Following Characters into Meaning

ENVISIONMENT, PREDICTION, AND INFERENCE

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firsthand
HEINEMANN
Dedicated to Teachers
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Letting the Text Revise Our Image of the Character

When we consider the characteristics of strong readers, most of us would agree that strong readers read a variety of genres with engagement, stamina, fluency, and comprehension, and they choose to spend lots of time reading. While these characteristics certainly suggest reading strength and can be quantified through running records, reading logs, and standardized tests, there are other important characteristics of strong readers that are not so easily quantifiable.

For example, we know that a strong reader is flexible and agile. When a strong reader encounters difficulty either on a word level or a comprehension level, she tends to move...
automatically and efficiently to call up the strategies that will be most helpful in dealing with the challenge. These agile readers are able to make adjustments on the run without losing hold of comprehension. Although reading agility and flexibility are invisible and hard to assess, it’s worth our while to support children in becoming the kinds of readers who are nimble, both as word solvers and meaning makers. In other words, we want children to be the kinds of readers who can move from strategy to strategy in a flash when they are figuring out words and who can envision and then revision the story as they move through it, taking in all the twists and turns.

**Agile readers are able to make adjustments on the run without losing hold of comprehension.**

In this lesson, we will provide readers with support for becoming agile envisioners, the kinds of readers who constantly take in new information and adjust their mental images. The idea for this lesson arises from our observation that many readers often carry forward something they’ve envisioned even if, as they read further, the text contradicts that mental image and requires that they revise what they’ve pictured. For example, several years ago, my colleague Donna Santman shared a story of conferring with a reader who was under the impression that the main character in her book had survived a fire. Although Donna hadn’t read that particular young adult novel, she knew enough about the story to be surprised with the student’s impression.

Donna said, “Can you show me the part where the character talks about surviving the fire? That sounds like it would be a part where we’d learn a ton about the character, how she handles such a frightening situation.” The reader flipped back a half dozen or so pages to show the part with the fire, and Donna discovered that it was a brief scene where the character and her friends were at a beach bonfire. The child may not have understood the meaning of bonfire and consequently pictured a full-blown fire. That sort of misunderstanding is bound to occur when reading. But the significant thing to note is that the reader held doggedly to her erroneous impression in the face of growing evidence that should have signaled to her that she’d misunderstood something. Her inflexibility blocked her from taking in the information that would have created a more accurate mental image of the scene.

In books, as in life, it is important that people are willing to revise our first impressions. As we see more, hear more, learn more, we adjust the impressions we made in a flash. When we began this unit and started reading aloud *The Tiger Rising*, children were likely to have a one-sided and unambiguous impression of Sistine. We hope that as they learn more about her, listening to her words and watching her deal with a variety of situations, they will develop a more nuanced and mature image of her, one that allows for the continued streaming information that Kate DiCamillo provides us, and we hope they do likewise in their independent reading books—now and forevermore. To become the kind of readers who adjust their mental images and envisioning by taking in the story information, children will need to know that it’s a powerful reader who reads along and can say, “Oops, let me think about that again,” or “Wait a minute. That doesn’t match what I’ve been picturing.” This is the point of the following lesson.
Recall that readers walk in the shoes of main characters. Tell them that today, and always, they’ll continue to do this.

“During reading time yesterday, I know each of you was a character in your book. When your character got furious, you probably found yourself clenching your fists, kicking at the ground, scowling at your partner. When your character stopped and looked up, seeing that the clouds had parted and a ray of sunshine was shining through you, no doubt, felt that sunshine on your face.

“This is what John Gardner meant in that quote I read earlier this year. ‘We read a few words at the beginning of the book and suddenly find ourselves seeing not words on a page but a train moving through Russia, an old Italian crying, a farmhouse battered by rain. We read on—dream on—not passively but actively, worrying about the choices that the characters have made.’

“Today I want to say, ‘Encore.’ That’s what the audience at the theater cries out when the audience wants the actors to do it again. Encore, readers. Do it again. Today, read as if you were walking in your character’s shoes—again. Remember to add in stuff from your own life—again. If the character goes to a park, recall the park right across from your house and fill in the details of your character’s park. If the character walks up the front steps of a school, bring our huge cement steps—all ten of them—into your mental movie.”

You’ll notice that I often use vocabulary terms that will not be familiar to many children. Kids need to be immersed in rich nuanced language! But the language needs to be meaningful, and you’ll see that I tend to weave a synonym into the text to help children grasp the meaning of a word such as encore, curmudgeon, peripheral vision, or autopilot.

Again and again, notice that minilessons need to help children accumulate and draw upon the entire repertoire of all you have taught, showing ways in which the new teaching extends and builds upon the old.

Be sure you use actions to accompany your language. When you say that you know readers shared their characters’ fury, clenching fists, kicking at the ground, and scowling you’ll want to do miniature versions of these actions. Help readers envision your words, and help them listen attentively.
Name your teaching point. Teach children that readers revise our mental movies when new details in the text lead us to self-correct.

“And today I want to teach you that a reader not only sees, hears, imagines as if in the story, making a movie in the mind, but a reader also revises that mental movie. Often when we read on, the story provides details that nudge us to say, ‘Oops, I’ll have to change what I’m thinking.’”

TEACHING

Help readers crystallize an impression of a character from the read-aloud. Channel them to create an impression that will need to be revised after further reading.

“Let’s for a second think back to Chapter 3 and remember the movie we made in our minds when the new character, Sistine, boarded Rob’s bus, coming into the story.”

Turning to Chapter 3 of the book, I said, “Remember that we pictured Sistine as a blond-haired, shy girl in a fancy pink party dress, nervously walking down the aisle of the bus. We thought she walked kind of like this?” I showed Sistine walking shyly onto the bus, looking down on the floor of the bus (it was her first day with these new kids). “The name Sistine, named after that beautiful painting that has angels in the clouds and God reaching out his hand to Adam, helped us form a picture of her, didn’t it?

“We have that picture of Sistine in mind. As we read on, let’s continue to imagine, filling in the details.”

Chapter 4

Sistine was in Rob’s sixth grade homeroom class. Mrs. Soames made her stand up and introduce herself.

“My name,” she said in her gravelly voice (I read the word gravelly in a way which showed my puzzlement over this description of the tone of her voice, because I wouldn’t have expected this girl in a pink dress to have a gravelly voice), “is Sistine Bailey.” She stood at the front of the room, in her pink dress. And all the kids stared at her with open mouths as if she had just stepped off a spaceship from another planet.

Say these words as if they matter. They do. A doctoral student of mine has researched children who struggle to comprehend, and she’s found that almost two thirds of them get themselves into trouble because they cling to their first ‘read’ of a story in face of all new evidence and end up with a chaotic hodgepodge of ideas instead of a coherent text.

You’ll need to be a bit manipulative here. The point of the mini-lesson is that because our envisionments draw not only on the text but also on the reader’s prior experiences, it is not uncommon for a reader to envision in ways that turn out to be wrong, and readers need to be nimble enough to revise those first envisionments. To convey this, you’ll first envision (and get your class to do so, too) in ways that turn out to be problematic.

In planning a minilesson, we tend to look for portions of a text that will make it easy for readers to do the sort of work we’re advocating. In constructing this minilesson, we first found two instances in the early chapters of The Tiger Rising in which our initial impressions of characters were soon turned upside down by new information. Rob appeared at first to be a wimpy kid but then races bravely to Sistine’s assistance. Sistine is introduced first as the new girl in a pink dress, but she eventually defies stereotypes. We used one of these passages in the minilesson, saving the other for small-group work.

Notice, that although I have already figured out that Sistine turns out to defy our initial impression of her, I do not reveal this realization up front. Instead, I channel the kids to form the same initial impression of Sistine that I formed, so that then, after reading farther in the text, their first impression will be challenged.

Remember, you are still cultivating the shy-girl-in-the-pink-dress image that you know will be turned upside down soon.
I said, “Okay, so I picture her, standing in front of the whole class. I’m picturing a room like ours, with kids sitting at tables. Sistine is new so she looks out into a sea of new faces, each person with his or her mouth open and eyes wide, looking at Sistine as if she was an alien. She probably feels scared and shy.”

**Extract some overarching principles from the demonstration you’ve just given, emphasizing that readers use information from our own lives to fill in gaps in texts.**

Shifting now into the role of teacher and looking kids directly in the eyes, I named what I hope they’d seen me do thus far. “Did you notice that I brought what I know of classrooms and of new kids into my picture? Readers do that. We draw on what we learned earlier in the book and draw also on what we know from our own lives to fill in the details of what we are imagining. But here’s the important thing that I want you to notice. Sometimes when we bring in stuff from our own lives, we create pictures that when we read on, turn out to be wrong. As we read on, in those instances, we find ourselves saying ‘Oops’ and revising our picture.”

**Read on, encountering text that will challenge our envisionment of that character. Show that we revise our initial ideas.**

Rob looked down at his desk. He knew not to stare at her. He started working on a drawing of the tiger.

“What a lovely name,” said Mrs. Soames.

“Thank you,” said Sistine.

Patrice Wilkins, who sat in front of Rob, snorted and then giggled and then covered her mouth. (“Oh, how horrible for Sistine.”)

“I’m from Philadelphia, Pennsylvania,” Sistine said. “Home of the Liberty Bell, and I hate the South because the people in it are ignorant.”

In reading workshop, minilessons often require the teacher to shift between reading aloud and thinking aloud. As I’ve mentioned earlier, it’s easy for these two to become indistinguishable, something that creates confusion for the observing children. So remember that you’ll want to rely upon a way to signal when you shift from reading aloud to thinking aloud. When you are thinking about the text rather than reading it, you’ll probably want to lower the book and look up toward the sky: Don’t hesitate to be a bit overly dramatic in ways that convey, “Now I’m not reading. I am, instead, musing over what I’ve just read.”

So far you have demonstrated prior lessons in which you taught children that readers draw on their prior knowledge to fill in details of the text they’re reading. But you haven’t yet demonstrated today’s teaching point, which is that when we read and find the text challenges our first envisionment, we often need to say “Oops” and revise these envisionments.

If it seems to you that we are creeping awfully slowly through the read-aloud book, know that Kathleen and I feel the same way. You will probably want to stay in sync with us nevertheless because if you zoom ahead in your reading aloud, this may make some of the upcoming minilessons harder, but know you are right to be chomping on the bit!
Putting the book down, I looked at the kids and said, “What??? That doesn’t match our picture of Sistine, does it?” Then returning to the book, I said, “Let’s read on.”

“And I’m not staying here in Lister. My father is coming to get me next week.” She looked around the room defiantly.

I again lowered the book, signaling that I was thinking rather than continuing to read. “Hmm, . . . ‘Sistine looked around the room defiantly,’” and I acted out that sort of look. “Boy does that change a lot for me! I was envisioning Sistine as shy and nervous, but now I need to revise my image, don’t you?”

Set children up to talk in partners about how they need to revise their mental movies in light of new information. Then summarize what you hope they learned that is applicable to another text, another day.

“Turn and tell your partner what words you once used—and now use—to describe Sistine.” The class erupted into conversation.

Convening the children, I summarized. “Readers, I heard you say that you used to think of Sistine as shy, quiet, girly, worried, and now you think of her as rude, snotty, angry, a snob. I hope you have learned not only about Sistine but also about reading. When we encounter new information, we, as readers, often need to change our minds.”

Active Involvement

Invite children to revisit a section of the text they read earlier, this time showing their new sense of the character.

“This makes me wonder if maybe we misread that bus scene from earlier, when Norton and Billy made fun of Sistine. Now I’m remembering how she said to them, ‘It’s not my fault you don’t have good clothes,’ and how she said to Rob, ‘What are you looking at?’ I’m realizing I was so consumed with the image of this shy girl with blond hair, wearing a pink dress that I didn’t notice all the clues that suggested she never did fit my image of a girl in a pink dress.
“Let’s reread and reenact that earlier scene. Partner 1s, you be Sistine. And Partner 2s, you again be both Norton and Billy. I’ll reread the scene from earlier in the book, and then you reenact the dialogue, making sure you bring out the tone of each character.” I read from the beginning of Chapter 3.

“Hey,” Norton called, “this is a school bus.”

“I know it,” the girl said. Her voice was gravelly and deep, and the words sounded clipped and strange, like she was stamping each one of them out with a cookie cutter.

“You’re all dressed up to go to a party,” Billy said. “This ain’t the party bus.” He elbowed Rob in the ribs.

The girl stood in the center of the aisle, swaying with the movement of the bus. She stared at them. “It’s not my fault you don’t have good clothes,” she said finally. She sat down and put her back to them.

At this part a few of the kids called out, “Oooh” and “What a dis!” while others giggled.

“Hey,” said Norton. “We’re sorry. We didn’t mean nothing. Hey,” he said again. “What’s your name?”

The girl turned and looked at them. She had a sharp nose and a sharp chin and black, black eyes.

“Sistine,” she said.

“Sistine,” hooted Billy. “What kind of stupid name is that?”

Again giggles resounded around the carpet. Max leaned forward on his knees, shaking his head. “I’d be mad,” he whispered.

“Like the chapel,” she said slowly, making each word clear and strong.

Rob stared at her, amazed.

“What are you looking at?” she said to him.

“You can distribute a copy of this page to children or not. The presence of the page will, of course, lead them to reread rather than to improvise, but it’ll also provide scaffolds. You may wait to see which partnerships seem at a loss without the page and distribute it only to those partnerships.

These reactions are comprehension monitors, showing the extent to which children are taking in the story.

“Partners turn and act out. You don’t need to try to stick with the words of the book. Say whatever your character might have said. Start with Norton saying, ‘This is a school bus . . .’”

Time and again you will notice that one of the most helpful things you can do for a reader is to get him or her started doing whatever it is you hope the reader will do.
As I moved among children, I watched two children role-play the scene on the bus, with the child who was role-playing the bullies saying, “This bus is going to school, not to a party,” and “Why are you wearing that fancy dress?” The child role-playing a tough version of Sistine, retorted, “You gonna hate me because I have nice clothes and you don’t?”

To one child, I said, “I want to caution you to not go over the top with the way you see Sistine. Remember we’re thinking she’s rude and tough. We didn’t say she’s brutal.”

Name what you hope children have learned that they can carry with them to another text, another day.

After three minutes, I wrapped up this section of the minilesson by saying, “Look what you’ve done today! Readers envision, and then we learn new evidence about the character and so we re-vision. At the start of today, we thought Sistine was shy and nervous, but now we have revised our image, realizing she can also be arrogant and tough, and I know you’ll do similar re-vision work whenever you read.”

**LINK**

Remind children that reading involves not only envisioning but also re-visioning.

“Readers, whenever you read, let the words of the story into your mind. Envision. Be there. As you read on, the story will usually give you new details that will make you say, ‘Oops’ and that will make you revise that mental movie of yours. Remember, reading is not only a process of envisioning. It is also a process of re-visioning. As you read today, you’ll be doing all that you have learned to do. (I pointed to our ongoing chart and added today’s teaching point to it.)

“I know you’ll be doing all this work as you read. For today, use a Post-it note to mark places where you revised your mental picture. I have a feeling those parts will be pretty important to your understanding of the characters in your book because authors want our ideas about characters to change, and when they do, those are important moments in a story. We’ll talk and think more about them later.

Encourage readers to take on the role, to walk in the skin of the characters, using gestures and ad-libbing. Give them license to act as that fictional persona, adding in lines the characters could have said but didn’t. Tell children that, of course, they will not have memorized the text, but they do know what Sistine is apt to say, what her responses would most likely be. It helps to ask children to put the photocopied page away and to ad-lib. Without the paper in their hands, they bring the text to life.

When I write minilessons, I draw on all I know about figurative language and literary technique in an effort to make my teaching memorable. It is no accident that I juxtapose the reference to readers envisioning with that of them re-visioning. I’m using parallel structure in hopes that my teaching will lodge into kids’ minds.

**Strategies Readers Use to Grow Ideas About Characters**

- We make a movie in our mind, drawing on the text to envision (or become) the character.
- We use our own experiences to help us walk in the character’s shoes, inferring what the character is thinking, feeling, experiencing.
- We revise our mental movies as we read on, getting new details from the text.
- We revise our initial mental movie as we take in new information.
“Remember—what do you do first when you get back to your desk?”
The children answered, “Fill out our logs.”

“Those of you sitting toward the back get started.” They dispersed. “The rest of you, don’t forget your logs and don’t forget that reading is all about imagining. Off you go.”

Notice that over time, we lighten our explicit support for logs. On previous days, I told children to fill out their logs, now I nudge them to keep the logs in mind, but I don’t specifically name this responsibility. Later, I’ll pass even more responsibility on to them.

When you look at a chart, you should see that principles of outlining (or of boxes and bullets) have informed the structure of the chart. Here the stars are A-heads, the arrows B-heads. Note the extremely supportive title.
When writers want to get better at writing, we study the work of master writers, thinking, “What has this writer done that I could emulate?” We especially notice craft moves that the writer uses repeatedly, and think, “What does this particular move seem to accomplish?” and wonder, “How did the writer go about writing in this particular way?”

To get better as teachers, it is important for us to study effective teaching just as writers study effective writing. And we can look especially for moves that a mentor teacher has done repeatedly and ask, “What does this particular move seem to accomplish?” and “How did this teacher go about teaching in this particular way?”

In this session, we pull alongside Kathleen Tolan, who is leading a small-group strategy lesson, and we observe her teaching. I’m going to pretend that I’m accompanying you on this observation. From time to time, I’ll suggest that instead of listening to Kathleen’s instruction, we pull together to reflect on what we see her doing as a teacher, noting especially the moves she makes that might be worth repeating another day, with another group of readers.

Listening In on a Strategy Lesson

You’ll notice from the start that although most reading conferences begin with a phase that we refer to as “research,” when the teacher observes what children are already doing as readers and interviews them about their reading work, in this particular strategy lesson, the research has already been conducted. Often our teaching of reading is informed by research that we did a few days ago or even a week ago. When teachers confer or lead small-group work with writers, it is rare that they draw simply on research that occurred a day or a week earlier. As writers progress, they tend to shift from doing one kind of work to doing yet another kind. Readers, on the other hand, tend to do the same kind of work again and again, on any given day (with small shifts if they are reading a particular genre, or at the beginning, middle, or end of a book). So it is more likely that a teacher will bypass the research phase of a reading conference or small group, relying on prior assessments, than that the teacher will bypass the research phase of a writing conference or small group.

When we joined her, Kathleen had already gathered a group of six children in the meeting area of the classroom. She had asked them to bring their
independent reading texts with them, which we notice, represent a variety of levels. This is a heterogeneous group. Sitting with the group in a close huddle, she said, “You have all been making movies in your mind as you read, and I think you’ve realized that it can be hard sometimes to actually get that mental movie going, am I right?” The children agreed. “So I thought we’d go back to this morning’s read-aloud. I’m going to do a little coaching that can help you get a mental picture going. Let’s first practice with a scene we know well from The Tiger Rising.

Kathleen turned to page 5 of Chapter 2 in The Tiger Rising and reread a scene the children had heard many times:

“Looky here,” said Norton Threemonger as soon as Rob stepped onto the school bus. “It’s the Kentucky Star. How’s it feel to be a star?” Norton stood in the center of the aisle, blocking Rob’s path.

Rob shrugged.

“Oh, he don’t know,” Norton called to his brother. “Hey, Billy, he don’t know what it’s like to be a star.”

Rob slipped past Norton. He walked all the way to the back of the bus and sat down in the last seat.

Starting the Reading Work, But Letting Students Finish It

Kathleen paused and looked up from the text. She repeated the final words she’d just read: “Sat down in the last seat,” and then said, “So I’m picturing Rob sitting there in silence, watching.”

Notice that Kathleen wants her small group of readers to do a particular kind of reading work. Instead of explaining at some length what she wants them to do, she invites the children to do this work by getting started doing it herself, externalizing her thinking. For example, instead of saying, “Will you picture Rob, sitting on the bus . . . ,” she simply said, “So I’m picturing Rob sitting there in silence, watching.” That is, she gets students going on the work she hopes they will continue doing and then steps back, leaving the students to continue on their own. You no doubt do similar teaching when you begin some shared reading work with your children, at first taking a rather dominant role as reader with the other voices merely chiming in on your voice, and then pulling your voice back so that your children’s voices take the lead. Of course, you are still right there, ready to become more dominant again if the readers flag and need your support.

Kathleen continued to read aloud and to think aloud.

Processing Your Demonstrations and Launching Children into Trying It

“Hey,” said Billy Threemonger. “You know what? This ain’t Kentucky. This is Florida.”

“Heard you, Billy,” said Rob. “You know what? This ain’t Kentucky. This is Florida.”

He followed Rob and sat down right next to him. He pushed his face so close that Rob could smell his breath. It was bad breath. It smelled metallic and rotten.

mid-workshop teaching point

I put down the book and said, “I picture Rob’s eyes peering at Sistine for a brief second and then shifting downward, as Rob avoids looking at her. He’s sitting in a small, old wooden desk that’s lined up with others like it in rows. I see Rob lifting his pencil and closing his eyes briefly to remember exactly how the tiger looked before he begins to draw.” I continued reading.

“What a lovely name,” said Mrs. Soames.

I looked up at the children and said, “Rob hears Mrs. Soames but keeps on drawing. And there’s Mrs. Soames smiling encouragingly at Sistine who’s standing in front of the class before a large, green chalkboard. Mrs. Soames’s voice is soft and welcoming.”

I named what I had just done. “Did you notice how I moved between the text and my mental picture? Adding the other characters and details about the classroom setting to my picture helped me imagine the whole scene.

“Okay, readers. Now it’s your turn. Partner 2, you already read a part aloud. So why don’t you start off and share what it makes you picture.”

As partners shared, I listened in and coached.

José was reading to Kwami from Crash.

My mother served the steaks.

“Penn Webb’s going out for cheerleading,” I said.

My dad is usually pretty cool, but this time his head jerked up like he got caught by an uppercut. “What? Who?”

continued on next page
After reading a bit more of the passage aloud, Kathleen reiterated what the text said, saying the content in her own words. “Billy’s face is this close to Rob like this.” (Kathleen put her face inches from Rosa’s face.) Looking at the children, she asked for confirmation. “Right? Can’t you picture the scene? Huge Billy Threemonger breathing down on Rob with that stinky breath and Rob staring straight ahead not crying.” In an aside, Kathleen said, as if parenthetically, “I’m bringing the not-crying detail from earlier in the book. That’s what readers do.”

For anyone wanting to emulate Kathleen’s teaching, it is important to notice that she has just stepped back from what she was doing to process it for her observing children. She explicitly named what she’d done when she said, “I’m bringing the not-crying detail from earlier in the book.”

Then she said, “See it in your mind, too. See Rob sitting in silence. See Billy’s face so close to Rob’s. See Rob’s face as he breathes in Billy’s bad breath. Do you see it? What do you think Rob’s face looks like? Turn and tell the person sitting next to you.”

You’ll notice that Kathleen has launched the kids in doing the work she just talked about and demonstrated. Children worked in partners so they could all be engaged simultaneously, and Kathleen again sat in the middle of the circle, circulating among the children almost as if she was the hands of the clock and they, the numbers.

Kathleen listened in and heard Lily say to Emma, “He is mad but his face is frozen solid.”

“Add on,” Kathleen whispered to Emma.

“Like his eyes are squinting and his mouth is tight,” Emma added, making the face herself.

“It’s like his face is frozen solid! See all the characters,” Kathleen responded, and then moved on to listen to and coach the next child.

You’ll notice that Kathleen coached with lean prompts, using as few words as possible and using very familiar phrases, all in hopes that with a few words, she could prompt readers to do things that she believed were right within their grasp. You’ll also notice that after Kathleen coached, nudging readers to do something, she did not stay to observe whether the child followed her advice and certainly didn’t go back and forth, working and reworking what the child did. Instead she coached one child, nudging that child to do something with another child. Then as the first child incorporated that advice, Kathleen moved to another partnership, then another, each time using lean prompts, inserted almost as voiceovers into the work that children were doing.

**Setting Kids Up to Try the Work Again and Again, with Lean Prompts**

The time Kathleen spent demonstrating, early on in this strategy lesson, was very brief, but it may not be her only demonstration. If there is a pie chart made of a strategy lesson, by far the biggest chunk of that pie chart is for children’s own work, with a teacher coaching into that work. Still, the teacher may elect to do a second demonstration, this time showing children how to raise the level of their work. In this instance though, Kathleen simply sets children up to try again. “Okay, so now you’re going to continue to envision, seeing the story in your mind. I’m going to read a little more to you, and again, try to see it.”

“You ain’t a Kentucky star,” Billy said, his eyes glowing under the brim of his John Deere cap.

Kathleen continued to coach softly, “Add that to your picture.”

And you sure ain’t a star here in Florida. You ain’t a star nowhere.”

“Okay,” said Rob.
Billy shoved him hard. And then Norton came swaggering back and grabbed hold of Rob’s hair with one hand and with the other hand, ground his knuckles into Rob’s scalp.

Rob sat there and took it.

“Picture being shoved and someone grabbing your hair and grinding his knuckles into your scalp. What would your face look like? Turn and talk.”

Children turned and talked to each other, telling what they envisioned. Kathleen listened in, and again used lean prompts to coach one child, then another, to say more, to imagine what the character would say.

After a bit, Kathleen said, “Okay, so now will you pick up your own books and read? In a bit, I’ll tap you, and then I want you to show me what you are picturing. You can show me on your face and act it out a little bit, or you can tell me what you see.”

Emma was reading *Brother Below Zero*. Kathleen drew closer. “What do you envision?” Emma said, “I imagine he can’t see. He’s squinting.”

Kathleen coached Emma toward a more detailed mental picture.

“Why is he squinting?” Kathleen wondered aloud.

Emma paused, tilting her head to the side. “Because of the snow?”

“So it’s hitting him in the eyes?”

“No, he’s looking through a window,” Emma answered decisively.

“Hmm, . . . he’s squinting and looking out the window. What does he want to see?”

“He’s trying to see if his brother is coming.”

“Is he looking in a searching kind of way? Is it a serious situation, or a not so serious situation?” Kathleen asked.

“ Serious,” Emma decided.

“So it’s serious. What’s he probably thinking?”

Emma moved her head side to side in a searching sort of way, and said, “He’s worrying and searching.”

Kathleen nodded. “So keep reading, and as you read, add more to that picture. And remember that you don’t want to picture just what a person is doing—like, ‘he’s searching.’ You want to try to picture how he is doing it, why he is doing it.” Kathleen is deliberately using the same words that she has used in previous teaching points. She doesn’t want to use five different phrases to say one thing, but instead wants to attach words to experiences so that the words begin to take on real meaning. She worked for a minute with the next child, Lily, and the next.

Transcripts of reading strategy lessons are deceiving because if I included what Kathleen said to the next few children you would by then have heard what she said to one child, another, another, another, and so the transcript could lead you to believe that Kathleen is doing a lot of talking, that it is the teacher who is especially active. But in fact, in a reading strategy lesson, the children spend the bulk of the time reading and the teacher watches, then intervenes lightly to coach on the run, then moves to another child and again assesses and then coaches.

**Helping Children Transfer Learning to Other Days, Other Texts**

After coaching readers for five or six minutes, reaching several but not all the members of the small group, Kathleen knew it was time to move on to the rest of her class. Before the session could end, it was important for her to help readers understand that what she taught that day is not about working with this particular text, but that instead, it is transferable to any text, any day.

“So let’s come back together for a second. Emma actually pretended to be a character and acted out the actions. And then she realized maybe she hadn’t paid a lot of attention to the feelings of the character, so she figured out what those feelings were. Lily, meanwhile, had needed similar help. Lily knew what the character was doing. Right away, she jumped to her feet and acted out, ‘She’s just standing there,’ but after we talked, Lily realized the character was perturbed, so the character was standing with an ‘Awww, man’ attitude, annoyed and angry, so she thought about how this would affect the character. This is all so smart! So when you keep reading, keep on making mental pictures as you read. Don’t just let the text just pass you by.”
Remind readers of all they know and invite them to call upon it when they need it.

“Readers, you are going to have time to talk with your partners now. Sometimes, I’ll give you and your partner a specific way to share your reading, but today you can decide how to spend your time together. You can use the chart ‘Ways You and Another Reader Can Talk About Your Reading Lives’ or the chart, ‘Ways You and Another Reader Can Talk About Your Books’ to spark ideas, but before you choose, I want you to ask yourself, ‘What do I need more support with?’ You can use this time to strengthen your muscles as readers. You might not draw on the particular charts I mentioned, or on any chart at all. Perhaps you will think back to a conference or small group and recall something from one of those times that you could work on. So take a minute and make a mental short list of possibilities based on what you want to get better at doing. Thumbs up if you have an idea or two.”

I scanned the room and called on a few children.

Kadija said, “I was thinking that I need more practice in talking about what the book is making me remember and feel so I can really be in the character’s shoes.”

I pointed to Emma, who said, “I have been working on reading more at home, so my partner could look at my log and tell me how I’m doing.”

“Readers, it’s time for you and your partner to agree on what you’ll do together and get started.”

I quickly made my way from partnership to partnership and compared what each duo had chosen to work on with my conferring notes. I was curious to see how many of the children were working on things we’d concentrated on during conferring or small-group time.