Comprehension Through Conversation

The Power of Purposeful Talk in the Reading Workshop

M A R I A N I C H O L S

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For Rick, who encourages with curiosity and understanding.
Foreword

One has to wonder about the early promise of standards-based reforms—that they would bring us vibrant classrooms, rich with a focus on understanding the world and how it was changing. I say “wonder” because in far too many classrooms today there is a tight focus on remembering, not a focus on understanding. Too often today, tightly scripted lessons move kids through a commercial curriculum largely devoid of any emphasis on helping children understand anything.

These are not the classrooms that Maria Nichols describes in this slender but powerful book. Instead, she describes classrooms where rich conversations replace mindless interrogations, where kids pursue the “I wonder” and “why,” not just the “who,” “what,” “where,” and “when.”

The lessons in these classrooms reflect the sorts of lessons that Peter Johnston and I (2002) wrote about in our book describing the learning environments we observed in some of the nation’s very best classrooms. But Nichols goes a step further than we did by setting out the nature of the conversations with several examples of lessons that portray the conversations these very lucky children experience day after day.

She presents us with the conversational dialogues occurring in these classrooms and then helps us see how children acquire deep understandings of texts and topics. Her rich examples suggest that this sort of instruction need not be limited to a few classrooms, but rather is attainable for each one.
Nichols offers not possible lessons, but full descriptions of actual lessons. Here you’ll find no ivory-tower examples of what might be, but examples of what is already available in many classrooms. These are classrooms of the sort that we hope our children and grandchildren are lucky enough to encounter—not once in a while, but routinely. These are classrooms that are still uncommon, but the sort of classrooms that I hope will soon be the standard in schools.

As you read this book it will become obvious, I think, that remembering what was read is a poor substitute for understanding what was read. You will understand why one young learner, Troy, says during a reading conference, “I’m reading slow because of all the talking in my head!”

There is a lot more to proficient reading, a lot more to thoughtful literacy, than recording the speed at which children read aloud. A lot more. Reading Comprehension Through Conversation will drive that point home.


Richard L. Allington
University of Tennessee
Acknowledgments

None of us is as smart as all of us.
—Ken Blanchard

My journey into the exploration of purposeful talk began many years ago in a staff meeting. As the term “accountable talk” was being introduced, I distinctly remember leaning over to a colleague and whispering, “My kids talk. What’s the big deal?” This discrepancy between the importance of talk in my mind and the importance others seemed to be placing on it stuck with me, and a classroom-based inquiry was born!

Years later, on a breathless Day One of a weeklong Reading and Writing Institute in San Diego, Richard Allington delighted the audience with a keynote focused on his research with Peter Johnston of exemplary teachers. Allington outlined a list of what he and Johnston termed the six T’s, or common features, of exemplary teaching. Talk was high on the list. Allington’s assertion that conversational talk was still underresearched was the impetus I needed to begin broadening my own focus on talk.

My exploration of talk, as with all my professional learning, has not been a solo journey. As I reflect on the friends and colleagues I’ve been privileged to think, talk, and learn beside, I’m reminded of an Oscar-weekend radio interview of composer and conductor Bill Conti. Conti was chatting with National Public Radio’s Wait, Wait, Don’t Tell Me! hosts about conducting for the Oscars. He joked about being connected by earphone to the production crew, who would prompt him to “cue up the music” when an award recipient droned on.
too long. I actually watched a bit of the Oscars that Sunday night, for no other reason than to listen for the orchestra to serenade long-winded stars offstage. I do admit to enjoying it!

However, I now feel more sympathy for those who received the musical "hook." How does one thank all those who have journeyed alongside us without a Bill Conti cueing the orchestra? I’ll try.

I carried my inquiry and developing understanding of talk with me as I took on the role of Literacy Demonstration Teacher in the newly developed Literacy Professional Development Center for San Diego City Schools. The Professional Development Center was designed to explore and build conversations around cutting-edge pedagogical practices. For three years, alongside my friends and colleagues Peg Crane and Lynda Elliott, I divided my time between literacy instruction with a class of children, a core of which looped with me from first grade through to third grade, and the exploration of content and instructional practices with the extraordinary teachers, staff developers, and administrators of the San Diego City Schools.

My thank-you’s begin with Peg, Lynda, and the children from the Professional Development Center classroom. Peg and Lynda brought incredible knowledge, experience, and joy to our work. And, without a doubt, the children were the most amazing group I have ever been privileged to learn alongside. Their thinking and voices are not only woven into this text, but are the driving force behind my commitment to the value of talk as a constructivist mechanism. I have seen firsthand what children can do when taught to think and to use talk purposefully as a tool for constructing knowledge.

I am appreciative of former San Diego City Schools Superintendent Alan Bersin’s resolve in bringing a focus on professional development to San Diego. Under his leadership, voices from across the United States and around the world joined us in constructive conversations about teaching and learning. I am indebted to consultants Debra Crouch, Virginia Lockwood Zisa, Lyn Reggett, and Kaye Lawson for adding their voices to these conversations, and their wisdom. The Literacy Department, led by Director Staci Monreal and Assistant Director Jennifer White, became the center for these conversations, and I am stronger in my practice as a result. I thank Staci and Jennifer for their vision.

My new role as Literacy Staff Developer at Webster Academy of Science and Research, a low socioeconomic urban elementary school in the San Diego Unified School District, has allowed my research on talk in a constructivist environment to flourish. Once a low-performing school, Webster has made remarkable gains due to an extraordinary staff of dedicated professionals. In her new role as
Acknowledgments

administrator at Webster Elementary, Jennifer White encourages teachers to focus on student engagement and the creation of a place where learning is both respected and celebrated. Jennifer’s eyes shine when she speaks of classrooms where children “slurp up learning.” Along with Jennifer, I am privileged to work closely with literacy support staff Teri Coker and Alexis Conerty, vice principal Marisol Marin, and math resource teacher Lisa Ann deGarcia, as well as an amazing group of teachers who have taken on the challenge of enabling Webster’s wonderfully vibrant children to use talk as a tool for negotiating meaning. You will meet teachers Susie Althof, Jesse Harrison, Stephanie Hasselbrink, Marika Nieratko, Jeralyn Treas, and Stacie Wright in the pages of this book.

Prior to Webster Elementary, I had the opportunity to practice alongside Chas Moriarty, administrator of Garfield Elementary, as he worked tirelessly to transform this traditionally low-performing urban elementary school into an orchestration of lively classrooms where children talk purposefully. In Chapter 4, you will meet Garfield first-grade teacher Maricela Cruz, who took to heart the importance of creating an environment where children think and talk purposefully together.

I am stronger in my practice thanks to conversations with longtime friends and colleagues who value struggling with tough questions about teaching and learning as much as I do. I thank Brenda Allen, Bill and Pat Eastman, Cherisa Kreider, Sylvia McGrade, Catherine Bogart Martinez, Cindy Marten, and Lisa Miller for their professional passion and camaraderie.

For many summers, I traveled to New York City to attend the Teacher’s College Reading and Writing Project at Columbia University. Led by Lucy Calkins, Laurie Pessah, and a talented team of staff developers, these institutes were a yearly intellectual sojourn that allowed me to immerse myself in rigorous learning and reflect on my own practice. My belief in the importance of talk grew as the Teacher’s College staff shared their yearlong conversations, for which I thank them.

For writers, taking pencil to paper has all but been replaced by fingers that dance over keyboards. Sometimes they dance deftly; at other times, they push wrong keys and make huge technical messes. I am indebted to my neighbor and friend, Dave Roger, for getting me out of more of these messes as I wrote than I care to admit to. He truly holds a seat of honor among “computer geeks”!

And of course, where would a writer be without the wisdom of her editor? I was blessed with the guidance of two extraordinary editors, Gloria Pippin and Lois Bridges. It is their mindfulness around focus and purpose, along with support from Lynne Costa, production editor, and Aaron Downey, project editor,
who guided me through the process of sharing my thinking. Thanks also to my copyeditor, Kate Petrella.

One of my favorite memories from childhood is of Saturday mornings spent in our local library with my mom and brother and sisters. I remember the magic of story hour, the formality of the hushed rooms, staring up at shelves loaded with books that towered over my head, the exact location of my favorites, and trying to navigate myself out the doors and down the steps with a Dr. Seuss-like crooked stack piled in my arms. My dad and I now spend many similarly glorious Saturday afternoons browsing through our local bookstore. My mother and father instilled in my brother and sisters and me a love of reading that has fueled a lifelong commitment to learning. I thank them both for this gift.

My sister Cris has been my cheerleader, deadline checker, and the one person who would call and interrupt my writing just to be sure I was writing. (Of course, I was . . . just in case she called to check.) Thanks, Cris!

And Rick. I know that’s not a sentence. There is no sentence that sums up a husband who is willing to put everything on hold while his wife writes a book. Thank you, Rick, for caring as much about children as I do, and believing that my work with them makes a difference.
Introduction

Conversation creates the conditions for us to rediscover
the joy of thinking together.
—Margaret Wheatley

It was the spring of our first year at the Professional Development Center. My first-graders and I had just wrapped up a nonfiction unit of study in reading in which we had immersed ourselves in the discovery of fascinating things in, and thoughts about, the real world. As part of the study, we spent time learning to use the features of the genre to support meaning-making. From there, we shifted into a character study in fiction, focusing on the importance of building an understanding of what’s in a character’s heart by listening to their words and carefully scrutinizing their actions. Embedded in these studies, as in all aspects of our learning, was the importance of thinking and talking about our thinking as a means of constructing ideas, negotiating meaning, and developing structures for independent thought.

I was walking in the door of the classroom, having just left the Professional Development Room, and bumped (literally) into Sergio, who was posted at the door, waiting for me. He had a book in his hand, and was bursting with excitement.

“Look, look!” he erupted. “This fish is dam selfish... see, it says right here—dam selfish!”

I stopped flat in my tracks to see what he was talking about. Sure enough, he had a nonfiction book about sharks filled with diagrams and charts. He was
pointing to a drawing of a food chain, a part of which was a picture of a fish eating another fish’s eggs. A damselfish, to be precise.

I went into teacher mode, explaining to him that this was a name of a fish, and it was a word with three chunks, or syllables, and the accent was on the first chunk, so it was pronounced dam-sel-fish, not dam-selfish.

Sergio’s face scrunched up (as only a child totally engrossed in thought can), and he intently studied the drawing as he mulled over what I had said.

“No, no, Mrs. Nichols . . . ,” he finally mused. “Me and Manny and Issy, we already talked about it. This fish is eating this other fish’s eggs, and that’s dam selfish!”

Ah, yes, Sergio had done what I had failed to do. He had integrated his non-fiction and fiction study, using these ways of thinking about text to carefully consider what was in a character’s heart as he simultaneously made sense of a diagram, supported by purposeful talk with his peers. So goes the work of teaching children to think together and negotiate meaning!

Constructivist thinking like this does not happen by accident. It is the by-product of classrooms where children think and talk together to make meaning, work collectively to construct stronger ideas, push back at thinking that doesn’t make sense to them (even the teacher’s), come to expect and anticipate differences of opinion, and do this on such a regular basis that thinking in this way becomes a habit of mind.

In these classrooms, phrases such as “I don’t get you!” “Wait, do you mean . . . ?” and Sergio’s “No, no . . . !” are not argumentative, but are genuine efforts to think, talk, and understand. They are the children’s way of saying, “I don’t quite understand or agree but I value your ideas, so let’s keep thinking and talking about this.” These phrases are the language of negotiating meaning.

Yet, how much time do we devote in our instructional day to teaching children to think and talk about their thinking as a means of constructing ideas and negotiating meaning? How much time do we spend helping children to understand the power that comes from listening to the thoughts of others, and together building a greater understanding than we were able to attain individually? Do we help our children to experience and value conversation as a tool to build meaning of a text, and as a tool for taking these ideas and applying them to our world?

Creating classrooms where children think and talk purposefully is not easy. But, too, it is never boring . . . and never a day goes by that I’m not amazed at how brilliant children can be as a result!
Growing Purposeful Talk
Using Read Alouds as the Spark

Reading and writing float on a sea of talk.
—James Britton

Jesse Harrison and her third-graders were on their third read of *The Summer My Father Was Ten* (1999), by Pat Brisson. In this beautiful picture book, a daughter retells the story of her father’s tenth summer, and the way a thoughtless act of destruction while playing baseball near his neighbor’s garden led to a friendship that transcended time. Jesse and her children had paused in their reading as the father stood, looking at the now empty lot where his neighbor, Mr. Bellavista, used to plant his tomatoes, peppers, and onions.

JESSE: (reading from text) . . . but he just couldn’t make the words come out.
BENJAMIN: (purposely seated next to the teacher to support engagement) He looks at the empty lot and he can’t forget because he knows it shouldn’t be empty.
DAMON: Yeah, he can’t get it out of his mind. It’s so sad.
JESSE: Oh, why so sad?
DAMON: It’s because a garden should be there, but they wrecked it, and the other sad part is when you want to say ‘sorry’ but you can’t, it’s, like, like it said, his body won’t go.
ANDRE: It’s like your brain knows, it’s trying, but your body can’t.
KEYSHA: In his heart I think he feels like he needs to say ‘sorry.’ His heart is pumping really hard, and he feels very nervous.
DIANA: Yeah, I felt that before. Just like it said, the words, they won’t—it’s too hard to say them.
KEYSHA: Sometimes I can’t say ‘sorry’ because I don’t know why I did something, so I’m nervous and scared. But I feel bad.
SHANTE: Yeah, that’s how he is—the father—he knows how they shouldn’t have wrecked the garden, and doesn’t know why they all did it. He knows what he has to do, but it’s hard. He feels bad. But he has courage to follow his heart.
DIANA: It’s like we can do that, too.

Through their talk, the children constructed critical insight into the father as a person, the change he goes through, and ultimately, the heart of the story. And, they were on the verge on taking that next step: using their understanding of the heart of the story to affect the way they live in the world.

The level of complexity in the children’s talk was not a chance happening. It is the product of thoughtful planning, explicit instruction, modeling, and orchestration of purposeful talk in the highly supportive instructional approach of Read Aloud. This chapter addresses text choices and lesson design that supports children in thinking and talking to negotiate and construct meaning, and enables teachers to orchestrate the talk, all in the context of Read Aloud.

Read Aloud: The to on the to, with, and by Continuum

Pearson and Gallagher’s Release of Responsibility Model (1983) offers us a framework for considering instructional approaches and support structures that enable the transfer of ways of thinking and talking about reading to independent practice. Figure 5–1 offers an adaptation of this model with an added foundation of a belief in talk. Only within a community that allows talk to thrive will children develop the habits of mind that bring purpose to their talk.

During Read Aloud, the most supportive instructional approach, we are teaching children to think about text in increasingly complex ways. Simulta-
It is the time to teach children what purposeful talk that constructs deeper meaning sounds like, how it works, and how valuable it is. Taking responsibility for the reading enables us to use complex text that the children may not be able to access on their own. We support the construction of meaning with thoughtful lesson design that scaffolds children’s thinking, allows us to preplan modeling and questioning, encourages purposeful talk, and enables orchestration of that talk.

As we orchestrate talk around rich text, children begin to engage in the negotiation of meaning that is the hallmark of purposeful talk and constructivist learning. Ralph Peterson reminds us that, “Through negotiation, students come to understand how someone else interprets an event, text, or situation; thereby, the basis for their own understanding is broadened” (1992, 81). The negotiation during Read Aloud, supported by the teacher, creates for the teacher an assessment opportunity to determine the children’s next steps in conversational behavior, and offers the children their first steps in the creation of a habit of mind crucial for becoming purposefully literate: an expectation that there will be other perspectives, and a desire to listen to and understand them for the purpose of enriching our own thinking.
Strong conversations in the Read Aloud begin with smart, thoughtful text selection. Compelling text is a must for engaging students in thinking and talking about their thinking. Fiction texts that compel children to have purposeful and powerful conversations that construct stronger understandings and build habits of mind are generally realistic, have characters with an appropriate level of depth that the children care about, and deal with universal issues and feelings that enable the children to connect and apply their thinking to real life. The text does not necessarily need to be about a familiar place or topic. After all, one purpose of being literate is that reading helps us to experience new places and situations. In essence, it is the heart of the text, not the setting or situation, that must matter, or “hit home.”

A perfect example of a text whose topic is unfamiliar but whose heart “hits home” is Eve Bunting’s *Train to Somewhere* (2000). In this story, set late in the 1800s, a group of children from an orphanage in New York are sent West by train for adoption. Many teachers shy from this text, feeling that most children cannot connect to a story about the despair of the orphanages of long ago or a journey with a purpose such as this. However, we must differentiate the literal text from the heart of the story. *Train to Somewhere* dances around universal themes such as hope, fear, and possibility. Children can connect to and understand these ideas. An understanding of the characters’ plight will develop during the Read Aloud as the children build purposeful talk.

It’s important to note that, especially with books intended for primary children, characters don’t need to be human to be realistic. First-graders fall in love with the Poppleton series by Cynthia Rylant year after year. They have no problem connecting deeply with and caring about a talking pig that lives next door to his best friend, a sometimes annoying but always dependable llama. The characters in Kevin Henkes’ books are equally as real to children. What child has never felt jealousy like Lilly, suffered with teasing like Chrysanthemum, or worried like Wemberly? And who among us did not wipe away a tear when E. B. White’s Wilbur gave Charlotte that last good-bye wink?

Using nonfiction text for Read Aloud can present unique challenges. Dense factual text, when read aloud, often overwhelms children. To be engaging as a Read Aloud and compel children to think and talk purposefully, narrative or lyrical nonfiction texts about topics that interest children may be a better choice. Selected excerpts of informational text can certainly be read aloud as well, but
nonfiction text with beautiful color photographs, captions, and other supporting features, including visual, organizational, or graphic aids, may be better choices for Shared Reading because they provide children visual access to all sources of information as they construct meaning.

**Thoughtful Planning**

Before we begin planning for a Read Aloud that utilizes purposeful talk as a tool for negotiating and constructing meaning, we must invest the time to read the text and know it well ourselves. We must have a sense of the rich meaning we hope the children will build. With fiction text, this means not only knowing the literal story, but developing our own understanding of the heart of the story (big idea, or theme). Complex text may encompass more than one theme, so flexibility and an awareness of the options is crucial. Then, we must plan ways of supporting the children in drawing on the heart of the story as they consider their own interactions with the real world.

Of course, the children’s ability to negotiate and construct meaning at the deepest levels a text offers will depend on their experiences and immersion in units of study that teach ways of thinking about text (explored in Chapter 6). But, to create a vision of possibility, we are going to explore conversation around texts at the richest level of meaning, assuming an instructional background that enables these conversations.

To illustrate this, let’s first consider a fiction text, “The Pudding Like a Night on the Sea” from *The Stories Julian Tells*, by Ann Cameron (1989). The literal story is about Julian, his little brother, Huey, and his dad, who are making pudding for Mom’s birthday. When the pudding is done, Dad naps, and the boys find themselves unable to resist the pudding’s lure. Unplanned conversation at the literal level with this text usually builds around pudding: the process, the ingredients, the messiness, and favorite flavors, in addition to how much the boys ate, how much trouble they’ll be in, and the essential question, “Why don’t they just get the kind in the cups at the grocery store like my mom does?”

But, if all the children talk about is pudding, or the literal, how will their talk ever build toward the heart of the story? And, if they don’t build a strong sense of the heart of the story, how will they lean on the literary experience as they navigate life in the real world?

Planning for talk that builds toward the heart of the story begins by envisioning just how this talk might sound. We begin with the end—or talk indicative of
Strong comprehension—in mind, then plan backward as we consider how we will draw this level of purposeful talk out of the children. The heart of “The Pudding Like a Night on the Sea” dances around Julian and Huey’s relationship with their father, so talk needs to build around this, not pudding.

To draw out talk that builds toward the heart of the story, we must determine the essential stopping places in the text. These stopping places may include spots in the text that allow the reader to construct an understanding of the characters and the interactions between characters; gain a sense of setting if it plays a crucial role; and focus on change and the causes of the change, among other things. There is no right or wrong when deciding on the exact places to stop, as long as you are able to draw talk from the children that builds purposefully toward the heart of the story.

Table 5–1 shows possible stopping places for “The Pudding Like a Night on the Sea.”

Next, we need to have a sense of what talk that is indicative of strong comprehension should sound like at each stopping place. Then, we plan questions for these stopping places to encourage this talk. When planning our questions, we need start with open-ended questions that offer the children an opportunity to think strategically, share their thinking, and do the work for themselves before supporting the effort with more specific questions. Often, we give children too much information by embedding what we hope to hear in the question.

If we are trying to build a sense of the father, a pivotal figure in understanding the heart of the story, what we don’t want to do is start the conversation by asking, “Why is this dad such a good dad?” Instead, we begin with a general question, such as, “What are you thinking?” This question allows us to gain an overall sense of the children’s thinking and gauge where they may be needing support in constructing meaning.

Then, if all we hear is literal talk about making pudding, we might decide to focus the conversation on the characters by asking a more deliberate question. Table 5–2 shows a progression of increasingly more supportive questions that might be asked if a general “What are you thinking?” does not do the trick.

These more supportive questions, along with other scaffolds, need to be planned to keep the talking and thinking focused throughout the Read Aloud if necessary, and lift the conversation beyond the literal if that is all we hear. As we plan for each of the stopping places in the text, we must consider: How will I craft a more supportive question in case I need one? Is there a place in the text I might reread as a support? Can I support the children in using prior
knowledge or making connections? How might I model my own thinking if necessary?

Of course, we must always be prepared for the possibility that our children will take the talk in an absolutely brilliant direction that we failed to consider. When this happens, we listen with intent and join in on the construction of meaning!

Stopping during the Read Aloud, asking questions and building talk that constructs an evolving meaning as the reading progresses, not only supports an

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Stopping place</th>
<th>Reason for stopping</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>After the description of the dad</td>
<td>To develop a sense of what Dad is like.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Partway through the pudding making</td>
<td>To gain a sense of how hard it was to make the pudding.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>When Dad tells the boys to leave the pudding alone</td>
<td>Too good a prediction spot to skip!</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>As the boys are eating more and more of the pudding</td>
<td>Hold this up to what we know about Dad—how will he react?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>When Dad discovers the pudding is almost gone</td>
<td>Gain a sense of how Dad feels and why. Predict using what we know about Dad.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>When Ann Cameron is playing with the words beating and whipping</td>
<td>Compare what children think is going to happen to what we know about Dad, his relationship with the boys, and the way a dad should react.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Once children make sense of beating and whipping</td>
<td>Make sense of this based on what we know about Dad, strengthen our understanding of their relationship and what kind of father he is.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>At the end</td>
<td>To think about the lesson the boys learned, how they changed, how having this kind of father helped, and how this helps us to think about parents in the real world and their relationships with their children.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 5–1

Growing Purposeful Talk
understanding of the text, but is the first step in teaching children a habit of
mind that will enable them to think and talk in this way on their own.

Returning to “The Pudding Like a Night on the Sea,” let’s consider the
evolving meaning we hope to construct, and the increasingly supportive ques-
tions that might be used to scaffold the process if necessary. Table 5–3 offers one
possible progression of thinking, talking, and questioning.

Finally, to push the children’s thinking and talk toward the heart of the story
and beyond, we need to use our understanding of the characters and change; in
this case, the lesson the boys learned and the way it will affect their future
behavior. We might ask a general question such as, “What do you think Ann
Cameron really wants us to think about?” Or, a slightly more supportive ques-
tion such as, “We’ve been discussing the boys and the way they learn from their
dad. Why would Ann Cameron write a story that gets us thinking and talking
about this?” Or, an even more supportive question: “What does this tell us
about families and how they live and grow together?” The important thing is
not so much the exact phrasing of the question, but its ability to push the chil-
dren to use their previous conversation to generalize and talk about deeper
issues in the text, issues that we all deal with in the real world. Shifting the
thinking in this way enables readers to use well-written text to help them live
smartly in the world. We’ll talk more about this in Chapter 6.

Thoughtful planning for a Read Aloud of nonfiction text requires supporting
children in moving beyond the literal, or the collection of facts, toward bigger
ideas in the text, an understanding of the author’s purpose and point of view,
and their own thoughts on the topic. It’s not that we don’t want children to
marvel at facts. To the contrary, nonfiction readers should not only ohh and ahh
over cool information, but must linger over it and work to make sense of it. To

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Comprehension goal</th>
<th>Possible questions from</th>
<th>Least supportive</th>
<th>→</th>
<th>→</th>
<th>Most supportive</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Developing an understanding of the father</td>
<td>What are you thinking about Dad and Julian and Huey?</td>
<td>What kind of father do you think Dad is?</td>
<td>What does the fact that Dad takes time to make pudding with the boys for Mom tell you about him?</td>
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<td></td>
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</tbody>
</table>

Table 5–2
### Table 5–3

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Stopping place</th>
<th>Reason for stopping</th>
<th>What talk indicative of meaning-making might sound like</th>
<th>Possible scaffolds if the children aren't constructing strong meaning</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| After the description of the dad            | To develop a sense of what Dad is like.     | He is a unique character, lively and smart. He can be really happy, but when he’s mad, watch out! (May be difference in opinion of whether this makes a good father—that’s OK!) | • What are you thinking?                                        
• What is Dad like?                           
• Does he sound like a good father?           
May need to reread and model think using the description of father. |
| Partway through the pudding making          | To gain a sense of how hard it was to make the pudding. | Wow—they’re working hard. Everyone has to help, and it’s a big mess to clean up. | • What are you thinking?                                        
• What do they have to go through to make this pudding? 
• Does it sound like a lot of work?           
• Why didn’t they just buy pudding that’s all done? |
| When Dad tells the boys to leave the pudding alone | Too good a prediction spot to skip.        | Oh no! They’re going to sneak some! I know I would … they’ll get in trouble! If I did that, my mom/dad would … | • What are you thinking?                                        
• How does it feel to be tempted by something? 
• What do we know about these boys, and boys in general? What do you think they’ll do? |
| As the boys are eating more and more of the pudding | Hold this up to what we know about Dad—how will he react? | They won’t stop—they’re going to eat it all! Dad worked really hard, and he’ll find out, and when he gets mad … But, he sounds like a nice dad. Disagreement here is OK, as long as ideas can be backed with evidence. | • What are you thinking?                                        
• How would a dad react to this?               
• What do we know about this dad?             
• What do you think he’ll do?                 
• Why?                                        |
### Table 5–3 continued

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Stopping place</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>When Dad discovers the pudding is almost gone</td>
<td>• Gain a sense of how Dad feels and why&lt;br&gt;• Predict using what we know about Dad</td>
<td>Oh boy—he’s mad now. All his hard work, and it was for Mom. Remember what the book said about Dad when he’s mad?</td>
<td>• What are you thinking?&lt;br&gt;• How would you feel if someone ate something you worked hard to make for someone else?&lt;br&gt;• What about Mom’s birthday?&lt;br&gt;• Reread description of Dad again. Think aloud to help children understand how that information might help our thinking.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>When Ann Cameron is playing with the words beating and whipping</td>
<td>Compare what children think is going to happen to what we know about Dad and his relationship with the boys, and the way a dad should react.</td>
<td>Oh no! They’re going to get spanked. Hey, I didn’t think he was that kind of a dad!</td>
<td>• What are you thinking?&lt;br&gt;• What do you think Dad means by beating and whipping?&lt;br&gt;• Does this match what we thought we knew about Dad?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Once children make sense of beating and whipping</td>
<td>Make sense of this based on what we know about Dad, strengthen our understanding of their relationship and what kind of father he is.</td>
<td>Oh, that’s what he meant. He was just scaring them—maybe to teach them a lesson. That’s kind of mean, but next time they’ll remember—so maybe it’s OK. He must love them, because he really was mad, but he handled it in a smart way.</td>
<td>• What are you thinking?&lt;br&gt;• What did Dad mean when he said beating and whipping?&lt;br&gt;• Why would he scare the boys like that?&lt;br&gt;• What does it tell you about him as a dad?&lt;br&gt;• Does this make sense with what we thought we knew about Dad?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>At the end</td>
<td>To think about the lesson the boys learned, how they changed, how having this kind of father helped, and how this helps them to think about parents in general and their relationships with their children.</td>
<td>Now they don’t want to get near the pudding! They learned a good lesson. They will never be that thoughtless again—this is a big change. Dad was smart to make them discover how hard the pudding is to make. Parents should be smart like that and teach a lesson instead of yelling and punishing.</td>
<td>• What are you thinking?&lt;br&gt;• Why didn’t the boys want any pudding?&lt;br&gt;• Do you think they’ll do something thoughtless like this again?&lt;br&gt;• What does this tell you about Dad?&lt;br&gt;• Do real dads behave this way? Should they?</td>
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</table>
ensure strong thinking and talking, we want our children to hold new information up against what they think they know, ask questions, form theories, read for evidence, and consider how the information links together and leads them toward bigger ideas.

Because we negotiate some forms of nonfiction differently than we do fiction, our planning may be different. Just as with fiction, we plan our nonfiction Read Aloud backward. That is, we start by envisioning what strong talk that moves beyond factual information alone (the literal) might sound like. But, before we plan stopping places, we plan for the way we will move through the text. Will the entire text be read aloud, or just selected sections? If reading just selected sections, which sections, and why? We must select the sections purposefully, then plan the stopping places that will allow purposeful talk to build.

To illustrate this, we'll use the picture book *Watching Desert Wildlife*, by Jim Arnosky. *Watching Desert Wildlife* (2002) is a collection of short nonfiction passages written in first-person narrative, which highlights the diversity and amazing adaptive characteristics of desert wildlife. This text is not only compelling enough to be read aloud in its entirety, but its sections are complete enough to stand on their own as a Read Aloud that models the thoughtful navigation of nonfiction text based on purpose. Any of the passages might be used for Shared Reading as well, which creates many instructional options.

One possible plan for a Read Aloud of *Watching Desert Wildlife* for the purpose of determining the big idea, author's purpose, and point of view is charted in Table 5–4.

When we read aloud only portions of a nonfiction text like this, the children often ask to take the text off to partnership and independent reading so they can continue their thinking. As each reader or partnership reads, they leave tracks of their thinking with sticky notes, and then pass the book along. This keeps the thinking growing, and encourages transfer of thinking about text in specific ways to independent practice.

A lesson planning template that has proven helpful in designing Read Alouds with this attention to deeper meaning, progression of questioning, and orchestration of purposeful talk can be found in Figure 5–2. The Read Alouds of “The Pudding Like a Night on the Sea” and *Watching Desert Wildlife* were designed to support children in negotiating a very complex meaning. To be successful in thinking and talking through text in these ways, children need experience with a progression of thinking and talking curriculum that builds in complexity. Chapter 6 will address these curriculum needs.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Stopping place</th>
<th>Reason for stopping</th>
<th>What talk indicative of meaning-making might sound like</th>
<th>How to scaffold if the children aren’t constructing strong meaning</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Front and back cover and quick glance through Table of Contents and several pages</td>
<td>• Briefly activate schema&lt;br&gt;• Orient readers to the text</td>
<td>Oh—the desert. I’ve been there/seen pictures. It’s really cool. It says “wildlife”—that’s probably plants and animals. This book might have some of the plants and animals I saw.&lt;br&gt;Hmm... there’s an Introduction. That usually tells us more about the book.</td>
<td>• What are you thinking?&lt;br&gt;• What do you know about the desert that might help get you ready to read?&lt;br&gt;• How should we go about reading this book based on our purpose?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Introduction</td>
<td>• Continue text orientation&lt;br&gt;• Form theory around a possible big idea, author’s purpose, and point of view&lt;br&gt;• Gain a sense of the author</td>
<td>So, he really wanted to see the desert because it’s so different. This book has lots of different animals, so maybe it’s really about the animals that were the most different, the coolest ones he saw. He seems to really be amazed by them.</td>
<td>• What are you thinking?&lt;br&gt;• What have we learned about our author? &lt;br&gt;• What did Jim Arnosky notice about the desert?&lt;br&gt;• Why might he have written this?&lt;br&gt;• What big idea is he wanting to share with us?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Section about desert birds in general</td>
<td>• Be amazed by cool facts&lt;br&gt;• Flexibility with schema&lt;br&gt;• Understand more about author’s point of view and purpose&lt;br&gt;• Read for evidence to support theory about big idea, or abandon/change mind</td>
<td>He does seem amazed because of the way he describes the birds. The wren holds on to spines with its toes! I thought that would hurt them—that nothing could get close to a cactus. I think he wants us to be amazed, too. He said the desert is different from where he lives. Maybe he wants us to know that different places have different animals, and they survive there in smart ways.</td>
<td>• What are you thinking?&lt;br&gt;• What does Jim Arnosky think about desert birds?&lt;br&gt;• Do you agree?&lt;br&gt;• How are desert birds like and not like the birds where he lives?&lt;br&gt;• Why would he point this out?</td>
</tr>
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Table 5–4
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Stopping place</th>
<th>Reason for stopping</th>
<th>What talk indicative of meaning-making might sound like</th>
<th>How to scaffold if the children aren’t constructing strong meaning</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| Section about the Gila Monster | • Be amazed by cool facts  
• Flexibility with schema  
• Make sense of information  
• Understand more about author’s point of view and purpose  
• Gather evidence to support theory about big idea or abandon/change mind | Did you hear how they bite? I thought lizards were just no big deal. I didn’t know some could hurt you. I think they’re nocturnal—it said they’re most active at dusk. Maybe that’s because it’s so hot. Or maybe that’s when their food comes out, when it’s cooler. It’s the way they survive the heat. Jim Arnosky is amazed by this, too! And, I think he wants us to be amazed. So, maybe that is the big idea of this book. I think the book is really about how these animals survive in smart ways. | • What are you thinking?  
• What amazed you?  
• How does Jim Arnosky feel about this animal?  
• Why is he writing about this?  
• Does this information fit with our theory about the big idea? |
| Section on Elf Owl | • Select portions of the text to read based on purpose and theory of big idea  
• Be amazed by cool facts  
• Flexibility with schema  
• Make sense of information  
• Gather evidence to support theory or abandon/change mind | Wow, I didn’t know an owl could be that small. It lives in a cactus. Maybe that’s because there aren’t any trees. So, the desert animals do find smart and unique ways to survive. That’s the big idea. It’s lucky the woodpeckers are there to make the holes. The animals actually help each other. I think desert animals are pretty cool, too! | • What are you thinking?  
• How are you feeling about desert animals?  
• Does this information fit with our theory about the big idea?  
• What do we think Jim Arnosky’s purpose and point of view is?  
• What do you expect from the sections we didn’t read based on our theory? |
### Planning for Purposeful Talk and the Construction of Meaning

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Date</th>
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| Deeper meaning in text: Big ideas, theme, and/or critical understanding children should construct (either in this read, or over several reads). | Instructional Focus: Way of thinking and talking about reading children are studying. |

| Text: Phrase to cue you for stopping places based on focus point and to allow for the construction of meaning. | Questions, wondering, or comments: Open ended means of getting the thinking and talking started. | What talk should sound like: A sense of what you might hear at this point in the construction of meaning. | Scaffolds to support the thinking and talking if necessary: More supportive questions, places in text that might need rereading, model thinking, etc. |

| Closing: close the conversation by recapping the meaning constructed, and debriefing the process. |

| Reflection: thoughts about children’s use of talk to construct meaning, progression with the focus, unexpected confusions or struggles, and implications for next instructional steps. |

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**Figure 5-2**

Orchestrating the Talk

As the children’s talk begins to reflect stronger thinking as a result of thoughtful planning, we must consider how to keep the conversations focused for the constructive work of negotiating and building meaning. In their book *Questioning the Author* (1997), Isabel Beck, Margaret G. McKeown, Rebecca L. Hamilton, and Linda Kucan identify six Discussion Moves teachers use for just this purpose. They are:

- marking: responding to specific ideas in a way that highlights them
- turning back: holding children accountable for their thinking and the text
- revoicing: interpreting what a child is attempting to express, and rephrasing it so others are able to think alongside and build off the idea
- modeling: making our thought process visible for children
- annotating: filling in information that children are not able to construct from the text or have no schema for
- recapping: summarizing ideas that have been constructed up to a particular point in the conversation

The following snippet of conversation is part of a larger conversation my second- and third-graders and I were constructing from another Julian and Huey story, “My Very Strange Teeth,” from *The Stories Julian Tells*, by Ann Cameron.

In this lively story, Julian has an old baby tooth and a new tooth in the same space in his mouth. He doesn’t want to wait for the old tooth to fall out, so Dad suggests various barbaric methods of extracting the old tooth (using pliers, or tying a string from the tooth to a doorknob). Julian wisely decides that maybe having two teeth in one space isn’t so bad after all.

During the piece of the conversation charted in Table 5–5, four of Beck’s Discussion Moves were used to support purposeful talk and the construction of meaning.

Recapping, Revoicing, Turning Back, and Marking helped to purposefully orchestrate this conversation toward deeper understandings of Julian’s feelings, Dad’s motives, and the eventual understanding of the heart of the piece. Annotating and Modeling were not used in this snippet of talk. Julian’s tooth dilemma was familiar territory for most children, so annotating was not necessary. Modeling was equally unnecessary, as the children were able to think and talk through the deeper issues without higher levels of support.
COMPREHENSION THROUGH CONVERSATION

### Classroom Conversation

**MARIA:** So, what are you thinking?

**CHENELLE:** He wants his tooth to come out.

**KENNY:** Yeah, his tooth is loose, and he doesn’t want to wait like two weeks, and he doesn’t want two teeth there, the one that is growing in and the old one that is growing out.

**TAMARA:** It could be even longer—like months! That's TOO long to wait!

**JAILYN:** Well yeah, because like I agree with you, because you know how people get embarrassed and stuff. That's embarrassing—it’s why he says I can’t wait!

**MARIA:** So, you’re saying that he wants the old tooth out because he’s embarrassed by it, and he's getting impatient?

**CHILDREN:** Yeah!

**MARIA:** Reads the parts where Dad offers to use the pliers or tie a string from the tooth to the doorknob.

**ANTHONY:** I would be scared.

**MARIA:** Say more about that.

**ANTHONY:** With all the stuff Dad said, he might be, well, not scared, but like umm . . .

**ISSY:** Afraid?

**ANTHONY:** Yeah, afraid it might hurt. Dad might hurt him.

**JAILYN:** Well, I agree with you, because like, you know, if he wants to make the teeth come out then you know how people just like, how people make it, like you know how Issy just loose her tooth and even her Dad didn’t like pulled it and stuff, or do that, tie it on the door.

**MARIA:** So, you’re saying that Julian’s dad is suggesting things that your dads wouldn’t do?

**JAILYN:** Yeah, yeah.

**MARIA:** Let’s think about what we know about Julian’s dad. Does it make sense that the dad would want to hurt him?

**TROY:** He’s tricking him! You know in the other stories, he tricked him to do all the work. But he won’t trick him. Julian’s gonna wait.

**MARIA:** Oh! Troy’s saying Dad is tricking Julian.

**JAILYN:** Like, I agree with you, Troy, because you know how parents just trick children about getting your tooth out. Like, ‘you won’t feel a thing’

### Beck’s Discussion Moves

**Recapping:** By summing up the previous comments, the talk was bundled in a way that allows the conversation to move on. Recapping can also be used to retrace the meaning that has been built to a particular point when conversation stalls. This gives everyone a chance to rethink, and those who didn’t follow the talk the first time have the opportunity to catch up.

**Revoicing:** Restating a confusing or complex thought allows others access to the ideas. Jailyn, an English language learner, needed support in making her idea comprehensible to the others.

**Turning Back:** Encouraging children to reexamine their thinking leads to deeper thinking. Beck also uses this term to describe moves that teachers make to hold children more accountable to the text. Encouraging the children to hold their thinking up to what they knew about the dad enabled a new idea to emerge.

**Marking:** The highlighting of an idea as important by emphasizing it in some way. Troy was using what he knows about the dad from the other Julian stories we had read. I used my voice to emphasize, or mark this idea as important, and encourage more conversation.
Using the Turn-and-Talk

At times during a Read Aloud, we stop and immediately build the conversation as a whole class, as was done in the talk excerpts from *The Summer My Father Was Ten*, and “My Very Strange Teeth.” Building conversation with the whole class works well when a variety of voices are contributing, the pace is lively, all are listening with intent, and the negotiation and construction of meaning is purposeful.

There are times, though, when we offer children a chance to prepare for the whole class conversation by turning from the circle to a partner and talking with the partner first. During these turn-and-talks, children have an opportunity to process, try out, and strengthen their thinking with their peers, then come together and use their partner talk to build a whole group conversation, which the teacher then orchestrates. A turn-and-talk can be preplanned. Any time you suspect that students may need time to process a response to a complex part of the text, you can ask them to turn and talk first, mine the partner talk for “gems” to begin the whole class conversation, then come together to build that whole class conversation.

A turn-and-talk can also be spontaneous, used when too many voices are silent. A turn-and-talk requires all to get their thinking out, as children have an immediate responsibility to their partner. While children are talking with their partners, the teacher is able to listen in and gauge their level of comprehension. If the quiet is due to confusion, listening in to the partner talk will help to pinpoint the confusion, and allow the teacher to support the children in backing up and constructing meaning.

The turn-and-talk is equally valuable any time many voices are clamoring to be heard all at once. These spontaneous explosions of meaning usually happen at major “ah-ha” spots in a text, natural prediction points, or events or feelings children readily connect with.

Midway into that third read of *The Summer My Father Was Ten*, Jesse’s students had one of those explosions.

**Jesse** (the teacher): (reading from text) . . . but still, Mr. Bellavista made no move to plant.

**Darcie:** Probably Mr. Bellavista hasn’t started to plant because he’s scared to.

**Jasmine:** Oh! I was thinking the same thing! Mr. Bellavista thinks that if he plants again, the boys will go in and play and ruin the garden again.
Many voices: Oh! Oh, yeah! (Hands shooting up) That's what I think too . . . yeah, you had my same idea . . . it has to be because in the picture . . .

Jesse: OK, OK, turn and talk—what makes you think this is what Mr. Bellavista is thinking?

This “ah-ha” about Mr. Bellavista seemed to electrify the group. Jesse realized that many children were eager to give voice to their reasoning for thinking this way, and a turn-and-talk gave each child an opportunity to be heard.

Whenever children turn and talk, I am out of my seat, listening in on conversations. Table 5–6 highlights the importance of the turn-and-talk both for children and teachers.

After a brief minute or two of turn-and-talk time, the children are called back together to begin building a larger conversation. I begin by asking a partnership that was off to a strong start to share their thinking. “Let’s come back together, Anthony, you and Marla were talking about why this character was behaving in this way. Would you share your thinking, to get us started?”

If I’m aware of conversation in another partnership that adds to or builds on this idea, I will direct the conversation to them right away. I might say something like, “Vanessa and Manny, your talk about the characters’ feelings goes right along with this. Will you add on and keep the talk going?”

If I’m not aware of another conversation that builds, I will open up the opportunity to build by asking, “Who can add to that idea, or work with it in some other way?” Or, “What do the rest of you think about this idea?” We’ll consider new ideas with input from all voices until they seem to reach their full-

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>The turn-and-talk gives children an opportunity to:</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• Process their thinking out loud</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Rehearse their idea with partner feedback</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Strengthen their idea through partner input</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Change their idea based on ideas and/or evidence they had not considered</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Clarify areas of confusion</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Translate their thinking into English or access vocabulary with partner support</td>
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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>The turn-and-talk gives the teacher an opportunity to assess:</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• Level of individual comprehension</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Strategies children are using</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Holes in children’s understanding</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>… and to mine small conversations for big ideas that will serve as a springboard for whole class conversation</td>
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</table>

Table 5–6
est potential. Then, I recap the talk, quickly summing up our understanding to that point, and move on.

As Table 5–7 illustrates, transitioning from the turn-and-talk to whole group conversation and working to keep a line of thinking alive teaches children to listen with intent and build off other children’s thinking. And, it allows us continued opportunities to assess, orchestrate, nudge, and teach content along with the value of talk.

This process can take place at each major stopping point during the read. Or, you can use a mix of talking and constructing meaning in whole group with the turn-and-talk used at particular points in the text that warrant its extra support or the need for all to talk.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Moving from the turn-and-talk to whole class conversation gives children an opportunity to:</th>
<th>Moving from the turn-and-talk to whole class conversation gives the teacher an opportunity to:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• Compare and contrast their thinking with others’ thinking</td>
<td>• Assess partnerships and the class as a whole in general</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Practice articulating a co-constructed idea or point of view with clarity, drawing on their partner to support them</td>
<td>• Assess a child’s amount of participation in partnership versus whole class</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Practice supporting a co-constructed idea or point of view with evidence from the text or knowledge of the world, drawing on their partner to support them</td>
<td>• Orchestrate the talk toward deeper understandings using the bits of partner talk that were listened in on</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Learn the importance of listening with intent</td>
<td>• Nudge children toward strategic thinking</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Grow their thinking stronger by listening to others’ ideas</td>
<td>• Teach for transfer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Follow a thought as it grows</td>
<td>• Practice flexible thinking</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Practice ways of disagreeing that are positive and respectful</td>
<td>• View purposeful talk as positive and energizing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• View purposeful talk as a means of negotiating, understanding, and rectifying differences</td>
<td>• Develop habits of mind</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 5–7
For partner talk to flow efficiently without unnecessary pauses in the thinking and talking, students should know in advance who they will turn and talk with. Long-term partners are best, as you will not need to reestablish who talks to who every Read Aloud. Partners simply come to the circle next to each other. When one is absent, they turn to the closest partnership and join in.

In Susie Althof’s kindergarten class at Webster Elementary, students routinely practice their turn-and-talk before the reading begins. “Show me how you’re going to turn and talk to your partner,” Susie prompts. Immediately, children turn knee to knee, eye to eye, as Ardith Davis Cole (2003) describes. Many of Susie’s children sit with elbows on their knees, chins in their hands, gazing at each other with smiles. Some reach out and hold hands, others lean in to each other. These children clearly love this! “Show me you’re ready to learn together again” Susie calls out. Just as quickly, all turn their attention back to Susie, ready to engage in a great read.

In Stephanie Hasselbrink’s fifth-grade class, partners come to the circle together, sitting close enough that just leaning over enables them to begin a turn-and-talk. To be sure, the cute knee to knee, eye to eye, adoring glances are gone, but not the richness of the talk. Because these same partners talk during every Read Aloud, and are also partners as a support for independent reading (to be discussed in Chapter 7), these children have a history of past conversations and other shared text to draw on as they work to construct meaning with the current Read Aloud.

Careful text selection, thoughtful planning, tools for orchestrating talk, and partner support are crucial ingredients for teaching children to think and talk for the purpose of negotiating and constructing rich meaning. They are the scaffolding pieces that offer children that “Hey, I can do this!” feeling. Supporting children in their thinking and talking about text is not enough, however, if they are not taught ways of thinking and talking that enable them to construct the deepest meaning possible. Our next step is to consider the content of our instruction. Chapter 6 will explore Units of Study as a means of offering children a continuum of increasingly complex ways to think and talk about their reading.
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