

To Understand

New Horizons in Reading Comprehension

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*For Jamika,
and those like her who ask questions that must be answered.*

*For Bruce,
as ever.*

Contents

Foreword ix

Acknowledgments xi

Prelude xv

Chapter 1: Rethinking Understanding 1

Chapter 2: Seeking Understanding in Our Minds,
in Our Lives 20

Chapter 3: Driven to Understand 41

Chapter 4: Dwelling in Ideas 71

Chapter 5: To Savor the Struggle 99

Chapter 6: A Renaissance of Understanding 131

Chapter 7: Nothing as Certain as Change 160

Chapter 8: The Great Conversations 195

Chapter 9: To Feel, to Remember, to Understand 226

Appendix A: Comprehension Strategies Defined 246

Appendix B: What's Essential? Literacy

Content K–12 253

Appendix C: Conditions for Success in Reader's and
Writer's Workshops 259

Appendix D: Conference Record	261
Appendix E: Beyond Reporting on the Book: How Children Can Record Their Thinking <i>About</i> Books	263
Appendix F: Thinking Strategies Proficient Learners Use	265
Appendix G: Tactics for Teaching Comprehension: Effective Strategies for Teaching Deep Structure Systems	274
Appendix H: Best Practices in Oral Language Teaching and Learning	277
<i>Bibliography</i>	288
<i>Index</i>	292

Foreword

SOME THINGS ARE WORTH THE WAIT. Think chocolate chip cookies baking in the oven, flowers peeking their heads out of the snow in spring, that first day back at the beach after a long, cold winter. And just like fresh-out-of-the-oven chocolate chip cookies, bright yellow daffodils, and warm sand sifting between fingers and toes, Ellin’s insightful and thought-provoking book *To Understand* is worth the wait, too.

You may know Ellin from *Mosaic of Thought*, the groundbreaking book on comprehension she coauthored with Susan Zimmermann. Because of their book and others that followed, teachers across the country now teach their students strategies for enhancing understanding and constructing meaning.

But it was a chance encounter with a brilliant little girl named Jamika that propelled Ellin to think more deeply about her earlier work. When Jamika looked Ellin straight in the eye and asked her, “What does ‘make sense’ mean?” Ellin didn’t know what to say; she wasn’t really sure. But if you know Ellin like I know Ellin, you know she wouldn’t let Jamika’s question go unanswered.

Through research and study, introspection and reflection, sleepless nights and countless days in classrooms working with teachers and their students, Ellin crafted a substantive answer to the question, What does “make sense” mean? What does it mean to understand?

To Understand is not a sequel to *Mosaic of Thought*. *To Understand* challenges us to think beyond comprehension strategies; it invites us to ask what these strategies are for. Why should readers use them? What’s our ultimate goal? Once our goal is defined, what are its characteristics? What mentors might we turn to?

To tackle these questions, Ellin has developed three powerful models. In the first, Dimensions and Outcomes of Understanding, she identifies, names, and explains key indicators of intellectual engagement, among them dwelling in ideas, revising our thoughts, and creating emotional connections. As always, Ellin aims high, encouraging us to think of all our children as intellectuals and scholars.

But to create space for this kind of engagement, she urges us to cut through the clutter, slow down, determine what's essential, and teach those things deeply and well. Where to begin? Fortunately, Ellin has developed another powerful model that she aptly calls *What's Essential for Literacy Learning*? It's here that she lays out the key features of literacy learning. Based on mountains of research, Ellin has synthesized it for us in a practical, easy-to-use format.

Along with the Literacy Studio, the reader's/writer's workshop model first described in the second edition of *Mosaic of Thought*, Ellin brings these models to life through compelling vignettes of her work in some of the most economically distressed schools in this country. You'll fall in love with Jamika and Kevin. You'll want to transport yourself to Kathy Francescani's and Jodi Snyder's amazing classroom in Cleveland. And most of all, you'll be inspired to consider the implications for you and the children you teach. *To Understand* is the perfect book to read and discuss with colleagues. It will make you think. It just might keep you up at night. And that's just what Ellin would love to hear!

Happy reading,

Debbie Miller

Prelude

I CAN FIND 110,000 THINGS TO DO instead of writing: another load of laundry to throw in, a bathroom that could use a fresh coat of paint, emails to which I really should respond, plans for upcoming speeches and workshops, errands to run. Once seated at the keyboard, as I am now with a little music in the background and December sun reflecting off the snow and streaming into my little office, I actually relish the physical sensation of my mind speaking through my fingers as they fly across the keys. I rarely have to wait for ideas to come; as soon as I sit down, my fingers begin to move. It's that sitting-down thing . . .

My long-suffering friend, editor, and mentor, Tom Newkirk, professor of English at the University of New Hampshire and author of numerous important books for teachers (including *Misreading Masculinity*, 2002), drew the short straw and was asked to shepherd this book from conceptualization through publication. Tom worked with me and Susan Zimmermann while we were writing *Mosaic of Thought* (1997, 2007). I trust his judgment, respect his work, and am a huge fan of his writing, so I was thrilled, but I doubt he knew what he was in for.

One afternoon when Tom was in Denver to work with teachers in the area, I was chauffeuring him around town and mentioned how surprised I was that *Mosaic of Thought* had been so successful. I said I had hoped it would sell in the double digits (i.e., more than nine!) and that if it needed a little help, I figured I could talk my dad into buying five or six more copies. The conversation led to my difficulty in getting started on a second book, and then I made a comment Tom will never, ever, ever let me forget. It was something along the lines of, "You know, I feel a bit like John Elway [superstar quarterback for the Denver Broncos football team], who had to make a decision about whether to retire after winning the [1998 and 1999] Super Bowl. Shouldn't you quit while you're on top? *Mosaic* did well; maybe I'm a one-hit wonder!"

I thought I had made a wonderful analogy that would explain why I was struggling so much to get started on a second book, but Tom laughed so hard he nearly split open. He doubled over in the car seat next to me and gasped for air, trying to get some words out between howls of laughter.

“John Elway? John Elway?” I began to wonder if he was going to choke or have some kind of a seizure. “You have the audacity to compare yourself to John Elway?” This was followed by more shrieking laughter from the distinguished professor. “You think you’re John Elway? That’s the funniest thing I’ve ever heard. Way to take yourself too seriously, Ellin. John Elway, ahhhh haaaa, haaaa, haaaa.” Tom takes his sports seriously. “You’re talking about writing a book, not winning the Super Bowl!” Peals of laughter.

A little shot of humility does wonders every once in a while. The truth is that Tom has tried to work with me in every conceivable way to move this book forward, and the bottom line is that it has been a tough one to write. I was uncertain during the writing, as most writers are, whether the ideas would be useful for anyone outside my immediate circle of colleagues. I wondered if readers would question the use of vignettes about artists and writers with which I begin most chapters. I wondered if I could make the “What’s Essential” model clear enough to truly help teachers focus literacy instruction on what matters most. I lay awake at night imagining exasperated readers wondering when I would just get to the heart of the matter—the classroom applications. I wondered if state standards and testing requirements would restrict teachers to such a degree that they would question whether they had the time to probe the limits of understanding with their students. I wondered if it was even worthwhile to talk about the nature of comprehension with students in a country that appears to value test scores over lasting understanding. I wondered if there was any real purpose for the book.

The worrying was familiar territory. I had similar concerns when we were writing *Mosaic* and eventually discovered that they were groundless. In the last ten years, teachers have taken the concepts we presented and used them in masterful and innovative ways; I could never have imagined how much learning was possible with strategy instruction. Teachers have discovered new facets in each strategy, experimented with different teaching sequences, manipulated the timing for instruction on particular strategies, used new language to define and describe strategies to children, and discovered new ways for children to capture and record their thinking and become truly masterful in thinking aloud about the strategies. Teachers have engaged in thoughtful and provocative debate in conferences, publications, listservs, and study groups in schools throughout the country. As I review the program for this year’s International Reading Association conference, I notice dozens of sessions on comprehension strategy instruction. The energy, creativity, and intelligence teachers have applied to their under-

standing and implementation of the strategies has been nothing short of a phenomenon, and I have been privileged to observe it all in a state that might only be described as awe.

And oh, the stories I've heard of children's learning. Every week for nearly ten years, teachers have shared the stories of children whose insights about the texts they read and the concepts they learn are surprising and brilliant. Using strategies as tools to leverage deeper understanding, students from preschool through college have come to understand subtleties and themes that previously eluded them. They have used the strategies to write more persuasive college entrance essays, to engage in lively conversation with other students, and to share alternative points of view that cause other students to rethink their own interpretations. Children around the country and beyond have experienced, some for the first time, the joy that comes from creating meaning for themselves, rather than being dependent on a teacher's interpretation or a summary in Cliff's Notes. In so doing, these children have shown educators how gratifying it is to contribute to students' independence and how rewarding it is to teach children to think rather than to recall, retell, and answer endless "comprehension" questions. I've learned about the limitless power of children's minds—they have moved me to tears, laughter, and shock; they have reenergized those of us on the cusp of burnout; they have reminded us why we teach. I guess I needn't have worried.

In 2007, Susan Zimmermann and I dug back in and created the second edition of *Mosaic of Thought*, which was published on its tenth anniversary. We wanted to update readers about innovations we've observed in classrooms and to tell the stories of children who are more potent and efficacious learners because of comprehension strategy instruction. We brought readers up to speed on the research in reading comprehension, provided more teaching tactics, and discussed comprehension strategy instruction across the curriculum.

In partial defense of the time it took to write this book, I must say that a few other things have been going on in the last ten years. I left the Public Education & Business Coalition (PEBC) in Denver and began work as deputy director for Cornerstone, a national literacy initiative working in some of this country's lowest-income schools. I traveled to nearly every state and three foreign countries to work with teachers interested in teaching comprehension, and I celebrated as my colleagues from PEBC in Denver followed *Mosaic* with ten books focused on teaching comprehension and other aspects of literacy and professional learning. In a moment ten years have flown by. My daughter, Elizabeth, has found her way to college; Noodle the cocker spaniel died; and Chaucer and Toby, the basset hounds, have taken up residence with the

Keenes. Sadly, an old friend or two has faded from sight, and family and friends have endured great suffering and sorrow. New and wonderful friends have become air and water in my life, and I have met teachers in every place I've visited who inspire me more than I'll ever be able to describe.

Maybe the worry about this book was needless. Or maybe worry is just focused thinking—working to solve problems, trying to write clearly, crafting something with staying power, giving oneself time to reinvent and strengthen the ideas. It may be that I needed these ten years to percolate and observe, learn from colleagues, and revise my own thinking. It may be that I needed to test these ideas in schools where children who have very little could teach me about boundless intellectual strength. I suspect John Elway worried, too. Maybe, Dr. Newkirk, that is the connection that makes my analogy work—just a little!



Working with Cornerstone schools fundamentally changed the way I view children. Through the initiative's efforts in some of this country's neediest schools and districts, I had to come face-to-face with some fundamental beliefs. Do I believe that *all* children—not just those who come from two-parent households, aren't identified for special education, hold a library card, go to preschool, and live with someone who reads to them—can comprehend deeply, retain and reapply complex concepts, and live an intellectual life, if they so choose? I would have quickly answered that question in the affirmative before, but Cornerstone kids dramatically expanded my thinking. They made me want to move beyond the cliché language we all use and emblazon on tee shirts and tote bags—"all kids can learn at high levels"—to a discourse we can use in classrooms that defines "high expectations" more precisely and moves children toward their nearly unlimited capacity for understanding.

Working with Cornerstone children, my expectations came into clear focus; they became more specific. I came to believe that *any* child who has the intellectual capacity to develop oral language in the first five years of life is capable of becoming one of the leading original thinkers of the future. I began to believe that any child could surely find herself taking the podium of the U.S. Senate, or conducting groundbreaking research on leukemia, composing original symphonic music, delivering babies, writing a policy paper on starting small businesses in developing countries, counseling young mothers trying to work their way out of poverty, or leading a movement in postmodern painting. Listening to the originality of their thinking, getting beyond their sometimes limited oral language to the

exquisite ideas that lie beneath, I realized that existing beliefs about high levels of academic achievement are utterly inadequate if we want children, particularly those in poverty, to realize their intellectual potential.

I know that many educators reading this book *do* go beyond the rhetoric, do see their students as powerful thinkers capable of growing into scholars and leaders—but we have colleagues for whom the last paragraph may have caused a moment of discomfort, maybe even a laugh. Some of these colleagues are well respected and do good things for children. I have no doubt that even those who chuckle at the prospect of their students serving as U.S. senators would characterize themselves as teachers with high expectations for their students. What, then, does it mean to have high expectations for children’s learning? How can we alter the ingrained beliefs that limit children’s options? How can we move beyond that cliché—all kids can learn at high levels—to a language of expectation that opens doors for all children?

I will argue in this book that when we rethink what we mean by comprehension, when we redefine what it means to understand, we can reshape our beliefs about children’s learning potential; we can come closer to making real the promise that all children can make lasting contributions to the society in which they live. I believe that we can extinguish the notion that some kids are going to make it intellectually and other kids just aren’t. We can begin to see that all children can be responsible for private or public greatness. We can become certain that the vast majority, regardless of their present performance level and life situation, have the wherewithal to live intellectually engaged lives.

A principal said to a colleague of mine recently, “Someone has to man the gas stations, flip the burgers, and drive the taxis.” We’re shocked by this statement because one can only surmise that his attitude spills over into decisions he makes as a school leader. Yet as a society we apparently adhere to his notion, consciously or otherwise. The evidence abounds in schools and beyond. Adults sort children physically and academically, making silent but potent decisions that some will live lives in which they use the power of their minds to make a contribution to the world, and others will provide backup for those who think. Are we at ease with that view? If not, how can we transform entrenched beliefs that have been quietly reinforced by people who believe that someone has to flip the burgers? These are the questions I wish to explore in this book.



In *To Understand*, I want to walk on untouched snow. When I first started to work on the ideas we wrote about in *Mosaic of Thought*,

I realized I had to write in order to figure out why I thought comprehension strategy instruction was so useful and important to American literacy education. When I finally got down to the writing, I discovered that I was figuring out some of the complexities of comprehension strategy instruction *because* I was writing about them. *Writing to learn* is a phrase that took on a very personal meaning.

I struggled for months—okay, years—with this project, knowing that I could write a “how-to” book filled with lesson ideas that would be relatively easy to write and that teachers would appreciate and find useful. I knew I could write a book that would affirm what great teachers were already doing and perhaps give some the strength to continue. Why couldn’t I work up the enthusiasm to do that? I was mindful of *Mosaic’s* success and realized that, like certain unnamed sports stars in certain unnamed sporting contests, it’s tough to repeat a big success. I worried about the loneliness of writing alone, knowing how much Susan Zimmermann brought to the experience of writing *Mosaic of Thought*. I had bathrooms to paint, laundry to do, dogs to groom . . .

I came to realize that my interest lay in writing another book in which I didn’t fully understand all that I was writing about. I wanted to write about concepts I was struggling with; I wanted to write a book that would give readers the delicious opportunity to sort out for themselves (rather than having me prescribe) what it all means for children’s learning. I wanted to write a book in which I would learn more than teach, in which I could pose big questions; I wanted to write a book that would challenge me intellectually in the process; a book in which I could field-test ideas that *might* be provocative, *might* be useful; a book in which I could write to learn—again.

Chapter 1

Rethinking Understanding

Jamika's Story

The classroom was crowded with adults, and the second graders—thirty-two of them—were noticeably fidgety, hyperaware of our presence as well as the colder-than-usual late-fall temperatures outside. There had even been talk of a snowflake or two mixed in with the persistent Jackson, Mississippi, rain. Not that anyone could see snowflakes if they appeared; there was a kind of film over the classroom windows that blurred the shapes beyond and allowed only a dingy light.

I was visiting the schools in Jackson for the first time, accompanied by several of my colleagues from the Cornerstone Initiative, a University of Pennsylvania–based literacy staff development project working in extremely low income schools around the country. We were thinking together about the best staff development strategies, hoping to develop and refine tactics for working with teachers and children in nearly thirty schools—schools where many programs had been launched and abandoned and where teachers had learned to keep their heads down, do the best they could for children, and weather the next “program du jour” that someone decided was worth a try.

I had suggested to my colleagues that we begin in these schools by getting into classrooms immediately. We should get a sense for the books kids were reading and the kinds of writing they were doing—we could confer with children to begin to understand their oral language and reading fluency as well as gain insights and ideas about the stories they were reading and writing. The conferences would yield records we could then discuss with classroom teachers. We would begin our work not by “training” teachers in some program we were bringing to them, but in discussion about their students’ actual strengths and needs.

I was ready to show my colleagues what I meant as we began our work in the second-grade classroom on that chilly morning. I pulled a stool next to Jamika and flipped my notebook to a clean page.

“Jamika, my name is Mrs. Keene, and I’m very interested in what you’re reading this morning.” Wordlessly, she showed me her book and glanced over my shoulder to the dozen or so adults looking on. I thought about what I could do to help her relax a little. “Honey, when did you start this book?”

“This morning.” She seemed timid and utterly overwhelmed by the crowd of adults around her.

“Okay, what do you think about it so far? Do you feel like you understand it? Does this book make sense to you, Jamika?”

These are questions I must have asked thirty thousand times in my twenty-seven years in education. I ask them almost as if I’m on automatic pilot—they just come out at the beginning of a conference with a child I don’t know. I ask them almost subconsciously—my mind could be anywhere—they’re a sort of reflexive way to get the conference going. But those three innocuous questions unleashed a torrent for which I was utterly unprepared. Jamika was anything but timid. Jamika’s response became the driving force behind this book.

“All my life,” she began in a very determined voice and at relatively high volume. It crossed my mind that she was all of seven years old, and I stifled a giggle. For this tiny girl, I was obviously the straw that had broken the camel’s back. “All my life, there’s just one thing I don’t ever understand. Y’all always say that—does this book make sense? Ms. McKin, she always says that, too. She say, ‘Jamika, does that book make sense to you, you feel like y’all are understanding that book, because you know the most important thing about books is they got to make sense to you.’ She tell the whole class that, she tell me that, she always sayin’, you make sure if you reading a book that don’t make sense, you get another book because it got to make sense when you reading.’”

Jamika hardly drew a breath and was picking up speed and volume a bit like an airplane rolling down the runway for takeoff. “Then it’s the same at home. My mama’s always saying to me, ‘Jamika, you know you better be reading books that make sense to you. The whole thing about reading is that books have to make sense to you and if they don’t, you tell me and I read it to y’all or we get you another book, ’cause you gotta remember that the most important thing about reading is that books, they got to make sense to you.’ And then I come back here to school and they always asking me, ‘Jamika, that book make sense to you? You sure? Because you know the most important thing about reading is it got to make sense to you.’”

I took a quick glance at Jamika’s teacher, who was squatting nearby listening in on the conference—make that monologue. From the look on

her face, the president of the United States might have just opened the door holding a bouquet of flowers. She was flabbergasted—think deer in headlights—and while she was still being flabbergasted, Jamika was still talking about how every adult in her long life had emphasized the need to read books that make sense.

Jamika finally took a breath. It was a dramatic pause long enough for me to wonder if she may well *become* the president of the United States some day. I was thinking that the sooner that happened, the better, when she let her final salvo fly.

“But, none a y’all ever say what make sense mean.” She looked at me defiantly.

While I staggered under the weight of that statement, I glanced around me at the rest of the adults, all of whom had that deer-in-headlights look going on. I could almost read their minds, “Okay, Keene, let’s see you deal with *this* firecracker! You sure had a bright idea—start in a new school by conferring with kids in the classroom. Wonder what you think of that now!” And I could almost hear the teacher thinking, “I thought this one was supposed to have written a book on comprehension. She doesn’t look too smart to me.” Their perceptions were undoubtedly strengthened when I replied to Jamika’s query, “Ah, well, ah, you know, hmm, you see, ah . . . I’ll have to get back to you, Jamika!”

Well, what was I going to say after a diatribe like that? I guess I could have said, “Jamika, comprehension occurs when the reader constructs meaning in a way that combines his or her schemata with the author’s intended message, deriving a unique interpretation.” Somehow, I don’t think it was the graduate school definition she was looking for. I staggered away to another child, hoping to recover and focus on some of the objectives I had for the day, but Jamika’s question haunted me.

I lay awake that night in my less-than-ideal hotel-room bed with Jamika’s words resonating. “None a y’all ever say what make sense mean.” I tried to recall whether, in the first edition of *Mosaic of Thought*, we had ever really defined comprehension. (We had not.) I tried to think of a way I’d like to talk to kids about what it means to understand. (I came up short.) I resolved to return to Jamika’s classroom the next day and to examine how she would have answered her own question, just by being a member of the class. In other words, if Jamika had not asked me what it means to understand that day, what conclusions would she have drawn, if left to her own devices?

I met with Jamika’s teacher to inquire about a typical day in her classroom. What would Jamika have done if we hadn’t visited the day before?

What did her normal classroom routine entail? The teacher pulled out the teacher's edition from the basal anthology and opened it to a little story she had intended to use with Jamika's guided reading group the day before. The story had a simple plot involving a stray cat that wanders into an elderly woman's garden and is adopted by her, but is prone to stealing food from her table. The woman teaches the cat a lesson by sprinkling hot chile peppers in and around the food.

The story was a typical leveled text we would expect to use in early second grade. When I looked at the teacher's edition, however, I was struck by the publisher's suggestions for teachers. This little story was not only intended to help children with word learning and fluency practice (a very appropriate use for a leveled text); the teacher was also directed to ask comprehension questions. And not just a few questions—sixty-eight of them!

Now, let's say that you're Jamika. You want to know what "make sense" means. You are part of the group that reads this story, and you and your peers respond to the comprehension questions your teacher asks. Let's imagine that the teacher cuts—by half—the number of questions she asks, reasoning that children do not need that many questions to lead them through a story so simple it is comprehensible even if the reader only looks at the pictures! You're still responding to thirty-four questions! You're Jamika. What does "make sense" mean?

After the story is read, the teacher's edition suggests that children be invited to retell the story, in the order it is written. Children are encouraged to use words such as *then* and *next* in their retellings. Finally, a few vocabulary words are thrown into the postreading discussion, and that constitutes the group's reading instruction for the day. You're Jamika. What does "make sense" mean?

If, like Jamika, this scenario describes your daily comprehension instruction, "make sense" must mean you read a story, answer questions, retell, and learn a few new vocabulary words.

I began to wonder about the children on whose behalf Jamika asked her question. Surely other children who hear us emphasize the importance of understanding what they're reading must also wonder "what make sense means." The answer is the same in the vast majority of classrooms I have visited. If we consider the way in which we use materials (reading short pieces and asking children to retell, learn new vocabulary, and answer comprehension questions) and how we spend time in the name of comprehension (asking children to answer questions, keep journals, and create projects about the books they read, all of which are just more elab-

orate retelling), we actually do have an answer for Jamika. In this country, our de facto definition of comprehension is that we want children to:

- retell
- answer questions
- learn new vocabulary

I certainly have no problem with asking children to retell, answer questions, and learn new vocabulary words. As a matter of fact, I believe those skills are terribly important and recognize that they will be useful in a number of contexts throughout children's lives, not the least of which is when they take high-stakes tests.

My concern is this: Is this enough? Is this definition worthy of our students' considerable intellectual capacity? Isn't it possible that they can do much more when working to understand?

As I considered Jamika's question, I also had to ask: Do students even need comprehension strategy instruction if all they're expected to do is retell, learn a few new vocabulary words, and answer questions? My conclusion was not a good one if you happen to be the coauthor of a book on comprehension strategies, but it was unavoidable. Our students *don't* need comprehension strategies if our only objectives are answering questions, retelling, and learning new vocabulary. These were certainly the objectives toward which our own teachers taught. We can all remember book reports, endless written responses to comprehension questions, and vocabulary exercises in which we were asked to reveal the meaning of the word within a sentence we wrote. We didn't have comprehension strategy instruction as children—we didn't need it! Our kids don't need it either unless we change our objectives for comprehension—unless we create a definition more worthy of their intellectual development. Comprehension strategies are the *tools* with which we leverage deeper understanding. But what is deeper understanding?

Finally, I realized that Jamika's daily experience in comprehension wasn't actually improving her comprehension. When we ask questions, have the children retell stories, and help them learn new words, we aren't necessarily *teaching* comprehension, we're actually *assessing* comprehension! We're checking to see if they "got it," which in and of itself, does little to help students improve their comprehension. We wring our hands about how little time we have to actually teach in contemporary classrooms, but a great deal of time that might be devoted to teaching is instead being spent *testing* comprehension. And the one thing we definitely need to do more of in this country is assessment, right?

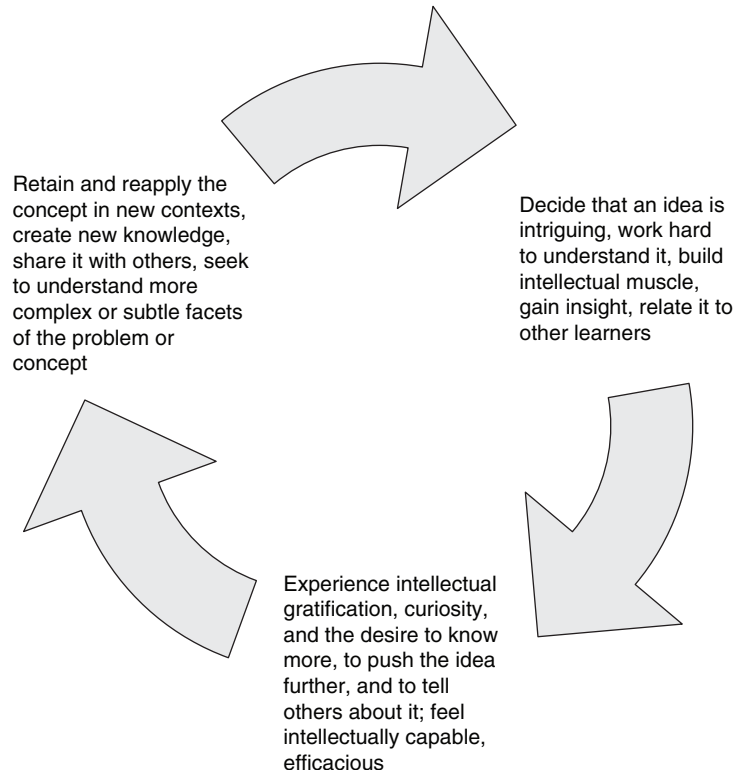
It became clear to me that we need a new definition for comprehension, a definition more worthy of our children's intellectual potential. We need to define and describe our objectives—our teaching intentions—in comprehension. When we teach comprehension strategies, what do we hope they lead to in children's thinking? What do we expect to see and hear when children understand? What indicators and outcomes are we likely to observe? What constitutes deep understanding?

Understanding and the Development of the Intellect

When I began to write about Jamika's question, I realized that to understand is, in some ways, synonymous with the development of the intellect. When we work hard to understand any concept or idea—whether a theme in a novel or a scientific or mathematical concept—we are building intellectual muscle. We experience the intellectual gratification that comes from struggling with an idea until we understand it. We begin to feel efficacious, capable of deep understanding. We experience the capacity of our own mind. When we truly understand a concept, we are able to remember it, revise it, and reapply it later. When we retain and reuse an idea in a new context, we create new knowledge, new thinking for ourselves and for others. When we create new knowledge, we often find ourselves curious about more subtle facets of the problem or concept. When we're curious, we are building upon a uniquely human trait—the need to pose questions and seek answers. Curiosity becomes insatiable, seeking to understand becomes intoxicating, and we find the life of the mind deeply pleasurable. We want more. The cycle repeats (see Figure 1.1).

One of my first recollections of an intellectual experience may help to illustrate this connection between understanding and intellectual development. I was asked to do a research project on the death penalty for my honors U.S. history course in high school. I used dozens of resources, interviewed people of widely varying backgrounds and ages, studied laws in various states, and probed my own values and beliefs until I was exhausted. I woke up in the middle of the night filled with questions and images, forced my friends and family into lengthy conversations, and changed my mind repeatedly. I had to present and defend my ideas to my classmates, who peppered me with questions and challenges. When my presentation was over and the paper submitted, I still couldn't shake the topic. I continued to flail in my mind, struggling with the complexity of the problem, the unanswerable questions. I don't remember what grade I was given, but I had discovered the elation of intellectual enterprise. My gratification was born of an

Fig. 1.1. Understanding and the Development of the Intellect



internal source. No external reward could ever supplant the excitement I felt as I gradually pieced that puzzle together. Coming to understand this complex issue made me want more. It opened my mind to learning for learning's sake. The project was a powerful introduction to an intellectual life, one that had not been part of my early education.

Remembering My Intellectual Roots, Hoping for More

I was fortunate to grow up in a family where education was valued. There was never any doubt I would go to college. I was praised and sometimes rewarded for good grades. My mother read to me as a child, took me to the library for summer reading programs, and made sure there was always a book or two under the Christmas tree.

However, mine was not a home in which children were asked to discuss ideas at the dinner table (except when my grandfathers were present—more on that in Chapter 8). My parents did not bring my brother

and me into their conversations about the events of those volatile Vietnam and Watergate-era days. My mother did take us to the Greeley Philharmonic concerts, but we whined about sitting through what felt like endless nights in the University of Northern Colorado gymnasium listening to music that seemed meaningless. We traveled frequently, but often missed the intensive learning that can accompany the discovery of new places. We begged to forgo another cathedral or museum, and my parents relented. They must have reconciled themselves to our lack of interest by assuming that kids don't really want to spend time out of school engaged in intense discussion and more learning. I don't think it occurred to them to include us in more intellectual discussions.

Were they right? I certainly didn't lose myself in thought or find myself tempted to delve more deeply into my learning (with the exception of the death penalty research) during high school. I got decent grades, participated in student government, and talked to friends on the phone for hours—that's what we did before "texting" and IM'ing! I liked some teachers and worked hard for them, abhorred algebra, and ditched class to go to Winchell's donuts on Friday mornings—until my mom caught me (it was a small town). I skated by with minimal effort, far more interested in social pursuits than academic ones. I didn't consider myself particularly smart, and few in my life tried to disavow me of that notion. I was above average, but not intellectually engaged, and I don't recall being bothered by that. I suppose, if I gave it much thought at all, I assumed I would go to college, teach elementary school as my mother and her mother had, during which time I would marry, have a family, nurture great friendships, and travel as much as I could. I didn't even consider what kind of intellectual life lay ahead of me.

I hadn't experienced intellectual engagement—I didn't know what it meant to truly understand—until that project in honors U.S. history. The trend shifted in college. I was fortunate to attend a university where classes were small and discussion was encouraged. I found the readings in most classes intriguing and learned to build an argument based on my evolving understanding of the content and of my values, beliefs, and opinions. I found real joy in writing and, for the first time, received feedback that my writing was good. I read authors whose writing I deeply admired and longed to hone my skills.

I began to savor a life of learning. I prioritized my time to include intellectual pursuits. I discovered museums, theater, opera, and classic literature. I sought relationships with people who talked about ideas. I enjoyed political banter and loved the feeling of pushing a feisty conversation to a

new place. I started to understand concepts I thought were beyond my intellectual reach. I got involved in political causes. I wrote letters to the editor. I volunteered to assist professors in their research. I read. And read and read and read.

I am one of the lucky ones. In my family, you went to college. If I hadn't, it is quite possible I never would have fallen in love with learning. I suspect many Americans—and many teachers—had similar experiences.

Some Troubling Questions

If it is true that many of us first experienced the joy of living an intellectually engaged life while in college, I can't help but wonder—are we comfortable waiting for our students to reach college before they view themselves as intellectually powerful? What about the kids who never get there? When will they be introduced to the life of the mind? Is it possible to create for much younger children the kinds of intellectual engagement most of us first experienced in college? Can we avoid the all-too-common scenario in which children plod through our classrooms completing assignments, reading the required books, sitting through endless state and local assessments—getting by, but rarely engaging? When we say we're working to raise student achievement or narrow the achievement gap, does that mean we are trying to raise test scores, or does it mean we're working to ensure that students really learn—retain and reapply—important concepts? How do we know if students truly understand? Why do students fail to remember and reapply what we have so carefully taught? What about the students who struggle? Is their academic diet of more-of-the-same-each-year-only-louder acceptable?

These are the questions I believe we need to address if we are to make a profound impact on our children's intellectual lives. If, as I argued earlier, intellectual development is closely tied to understanding, and if understanding relates to the ability to retain and reapply concepts we have been taught, then the way we define and describe understanding takes on a new level of import. The way we talk to children about the *experience* of understanding—in their minds and in their lives—becomes paramount.

Into the Classroom

I knew that to answer Jamika's provocative question and all the questions to which it led, I had to experiment in the classroom. I wanted to

purposefully introduce children to deeper understanding and intellectually engaging experiences much earlier, but in a manner appropriate to their age and development. I reasoned that I could begin by teaching the comprehension strategies we described in *Mosaic of Thought* (see Appendix A, “Comprehension Strategies Defined”). But I wanted to go further. I wanted to extend comprehension strategy instruction—having kids share their connections, images, and inferences—by asking them to describe the *outcomes* of using strategies. What did they come to understand when they used strategies? What was their experience, cognitively and behaviorally, when they were in the process of understanding? If comprehension strategies are the tools we use to leverage deeper understanding, what *is* deeper understanding? What does “make sense” really mean?

In dozens of classrooms with kids of all ages and “ability levels,” I read aloud and invited children to use the comprehension strategies, but I went to the next step—I asked them to define and describe what they understood after using the strategies that they might have missed if they hadn’t used them. I asked them to describe what it is like when they truly understand. I wanted to hear about their insights into texts, but also their *experiences* in the process of understanding. I wanted to use their descriptions to define and describe the comprehension process—in terms of both cognitive and behavioral experiences—to others.

I was astonished to find that when I asked them to push their thinking further, almost without exception, children expressed insights, views, opinions, and understandings that dramatically exceeded my expectations—they understood and articulated far more than I had imagined they could. I found that when I extended the teaching of a comprehension strategy and asked children to describe what they understood and how they experienced the comprehension process, kids could define and describe their thinking at unprecedented levels.

I decided to experiment with this new dimension in a demonstration lesson I was scheduled to give during a summer workshop for a large group of teachers. It was a somewhat risky decision, but I wanted a large group of teachers to witness what I had been seeing in classrooms around the country.

Eight upper-elementary students in Alief, Texas, were literally yanked out of the swimming pool across the street from the workshop site and led, dripping, into the school cafeteria to sit on a hard linoleum floor and discuss a picture book read to them by a total stranger in front of a hundred teachers. Not the most ideal learning environment, but these kids were not only engaged, they dazzled the observing teachers (whom they seemed to completely forget).

When I read *The Other Side* by Jacqueline Woodson, any nervousness they had felt evaporated, and they posed questions—the comprehension strategy I taught that day—that drew us into subtleties of meaning I had never imagined. When I pushed them further and asked them to describe what their questions helped them to understand, the responses exploded into a spirited conversation. They discussed issues related to how young children develop racial stereotypes, the role of parents in shaping children’s racial perspectives, and their own experiences as black and Hispanic students in settings where the majority of children were white. The teachers couldn’t take notes fast enough; some cried. When we announced that the kids could return to the pool, they groaned. They were nowhere near ready to leave.

These and dozens of other experiences with children representing the entire grade spectrum led me to believe that introducing children to the life of the mind is a largely untapped and rich area into which we can push our comprehension teaching. I began to realize that by building intellectual engagement and discussing the nature of deep understanding, we could indeed empower children to retain and reapply ideas.

Working with children and teachers helped me narrow the focus of this book to four key questions:

1. What does it mean to understand?
2. How do we define and teach toward high expectations and high levels of understanding?
3. What matters most in literacy learning?
4. In what ways can we live our adult lives as intellectually curious models for our students and our colleagues?

I address these four questions in four corresponding sections throughout Chapters 3–9. These four questions—explored in sections called Mentors, Dimension, Literacy Essentials, and Dwelling in the Mind—form the structure of most of the book. (I’ll also introduce three descriptive models to help us recognize true understanding and discover how to teach it. But more about those in Chapter 2.) First, though, I want to provide a few introductory thoughts about each of these questions and explain how the sections of *To Understand* are structured around them.

What Does It Mean to Understand?

If *Mosaic of Thought* was about teaching children to use strategies to understand text more completely, this book must focus on Jamika’s profound question—*what does it mean to understand?* When children tell us

they have a text-to-self connection, does that necessarily mean they understand? When a child plasters his book with a flurry of yellow sticky notes describing his mental images, does he comprehend? If a child can generate inferences to share with her peers in a book club conversation, does she truly grasp the book's point? Comprehension strategies are taught for one reason—so that readers can understand more deeply. What, then, does that mean? In literacy education, we are told that reading and writing for understanding are of paramount importance. We teach children to decode and pronounce words so they can understand what they read. We teach children to write so their readers can understand them. We ask innumerable questions about books to assess whether children understand. We tell kids like Jamika that understanding is important. But when do we talk about what it means—what it looks like, feels like—to understand?

When I speculated about how Jamika might define comprehension based on her classroom experience, I imagined that she would probably deduce that “to understand” means to answer questions, retell, and learn new vocabulary words. When I examined state standards and documents created by teachers to define understanding, I found that we do use some common descriptors. We want children to:

- retell what they've read
- answer literal and inferential questions
- learn new vocabulary words from the text they read
- retain and reapply concepts from nonfiction
- appreciate poetry and literature
- read for pleasure and become lifelong readers

The same questions flooded back into my mind: Is that really what we mean by understanding? If these descriptors comprise our definition of comprehension, is it not likely that they will become our teaching objectives? And, if those definitions become our explicit or even implicit teaching objectives, is it not likely that those are exactly the targets toward which children will strive? Are we comfortable with those targets when we've glimpsed children doing so much more?

It is possible to use the comprehension strategies we described in *Mosaic of Thought* to help students not only to make connections or visualize, to synthesize or question, but also to *think* more effectively and with greater depth and insight, in a wider variety of books and genres, across disciplines, and in all aspects of their lives. It is possible that the comprehension strategies can be used as tools for *understanding and intellectual*

development rather than simply tools for reading comprehension. It is possible that, when we define comprehension differently, children will transform their thinking accordingly, and aim for the new targets we define. It is possible, when we set higher targets for comprehending, that our children will rise to the occasion.

How can we begin to redefine understanding? As I pondered this question, it struck me that there are many who have come before us—artists and writers, for example—whose lives have been a testament to the urge to understand. I became intrigued with the idea that we might study these mentors—evaluate what moved and motivated them, examine what characterized their creative and intellectual lives, scrutinize the forces that drove them to understand, and translate those insights into the world of schools. By studying the lives and work of those whose work reflects deep understanding, we can help children adopt similar thinking traits and qualities earlier in their lives. In other words, people whose lives have been devoted to understanding the world can serve as examples for teachers who value deep and lasting understanding for their students.

The Structure of To Understand

Starting with Chapter 3, I begin each chapter with a short vignette in which I connect the lives of writers and artists who, I believe, have much to reveal to us about teaching and learning. I call this section **Mentors** and, through these vignettes, seek to redefine what it means to understand.

How Do We Define and Teach Toward High Expectations and High Levels of Understanding?

Often, especially in schools that serve low-income students, I see banners announcing, “We are all life-long learners!” or “Everyone in this school is a reader” or “We’ve read 10,000 books this year!” I hear of “incentive” programs in which the principal agrees to shave his head or wear her pajamas to school if the children read a certain number of pages or titles, and I’ve seen posters advertising parties and other rewards for children who meet particular goals during the school year.

I understand the benevolent intentions behind each of these efforts. Yet I must ask—do these efforts truly represent what it means to have high expectations? In fact, are we teaching children that learning is rewarded extrinsically and that learning for learning’s sake may not be adequate? Are we teaching children that quantity of pages read matters more than the quality of their reading experiences—the degree to which they find

themselves caught up in the adventures of Harry Potter or driven to learn more about the rain forest?

Few among us would say we harbor anything less than the highest expectations for children. But in what ways do those expectations manifest themselves, particularly in literacy learning? Do we demonstrate our lofty goals by asking the children to fly through hundreds of books, with little expectation that they dwell in the ideas or learn more? And an even more important question: Do we truly believe that what is expressed on the banners is true for *all* children? Do we weave the highest expectations into our daily communications with all children, overtly and subtly? Do we demonstrate our belief that they can think at high levels every day?

The power of constant high expectations came home to me following several demonstrations like the one in Alief, Texas. I began to realize that the only reason children weren't thinking at consistently high levels was that I hadn't consistently *asked and expected* them to. I hadn't modeled for them how people go about the process of understanding and what they can expect when they do. I was satisfied when I heard that they generated questions, for example, or had an inference or an image in their minds as they read. I was pleased when they became metacognitive—showed that they were thinking about their own thinking—but I rarely asked for, or got, much more. When I did, it felt like a happy accident.

It was almost as if the very manner in which I had previously asked children to define and describe their thinking had actually *limited* their thinking. For example, I had been asking children to “see if you can think of a question about the story” or “tell me if you can think of anything from your life that reminds you of this story” or “tell me if you can visualize anything as I read.” I discovered that even subtle changes in my language promoted huge leaps in their thinking.

If instead I recast my language—“think about all the questions you have as I read and then pick one or two you think will best help us understand more about the story” or “what are all the things you already know, believe, or feel that will help you understand this piece” or “stop and create a vivid, detailed image in your mind that will help you to understand more than even the author put in this story”—the children responded with far more relevant questions, insightful connections, and detailed images, all of which helped them do far more than just use a comprehension strategy. If, when children did share a question or connection, an inference or synthesis, I pushed them to say more, to develop their ideas, they almost always did so.

I began to realize that showing high expectations for literacy learning is a far more subtle and precise process and requires far more consistent attention to the ways in which we interact with children than any contest, award, or banner, or any comprehension strategy. The degree to which children understand deeply is very dependent on the language we use to define, describe, and encourage higher levels of understanding.

The Structure of To Understand

The second section of each chapter explores ways to define and demonstrate higher levels of understanding; it is devoted to ideas for helping children discover what happens in their minds and in their lives when they understand. I call this section **Dimension**, as each chapter focuses on a particular dimension, or aspect, of understanding.

What Matters Most in Literacy Learning?

How can we teachers create the time in our demand-laden, curriculum-cluttered days to focus on the highest levels of understanding? In what ways can we transform ordinary literacy lessons into intellectually memorable experiences? How can we create a classroom culture conducive to those goals?

For nearly a decade I have struggled to respond when teachers say, “Kindly explain, Ellin, how I’m supposed to teach to a higher level of comprehension—one that is far more challenging for my children—when I can’t begin to cover the prescribed curriculum? Isn’t redefining comprehension and all the instruction and discussion it implies going to take a whole lot of time?” Of course it is—it would be dishonest to suggest otherwise. But it’s time well spent, because teaching for deep levels of understanding dramatically increases the likelihood that children will retain and reapply what they learn.

I am acutely aware that we need to explore real, workable ways to manage a bloated curriculum and directly address the questions, What gets left out? and How do I know it’s okay to emphasize certain areas in the literacy curriculum over others? These may well be the most important questions we can ask.

Wherever I go, I see teachers operating at high speed trying to teach “a little bit of this, a little bit of that” and hoping to “cover” what they’re supposed to in time for the next assessment. Meanwhile, the kids observe this frenzy of activity like they’re watching a great tennis match, as their

teachers run back and forth trying to keep the ball in the air. They might as well be following a long volley—looking first this way and then that—as their teachers frantically try to get everything done. I can almost hear them say, “Wow, look at her go!”

It seems to me that our field has been avoiding one very important question—what matters most? Where should we focus our precious instructional attention so children have the opportunity to truly learn—retain and reapply—the literacy concepts they need? We know from decades of research that humans learn best when concepts are

- introduced a few at a time
- important to the learner
- taught in depth
- taught over a long period of time
- applied in a variety of texts and contexts

How can we reconcile this basic premise about human learning with the enormous curricula we’re charged with teaching? If we can answer that question, and I believe we can, we can find the time to teach children to a higher standard—a different level of comprehension.

Once I understood that we need to overhaul our definition of comprehension and that the most overt expressions of high expectations aren’t necessarily the most potent, I had to face the fact that we must learn to teach fewer concepts in greater depth over a longer period of time. But what does that look like in the classroom? How can teachers make informed decisions about what curricula to emphasize, what to put on the back burner, and what to leave out altogether? Clearly it is difficult for teachers, with their heavy workloads, to do the research that would identify which elements of the curriculum are most important and which matter less.

The Structure of To Understand

Answering this question—what is essential to teach—is tackled in the third section of each chapter, which I call **Literacy Essentials**. In it, I define and describe the K–12 literacy objectives that are most essential for children’s literacy learning. I suggest specific ways teachers can focus on the key literacy skills and strategies that matter most, deemphasizing or eliminating skills and strategies that matter less, thereby creating time to teach for deeper levels of comprehension and greater retention and reapplication of concepts.

I also propose specific strategies teachers can use to transform daily literacy instruction into richer, more memorable learning experiences that simultaneously introduce children to the world of the intellect and equip them with the comprehension skills they need to manage a wide range of texts and concepts. I describe how teachers who work in some of this country's most diverse and challenging schools have found ways to overcome perceived and real obstacles and transform their classrooms into intellectual havens for children; I detail the improvements in the children's thinking and learning and outline the content these teachers focused on to help their students realize these gains. In this section I also argue that our traditional notions of how to structure literacy workshops may not be the most conducive to understanding at high levels, and offer an alternative—a new conceptualization for the daily reader's/writer's workshop.

In What Ways Can We Live Our Adult Lives as Intellectually Curious Leaders for Our Students and Our Colleagues?

I began my teaching career in a suburban Denver school district that valued not so much what we educators knew, but what we might become. Our leaders, in particular the superintendent of schools, Richard O'Connell, saw diamonds in the rough in young teachers and principals. Rick recognized leadership when he saw it and worked to promote not just the development of our teaching skills, but also our intellectual selves. He valued teacher's learning lives outside of school and found ways to encourage and support their growth. He understood the value of investing in teachers' graduate learning (my own included) so that we could come back to colleagues and share new insights and understandings. Professional development was based on a teacher-to-teacher model much more than on an expert-to-teacher model. Rick took considerable risks in placing people (myself included) in positions that were just beyond our reach, knowing somehow that interested, curious people would work hard and learn quickly in order to meet his expectations. He valued the struggle. He knew that it was important to *learn* to be good. I discovered that I was capable of working in leadership roles far earlier than I would have had he not pushed me. He sought to make people uncomfortable, somehow applying Piaget's concept of cognitive dissonance (we learn most effectively when we are slightly uncomfortable with an idea and not sure we understand it) at a district level. He understood that we learn when we are in just a bit over our heads. I attempted professional undertakings because he inspired me, challenged me, irritated

me, fought back at me, and indulged my passionate tirades about directions the district was taking.

Part of my learning in those days in the early to mid 1980s was in graduate courses at the University of Denver, where literacy educators like Shelley Harwayne, Lucy Calkins, Don Graves, and Mary Ellen Giacobbe were brought in to conduct summer institutes. I vividly remember offering to make the coffee, clean up, and drive visitors to and from the airport so that I could sit in on the seminars and soak up every drop. The message, so consistently communicated in those days, was that to be the best teachers, we have to be avid learners ourselves. If we want to teach reading well, we must first read widely and voraciously. If we want to teach writing well, we must write frequently and take risks in our own writing. If we want to serve as credible intellectual mentors, we must live intellectual lives.

How lucky I feel to have had a leader like Rick, enjoyed regular exposure to nationally known literacy experts, and worked alongside people who provoked and inspired me. How lucky I was to be surrounded by interesting, intellectually engaged colleagues who kindled in me a need to know—through professional pursuits as well as a textured life outside school. I had superb models—partly the luck of the draw, partly because I chose to study them—whose leadership I could analyze and whose suggestions I considered carefully.

Now, in my twenty-fifth year in education, I have to ask how we can provide similar leadership for our colleagues. Do we live the intellectually engaged life from which our colleagues, as well as our children, can learn? Do we make the time to develop our intellectual lives outside of school? What good will living richly textured lives of the mind do for our students and our colleagues?

The Structure of To Understand

In the fourth section of each chapter, entitled **Dwelling in the Mind**, I ask the reader to consider his or her intellectual life. I suggest that if we remain cognizant of the dimensions and outcomes of understanding—the indicators and effects of understanding in our minds and in our lives—we can live the intellectual lives we may have forgotten or left untended for years. I suggest ways in which we can integrate insights from our intellectual lives into classroom conversations that will prove memorable and prophetic for students. I argue that by observing a teacher who not only *says* she loves learning, but also reveals the ways in which she intellectually organizes and experiences the world, her students and her colleagues will be drawn to the life of the mind.

A Tip for Reading This Book

I designed the book so that teachers reading together in a study group might approach the book in a couple of different ways. You may wish to read this book “horizontally”—that is, read all the Mentors sections first, followed by the Dimension sections, then the Literacy Essentials and Dwelling in the Mind sections. Or you may wish to read “vertically,” as we traditionally read a chapter, progressing through all four sections in sequence.



This is a book about what it means to understand. It is about how we use books and language to discover, alongside children, the power of the human intellect. It is about focusing on what matters most in literacy teaching rather than teaching a little of this, a little of that, until we’ve squandered every opportunity for children to explore ideas in depth. It is about learning from intellectual mentors whose lives provide insight and direction for a nation of young scholars. This book is about capturing the essence of understanding and bringing it to life in our own and our children’s hearts and minds. This book is about what it means to understand.



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