Beyond Questions: A Fellowship of Opportunities for Fostering Preschoolers' Story Comprehension

Molly F. Collins

This article explores a fellowship of opportunities to support preschoolers' story comprehension and inferential thinking in read-alouds and shares outcomes from professional learning opportunities and examples from children's literature.

Background and Significance

Storybook reading is a popular context for supporting preschoolers' emergent language and literacy, particularly vocabulary (Wasik et al., 2016). The ways in which books are shared is also critical to text comprehension in the early years (McGee & Schickedanz, 2007), but less attention has been paid to the ways in which books might be used to develop story comprehension and inferential thinking (Walsh & Hodge, 2018). *Inferential thinking* about text is the ability to create new and implicit understandings by integrating existing knowledge and explicit and implicit story information, including causal associations, from the text and illustrations. It requires analysis and reasoning and also includes explanation and summarizing (Price et al., 2009), processes of higher cognitive demand than recall, sequencing, or labeling (Walsh & Hodge, 2018). *Story comprehension*, the ability to derive meaning from the text to create a coherent understanding of the story, requires inferential thinking (Strasser & del Río, 2013).

Preschoolers develop thinking abilities by comprehending language in listening opportunities, such as read-alouds. Preschoolers make inferences (Lepola et al., 2016), generate causal connections, and use background knowledge (Kendeou et al., 2009), which are important to comprehending text now (Tompkins et al., 2013) and later (Silva & Cain, 2015).

Studies of book sharing with preschoolers show need and promise. Adults engage in much more literal talk (i.e., lower cognitive demand talk utilizing recall or labeling) than inferential talk (i.e., higher cognitive demand talk utilizing reasoning, analyses, and syntheses) (Deshmukh et al., 2019; Price et al., 2009; Sun et al., 2020). When teachers do engage in inferential talk, children's responses include similar thinking (Zucker et al., 2010). Queries that promote cause and effect about events and characters foster comprehension more than those that seek

predictions or personal connections (Strasser & del Río, 2013). Teacher talk that includes inferring and specific attention to what to think about results in significant effects on inferential thinking about text (Collins, 2016; Lepola et al., 2022).

Asking questions is a common discourse tool for sharing books with young children; however, Walsh and Hodge (2018) caution that many questioning approaches focus on outcomes other than comprehension, such as the role of question format (open- or closed-ended) (Milburn et al., 2014), vocabulary, or language complexity (Wasik et al., 2016). Frequent use of questions that elicit yes/no or single-word responses can limit opportunities for fostering comprehension (Deshmukh et al., 2019). More research on supports for children's thinking, children's responses to questions, and asking the right questions is needed. Good queries engage minds in explanation, reasoning, and the use of literal information to draw conclusions and to model the inquiry needed for later reading comprehension (Collins, 2016; Lepola et al., 2016). Understanding our educational goal—developing comprehension—is critical to using questions effectively (Strasser & del Río, 2013).

Questions are only the tip of the iceberg. Nurturing story comprehension and inferential thinking requires the skillful orchestration of many components of a read-aloud. It requires hosting a fellowship among opportunities unique to storybook reading.

Project Overview

Using design-based research and models of shared agency in early education learning communities

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(Melasalmi & Husu, 2019), we collaborated with preschool teachers in a pilot study of professional learning to support children's story comprehension and inferential thinking about text using multiple aspects of the classroom read-aloud experience.

Three state PreK teachers (pseudonyms) in public schools or community-based programs within an urban city in the southern US gathered for eight monthly seminars in classrooms after school with the research team to study and discuss topics on nurturing inferential thinking in preschoolers. Designed and led by the author, seminars were 2-hour interactive conversations that explored aspects of read-alouds to deepen comprehension beyond questioning: (1) choosing good literature; (2) planning discussions; (3) introducing stories; (4) providing comprehension asides; (5) hosting inferential discussions; and (6) implementing multiple readings and discussions. Using children's books and hands-on materials, teachers discussed examples and practiced instruction.

Between seminars, the research team videotaped teachers' reading project-specific books and narratives of choice in school and met teachers for co-viewing conversations. Extra-textual talk (ET) (other than the text of the story) about a project book was coded for teachers' inferential language use at the beginning and end of the project. Children (*n* = 50) took pre- and post-project story comprehension tests (SCTs) comprised of inferential questions about the project book. Findings revealed gains in the frequency of teachers' inferential utterances and in the number of children's inferential SCT questions answered correctly (Figure 1). Although trends are present, the small sample size prevents further conclusions.

In the following sections, we describe instructional components of the fellowship, provide examples from teachers' experiences, share additional texts to show breadth of application, and use a favorite text, *Last Stop on Market Street* (de la Peña, 2015) to demonstrate depth of the fellowship model and its potential for deepening preschoolers' story comprehension and inferential thinking.

Choosing High-Quality Literature

Choosing good literature is paramount to fostering children's opportunities for inferential thinking (Hoffman

> **PAUSE AND PONDER**
>
> - How often do you study a book before reading? What do you prepare?
>
> - How do you currently support preschoolers' inferential thinking when reading stories? What would you like to change?
>
> - Which one of the components seems like a good first step? What would help you get started?

et al., 2015). We chose complex fictional narratives to afford opportunities to reason about text (see "More to Explore!"). They provide exposure to different perspectives, opportunities to learn and deploy background knowledge, and experience appreciating and solving problems that require comparison, interpretation, and other advanced cognitive skills (Hoffman et al., 2015).

Interpreting complex texts fosters story comprehension and hones thinking by engaging children in these skills and providing practice in thinking.

High-quality stories have themes with an overarching message, usually about a universal value to humanity, which is then curated through characters' actions and experience, a rich plot, and interesting settings and circumstances (Temple et al., 2019). Characters are "dynamic, changing, and malleable (Hoffman et al., 2015, p. 12)," that is, like real people with flaws, idiosyncrasies, and relatable behaviors. Plots contain action that relates to the theme, drive the story forward, and spawn characters' growth. Rich language exists not just in language *form* (e.g., new or sophisticated words, complex syntax), but also in *function* or in its fostering of imagery, interpretation of non-literal language, and appreciation of meaning (Hoffman et al., 2015). Text and illustrations convey meaning by complementing each other. Preschoolers, so drawn to illustrations, benefit from discussions that help them take meaning from these elements.

Planning Discussion Topics and Inferential Language

A second component in the fellowship to support preschoolers' story comprehension is planning an inferential discussion to follow the reading. This allows teachers to draw upon children's knowledge of the entire story and to explore multiple and intentional topics in extended conversation. In the planning process, teachers identify topics to discuss, the pages of the book for scaffolding thinking, and the inferential language to use in the conversations.
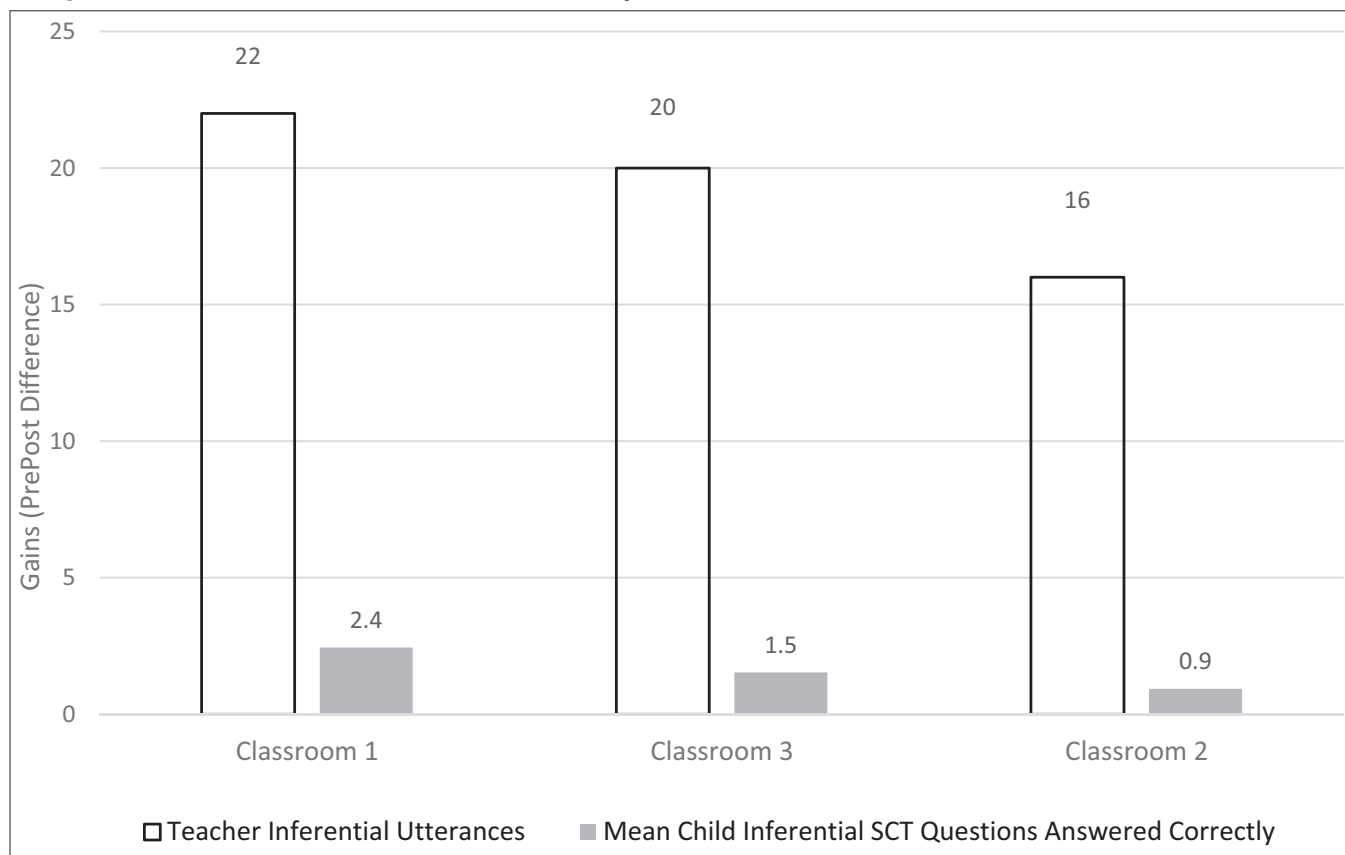
Choosing Discussion Topics

Teachers should read and study the book to understand its content. Themes are ways stories convey meaning.

Figure 1
Gains in the Number of Teachers' Inferential Utterances and the Average Number of Children's Inferential Story Comprehension Test Questions Answered Correctly

Explicit themes are stated outright; implicit themes are hinted and nuanced (Temple et al., 2019). These include details about sequences of actions, character development, contributing factors, or meaningful subplots and are worth exploring across multiple readings and discussions. In *A Sick Day for Amos McGee* (Stead, 2010), multiple themes included kindness, nuances about animals, and messages about friendship. *The Name Jar* (Choi, 2001) offers information about cultural diversity in names, perseverance, and acceptance. *The New Small Person* (Child, 2015) considers the arrival of siblings, family dynamics, jealousy, and belonging. Young children need modeling and specific attention to what to think about (Schickedanz & Collins, 2013). Because much is implied in rich fictional narratives, we studied narratives to identify worthy topics for discussion and used a Discussion Planning Worksheet to help (Figure 2).

In our focal text, *Last Stop on Market Street,* we identify three central topics for successive discussions: CJ's initial reluctance, what Nana taught him about the world,

and what was important to Nana (Table 1). The order of discussion topics is important. Later discussions are more meaningful (e.g., what was important to Nana) when earlier conversations have mined terrains that can contribute (e.g., why CJ changed his mind; how Nana helped).

Selecting Pages to Support Discussion

Grasping the meaning of stories requires high cognitive demand skills that allow discovery of topics and details and offers practice in exploring the ways text and illustrations deliver the message. Because young children benefit from visual scaffolding (Auckerman & Schuldt, 2016), a teacher should choose illustrations to accompany the discussion (Figure 2).

In *Last Stop on Market Street*, the first discussion that explores CJ's reluctance and eventual change of heart uses pages in which CJ balks along the journey (e.g., the "how come" pages) toward enlightenment (e.g., feeling the music). Table 1 provides examples.

Figure 2
Discussion Planning Worksheet

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<center>**Plan Your Discussion!**</center>

Title of Book: _____

Discussion after which Reading? (circle one)   1st   2nd   3rd   4th

I. Discussion Topic Selection - What is the topic or knowledge to be explored in the discussion? Decide on one and write it here.

II. **Selecting Discussion Pages & Crafting the Language**

- Choose a few scenes or pages in the story that you will use to support your discussion topic after the reading. Write those page numbers in the boxes below.
- Write down the language – literal and inferential prompts – you will use to host and model inferential thinking.

1	Scene #1 (p. _____)
2	Scene #2 (p. _____)
3	Scene #3 (p. _____)

</div>

Table 1

Discussion Topics, Pages of Support, and Inferential Language for Multiple Discussions of Last Stop on Market Street (de la Peña, 2015)

Discussion topic following the reading	Pages	Language to model and elicit inferential thinking	Benefits to story comprehension and inferential thinking
1. Why did CJ not want to go, at first, and why did he change his mind?	1–2	■ As they left the church, what did CJ do? ■ What does his skipping tell us about how he feels?[a] ■ Yes, "the outside air smelled like freedom." Why might he have thought that?[a]	■ Recalling details (doors, skipping, air) ■ Inferring feeling ■ Inferring character's thinking
	11–12	■ The bus lurched and stopped. ■ CJ had another complaint to add to having to wait in the wet and not having a car. What did he say this time? ■ CJ pouted as he looked out the window. Why did he feel sorry for himself?	■ Vocabulary to support story meaning ■ Modeling summarizing (waiting, no car) and synthesizing (another complaint) ■ Synthesizing behavior (pout)
	16–18	■ Did CJ start to change his mind about having to go with Nana this time? How do we know? ■ What made him change his mind?	■ Inferring using evidence ■ Inferring cause
1. What did Nana teach CJ about the world?	3–4	■ When CJ was grouchy about waiting in "all this wet," what did Nana say? ■ What was CJ thinking about after she said that?[a] ■ What did Nana make him notice?	■ Recalling details ■ Literal prompt for inferring ■ Synthesizing
	9–10	■ Nana taught CJ about people in the world. What did she help him learn when….[a] ■ Mr. Dennis did the magic trick? ■ They sat up front? ■ What else did she do (smiled, greeted)? ■ Why was it helpful to CJ?	■ Modeling inferring by eliciting components ■ Appreciation for people ■ Inclusion ■ Treating everyone well ■ Modeling synthesizing: Nana ensured CJ engaged and was kind.
	21–25	■ How did CJ feel about the familiar faces now?[a] ■ What did Nana help him learn?	■ Inferring: CJ's new perspective ■ Inferring: her role in teaching about uniqueness
1. What was important to Nana? I bet we can figure out why, too.	13–14	■ They saw and talked with some different people on the bus, didn't they? What did they learn from the man with a spotted dog? ■ Why was this important to Nana?	■ Orienting ■ Synthesizing: Nana appreciated differences, questioned perspectives, modeled inclusivity, and challenged deficit-thinking
	23–24	■ CJ wondered how Nana always found "beautiful" where he never thought to look.[a] What did he mean? ■ Does CJ see beauty in his world now? Why?	■ Inferring CJ's realization ■ Inferring: Nana's teaching taught him to notice and appreciate
	27–28	■ What were some of the things important to Nana in the story?[a] (Getting to know people, showing appreciation, and seeing the beauty in our communities) ■ Anything else on this page? (Where are Nana and CJ?)	■ Summarizing for inferring ■ Inferring: destination and serving others

[a] Language can be simplified for varying language skills.

Crafting the Language of Discussion

Young children need help in engaging in inferential thinking (Martinez et al., 2017). Teachers should plan the precise language to use in the discussion to scaffold inferential thinking (Walsh & Hodge, 2018). This requires time and tinkering but ensures a thoughtful discussion and memory for the language to launch it. Project teachers agreed that crafting the language can be challenging. Janelle noted early in the project, "Many times it is hard to move away from my frequent types of questions." Teachers appreciated using the Discussion Planning Worksheet (Figure 2) and discussing language and benefits to story comprehension (Table 1).

Teachers who read aloud may relate to forgetting prompts, flubbing the wording, or having the discussion unintentionally redirected. We certainly relate! The discussion topic, pages, and language planning opportunities are innovative and worthy fellows for nurturing thinking.

Story Introductions

A warm introduction between people usually includes learning names and exchanging information that launches further getting-to-know-you conversation. Similarly, a good story introduction provides the title of the book and enough information about characters or the plot to stoke curiosity but not enough to ruin intrigue or spoil opportunities for reasoning. Cover illustrations often contain imagery that differs from illustrations (Lambert, 2015) and may portray the story's message aesthetically. Introductions thus have potential to acquaint and delight while assisting story comprehension and inferential thinking.

Because illustrators leave information implied, story introductions provide opportunities to reason about what is to come. For example, some titles contain ideas not present in the cover illustration. The lack of a chair on the cover of *A Chair for My Mother* (Williams, 1982) introduces a curiosity. Good story introductions allow us to meet characters and to wonder about their ensuing dilemmas. Covers can delightfully mislead (e.g., *Possum and the Peeper*, Hunter, 1998), symbolize without culminating (e.g., *Corduroy*, Freeman, 1968), illuminate significance (e.g., *Watercress*, Wang, 2021), or pose a clear dilemma (e.g., *Blackout*, Rocco, 2011), all of which equips listeners for sense-making and reasoning as the story unfolds.

In its scene-setting illustration, the cover of *Last Stop on Market Street* can seed later inquiry. By studying covers (Figure 3), we discovered details that could inform an introduction. For example, we do not know if the bus is at the last stop (idling) or heading there (in motion). We do not know the salience of the child and adult waiting at the bus stop: are

they main characters or part of the bustling crowd? Our curiosity is piqued in wondering about the significance of a last stop. Is it a destination? A call for disembarking? Language to introduce this story before a first reading could be:

- (Showing the front cover) "Our new story is, *Last Stop on Market Street*." (Showing the front and back cover) "Here we see a city bus (pointing) that people ride to work, libraries, school, stores, parks, homes … to places in the city. This bus's route is Market Street, so it picks people up and drops them off on Market Street all day long. And here (pointing) is a little boy named CJ with his grandmother, Nana (pointing). They are going to get on the bus and ride it all the way to the last stop on Market Street. That could be a very long ride! Let's find out if something interesting happens on the way and why they might be going there."

This introduction orients children to the setting and provides information about a city bus. Preschoolers often have limited experiences (e.g., school buses) and background knowledge. It introduces characters and uses the intriguing title to ignite curiosity about the story. Authors and illustrators can be named during first or later readings. Showing the front and back covers reveals the full details of the bus and its riders, a foreshadowing of things to come (Table 1). The introduction keeps the post-reading discussion in mind, exemplifying the fellowship for supporting children's thinking.

Reading Well

Reading the book well fosters story understanding (Martinez et al., 2017). Meaning is conveyed through the segmental features of language (e.g., words and sounds) as well as the supra-segmental features, such as expression, tone, rhythm, and stress. Adults who read aloud well enable children to appreciate what language means and indicates beyond definition (vocabulary) and sentence structure (syntax). We encouraged three levels of reading well to deepen children's story comprehension:

- pronouncing words (word level)
- using intonation (phrase level)
- adding embellished expression (story level)

Words

Reading words well preserves fidelity to the text and brings the author's message to life. It provides exposure to complex language, including sophisticated vocabulary, dialect variation, and words in other languages and helps children comprehend literal information (Collins, 2016).

Figure 3
Cover Illustration Used to Support Story Introduction Discussion
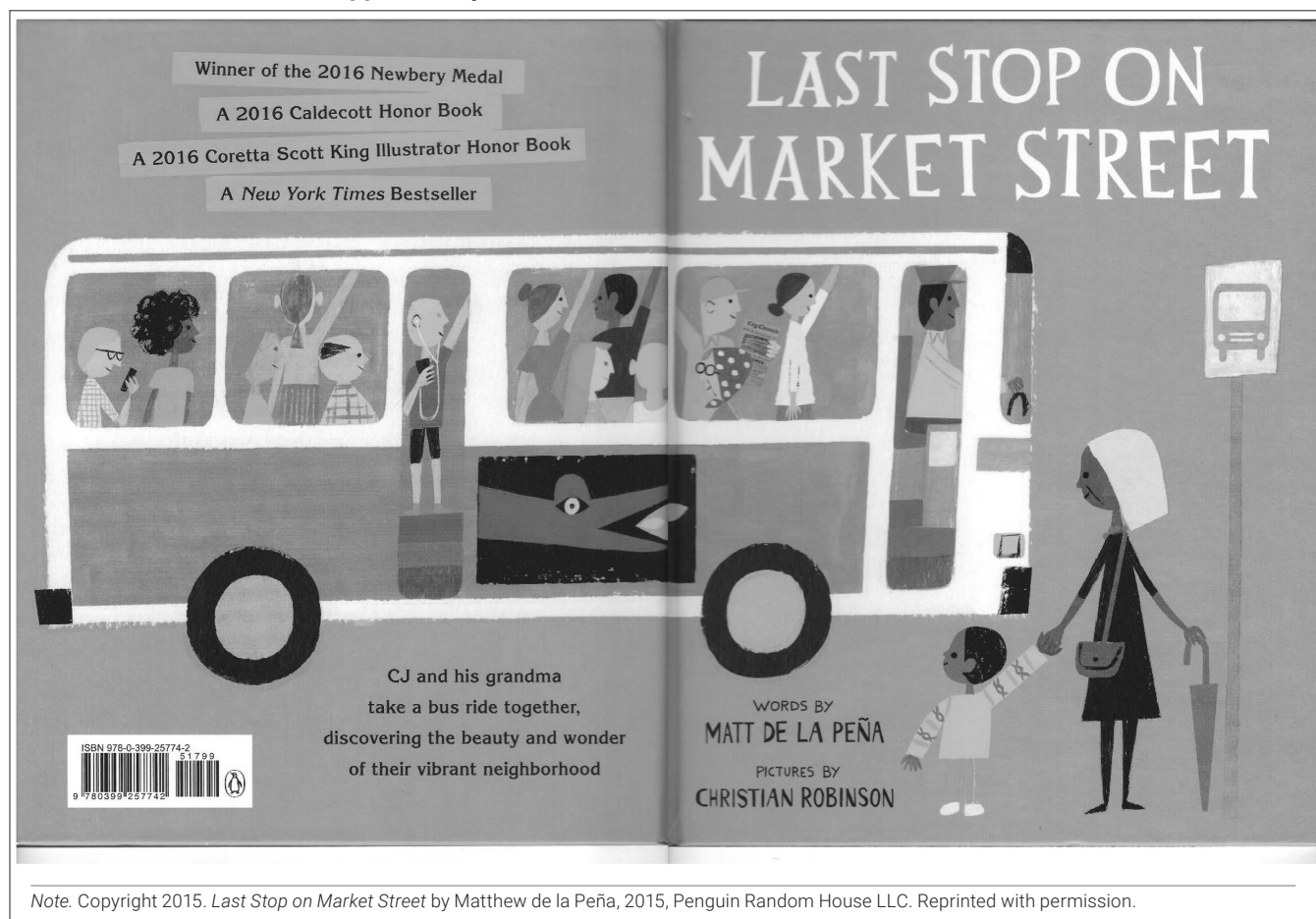
Note. Copyright 2015. *Last Stop on Market Street* by Matthew de la Peña, 2015, Penguin Random House LLC. Reprinted with permission.

Pronouncing words accurately conveys the meaning intended by the author and prevents vocabulary-based misunderstandings. For example, a single sound difference can change *burrowed* to *borrowed*, *weary* to *wary*, and *bubble* to *bauble*. Our collaborating teachers embraced this idea often, as shown when discussing *Fireman Small* (Yee, 1994, p. 8):

Kemeisha: (reading text) *The bough breaks and Tiny Cat falls*

Kemeisha: What is that? The bough? How do you say it?

Janelle: Bough (rhyming with dough)? I would have said it like 'dough' because it's spelled like 'dough,' but I'm not sure.

Maya: I've heard 'bough' like a tree bough. Rhymes with 'cow.'

Kemeisha: I have never heard that word. Look, I learned a new word!

Reading well honors dialect in the text, such as, "Miguel and Colby never have to go nowhere," in *Last Stop on Market Street* (de la Peña, 2015, p. 11). Reading dialect as written enriches story meaning by fostering appreciation of characters, linguistic diversity, and contexts.

Reading well exposes children to words and names in other languages, such as "Go on, *mija*, make a wish," in *Carmela Full of Wishes* (de la Peña, 2018) or, "It's the first-day *hijab*. Asiya knows it and I know it," in *The Proudest Blue* (Muhammad, 2019). It models respect for people, language, and understanding difference, so practice is encouraged (Martinez et al., 2017)!

Phrases

Reading well at the phrase level involves attending to expression, pacing, and emphasis when reading groups of words. For example, misreading the exclamation, "Was I ever mad!" as the question, "Was I ever mad?" in Meyer's (2004) *I Was So Mad*, could befuddle a careful

listener who is following the character's exasperation. In Phi's (2017) *A Different Pond*, a teacher who reads well will use falling intonation to read, "Step where I step," to convey a location not a request lacking "do."

In *Last Stop on Market Street*, CJ spouts a litany of "How come…" questions to register his dismay with Nana. Reading these phrases with increasing volume, as a complaining child might, underscores his annoyance.

Story

Reading well at the story level communicates meaning beyond sentences. Teachers often demonstrated and discussed intonation, shown here with *Ira Sleeps Over* (Waber, 1973, p. 7):

Maya: *"How will you feel sleeping without your teddy bear for the very first time? Hmmmm."* (Hmm is read with falling intonation in a pensive tone, as if thinking.)

Kemeisha: "See, I would read it like this: *Hmmmm????' 'Kind of sassy like.*"

Both laughed and agreed that Kemeisha's sneer and rising intonation perfectly conveyed the sister's taunting!

In *Last Stop on Market Street*, embellished expression means reading the text on p. 20 loudly, as if making an

Table 2
Comprehension Asides: Teachers' Rationales, Examples, and Strategies

| Teachers' rationale | Example | Strategies | | | |
		Pointing to picture	Explanation	"Thinking aloud"	Comparing illustrations
The character, Jack (Winter, 2000), is partially covered in bed. Children may not realize it is the same person shown previously.	Kemeisha: (pointing to Jack in bed, p. 12) "That's still Jack. We can tell because that's his hat (pointing) and he has the same curly hair (pointing) as the picture (pointing to rebus on p. 11) over here."	X	X		X
Text does not say that Max (Wells, 1991) fell asleep. Illustrations do not match text.	Janelle: (reading text, p. 8) *After a while, Max woke up.* Janelle: So it looks like he fell asleep (turns back to page 7 points to Max whose eyes are closed) and after a while he woke up. Janelle: (reading text) *Ruby was gone.*	X		X	X
Children might not realize that although Chaucer's (Krensky, 2010) friends know he sleeps during winter, Chaucer does not know he hibernates.	Maya: (reading text, p. 4) *"This winter," said Nugget, "We're going to miss you a lot." "Really?" asked Chaucer. "Where will I be while you are missing me?" "Sleeping," said Kit. "That's just what bears do."* Maya: So they know (pointing to friends) that Chaucer is going to sleep. He is going to hibernate. That is what bears do in the winter. So his friends are saying, "I'm gonna' miss you."	X	X		

Note. X's indicate strategies used by teachers in the examples.

announcement, and with widened eyes to indicate the big reveal: '*Last stop on Market Street*,' *Mr. Dennis called.* This refreshes the curiosity raised in the story introduction (i.e., what is at the last stop and why they are going there), thus strengthening the fellowship among components—the introduction, the story itself, and reading well—for supporting story comprehension.

Comprehension Asides

Supporting preschoolers' story comprehension during the reading requires judgment and knowledge of children's perspectives. A *comprehension aside* is a comment or gesture provided by the teacher during the reading to add information or a personal opinion that deepens understanding or prevents confusion (Schickedanz & Collins, 2013). Brief and well-placed, it does not invite extended discussion. Similar to literary asides in theater (Mamet, 2022), a comprehension aside offers insight to the listeners as a direct comment or as an audible thought. Unlike theater asides, however, the comprehension aside does not reveal truths or implicit information that will be learned later as the story unfolds or as the teacher scaffolds thinking. Comprehension asides should enable opportunities for reasoning, not replace them. Other techniques, such as asking children if they understand or probing what children think might happen, differ in aim, can interrupt the processing of larger chunks of text, initiate an extended conversation at an untenable time, or generate errors that distract from everyone's understanding. The timing of information matters to children's comprehension (Schickedanz & Collins, 2013; Walsh & Hodge, 2018). Asides provide customized information (Martinez et al., 2017) from a knowledgeable other who is mindful of multiple goals for thinking.

Comprehension asides can explain time and motion, for example, as two-dimensional illustrations may not represent them clearly. In *Watercress* (Wang, 2021), illustrator Jason Chin uses the page spread to contrast the present day with the parents' memories of similar experiences decades ago in China. Although adults understand that cornstalks in the page gutters and black and white colors on the right page signify a change in time, preschoolers might misinterpret illustrations as chronological, existing at the same time that the character is stopped on the dirt road with her reminiscing family. A teacher can offer a comprehension aside by tracing their finger from the left page to the right page and explaining, "Here we see what her parents are remembering when they were children."

Young children welcome information from trustworthy sources; however, they often draw incorrect conclusions, fail to reason, lack background knowledge, or miss details that support understanding (Schickedanz et al., 2022). Because authors and illustrators leave much unsaid, comprehension asides during the reading are useful. Our teachers thought so, too! They used several strategies to clarify and prevent misunderstanding (Table 2). Use the table to track your strategies!

Occasionally, the organization of text and illustrations presents challenges to preschoolers' thinking. In *Last Stop on Market Street*, we offer a comprehension aside to

Table 3
Launching Discussion with Types of Talk to Foster Thinking

Excerpt from Discussion of *Chaucer's First Winter* (pp. 3–4)
Maya: He has friends. What kind of animals are his friends?[a,c]
Children: a squirrel and a fox
Maya: (pointing to characters respectively) A squirrel and a fox, Kit and Nugget[a]
Maya: On this page, what did they tell Chaucer?[a]
C1: **They miss him**.
Maya: And, what did he not know?[b]
Maya: He did not know something that Kit had to tell him.
C1: He did not know it's going to be winter!
Maya: **Right! He did not know it was going to be winter. That's one thing.**
T3: What else did he not know?[b]
C2: He did not know what winter was.
Maya: Yeah, **he did not know what winter was.** It was not spring.
C3: That he had to hibernate.
Maya: Yes, **that he was going to hibernate!**
Maya: He was like, "What's hibernate?"[d]
Maya: They told him he will have to sleep for a long time.

Note. Boldface indicates evidence of Chaucer's naïveté to synthesize later.
[a] Literal.
[b] Inferential.
[c] Knowledge.
[d] Modeling inferring.

prevent confusion about characters we have not met. For example, on the bus, Nana refers to Bobo, the Sunglass Man, and Trixie; however, they are not depicted and remain unknown to listeners until their later appearance as the unfamiliar faces CJ is glad to see. After reading about them, a teacher could offer, "We don't know who they are, but we are going to find out." Careful selection of asides also meshes well with later discussion topics, and illuminates the value of the fellowship of opportunities.

Hosting Inferential Discussion

Following the first reading of a story, teachers can host a discussion about the topic they identified during planning and kept in mind during the reading. Because children have heard the story, including support for new vocabulary, they are equipped with story knowledge to engage in reasoning about an initial topic. Saving extended discussion about the story for after the reading is important because children develop skill in comprehending text from sustained listening during the reading, benefit from talking about chunks of text, and can reason and synthesize when details, including literal information, are well in-hand. Moreover, the types of questions known to be helpful to story comprehension and inferential thinking (Collins, 2016; Strasser et al., 2013) require sufficient information and time for elaborated exchanges beyond what is available during the reading. Rarely does the end of the

story bring complete resolution. Authors and illustrators leave much implied. Good stories create opportunities for discovering nuances not available from simple recall or sequencing probes.
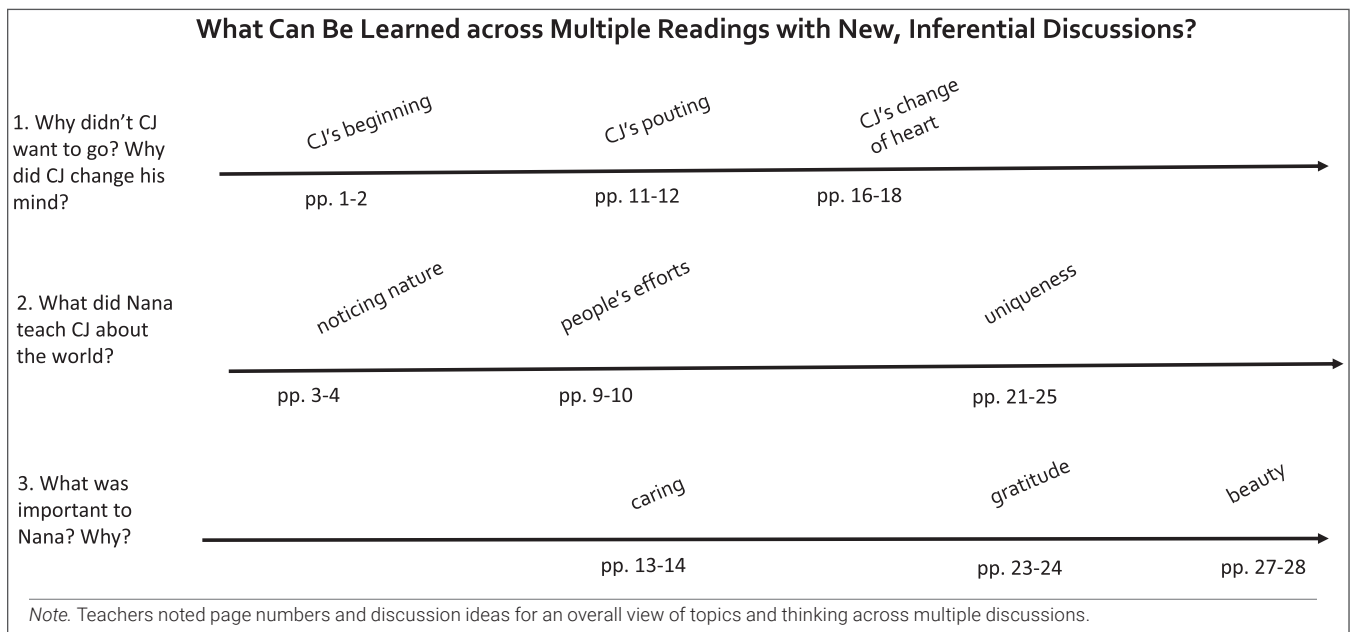
Asking the Discussion Question

To host the first discussion, the teacher poses the question by wondering aloud or asking. Maya's early efforts to host a discussion established Chaucer's naïveté (Krensky, 2010) through inferential, literal, and knowledge prompts (Table 3).

In *Last Stop on Market Street*, a teacher can probe CJ's initial feelings followed by his change-of-heart, a main topic of the story worth exploring early (Table 1). After reading the last page, the teacher can transition to the discussion query by saying, "CJ seems busy and happy at the last stop, doesn't he? But did he always feel this way? Why didn't CJ want to go, at first? Let's take a look at some pages at the beginning…."

Modeling and Eliciting Inferential Thinking

Next, turn to illustrations to support the discussion while engaging children in the inquiry. For example, literal queries on pp. 1–2 in Table 1 establish CJ's mood when they exited the church. CJ's exuberance in pushing the doors open, bounding down the steps, and thinking that the air smelled like "freedom" is important for understanding his ensuing contrariness. Examples of inferential prompts and

Figure 4
Multiple Readings Worksheet

What Can Be Learned across Multiple Readings with New, Inferential Discussions?

1. Why didn't CJ want to go? Why did CJ change his mind?
   - CJ's beginning — pp. 1-2
   - CJ's pouting — pp. 11-12
   - CJ's change of heart — pp. 16-18

2. What did Nana teach CJ about the world?
   - noticing nature — pp. 3-4
   - people's efforts — pp. 9-10
   - uniqueness — pp. 21-25

3. What was important to Nana? Why?
   - caring — pp. 13-14
   - gratitude — pp. 23-24
   - beauty — pp. 27-28

Note. Teachers noted page numbers and discussion ideas for an overall view of topics and thinking across multiple discussions.

> ## TAKE ACTION!
>
> 1. Survey classroom libraries to identify the quality of fictional narratives. Gather colleagues to source good stories from libraries and bookstores to supplement your collection.
>
> 2. Study curricular books and additional stories before reading them aloud to identify what they offer for learning and discussion. Create a Book Study group with colleagues. Meet regularly to dive into books and plan topics and inferential language for story discussions.
>
> 3. Practice reading aloud and hosting the discussion. With a colleague, ask discussion prompts using the language you crafted for the discussions. You know the children in your classroom. What types of responses do you anticipate?
>
> 4. Engage coaches and principals to provide PD on the fellowship: choosing books, planning discussions, providing story introductions, using comprehension asides during the reading, hosting thoughtful discussions after the reading, and having multiple discussions. Start with one component and build.
>
> 5. Support language learners by modeling sophisticated thinking. If needed, simplify language, not thinking.
>
> 6. Explore the fellowship with other genres to diversify discourse opportunities for young children.

literal details to use in service of analyzing and synthesizing events in the story are provided in Table 1 and on various pages when CJ asks his litany of "how come" questions. On pp. 11–12, discussing why CJ told Nana that his friends never have to go anywhere probes CJ's growing annoyance and newfound moxie in showing Nana that he is put upon.

Examples in Table 1 demonstrate modeling and eliciting inferential talk. Answers and "figuring out" should also include literal information and its contribution to inferential thinking. Modeling is important for preschoolers because it exposes children to the types of thinking processes that good readers use. They think aloud, relate new information to known, revise thinking, seek causal relationships, and articulate discrepancies when sensemaking has gone awry.

Multiple Readings with New Discussions

Engaging in multiple readings of books is beneficial to inferential thinking (Collins, 2016; Strasser et al., 2013) and story comprehension (McGee & Schickedanz, 2007).

Preschoolers benefit from opportunities to engage in inferential talk (Lepola et al., 2016); thus, multiple discussions that include such talk increase children's exposure to and engagement in inferential thinking. Because discussions build upon cumulative knowledge, repeated readings with analytical talk are helpful to thinking and build on previously established inferences (Collins, 2016).

New discussions give opportunities to grasp more than one topic of a story and allow teachers to fortify appreciation for characters' perseverance, contextual challenges, and others' supporting roles. These appreciations go beyond a singular theme and require time and discovery. Understanding all the story offers is critical to text comprehension. A fellowship itself, repeated exposures to inferential talk around new discussion topics deepens thinking about a single text and increases experiences in reasoning about text in general. It reveals the integration of knowledge threads *within* a single discussion and *among* all three—a fellowship (Figure 4).

Concluding Thoughts

Supporting preschoolers' story comprehension and inferential thinking is a fellowship of experiences throughout a read-aloud. Selecting good literature, studying books, and planning discussions begin the relationship. During the reading, introductions orient and beckon. Reading well is foundational to meaning, and comprehension asides assist. After the reading, inferential discussions connect novice and expert across multiple discussions to plumb the depths of a story.

Through project activities, teachers welcomed the fellowship of opportunities for supporting children's story comprehension and thinking. In acknowledging the project's benefits, teachers revealed a second fellowship: enthusiasm for collaboration (e.g., Kemeisha: "working together"); a passion for continued learning (e.g., Maya: "The more I do it, the more comfortable I get!"); and new appreciation for books and children's thinking (e.g., Janelle: "I've been able to look at books differently for my students.")

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Conflict of Interest

I confirm that I am abiding by policies of ethics and integrity. I have no conflict of interest.

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MORE TO EXPLORE

Resources for high quality fictional narratives for professional learning opportunities:

- American Library Association – Notable Books. www.ala.org/alsc/awardsgrants/notalists/ncb

- International Literacy Association – Choice Books List (older PreK & K). https://www.literacyworldwide.org/get-resources/reading-lists

- Resources from the National Association for the Education of Young Children. https://www.naeyc.org/resources/pubs/tyc

- Jumpstart – Read for the Record Challenge. www.jstart.org