



# Building Bigger Ideas Through Purposeful Talk

by MARIA NICHOLS

*Learning is a dynamic, social, meaning-making process that floats on a sea of talk.*



## LITERACY CHAMPION: MARIA NICHOLS

Maria Nichols' work as an education leader includes 33 years with the San Diego Unified School District, where she served as a Demonstration Teacher, Literacy Coach, and eventually as the Director of School Innovation. Her passion for transformational approaches to teaching and learning, powered by the constructive, dynamic nature of talk fuels her writing, as well as her collaborations with educators, districts, and organizations across the U.S. and internationally.

## One to Know: What Is Purposeful Talk, and Why Does It Matter?

The constructive nature of talk engages children as thinkers, readers, and writers by capitalizing on their natural curiosity and honoring their intellect. This constructive, purposeful talk is not merely casual chit-chat, repeating the known, or the rote answering of questions. Rather, it's a way of thinking and talking together that enables children to construct understandings bigger and bolder than possible in a single mind alone.

Talk is purposeful when it:

- **honors constructive intent.** Purposeful talk engages children in a deliberate process of building on a range of thinking to construct unique ideas.
- **harnesses the power of varied perspectives.** Purposeful talk deliberately draws from a range of perspectives to broaden and deepen the thinking and constructive potential. Children learn to value differing perspectives, actively seek them out, and work to fully understand each.
- **engages children over expanded time and space.** Purposeful talk honors the time it takes to deepen and evolve understanding. Children carry conversations with them as

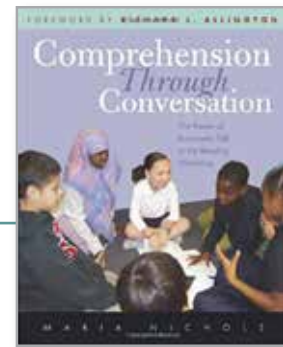
they go about other tasks and engage with other people, mulling over the range of thinking, then returning to the original conversation with fresh perspective to further propel the constructive process.

As children learn to think and talk purposefully about the questions and ideas nudged open by texts, they become active, agentive meaning makers capable of wrestling with complexity. Over time, they realize the power of using their developing literate abilities to better understand and shape their world. In this way, purposeful talk actually transforms the learning process.

## What to Do: Create a Culture of Talk

Immersing children in a culture of talk can and should begin with our youngest learners. Children need to learn about talk and through talk simultaneously, so that the processes of thinking, talking, and meaning-making are dynamically interwoven.

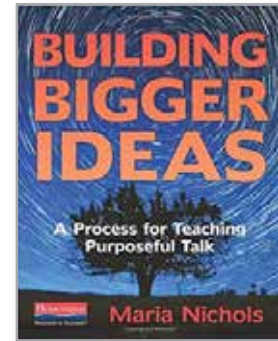
*Comprehension Through Conversation: The Power of Purposeful Talk in the Reading Workshop* (Heinemann, 2006) offers a foundation for building a culture of talk, including the introduction of specific purposeful talk behaviors as a beginning place for teaching about talk as children make meaning through talk.



### Purposeful Talk Behaviors

- **Hearing all voices** is not simply polite turn-talking. Rather, it's about developing an awareness of the varied ways that individuals bump into ideas.
- **Growing ideas focuses** children on the purpose of talk – ideas that are bigger and bolder than possible inside a single mind alone. Growing ideas has three sub-behaviors:
  - Saying something meaningful: adding thinking intended to move the meaning-making forward.
  - Listening with intent: actively taking in others' thinking, and working to make sense of and respond to it.
  - Keeping thinking alive: building on the thinking of others by agreeing with added reasoning, questioning, or disagreeing with reasoning.
- **Negotiating meaning** supports children as they learn to navigate differences flexibly and constructively.

*Building Bigger Ideas: A Process For Teaching Purposeful Talk* (Heinemann, 2019) deepens the exploration of talk behaviors, with a focus on facilitation of talk that's invitational, responsive, agentive, and meaning-driven. Chapter by chapter, it offers specific facilitative moves and language for engaging children as they learn to think and talk together, and supports the development of independence.



## More to Know and Do

**Support thoughtful text selection.** For thinking and talking to grow, children need expanded time with texts filled with compelling ideas – ideas that touch the heart and touch the mind simultaneously. Compelling texts are those that are real and relevant to children’s world, are ripe with ambiguity, open to multiple interpretations, and resist closure. These compelling texts offer fodder for rich conversations in the moment, beg for rereadings, and often become touchstones for propelling the construction of complex understandings.

**Do away with right-answerism.** Elevating ideas over answers is key to keeping thinking and talking growing. As we read with children, it’s so important to pause for their thoughts and questions, recognizing both as windows into their own unique meaning-making. We may ask questions, but thoughtfully, ensuring they’re open-ended and meaning driven, as nothing halts talk with more certainty than a whiff of “testing” questions with single right answers. Word choice matters here. As ideas build across a read, use tentative language, such as “perhaps,” “maybe,” or offer possibilities by saying things like, “I wonder if...”. Model flexibility with ideas by saying things like, “Oh, now I see ...” or “That’s changing my thinking...”.

**Use talk to transport children between being readers and being writers.** The ideas children nudge open as they think and talk about compelling texts also have the potential to launch them as writers. Talk carries children into the act of composition, supporting their use of the written word to further grow their understanding. Encourage children to approach writing as an act of discovery, using both oral and written language to find a foothold into their own thoughts. As ideas develop, help children hone in on their purpose and audience so that they become agentive as authors, and realize the power of their voice in larger conversations.

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