

# THE TEXTS, THE TASKS, THE TALK: READING, DISCUSSING, AND EXPLORING CHILDREN'S LITERATURE



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CLASSROOM LIBRARIES, independent reading, teacher read alouds, small group book discussions, and differentiated literacy instruction have been pillars of reading classrooms for decades. Yet, in recent years we (teacher educators) have observed these literacy trademarks less and less often in elementary classrooms. Instead, many districts and schools have adopted reading programs with a scripted instructional guide. This has too often resulted in little to no independent reading time, fewer teacher-selected read alouds with engaging texts, and a lack of differentiated instruction.

Research reminds us that the common features of effective elementary literacy instruction include: providing *time* for children to read, offering a diverse selection of *texts* suitable for various reading levels, *teaching* reading strategies through modeling and demonstration, fostering classroom *talk* that is more conversational than interrogative, incorporating substantive *tasks* that are appropriately challenging while offering student choice, and using *testing* to serve as a guide for instruction (Allington, 2002). Other scholars report similar ideas, including the significance of independent reading *time* during the school day (Hudson & Williams, 2015); the importance of an abundance of *texts* for the diverse needs of students in classrooms (Miller & Sharp, 2018); the use of literature as a *teaching* tool (Hattan, 2024; Young et al., 2023); academic *talk* that emerges from authentic text discussions (Kelly & Moses, 2018; Pilonieta & Hathaway, 2023); and, the need for differentiated lessons in which students are reading and completing *tasks* appropriate

for their ability (Allington & Gabriel, 2012). We also know that “[i]t’s impossible to meet the needs of all students when they read the same chapters at the same time and respond to the same questions” (Jones, Clarke, & Enriquez, 2009, p. 3), whether that be reading texts included in widely used core reading programs (Reutzel et al., 2014) or children’s literature.

As practitioners who encourage the use of high-quality children’s literature that is relevant to the students in specific classroom contexts, we emphasize the significance of implementing effective classroom practices. These practices encompass the abundant use of children’s literature and the integration of challenging tasks to support engagement with the texts and literacy learning. Additionally, we underscore the importance of fostering increased classroom dialogue around these texts. In the following sections, we delve into the explorations of *the texts*, *the tasks*, and *the talk* that unfolds during the reading, discussion, and exploration of children’s literature. We take into account diverse age ranges, varying levels of text complexity, notable and award-winning books, and the usefulness of resources. We offer suggestions that may benefit pre-service, novice and veteran teachers, researchers, and teacher educators.

## The Texts

Educators have the responsibility and privilege of selecting texts to use and make available in their classrooms. Providing texts that represent a variety of genres, levels, topics, and formats will support students as they become stronger readers

and thinkers (Miller & Sharp, 2018). Intentionally chosen texts can be used in a whole class format as the teacher conducts a read aloud and models fluent reading or demonstrates reading strategies, in small groups through the revisiting of reading strategies and through robust book discussions, and individually as students choose appropriate texts that are of interest to them. We recognize that some teachers have less autonomy in the choice of texts based on the school and district. However, we also believe that even within structured reading programs, teachers have opportunities to expose students to a variety of texts through read alouds, independent reading, or text sets to supplement the content.

The vast quantity of available books makes text selection both easy (*There are so many I could use!*) and challenging (*Where do I begin?*). Teachers may choose texts focused on a common theme such as treating others as you would like to be treated, a specific standard such as texts that require readers to synthesize or draw conclusions, or a topic such as immigration or the right to vote. Often, texts can serve multiple purposes. For example, *Last stop on Market Street* (de la Peña, 2015) could be used to address social studies standards, literacy standards, and social-emotional learning competencies. This book could also be used to discuss the topics of homelessness, service, fam-

ily, and community. Text sets can be curated to serve multiple purposes (Cappiello & Thulin Dawes, 2021). As an example, Table 1 includes nonfiction and fiction texts (recent and earlier books) that can be used for a possible theme of Understanding and Respecting Differences/Treating Others with Kindness.

Beyond the purpose of using a text in the classroom, it is also important to provide students with a variety of genres (e.g., fiction and nonfiction, including biographies and informational text) and formats (e.g., picturebooks, graphic novels) so they have opportunities to consider texts in different ways. For instance, poetry and books in verse use fewer, but intentionally chosen, words and “express meaning through the graphic placement of words on the page” (Raybuck, 2015, p. 63). Historical fiction can be challenging for children as they seek to determine which parts of the story are historically accurate and which parts are fiction (Youngs & Serafini, 2011). Graphic novels require readers to attend to both the text and images (Smith & Pole, 2018). Nonfiction and expository texts can be content-heavy, and readers must also consider the complexities of integrated images, graphics, and designed typography (Smith & Robertson, 2019) since overall reading comprehension and graphics comprehension are highly correlated (Roberts, Norman, & Cocco, 2015).

**Table 1**

**TEXT OPTIONS FOR THE THEME OF UNDERSTANDING AND RESPECTING DIFFERENCES/TREATING OTHERS WITH KINDNESS**

PURPOSE	BOOKS
Picturebooks for read alouds, partner reading, or independent reading	<i>A walk in the words</i> (Talbot, 2021) <i>Big</i> (Harrison, 2023) <i>Emmanuel's dream: The true story of Emmanuel Ofosu Yeboah</i> (Thomson, 2015) <i>The day you begin</i> (Woodson, 2018) <i>The invisible boy</i> (Ludwig, 2013) <i>Listen: How Evelyn Glennie, a deaf girl, changed percussion</i> (Stocker, 2022) <i>My city speaks</i> (Lebeuf, 2021) <i>Rescue &amp; Jessica: A life-changing friendship</i> (Kensky & Downes, 2018) <i>Six dots: A story of young Louis Braille</i> (Bryant, 2016) <i>Stand tall, Molly Lou Melon</i> (Lovell, 2001) <i>Thank you, Mr. Falker</i> (Polacco, 2012) <i>We're different, we're the same</i> (Kates, 1992)
Middle-grade novels for small group book discussions	<i>El Deafo</i> (Bell, 2014) <i>Insignificant events in the life of a cactus</i> (Bowling, 2017) <i>Out of my heart</i> (Draper, 2021) <i>Out of my mind</i> (Draper, 2012) <i>Roll with it</i> (Sumner, 2019) <i>Wonder</i> (Palacio, 2012)

To aid teachers in text selection, there are an abundance of awards lists, online reviews, and blogs available. Table 2 includes four resources we use to support our text selection and to stay well-informed about recent award-winning literature and resources.

Selecting texts that complement the curriculum, support the needs of our students, and provide opportunities for meaningful tasks and talk requires thoughtful consideration. Yet, it is also exciting to see teachers read new books and envision the ways students may learn from and connect with the content. The next two sections of this article will delve into *the tasks* and *the talk* that may be used with great *texts* in the classroom.

### The Tasks

*How do we use the texts that we choose with our students? How do we provide challenging tasks that are meaningful and not just*

*busy work? How can we provide choice within the assigned tasks?*

These are questions we have pondered and researched as we strive to design tasks that fit the text selection, purpose, and our students' needs. The tasks chosen for a particular text need to provide opportunities for students to understand specific characteristics of different text genres and provide teachers with ways to determine what the students know (Serravallo, 2018.) These tasks will differ depending on grade level, readers' abilities, type of text(s), and curriculum considerations.

The type of book chosen may determine some of the tasks included in lessons. For example, tasks that identify characteristics of fiction such as setting, characters, and plot or determining the main idea, or theme of a story might be included when working with fiction texts. On the other hand, tasks that highlight common text features of informational texts such as title, table of contents, index, glossary, headings or subtitles,

**Table 2**  
**RESOURCES TO SUPPORT TEXT SELECTION**

NAME, LINK, AND CONTENT	HOW TO USE	RESOURCES
<p><b>Books and Media Awards Shelf</b> by Association for Library Service to Children <a href="https://alsc-awards-shelf.org">https://alsc-awards-shelf.org</a></p> <p>A database of books, recordings, apps, and websites that feature ALSC's award winners (e.g., Newbery Award, Sibert Award) and Notable List titles spanning 100 years. For children from birth to 14 years of age.</p>	<p>Browse by award/notable list, author, genre, format, award year, and age range.</p>	<p>Each entry features a brief synopsis of the artifact that you can print or share. In addition, the "Find it at the library" feature shows libraries near your location that have the artifact.</p>
<p><b>March Book Madness</b> <a href="https://marchbookmadness.weebly.com/">https://marchbookmadness.weebly.com/</a></p> <p>The bracket-style competition among books in March is a fun way to expose students to new books and get them excited about voting for their favorites.</p>	<p>Choose from picturebooks, middle-grade novels, and young adult novels. See the website for rules, dates, book lists, and voting forms.</p>	<p>A list of books that will be in each bracket is made available each school year so readers have time to read before the voting. Past book champions are also posted.</p>
<p><b>Teaching Books</b> <a href="https://teachingbooks.net">teachingbooks.net</a></p> <p>This database provides thousands of multimedia and instructional materials that can be used to explore children's and young adult books and their authors.</p>	<p>Browse books by title, author, theme, text complexity, series and awards. Users can also create and share custom reading lists and seamlessly share book and author resources.</p>	<p>Use the advanced search feature and embedded resources such as standards connections, diverse books toolkit, author/illustrator interviews, lesson plans, text complexity and more.</p>
<p><b>National Council of Teachers of English</b> <a href="https://ncte.org/awards/ncte-childrens-book-awards/">https://ncte.org/awards/ncte-childrens-book-awards/</a></p> <p>Award committees for the Charlotte Huck Award for Outstanding Fiction for Children, Orbis Pictus Award for Outstanding Nonfiction for Children, and Notable Poetry Books and Verse Novels choose an award winner and honor books every year.</p>	<p>Browse by award with the most recent year highlighted. Includes links to award winners and lists from previous years.</p>	<p>Each award has the most recent year's award winner with information about that book and, if part of the award, additional honors and recommended books for the year. Information about the award and teaching resources are available for some of the books on these lists.</p>

sidebars, graphics, captions, and infographics might be helpful for readers to enjoy and comprehend this genre of text.

Furthermore, it is important to consider multimodality when working with picturebooks, including fiction and non-fiction books that contain graphics (e.g., photographs, diagrams, graphs, tables, maps). Graphics are used to convey additional information in texts and publications for children, and recent nonfiction includes an abundance of graphics (Bunnell, 2022; Fingeret, 2012; Guo et al., 2018). Research also shows that students may misunderstand or skip graphics (Jian, 2019; McTigue & Flowers, 2011). Ultimately, readers must attend to both the text and images in any text that has both. Teachers need to consider what tasks help accomplish these understandings. Below, we offer examples of tasks for fiction and nonfiction texts that could be implemented in the classroom using books from the resources suggested Tables 1 and 2.

### Tasks Example for Fiction Texts

Following the structure of Table 1, which outlines possible books to address the theme of Understanding and Respecting Differences/Treating Others with Kindness, teachers can engage students through picturebooks, novels, and discussions. Reading any of the children's picturebooks aloud can model fluent reading, address vocabulary, reinforce comprehension strategies, and allow for discussion of the theme. Students are encouraged to use the words and the illustrations to fully understand the author/illustrator's message, and students not only notice how the main character may be different from others but also all the ways the character is similar to other children. This concept is highlighted beautifully in *We're different, We're the same* (Kates, 1992). This picturebook includes several two-page spreads that first present and illustrate the differences among us, such as "Our hair is different" (p. 5), and then present the ways we are the same: "Our hair is the same. It grows on us in several places. It warms our heads and frames our faces" (p. 8). This pattern continues throughout the book to note the differences and similarities in our noses, mouths, skin, eyes, bodies, and feelings.

Students can continue exploring the theme of understanding and respecting differences through individual and partner reading of selected picturebooks from Table 1 such as *Rescue & Jessica: A life-changing friendship* (Kensky & Downes, 2018) and *Stand tall, Molly Lou Melon* (Lovell, 2001). During these sessions, the focus is on the integration of textual and visual elements to deepen comprehension and foster critical

thinking. For instance, students might closely examine the illustrations alongside the text, paying attention to how the images complement, counterpoint, or enhance each narrative. They could discuss how specific scenes or characters are depicted visually and consider the nuances conveyed through the imagery that may not be explicitly stated in the text. By analyzing both the written and visual aspects of picturebooks, students can gain a richer understanding of the themes and messages conveyed, thereby facilitating meaningful discussions and insights into understanding and respecting differences. This holistic approach encourages students to engage with literature in a multifaceted manner, promoting empathy, critical analysis, and appreciation for diverse perspectives.

Older students could also choose between two or more middle-grade novels such as *Insignificant events in the life of a cactus* (Bowling, 2019), *Out of my mind* (Draper, 2012), or *Wonder* (Palacio, 2012). The task during reading could require students to use evidence from the chapter book to infer what they are learning about the characters' personalities, decisions, motives, and changes. This requires students to read carefully, synthesize information, and read between the lines. Students can then use their written work during a small group discussion with peers who are reading the same book. This progression of exploring and discussing books through teacher read alouds, individual picturebook analysis, and then character inference using chapter books ensures that students' novel discussions include character analysis as well as plot, vocabulary, and theme. Alternatively, teachers may visit [TeachingBooks.net](https://www.teachingbooks.net) (see Table 2) for author interviews, discussion questions, extension activities, and other creative ideas designed to further understand the author and text.

### Tasks Example for Nonfiction Text

Nonfiction texts, including picturebooks and longer-length texts, combine narrative prose, traditional text features (e.g., backmatter, index), and graphics (e.g., maps, illustrations, photographs) to convey information. Many contemporary nonfiction texts are increasingly multimodal and require instructional strategies (i.e., *tasks*) that address the various modes utilized by the author (Bunnell, 2022; Fingeret, 2012; Serafini, 2015). Although many of the *tasks* suggested with fiction texts may be applied to nonfiction texts, additional strategies are needed to aid students' comprehension of multimodal texts. Using a resource presented in Table 2, ALSC Book & Media Awards Shelf, we selected an Orbis Pictus

Award book that may be used in an integrated social studies unit as an example for sharing several *tasks* to assist the teacher in teaching students how to read and interpret multimodal nonfiction texts.

The nonfiction picturebook *Manhattan: Mapping the story of an island* (Thermes, 2019) describes how the island of Manhattan in New York has changed in the past 400 years. It contains narrative explanations of the history of the island along with a variety of beautifully illustrated maps. This book includes many characteristics of informational texts and picturebooks including headings, sidebars, graphics, and backmatter (afterword, timeline, select sources, and an author's note). In addition, endpapers—which are important points on the landmark map of Manhattan, including sixteen points of interest in the front endpaper and the remaining nine points of interest in the back endpaper, as well as a diagram of the rock and sediment beneath the island—are included.

One *task* aimed at guiding students in interaction with nonfiction picturebooks includes engaging them in an analytical task where they critically examine text features. The teacher can provide specific prompts or questions to facilitate their engagement with the text. For instance, using the text *Manhattan: Mapping the story of an island* (Thermes, 2019), students could be tasked with analyzing and discussing the particular sidebar found on page 8. They may be prompted to explore questions such as “Why do you think the author included the sidebar?” and “How does this additional information contribute to our understanding of the topic?” Furthermore, students could be encouraged to compare and contrast the information presented in the written text with the accompanying graphics (e.g. maps, illustrations) by considering questions such as: a) “What details can you observe in the graphic?” b) “How does the graphic complement or expand upon the textual information?” and, c) “What insights does the graphic offer that enhance understanding of the topic?” (Norman & Roberts, 2013). Additionally, students can be guided to explore how text features such as headings and backmatter contribute to their comprehension of the text.

One *task* for teaching students how to read and interpret the characteristics used in nonfiction picturebooks is a think-aloud (Coleman & McTigue, 2013). An effective think-aloud includes sharing the text with the students as the teacher demonstrates their thought processes while reading the text out loud. For example, using the text *Manhattan: Mapping the story of an island* (Thermes, 2019) the teacher describes how stu-

dents may read and interpret the sidebar found on page 8. The teacher's think-aloud may include responses to questions such as “Why did the author include this sidebar?” and “How does this information help me understand more about this topic?” In addition, the teacher's think-aloud may demonstrate how to switch attention between the written text and the graphics (e.g., maps, illustrations) using the following questions: a) “What do I see in the graphic?” b) “Does the graphic match what the words are telling me?” and, c) “How does this graphic help me understand?” (Norman & Roberts, 2013). The teacher can also use the think-aloud to demonstrate how text features like headings and backmatter (e.g., text features) benefit the reader.

The next section will elaborate on the power of discussing content and ideas with others since “quality literature and thoughtful discussions facilitate critical thinking and meaningful interactions with both peers and texts” (Serafini & Moses, 2014, p. 466). Teacher read alouds, whole class conversations, and partner or small group discussions about texts are all essential to a dynamic, collaborative classroom. While these include *tasks* that can be used with *texts*, each also involves *talk* within the classroom community.

## The Talk

Having explored the intricacies of text selection and the various tasks that can be designed around chosen texts, it becomes evident that the synergistic efforts and conversations (*the talk*) between teachers and among students, also play a central role in the dynamic process. Research indicates the many benefits of sharing ideas through collaborative conversations. From exchanging diverse perspectives to deepening understanding, conversations with and about books have advantages for educators and students alike. Reading and discussing children's literature in the classroom allows students an opportunity to consider themes and ideas together (Serafini & Moses, 2014), especially since the books teachers read to students are often more sophisticated than texts they can read independently. Incorporating various types and genres of literature into these meaningful exchanges helps foster student agency and supports the development of literacy practices (Deliman & Breitenstein, 2022). Literature can also become a powerful teaching tool as teachers and students work together to critically analyze the messages shared in the text and explore complex issues (Newstreet et al., 2019). In this section, we explore how collaboration can have a transformative impact, not only among teachers but also between

teachers and students. We'll explore three different types of talk that support students' literacy development: teacher-to-teacher talk, teacher-to-student talk, and student-to-student talk.

### Teacher-to-Teacher Talk

As we shift our focus to the collaborative exchanges that happen between teachers engaging in conversations with one another, the significance of these conversations emerges as a dynamic force in shaping curricular experiences for students. The exchange of ideas among pre-service and in-service teachers has the potential to strengthen learning engagements while also serving as a catalyst for professional growth.

In a recent study, conducted by two of the authors, the topic of collaboration with pre-service teachers (PSTs) was explored. In one undergraduate course, focused on early childhood education, PSTs were assigned a picturebook text set and curriculum integration project to be completed in small groups. The PSTs worked together to develop text sets according to a chosen theme and planned an integrated lesson using at least one of the books in the text set. When asked to reflect on the process of completing the assignment, including the collaborative aspects of the work, the PSTs responded positively. Many reaffirmed their beliefs about the positive impact of collaboration and agreed that working together had the potential to enhance the educational experiences of the children with whom they work. One student commented, "I found this process to be enjoyable as my group and I were able to build upon each other's ideas and create a lesson plan we all found to be fun and useful in a classroom setting." This example of teamwork assisted the PSTs in developing a plan that was both effective and applicable.

One of the most significant advantages of the collaborative experience, as articulated by the PSTs, was gaining insights into their peers' perspectives. Highlighting the benefits of collaborating with peers, one student emphasized three particularly influential aspects. She noted that incorporating "everybody's different opinions, perspectives, and writing it together" enriched her overall assignment experience, underscoring her appreciation for the collaborative process. Working together, the PSTs were able to think more deeply about diverse teaching strategies, develop a stronger sense of awareness of cultural sensitivity, and consider more comprehensively how they can utilize student-centered learning approaches. The PSTs expressed that the meaningful conversations they engaged in significantly enhanced the planning stages, following an iterative process of

exchanging ideas, giving constructive feedback, and working together to design the final product. In sum, a deeper and more meaningful project came about by drawing from each of the PSTs' unique experiences and contributions. One PST reflected on the ongoing iterative process of collaboration when she said her group members each questioned, "...could this be better, or this could be better." We were "always supporting each other and getting the best that we could out of it." These quotes encapsulate the collaborative spirit and collective effort that drove their success, illustrating the transformative power of teamwork in fostering effective communication and innovative teaching ideas.

While there are many benefits to teachers engaging in meaningful conversations about curriculum development and collaborative planning, there are several challenges that may arise. In Table 3, we offer potential solutions to some of these challenges for educators who are interested in fostering a collaborative culture. Through the use of proactive measures and effective communication, it is possible to overcome potential challenges while maintaining a commitment to fostering a collaborative culture within and across classrooms in a school community.

### Teacher-to-Student Talk

Discussions using literature and critical inquiry can lead to positive teacher-student relationships, increased motivation to learn, and heightened student agency (Deliman, 2021). In addition to the many benefits of teacher-to-teacher collaboration, there are also numerous benefits to fostering collaborative efforts and strengthening dialogic interactions (Barak & Lefstein, 2021) between teachers and students through *teacher-to-student talk*.

According to the International Literacy Association (ILA, 2018), "reading aloud is undoubtedly one of the most important instructional activities to help children develop the fundamental skills and knowledge needed to become readers" (p.2). Read alouds are most effective when teachers approach them with intentionality. The teacher should pre-read the text, practice reading it aloud to rehearse voice inflections and change voices for characters, mark stopping points to ask a question or engage in a think-aloud about a word or idea, and invite students to respond to the text before, during, and after the reading (Albright & Ariail, 2005). Table 4 provides an example of teacher preparation before reading aloud the 2024 Caldecott Award winner *Big* (Harrison, 2023) which uses the text and illustrations to deliver a powerful message about the negative

impact of referring to a child as “big” in a world that values smallness. This example includes activities that support the *talk* before, during, and after reading.

Pre-reading strategies, such as discussing the author’s purpose and reviewing key vocabulary, not only build interest and engagement but also help set the purpose for reading. Through collaborative analysis of key pre-reading strategies, teachers and students can work together to facilitate important literary discussions that enrich the overall reading experience. In addition to building background knowledge and fostering predictions during the pre-reading stages, teachers can facilitate meaningful discussions with students to help them learn unfamiliar words and set the stage for improved engagement and deeper analysis of the text. With appropriate text selection, teachers can support vocabulary acquisition (Larragueta & Ceballos-Viro, 2018) and help students develop word consciousness (Churchill & Danielson, 2021) through *teacher-to-student talk*.

Tasks completed during reading can include character analysis, identifying text structure, and monitoring comprehension. In Table 4, we offer potential inferencing questions to be asked when reading aloud and discussing *Big* (Harrison, 2023). Asking inferential questions invites readers to use their background knowledge and textual evidence to form a conclusion. Kelly and Moses (2018) provide teachers with a reminder

to allow unexpected inferences from students and to not enter an interactive read aloud with predetermined answers to inferential questions. Instead, teachers can invite further discussion and questioning among students as they interpret the messages shared in the text. This will also help the teacher better understand students’ thinking processes. Mohr et al. (2023) address the complexity involved in helping young readers develop meaning-making skills via “easier and harder inferences” when reading and interpreting texts. The *talk* that happens in these exchanges about *what the author tells us* and *what the author doesn’t tell us* helps readers build key foundational literacy and critical thinking skills. Emphasizing the constructive thinking process through think-alouds and read alouds can support the students’ later independent reading practices. Thus, efforts to enhance student and teacher collaboration can lead to overall greater social, emotional, and academic development (Zins et al., 2007). When teachers and students actively contribute to the learning through *teacher-to-student talk*, this has the potential to lead to more positive outcomes for everyone.

#### Student-to-Student Talk

We’ve addressed the benefits of the collaborative exchanges (*the talk*) that happen among teachers and between teachers and students. At the heart of an engaged and active learning

**Table 3**

### CHALLENGES AND SOLUTIONS TO FOSTERING A COLLABORATIVE CULTURE


CHALLENGE	BARRIER	A POTENTIAL SOLUTION
Time Constraints	Busy schedules and growing lists of responsibilities	Implement a structured collaboration time during the school day or through a virtual meeting. (e.g., first-grade teachers meet every other Thursday at 11:00 to discuss assigned topics, such as finding books/resources, lesson planning with mentor texts, etc.)
Resistance to Change	Established practices or pressure to adhere to a rigid curriculum	Emphasize the many benefits of collaboration while making gradual changes over time (e.g., invite teachers to share success stories of collaboration in PLC meetings to see the many benefits, such as sharing leadership and decision-making, and supplementing the curriculum with engaging resources to meet the diverse needs of students)
Teaching Styles	Different philosophies or pedagogical approaches	Encourage mutual respect, foster open communication, and strive to find common ground (e.g., within grade-level teams, teachers can poll their expertise and differing approaches as a way to share innovative teaching ideas more effectively)
Inadequate Resources	Limited access to resources needed	Explore external options such as grants or support from the local library and then share those gathered resources (e.g., create an accessible list for faculty that highlights suggestions of where to find books, how to leverage technology, and include possible funding sources)

community are the interactions that happen among students as they develop their skills as critical thinkers and effective communicators. Through *student-to-student talk*, the students not only share their personally meaningful takeaways but they contribute to their peers' understanding by encouraging diverse perspectives and fostering a deeper understanding of the content they are discussing. For example, in Table 4, there is a predetermined list of essential vocabulary to discuss before reading the text. When discussing these core vocabu-

lary words, the teacher can encourage students to share their definitions of these key terms. As the students listen to their peers' ideas they can begin to clarify their own uncertainties and explore how words are used in different contexts. These rich discussions prompt the students to think critically about the meanings of words while strengthening their communication skills.

In addition to fostering literacy practices, student-to-student engagement provides openings for students to learn how

**Table 4**  
**READ ALOUD PREPARATION AND ACTIVITIES FOR *BIG* (HARRISON, 2023)**

			
<i>BIG</i> (HARRISON, 2023)			
AUTHOR'S PURPOSE	BEFORE READING ACTIVITY	DURING READING ACTIVITY	AFTER READING ACTIVITIES
<i>Building Background Knowledge</i>	<i>Reviewing Vocabulary</i>	<i>Inferencing</i>	<i>Discussions &amp; Writing</i>
Words can hurt and words can heal  Self-acceptance  Cultivating kindness  Letting go of societal labels	creative compassion considerate graceful nimble judged sensitive invisible exposed stung  hard to shake off let it all out	What does it mean when the girl feels invisible? (p. 18)  When does a person become too big to cry? (p. 39)  How does the meaning of the word “big” change throughout the book?	Throughout the book, the girl is surrounded by labels. Consider words from the story (moose, cow, big, creative, considerate, etc.) What are some words we use to describe people? Which words hurt? Which words heal?  With a friend, sort these words under the terms “heal” and “hurt”. Younger students could use words from the sort to complete the sentence stem: I am _____. (e.g, I am brave. I am kind and happy.) Older students could use words from the sort as a guide to write about how the words that people have said impacted them.

to navigate differing opinions and take ownership of their learning. When teachers build in opportunities for students to work together on after-reading activities, such as those suggested in Table 4, these *tasks* may prompt deeper reflection, by encouraging the students to consider various interpretations and applications of vocabulary words within different contexts and texts. For example, the sentence stem, “I am...” encourages the students to expand comprehension as they connect the vocabulary to their own experiences, thereby drawing parallels and considering real-world applications beyond the classroom contexts. In addition to helping students gain new insights, these conversations allow for a deeper appreciation of multiple viewpoints while fostering empathy and enhancing collaboration.

From the collaborative efforts between pre-service and practicing teachers, to the rich dialogues fostered between teachers and students, to the meaningful conversations between the students themselves, the power of sharing ideas is evident. As teachers prepare meaningful learning engagements using children’s literature it is worthwhile to acknowledge the impact *the talk* can have on these purposefully designed learning experiences.

### Conclusion

The intentional coordination between *text* selection, purposeful *tasks*, and collaborative conversations (*the talk*) forms a transformative learning experience for teachers and students alike. As noted in the introduction, we believe the decline in the use of traditional literacy practices underscores the need to reaffirm the benefits of engaging in rich discussions about literature and providing openings for students to foster curiosity about books. Text selection emerges as a crucial element, emphasizing the importance of using both narrative and informational texts across genres and themes. Equally significant are the tasks that offer practical approaches and strategies that deepen comprehension and engagement. The combination of these efforts helps nurture critical thinking and communication skills while enhancing literacy practices.

As teachers and students work together in this engaged way, they become better equipped to navigate differing opinions which enhances the collaborative efforts. This fosters an environment where diverse perspectives are valued, encouraging participants to critically analyze texts and engage in meaningful dialogue that promotes empathy and understanding. These pedagogical considerations offer space to invite discussion about complex issues addressing the multifaceted purposes

children’s literature can serve. This collaborative journey in reading, discussing, and exploring literature not only benefits academic and social development but also lays the foundation for creating compassionate learning communities that share a love for reading. •

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