker changes the book’s tone. When Trisha enters fifth grade she meets Mr. Falker, a tall, elegant teacher who wears neat clothes. Mr. Falker encourages Trisha when she draws, and looks hard and mean at students when they make fun of her. If he hears children making fun of Trisha he says, “Stop! Are all of you so perfect that you can look at another person and find fault with her?” Thanks to his admonitions, most of the children do not laugh out loud at Trisha any more, except for Eric. Eric has been sitting behind Trisha for two years, taunting and bullying her. There is a picture of Trisha in a cowering stance, her hands clenched in fists and a frown on her face, with Eric yelling things at her like, “dummy,” “not one of us,” “you don’t count,” and “no hoper.” Trisha is terrified of Eric and is happy at school only when she is with Mr. Falker. However, the meaner Mr. Falker is toward Trisha, the meaner Eric becomes, so Trisha begins to isolate herself socially and develop avoidance behaviors. Trisha hides in the bathroom before recess so she can avoid Eric’s mean remarks. The book contains a poignant picture of Trisha hiding under a darkened stairwell while her classmates play in the sunlight outside.

After I read this page, my students and I discuss children like Eric, who are bullies and use aggression to hurt children like Trisha. I present facts from research and connect them to the story. Trisha has become part of the 10% of children in the United States who are chronic victims or targets for physical and verbal attacks from their peers. We then go on to discuss that psychologists have found that children who are victims tend to have low self-esteem and feel anxious, lonely, and insecure (Graham, 1998). I also mention that female victims tend to internalize their problems, become withdrawn, and be victimized over a long period of time (Hodges & Perry, 1999). My students and I discuss why this might have happened to Trisha. We conclude that she experienced a major move from Michigan to California, lost her beloved grandparents who were a source of emotional support, and continued to fail at the important task of reading that she hoped to master. Trisha was a victim who blamed herself for her situation; children like Trisha, who are chronic victims, lose interest in school and develop depression (Hodges & Perry; Limber, 1997).

Bullying is a reality in many schools, and many students, like Trisha, are painfully aware of this fact. This idea can spark discussion on bullies and how they hurt students who struggle to read. Students can discuss aggression and solutions that they can employ. Teachers can introduce the bullying cycle that explains the roles people play when bullying occurs (Olweus, 2002). Students can participate in role-plays where they are bullies, enablers, disengaged onlookers, or activists who take a stand and defend victims like Trisha. Students should be encouraged to look at the pictures in the book and consider the perspective of their character and how he or she may be thinking or feeling. Adolescents are more likely to help someone when they can look at a situation from the other person’s perspective and learn empathy and sympathy for that person’s plight (Eisenberg, 1995). This activity can conclude with a discussion about victims and how they often feel lonely, anxious, and insecure. Students can write their experiences in two-column notes, comparing Trisha’s situation and problems to those in their own lives.

Other books about bullies and victims can be read to help adolescents better understand Trisha’s plight. Hooway for Wodney Wat by Helen Lester (1999) is the story of Rodney, a rodent with a speech impairment who cannot say his Rs. Things change at Rodney’s school when Camilla Capybara joins his class. She is bigger, meaner, and smarter than any other rodent, and everyone is afraid, especially Rodney. One day Rodney catches Camilla out in a game and saves his classmates from her bullying ways. This story reflects the transformation of a shy rodent with a speech impediment to the hero of the class. It also contains
wonderful illustrations that portray body language and emotions that the characters feel. *Mr. Lincoln's Way* by Patricia Polacco (2001) is another book about bullying that provides a different perspective. It is the story of Eugene, a bully who has no friends until Mr. Lincoln helps him find his strength and inner kindness. Once this happens others see the qualities in this troubled boy.

The next page of the story reveals how Mr. Falker deals with Eric’s bullying. When Mr. Falker overhears Eric’s mean words he sends him to the principal’s office and reassures Trisha that she will not have to worry about him any more. It is at this moment Mr. Falker comes to realize that Trisha has been hiding the fact that she cannot read and has been compensating by memorizing what the other children read. He asks her to stay after school and begins working with her. Mr. Falker works diligently to boost Trisha’s self-esteem. There is a picture of Mr. Falker hugging Trisha, who has tears in her eyes because he tells her how smart, cunning, and brave she has been. Mr. Falker commits himself to helping Trisha learn to read and enlists the help of Miss Plessy, the reading specialist. Together they work with Trisha after school using techniques like making circles on the chalkboard with sponges and using blocks to spell out words. In Trisha’s words, she worked on “letters, letters, letters, and words, words, words always sounding them out.” After several months of this intense instruction, Trisha begins to decode letters, then words, then sentences, and finally entire paragraphs. Trisha breaks the code of reading, and when she does she doesn’t even notice that Mr. Falker and Miss Plessy have tears in their eyes.

It is at this point that my students and I discuss the importance of best practices, differentiated instruction, and never giving up on a child. We discuss how important teachers are in a child’s life, especially younger students and those who struggle in school (Newman, 2002; Oakes & Lipton, 2003). Students contribute stories about a teacher who has inspired them or touched their lives. I explain that research has found important teacher qualities to be enthusiasm, poise, adaptability, warmth, and awareness of individual differences (Shulman, 1987). All are qualities Mr. Falker possessed.

At this point teachers of adolescents can parallel what I do with my class. Adolescents can discuss teachers, like Mr. Falker, who have influenced them and helped them achieve. To enhance their writing skills they can write letters to these teachers and thank them for all they have done. It would also be beneficial to discuss special techniques, curricula, or equipment that students can use to be successful in school. Helping students become tolerant and accepting should be the goal, along with helping adolescents empathize with children who have learning differences. *The Sneetches and Other Stories* by Dr. Seuss (1961) can be used to help students appreciate their differences and learn to be happy with who they are. The book *Read On Rita* (Cosgrove, 1992) would be another great read. This is a story about tutors and special readers and a hedgehog who steals reading from their lives. Fortunately, Rita, a reluctant reader, beats the challenge and wins back the thousands of words that the hedgehog has stolen. The book ends with Rita becoming a reader and gaining dreams and greater tomorrows from the books that she reads. The final page says, “Read on Rita, Rita, read on. Books are the key, dreams you can see.” *Read On Rita* and *Thank You, Mr. Falker* both contain many wonderful and insightful quotes. Students can choose their favorites and share them to enhance their communication skills.

On the final pages of the story, Trisha runs home and spoons honey on the same book her Grandpa did so many years ago. The final picture shows Trisha looking up at the stars and saying, “The honey is sweet, and so is knowledge, but knowledge is like the bee who made the sweet honey, it has to be chased it through the pages of a book.” Trisha cried because she “was happy, so very happy.” Mr. Falker has unlocked the door of reading and pulled her into the light. My students and I end our discussion talking about the successes they have seen in their intern classrooms.
Adolescents can also talk about their success stories, the careers they hope to achieve, and how reading will fit into their future plans. This discussion should focus on the influence of reading on all our lives and how important it is to never give up trying to become a good reader. Students can do an author study on Patricia Polacco's life because she is a great role model and a true inspiration for any adolescent who struggles to read. Polacco did not learn how to read until she was 14, yet she became an author and illustrator of many picture books.

**Becoming like Mr. Falker**

Picture books are a familiar and motivating medium and one I urge all instructors to try. Using picture books in my college classroom allows me to set theory in context, create a visual representation of it, and make it come alive. However, the benefit of picture books does not stop there, because when my students graduate they, in turn, can use them to remember theories and apply those theories to the adolescents in their classrooms. As teachers of adolescents, they can use picture books to recall theories and reinforce the skills and domains of knowledge that their students need. Books like *Thank You, Mr. Falker* are powerful because they build resiliency in struggling readers and empathy and moral reasoning in their peers. *Thank You, Mr. Falker* helps students learn about themselves, their peers who struggle, and the importance of becoming a compassionate person. A person like Mr. Falker, who understands the difficulties struggling readers face, stops the embarrassment to which they are exposed and works relentlessly to help them become readers, so they can chase knowledge through the pages of a book.

**REFERENCES**


