



TRANSCRIPT

Joyful Reading and Creative Expression With Young Children: Planning Tips and Tools

PAMELA SPYCHER

Do you wish you could bring more joy and creativity into your work with young children? Do you need some new ideas for helping young children with reading and writing? Perhaps you're interested in partnering more meaningfully with parents, families, and caregivers. In this video, you'll find answers to these questions and more. I'm going to share some tips, tools, and resources to help you plan joyful reading and creative expression activities with young children in preschool through the early elementary grades. You may be a teacher, or you may be working with teachers. Whatever your role, you'll find some useful ideas and tools you can add to your existing practice. I'll be focusing on planning joyful reading and creative expression activities around one storybook over the course of about a week.

Here's what you'll find in this video. I'm going to share some tips for choosing culturally affirming, language-rich, and beautifully illustrated storybooks. I'll share some tools you can use for planning joyful, interactive read alouds that engage all children in curiosity, critical thinking, and meaningful talk. I'll show you some different ways of teaching children the figurative language and powerful vocabulary we find in storybooks. I'll give you some resources for supporting children with creative expression through writing and the arts. And finally, I'll leave you with some joyful reading and creative expression activity guides that you can use in the classroom or send home for children to use with their families.

I've prepared a planning guide with links to free resources where you can learn more. The planning guide has lots of tools, tips, and templates to help you with your planning, and you can also visit the Joyful Reading webpage, where you can find webinar recordings, videos, research to practice guides, and teaching tools. I've included several pause points throughout the video where you can stop to try out some of the new planning techniques I'll be sharing. OK! I hope you're as excited as I am to jump into some joy and creativity. Let's get started.

[Pause]

The first step in planning joyful reading and creative expression activities is to find an amazing storybook that's worthy of your planning time and the children's learning time. Now's a good time to tell you what I consider joyful reading. It's where you're reading aloud a book that the children will fall in love with, and a book that they can connect with. It's dialogic and interactive. While you're reading, the children are invited to think, and talk, and share ideas, and ask questions. They'll engage in wondering and imagining and visualizing. They're sometimes surprised, and they often laugh. In short, it should feel like a pleasurable experience where children are happy. When children are feeling happy and connected, there's a lot of learning that can happen.

There are some key questions I ask myself when I'm looking for a joyful and affirming storybook. You'll find them in your planning guide. Some of the questions I ask myself are: Is the story complex and engaging? Will it hold young children's interest if you read it multiple times? Is there a lot to talk about? Is the story culturally affirming and inclusive? Will your students see themselves reflected in the story? Does the story promote inclusivity and respect for different kinds of people? Is the story language-rich? Does the story use figurative language that helps the children connect emotionally or through their senses? Does the story expose children to sophisticated vocabulary, words like *appreciate*, *encounter*, *surrounded*, or *delighted*? Is the story beautifully illustrated? Is there gorgeous or interesting artwork in the book? Do the illustrations tell the story in ways that complement the words? And, finally, does the story cultivate emotional intelligence? Does it promote children's positive sense of self? Does it help them to develop self-awareness?

It's possible that not every single book you choose will have all of these things going on at the same time, but they're all important questions to ask yourself each time you go looking for a new book. Here's one of my favorite storybooks that I think meets all of the criteria I just described. It's called *Last Stop on Market Street*, and it was written by Matt de la Peña and illustrated by Christian Robinson. This is a beautiful story that reflects the beautifully diverse world we live in. It's about a young boy named CJ and his Nana, who, one day, take a trip on a bus through their neighborhood. CJ is having a hard time seeing the beauty in his community, and he feels like some things aren't fair, like having to ride the bus when his friends get to ride in a car. As the story progresses, Nana teaches CJ to appreciate the people and experiences in their community.

For the rest of the video, I'll be using *Last Stop on Market Street* to show you how I plan joyful reading lessons and creative expression activities. If you have the book, you can use it to plan along with me. You can also use a familiar book you have on hand or a new book you've been wanting to share with children. When you go to choose your next book to read aloud, you can use the joyful and affirming storybook selection tips in your planning guide. You can also use the classroom library enhancement resources handout in your planning guide to take a closer look at the books in your existing classroom library. The handout has ideas for evaluating your library so it's more affirming and inclusive. It also has links to several websites with book lists to help you choose books. So, go have fun searching for a joyful and affirming storybook, and I'll meet you back here after the pause.

[Pause]

Now that you've chosen your joyful and affirming storybook, it's time to plan some comprehension questions for the children to interact with during the read aloud. I'm going to show you how I plan using the book *Last Stop on Market Street* as an example, while you use the book you chose in the last section of this video. Let's first talk about my learning goals for the children when I read aloud to them. The first learning goal I have is, of course, for the children to experience joy and connection during the read aloud. I'm really thinking about how I can model enthusiasm and pleasure and curiosity while I'm reading. In addition, I want the children to understand the story's sequence of events, its main problem or complication, and how that complication is resolved. I want them to relate to the life lesson in the story, and I want them to learn and use some of the new language in the story. I want them to be able to retell the story, both orally and in writing, and I want them to be excited about expressing themselves creatively about this story. Having clarity about the goals keeps me focused while I'm planning.

The next thing I do, before I even start writing down any lesson plans, is, I read the book. I know, I know, that may sound obvious, but I want to make sure I enjoy and connect with the book as a reader, and that I understand the sequence of events, who the characters are, how the main problem unfolds and is resolved, and I want to make sure I understand the life lessons the story has to offer. Then, I start writing down my lesson plans. Here are my four big tips for planning interactive read alouds that are joyful and affirming: Tip number 1, use sticky notes; Tip number 2, ask increasingly complex comprehension questions; Tip number 3, build in lots of student-to-student talk; Tip number 4, highlight powerful language.

Let's start with Tip number 1, use sticky notes. My lesson plan for the book is written on sticky notes. And I stick them right in the book where I'll need them. That way, I'm not fumbling around with a piece of paper while I'm trying to read the book to young and often squirrely children. I use a sticky note template and print the questions on it, and then onto the sticky notes. This is what the template and filled-in template look like, and this is what the final notes look like. If you're an instructional coach and modeling lessons in multiple classrooms, this really cuts down on preparation time. If you're a teacher team and planning lessons collaboratively, each person can plan around a different book, and you can share your sticky note plans, which also saves you time and gives you more lesson plans. There's a sticky note template and sample sticky notes for *Last Stop on Market Street* in your planning guide.

Tip number 2 is to ask increasingly complex comprehension questions. In my experience, young children are capable of understanding and engaging deeply with complex ideas. We just need to give them the chance to meet these high expectations by providing a high level of support to do so. That starts with asking good comprehension questions, questions that become increasingly complex each time you read the book in order to gradually build and deepen understanding of the story. I ask four main types of comprehension questions: On-the-surface questions, below-the-surface questions, deeper-dive questions, and ride-the-wave questions. Let's take a look at each type.

On-the-surface questions have to do with what the text says literally. These questions help children understand the basics of the story, like who the characters are, where and when the events take place, and the sequence of events. For example, in *Last Stop on Market Street*, I might ask, "Who is the story mostly about? Where is the story taking place? What is CJ doing now? What is Nana doing?" Questions like that.

Below-the-surface questions have to do with what the text means. They ask children to interpret, or make inferences, or draw conclusions about things that aren't said explicitly in the story. For example, at one point in *Last Stop on Market Street*, CJ says, "How come we always got to go here?" And Nana responds by saying that she feels sorry for those boys because they'll never have the chance to meet Bobo the Sunglass Man. The author didn't write explicitly that Nana is trying to teach CJ to appreciate the people on the bus. At this point in the story, I might pause to ask, "How is Nana helping CJ appreciate his community at this point in the story?" The question invites children to make inferences about Nana's motives based on what she said. And making inferences is a really important comprehension skill to develop.

Deeper-dive questions have to do with analysis and evaluation of the whole story. These questions ask children to think critically about the bigger themes or life lessons in a story, and they challenge them to form their own opinions using logic and reason. For example, after reading *Last Stop on Market Street* a few times, I would ask how CJ changed from the beginning to the end of the story and why the children think he changed. Then, I'd ask what

the children thought the author wanted us to learn from the story and I'd ask them to explain their reasoning. As you can see, these aren't simple questions with any right or wrong answers.

Ride-the-wave questions help children connect emotionally to the story in a way that helps them better understand events or characters or themes. For example, I might ask the children if they ever feel disappointed or even jealous when someone gets to do something they don't get to do. Or I might ask them, "How would you feel if you had a Nana like CJ, and why?" As I'm going through the book, I use my sticky notes to tell me where in the book I'll ask each question. Again, I don't ask all of these questions on the first day. That would be overwhelming. It's important to read the book multiple times over three, or four, or even five days in a week. As the children build their knowledge of the story, the questions become increasingly complex.

The joyful read aloud lesson planning tips and resources has a brief description of each tip along with some links to resources where you can learn some more about them. The joyful storybook reading five-day routine shows you the read-aloud sequence I like to use.

Tip number 3 is to build in lots of student-to-student talk. A lot of learning happens through meaningful and authentic talk, where children are sharing and discussing ideas and asking questions. So, when I'm planning, I want to make sure I'm building in as many opportunities as possible for all children to have an equitable opportunity to talk about the comprehension questions I just planned to ask them. How do I do that? First, I go back over the questions I wrote to make sure most of the questions are open-ended, rather than just asking for one-word responses. I also see if there are places where I can add language frames to support children to share their ideas. I make sure the language frames are open-ended, and I use new language in the frames to stretch children in their language development.

Some examples from *Last Stop on Market Street* are, "CJ probably feels [blank] because [blank]." "Nana helps CJ appreciate his community when [blank]." "If I had a Nana like CJ, I would feel [blank] because [blank]." Some children might need more support than others to talk with their peers. As I'm planning, I make note of additional support specific students will need. I might pair some of the children strategically, or I might plan to have a child sit close to me, or I might plan to preview the story for one or more children in their home language if they're new to English. Those notes go on the book, too, because who can remember everything?

To recap, before you sit down to read the book to children, get some sticky notes and spend some time planning different types of comprehension questions. Also, make sure to plan some language frames so all children feel confident to talk about the questions. Now, it's your turn to pause the video and to plan some comprehension questions and language frames with the book you chose.

[Pause]

Now that I have my comprehension questions and am prepared for all children to discuss them, I'm ready to think about the powerful language development that can happen through reading the story. Tip number 4 is to highlight powerful language. Joyful and affirming storybooks offer so many opportunities to highlight powerful language, including the beautiful literary language we find in stories and general academic vocabulary that can be used widely. In complex storybooks, there will be language that's unfamiliar to children. Highlighting language while

you're reading, for example, pausing to explain new words or figurative language, really supports children's comprehension of the story. The more you draw attention to the new language, the more likely children will be to learn it and use it themselves. Exposing children to this new and powerful language is the main way children develop their language repertoires.

When I think about vocabulary to highlight, I'm looking for words that are more sophisticated than everyday ways of saying things and also words that are used a lot in stories. Most of the words I choose to highlight are general academic vocabulary, also known as Tier 2 words. These are words that are important for understanding the story, and they're also words that I would love to see children using when they talk about the story or when they write their own stories. The first thing I do when I plan is to go through the book and find good words for pausing to explain. Sometimes, my list is pretty long. But I can't stop every few seconds to explain every word, so I have to prioritize.

The words I chose to pause and explain from *Last Stop on Market Street* are *freedom*, *surrounded*, *witness*, *appreciate*, *encounter*, and *community*. Then, I write down child-friendly explanations for the words. And I might also write a reminder to do a gesture or show an illustration, if that's relevant. For example, for the word *surrounded*, I'd pause and say, "When you're *surrounded* by something, that thing is all around you. Let's all use our arms to show how something would *surround* us." I'm also on the lookout for words that I can just briefly highlight with gestures or sounds, or just pointing to illustrations. The reasons why I want to highlight those words is, they're the kinds of words you'll find in literature or stories. They're often very descriptive verbs or adjectives. These are words like *lurched*, *plucking*, *swirling*, *glance*, *hummed*, etc. I'll just make a list for myself as a reminder to not just skip over the words, but to very briefly show what these words mean. For example, *lurched*. "Let's all *lurch* like the bus *lurched*." Figurative language, or what I like to call literary language, is those phrases or whole sentences that evoke emotion or help to paint a picture in your mind. One example from *Last Stop on Market Street* is, "The outside air smelled like freedom." Here, I would ask the children to close their eyes and imagine what it's like to smell freedom.

Just to be clear, my planning here involves pausing to briefly explain what the words mean while I'm reading the book to the children, so that they understand what's happening and don't get lost, and then I move on. I'm not stopping in the middle of the book to teach a whole vocabulary lesson. But some words are going to be worthy of a bigger time investment. I'll teach a few of them explicitly throughout the week. My goal is for the children to learn the words well enough so they can start using them in their speaking and writing, with prompting and support.

In your planning guide, there's a lesson planning template and tips for how to plan an explicit vocabulary lesson. The lesson planning template has three big phases. First, reintroduce the word. In other words, tell the children where the word appears in the book. Number two, support the children to use the word meaningfully. This is the heart of the lesson. And three, check for understanding and develop knowledge over time. The first time you plan a vocabulary lesson like this, it will take a while. But over time, you'll be able to plan them in five to ten minutes. To learn more about how to teach vocabulary this way, check out the webinar I did with a teacher. To see a vocabulary lesson like the one I planned using the template, watch the video we provided. Links to both of these resources and more are in your planning guide. Now, it's your turn to look for powerful language to highlight in the book you chose.

[Pause]

Now that the children have interacted with the story over several days, where they developed deeper understandings of it through discussion and learned some of the new language in it, it would be a shame to stop there. Joyful and affirming storybooks lend themselves to a myriad of creative expression activities. These activities give children opportunities to express themselves through the arts, communicate their understandings and feelings, and develop a positive sense of self. The next planning tips I'm going to share with you all have to do with what happens after reading the story with children. I'm going to ground these tips in a resource I created to support joyful reading and creative expression, both at school and at home. So as a bonus, you've got a parent-family engagement resource. Here's what the guide looks like for *Last Stop on Market Street*. As you can see, the first side is all about the book, and it has some very general comprehension questions that parents and families can ask their children as they enjoy the book at home. The types of questions you plan to ask in school will be more complex than this, and if you want to share more of that with parents, go for it. But this is a good start. On the flip side, you'll find all sorts of creative expression activities that you can do at school, or parents and families can do at home.

There are six categories I settled on for creative expression activities: Creative writing, visual and digital arts, kindness and community, mindfulness and self-awareness, movement and music, and pretend play. Let's go through how I planned each one. The first creative expression category is creative writing, which includes poetry. One thing that helps to apprentice children into story-writing is to use a mentor text or a really great story that the children could emulate as they learn to write their own stories. For this book, I had the children write and illustrate their own version of the story *Last Stop on Market Street*. I planned some questions to direct their thinking toward story-writing, like, "Where does the story begin? Who do CJ and Nana meet on their bus ride? And what does CJ learn in the story?"

Now, in the classroom, after reading and discussing the story with the children several times, I might ask them these questions and then co-construct the story together, with me writing on chart paper, and the children offering ideas. After retelling the story together in writing, children are in a much stronger position to go retell it in writing on their own. The second category is visual and digital arts. Here, I really want to prioritize the art in a story, so I plan for the children to draw, paint, or take a photograph of a place or a person in their community. I want them to connect on a deeper level with the life lessons in *Last Stop on Market Street* by thinking about what makes their community beautiful or the person they chose valuable. I also saw an opportunity to build in some literacy by asking the children to write an artist statement about their creation, and I crafted some open-ended language frames to get them started.

Kindness and community. In *Last Stop on Market Street*, CJ and Nana do something kind for their community by feeding people at a meal program. So I thought that the children could empathize with CJ and Nana by thinking about something kind they could do for their community. I planned some ideas I thought they might be able to do to get them started, like take a walk around your neighborhood, make your neighborhood more beautiful, or visit a grandparent or an elderly neighbor.

Related to kindness and community is mindfulness and self-awareness. These two categories intentionally integrate social and emotional learning. Here, I wanted the children to pick up on the idea that every person has value, including themselves. So I plan for them to do some self-

affirmations, which they can do each day. I gave them some examples to choose from, like, “I am kind, I am creative,” etc.

Movement and music is so fun to plan for. This includes dance and yoga, listening to different kinds of music, and making music or making up songs. In *Last Stop on Market Street*, CJ closes his eyes and learns to feel the magic of music. This is a beautiful invitation for children to connect to this part of the story. The questions I planned help them to listen to music like CJ. “What do you see in your imagination when you listen to this music? What do you feel in your body as you listen to this music? And when you’re ready, open your eyes and describe what you saw and felt.”

And last but not least is the category of pretend play, which is such an important part of growth and development and joyful learning. Here, I planned for the children to act out the story, and I gave them some ideas to get them started. I also gave them a lot of room to decide how they want to act it out. “As you pretend play, say the things your character said in the story and do the actions that they did. You can also make up new things your character would say. You can use costumes, props, puppets, dolls, figurines, or other creative materials to retell the story. The most important thing is to have fun!”

Now, it’s time for you to go plan some creative expression activities with the book you chose. You can use the template and look at the samples in the planning guide. Remember, the most important thing is to have fun.

[Pause]

Remember, self-reflection is the only way we can improve our teaching practice and planning process. Some of the reflective questions you can ask yourself are, “When and in what ways did the children experience true joy? When and in what ways did they express themselves creatively? What did the children learn throughout the process? What did I learn?” Some evidence you can gather to inform your self-reflection are student work samples or your observation notes. You can also just ask students. Finally, collaborating with colleagues is the best way to reflect and improve. Why not try planning with a colleague or two? How about if you invite one another to see what things are like in each of your classrooms? What could you learn if you looked at student writing or artwork together? Now, it’s your turn to go teach the lesson you planned and to think about how you can fold in self-reflection to keep getting better at teaching joyful reading and creative expression.

Thank you so much for watching this video. I hope the tips, tools, and resources will help you to bring more joy and creativity into your work with young children. Don’t forget to download the planning guide and to visit our Joyful Reading webpage for more ideas.