DIALOGIC READING TOOLKIT

Building Early Literacy
One Storybook at a Time

Branch Alliance
for Educator Diversity

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The Power
of Early Literacy

Reading a storybook with a child provides a window to new experiences. It boosts brain development and provides an opportunity for children and caregivers to bond while cultivating early literacy. Early literacy can be broadly defined as one's knowledge, skills, and disposition that precede learning to read and write in the primary grades.[1] Caregivers might be surprised at how easy it is to develop early literacy skills in young children.

The importance of family involvement in a child's development of early literacy skills has been well documented in the literature.[2,3] One simple way to begin developing these skills is through storybooks. Reading to a child is one of the most important things a caregiver can do to build many important early literacy skills that support a child's academic success. The interactive experience between a caregiver and child when reading supports literacy development such as oral language development, letter recognition, letter sounds, and later reading and writing skills.

All children benefit from being read to. For children whose home language is not English, reading storybooks in their home language as well as in English can be beneficial in numerous ways. Doing so helps the child maintain familial ties, culture, and community while also developing English language fluency.

There are multiple misconceptions surrounding bi/multilingual language development in children. It is important to note that exposing young children to more than one language does not cause delays in language development, confuse the child, or lead to future academic problems. In fact, research has found multiple neurological and academic benefits of bilingualism that span all life stages.[4]

The U.S. Department of Education[5] reports that early literacy instruction in phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension all have clear benefits for students who are bilingual – no matter what primary language is spoken in the home. Consequently, educators and families need to understand that it is not the language used, but the types of literacy rich activities, such as storybook reading, which make the difference.

There is a need for early literacy teacher preparation programs to help teacher candidates understand the influence that families have in a child's early literacy development. This includes increasing candidates' understanding of the funds of knowledge students, their families, and their communities possess. Additionally, knowledge of universal screeners, evidence-based literacy instruction, and effective interventions also impact a child's early literacy success. Literacy preparation programs must address these areas and provide teacher candidates with the opportunity for purposeful practice to ensure proficiency in high quality literacy instruction.

In response to this need, Branch Alliance for Educator Diversity (BranchED) convened a group of teacher educators from Minority Serving Institutions (MSIs) (i.e., federally designated institutions that serve a significant percentage of diverse students) and their community partners to take part in a community-based project in which teacher candidates and caregivers work together to develop their skills to implement Dialogic Reading strategies that foster early literacy skill development. This toolkit is intended to help individuals recognize the value of a child's ability, their family, and their community, while collectively working together to develop early literacy skills.

BranchED

BranchED is a professional services organization and a collective of university faculty and leaders advancing educational equity and excellence by expanding individual capacity, enabling supportive relationships, boosting institutions effectiveness, and collaborating with communities. We believe every student deserves access to caring, adaptive, and well-prepared teachers; every teacher deserves preparation that fuses quality with diversity, and every person benefits when we create a higher standard of education together.

We are committed to achieving programmatic transformation leading to improved outcomes for diverse educators who, by extension, benefit all students by preparing them to thrive in our heterogeneous society. The BranchED Framework for the Quality Preparation of Educators[6] informs programmatic transformation, which guides the development and enhancement of equity-oriented educator preparation programs that prepare educators to reflect, respect, and reify the value of the diversity of America's PK-12 school children.

The Framework

BranchED's Framework is the lens through which the organization looks at, provides feedback to, supports continuous improvement efforts of, and innovates with Educator Preparation Providers (EPPs). It is the bedrock of all the organization's activities.

BranchED's Framework is unique, in that it does not focus on candidate competencies nor philosophical orientation. Rather, it focuses on six design principles that high-quality educator preparation programs implement to ensure graduates are competent and confident educators

able to leverage, not fear or ignore, the differences among their students. Two of these design principles (*Community of Learners* and *Data Empowerment*) provide the foundation for the remaining design principles: *Practice-Based Approach*, *Inclusive Instruction*, *Equitable Experiences*, and *Intersectional Content*.

This toolkit is situated within two of the design principles: *Community of Learners* and *Practice-Based Approach*. High-quality early literacy programs are achieved through the collaboration of diverse communities of learners. All stakeholders in the community must possess and demonstrate essential early literacy skills that have been proven to support literacy learning. In addition, a practice-based approach cultivates the development of early literacy knowledge and skills through opportunities to practice implementing literacy practices with support. Opportunities to engage in deliberate practice foster a safe space to learn about implementing early literacy practices that contribute to the educational success of all children.preparation programs that prepare educators to reflect, respect, and reify the value of the diversity of America's PK-12 school children.
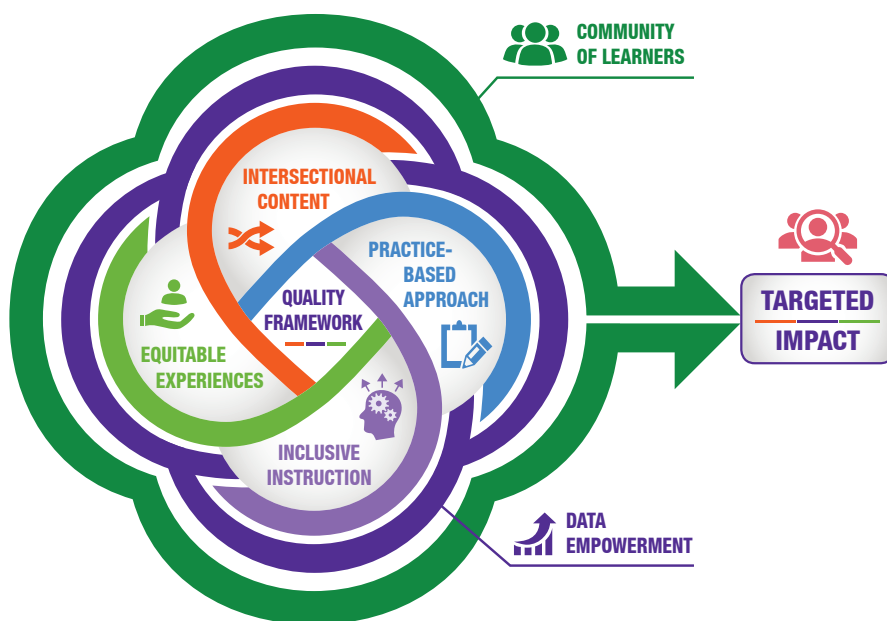
Introduction
to this Toolkit

This toolkit is intended for use by Educator Preparation Programs (EPPs), community organizations, districts, caregivers, early childcare providers, and other key stakeholders committed to early literacy development. Its purpose is to serve as a guide for introducing Dialogic Reading, an evidence-based early literacy strategy, in schools, homes, and throughout the community.

Overview of the Toolkit

Families and communities are integral contributors to improving early literacy outcomes for children. This toolkit begins with an introduction of strategies for engaging families in early literacy activities. It provides specific considerations for approaching literacy from an asset-based approach, recognizing the assets and funds of knowledge existing within all families and communities, and reviewing common assumptions and myths that may influence literacy learning.

In addition, the toolkit provides precise strategies for effective implementation of Dialogic Reading. There is specific guidance on selecting books for implementation, teaching the concepts of print, and implementing the foundational components of Dialogic Reading. The Dialogic Reading strategies provided in this toolkit are applicable across targeted literacy content areas and incorporate essential literacy components. The toolkit also includes information about the utilization of Mixed Reality Simulation (MRS) for purposeful practice of Dialogic Reading strategies. MRS is an immersive virtual experience that can be leveraged to better prepare educators and school leaders for real world situations.[7] While MRS is an effective way to provide opportunities for purposeful practice, the scenarios shared within this toolkit can also be used as case studies and/or role play.

Engaging Families
in Early Literacy Strategies

Research demonstrates that family/caregiver engagement leads to improved student academic performance.[8] The National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) has identified six principles that demonstrate successful caregiver engagement practices.[9]

SIX PRINCIPLES OF SUCCESSFUL CAREGIVER ENGAGEMENT PRACTICES

1 Invite caregivers to participate in decision-making regarding their child's education.

2 Nurture various forms of two-way communication with caregivers.

3 Promote reciprocal engagement by inviting families to share their knowledge and skills.

4 Provide learning activities that can be implemented at home.

5 Engage families in programmatic making shared decision making.

6 Ensure policies and practices are in place to fully support families.

Deliberate exposure to language and immersive encounters with literature within the school setting, at home, and in the broader community, are pivotal elements in nurturing proficient readers among children. Engaging children and families in activities such as singing songs, reading and discussing books, and participating in writing and drawing to tell stories actively foster the development of oral language skills.

The following activities may be useful in engaging teacher candidates as they build this asset-based lens.

Using
An Asset-Based Approach

In the pursuit of educational equity, an asset-based or strengths-based approach plays a pivotal role. This approach focuses on harnessing the inherent strengths within students, families, and communities, and values the funds of knowledge they possess.[10, 11] More precisely, an asset-based approach is a collaborative exploration of individual abilities and circumstances that enables the individual to meet their needs and achieve their goals. The table below provides guidance on how to engage with families/caregivers and their children using an asset-based approach.

Strengths-based Attitudes	Guidance
All families/caregivers have strengths.	• Look and listen for strengths as families/caregivers interact with their children.
Families/caregivers are the first and most important teachers of their children.	• Listen to families/caregivers' knowledge about their children. • Remember children come to you during a snapshot of their development, but they spend a lifetime with their families/caregivers.
Families/caregivers are our partners with a critical role in their child's development.	• Pay attention to what families/caregivers tell you about their children at each developmental stage. • Build on what you learn from families/caregivers to help you partner with them to support their children's learning and development.
Families/caregivers have expertise about their child and family.	• Listen carefully to what families/caregivers share about their children, family, and culture. • Honor and value families/caregivers' expertise by listening to and using their suggestions on how to best care for their children.
Families/caregivers' contributions are important and valuable.	• Be open to families/caregivers' suggestions and requests. • Adopting an open mind will help you learn from families/caregivers about their children and what is happening.

Source: Quality Counts California[12]

Funds of Knowledge

Leveraging Funds of Knowledge provides valuable insights for enhancing effective teaching strategies and practices for diverse student populations.[13] To gain a deeper understanding of students' lives and backgrounds, it is imperative to center attention on the daily routines and practices within households. This approach emphasizes discovering "what is," rather than dwelling on "what is not." Moreover, it entails engaging directly with individuals rather than relying on preconceived assumptions and stereotypes.[14]

When leveraging Funds of Knowledge to enhance learning accessibility for children, consider the following:

- **Funds of Knowledge/Cultural Asset Mapping**
  - Identify and chart the cultural assets within the classroom community, including students' interests, extracurricular activities, and skills beyond the school setting.
  - Create a mapping system that connects external interests and skills to content area standards, thereby acknowledging and leveraging student strengths and backgrounds.

- **Parent/Caregiver Expertise**
  - Actively involve parents and caregivers in the educational process by inviting them to share their expertise with both teachers and students.
  - Facilitate scheduled events where parents can contribute their knowledge, fostering a sense of agency for parents and their children in the classroom.
  - Utilize parental knowledge to inform instruction, creating a collaborative and supportive learning environment.

- **Parents/Caregivers and Students as Storytellers**
  - Encourage students and their families to share meaningful stories, traditions, and skills, promoting a sense of community and belonging.
  - These storytelling sessions can occur during family nights or within the classroom, reinforcing a collective sense of efficacy in the academic setting.

- **Project-Based Learning**
  - Empower students to apply their Funds of Knowledge to learning and problem-solving.
  - Offer students choices in how they learn and how they share their acquired information.
  - Encourage students to infuse their unique skills and perspectives into project-based learning activities, fostering creativity and individuality in the learning process.
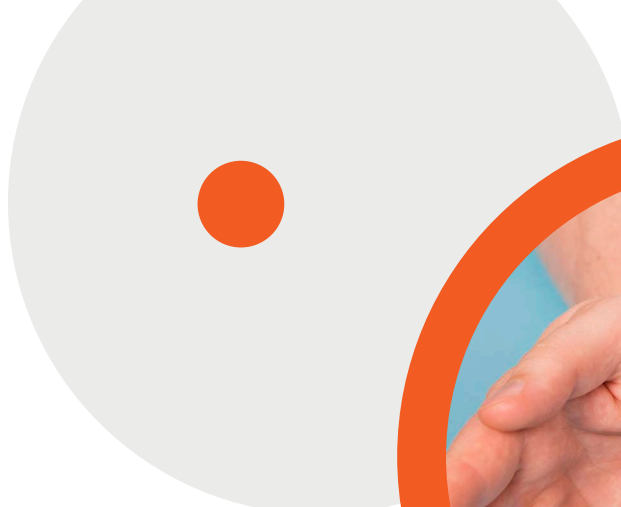
A Look Inside Myths and Assumptions

There are common myths about families that lead to assumptions about children and families that influence engagement with families and the learning environment. These include:

✖ MYTH	✔ REALITY
✖ Aligned with most media's frequent references, a typical American family has one type of family structure.	✔ Historically, America has been composed of many different family structures including the traditional nuclear, single, and multi-generational or extended families.
✖ Each family member experiences "the family" in the same way.	✔ Men, women, children and adults often experience family in different ways due to socially constructed gender roles.
✖ All family members have common needs, interests, and common experiences.	✔ Children may have different family experiences due to economic, parental and/or marital stressors, birth order, and type and level of disability.
✖ Family life is congruent, even, and somewhat predictable, and operates on the principle of harmony and love.	✔ The power relations and competition intrinsic to families, creates an atmosphere where families must balance feelings of both love and antagonism.

Assumptions can be described as unexamined beliefs or thoughts that may go unnoticed, but which shape our interactions in diverse contexts. When we examine our assumptions before engaging with children and families/caregivers, interactions are more meaningful and beneficial for academic and social development. The following questions provide a mechanism to reflect on our assumptions and foster self-awareness and constructive engagement when working with families/caregivers.

> **What might we unintentionally take for granted when it comes to collaborating with diverse families?**
>
> **What assumptions may we possess that could potentially affect our interactions with diverse families?**

Dialogic Reading

Dialogic Reading improves early literacy skills.[15, 16, 17] This evidence-based practice engages children as active participants in the storybook reading process.[18] In Dialogic Reading, the caregiver becomes an active listener by "asking questions, adding information, and prompting the child to increase the sophistication of his or her descriptions of the material in the picture books" (p. 680).[19] Dialogic Reading increases print awareness and assists preschool children in making gains in print knowledge, alphabet knowledge, and language development.[20, 21] Dialogic Reading strategies also help children demonstrate progress in expressive abilities, vocabulary development,[22] and inferential and narrative comprehension skills.[23]

Implementing Dialogic Reading Strategies

Implementation of Dialogic Reading strategies begins with coaching stakeholders in three key areas: text selection, concepts of print, and foundational components of Dialogic Reading strategies, which are detailed below. The coaching includes providing teachers, teacher candidates, caregivers, and community stakeholders multiple opportunities to practice selecting text, asking questions, and engaging in meaningful and impactful dialogue about books.

Selecting Texts for Dialogic Reading

Text selection is pivotal when implementing Dialogic Reading strategies. Well-chosen texts serve as a catalyst for engaging learners and facilitating interactive discussions to help children develop language, critical thinking, and comprehension skills. Several factors should be considered when selecting narrative and expository texts for the explicit implementation of Dialogic Reading strategies:

- **Appropriateness:** Select texts that align with children's ages, interests, and developmental levels. Ensure that both picture books and wordless picture books are relatable, compelling, and engaging to foster meaningful interactions. Picture books should provide predictable and clear storylines to support narrative comprehension and narrative production skills. Wordless picture books positively impact narrative comprehension, vocabulary skills, and the acquisition of oral language skills.[24]

- **Authentic Language:** Choose texts that showcase natural and authentic language usage and conversational patterns, including idiomatic expressions.

- **Bilingual Texts:** Select bilingual texts to support language development and cross-cultural understanding. Look for texts that are available in both languages that maintain similar content and themes.

- **Cultural Relevance:** Choose texts that reflect children's cultural backgrounds and heritage language, enriching their connection to the content and enabling meaningful conversations.

- **Language Demands:** Choose texts that match the language needs of the children. For English Language Learners, when the focus is on developing English language proficiency, consider texts with simple vocabulary and sentence structures and gradually progress to more complex text as language proficiency increases.

- **Rereadability and Interactive Potential:** Prioritize books with high levels of repetition and fanciful elements to encourage meaningful interactions, facilitating discussions, making predictions, asking questions, and making connections.[25]

- **Curriculum Alignment:** Select books that align with the various reading development aspects:
  - *Phonological Awareness:* Highlight skills like word and syllable counting, rhyming, alliteration, phoneme manipulation, and wordplay.
  - *Concepts of Print:* Focus on word and print awareness, directionality, functions of print, and effective book usage.
  - *Alphabetic Knowledge:* Foster discussions about the alphabet and letter recognition.
  - *Comprehension and Vocabulary:* Prioritize narrative and expository books where illustrations and text clarify characters or people, objects, and actions.[26]

Concepts of Print During Dialogic Reading

Concepts of Print are the awareness of the forms and functions of printed language.[27] During Dialogic Reading, adults introduce and review predetermined Concepts of Print with children prior to reading as a part of a daily routine.[28] Print awareness begins with recognizing letter shapes, names, sounds, words, features, and functions of print, and subsequently the understanding that oral and written language are related. Explicitly teaching the Concepts of Print helps children to recognize print around them and understand that print carries a message for both enjoyment and learning new information. The Concepts of Print are skills that children acquire during Dialogic Reading and while interacting with predictable and patterned books. Below are questions or requests that adults can ask children during the Dialogic Reading process to develop their understanding of the Concepts of Print.

CONCEPTS OF PRINT

Concept of Book	Concept of Text
▶ **Show me the cover (back, front) of the book.** ▶ **Where is the title (author, illustrator)?**	▶ **Show me where the book tells a story.** ▶ **Can you point to a word (two words, letter)?** ▶ **Point to each word as you read.** ▶ **What are the names of some of the letters?**
Directionality	**Mechanics**
▶ **Where do we start (finish) reading the book?** ▶ **Which way do we go when reading?** ▶ **Show me the top (bottom) of the page.** ▶ **Where do we go at the end of the line (page)?** ▶ **Which way do we turn the page?** ▶ **Show me the first (last) word on the page.**	▶ **Show me a capital (lowercase) letter.** ▶ **What is this (period, comma, question mark, exclamation point, quotation marks)?** ▶ **What does this mean (period, comma, question mark, exclamation point, quotation marks)?**

Foundational Components of Dialogic Reading

The foundational components of Dialogic Reading include *PEER* (**P**rompt, **E**valuate, **E**xpand, and **R**epeat) and *CROWD* (**C**ompletion prompts, **R**ecall prompts, **O**pen-ended prompts, **W**h-prompts, and **D**istance prompts). These components work together to ensure that children are prompted to respond to questions and to interact in conversations about texts that support comprehension development. The PEER sequence sets the framework for how to encourage extended discourse while using the CROWD question types.

PEER Sequence

Dialogic Reading extends beyond the act of reading a book aloud to children. Through the application of the *PEER* sequence technique, children are prompted to actively engage with the book and take on the role of the storyteller.[29] In this process, the adult assumes the roles of the questioner, active listener, and responsive audience. In the PEER sequence strategy, the adult prompts the child to talk about what is on the page, evaluates the child's response, expands on the response, and repeats the prompt to ensure the child has learned from the expansion. The PEER sequence is incorporated on each page of a picture book following the initial reading of the book. This approach, shared below, stimulates significant language and vocabulary development.

Prompt the child to say something about the book or name an object on the page.	**Say:** "*Tell me what happened on this page.*" **Ask:** "*What is this*?" (while pointing to a picture of a cow)
Evaluate the child's response.	After the child responds, confirm the correct responses, or share the correct response. **Say:** "*Yes, that is correct. That is a cow.*" or "*Great try. However, that is actually a cow.*"
Expand the child's response by rephrasing and adding information to it.	**Say:** "*It has four legs and a tail like a dog, but a cow is bigger than a dog and a cow says, "moo."*
Repeat the prompt to make sure the child has learned from the expansion.	**Ask:** "*What is this* (while pointing to the picture)*? What does the cow say?*"

Source: Whitehurst et al[30]

CROWD

Dialogic Reading has five distinct types of prompts, or question types to initiate the PEER sequences previously shared. These prompts are categorized under the acronym *CROWD*.[31] The following chart provides specific details about each question type and includes prompts or questions tailored for adults to use during the implementation of CROWD. The example below uses the illustrative children's book **Brown Bear, Brown Bear, What Do You See?** to model focused and explicit discussions using the CROWD strategy through the framework of Dialogic Reading.

Prompt/ Question Type	Details	In The Classroom/Home/ Community
Completion Questions	Leave the end of the sentence blank for the child to fill in while reading a repetitive book with rhyme and/or rhythm. These questions/prompts support students with the development of syntax, and the structure of language.	▶ **Adult:** *I see a yellow duck looking at me* (The adult shows the child the next page and has them complete the repetitive and rhythmic phrases). ▶ **Child:** *Yellow duck, yellow duck, what do you see?*
Recall Questions	Ask questions throughout the reading of the book that require students to retell what was read in fiction or informational books. Children's retelling should include an understanding of the story elements (characters, plot, etc.) and facts from the story.	▶ **Adult:** *What did the purple cat see?* ▶ **Child:** *The purple cat saw a white dog looking at him.*
Open-Ended Questions	Ask questions that provide children the opportunity to use detailed illustrations as well as the text in picture books to respond. With practice, children will improve expressive fluency and attention to detail.	▶ **Adult:** *Tell me what is happening on this page.* ▶ **Child:** (Respond by sharing what they notice in the pictures and words read aloud.)
"Wh" Questions	Ask questions while reading picture books that begin with who, what, where, when, why, and how. The questions should focus on the story elements, key details, and questions about new vocabulary and literary phrases.	▶ **Adult:** *What color is the frog? Where does the story take place?* ▶ **Child:** (Responds based on the text and the illustrations.)
Distancing Question	Ask questions that allow students to relate to the words and pictures in the book. Distancing questions encourage vocabulary growth, verbal fluency, focused extended discourse, and the ability to relate literary text to real-life experiences.	▶ **Adult:** *What does…remind you of? Have you ever…?* ▶ **Child:** *I remember when… This makes me think about…*

Source: Whitehurst et al[32]

Reading Strategies to Support Dialogic Reading

Once there is comfort with asking CROWD question types using the PEER Sequence, adults can use the reading strategy question types to support comprehension development. Text comprehension can be fostered by helping children use specific reading comprehension strategies while engaging with a book.[33] Reading strategies that support emergent readers' interaction with the text include making predictions, answering and generating questions, summarizing text, making connections, and making inferences. Research also supports additional strategies like comprehension monitoring, using graphic and semantic organizers, recognizing story structure, and visualizing.[34]

The table below highlights these reading strategies and the significance of each for nurturing emergent readers' capacity to delve deeply into texts during read aloud and Dialogic Reading sessions. The children's book titled, "Snowy Day," serves as a model text for the reading strategy questions identified in the chart below.

Reading Strategy	In The Classroom/At Home/In the Community
MAKING PREDICTIONS asks students to use the information from the text and personal experiences to "predict" what will happen next.	▶ *What do you think will happen to the snowball in Peter's pocket? Why?* ▶ *What will Peter do next?*
ASKING QUESTIONS gives students a purpose for reading and focuses their attention on what they are to learn. There are four types of questions that can be asked: 1) right there; 2) think and search; 3) author and you; and 4) on your own. Teaching students to **GENERATE QUESTIONS** while reading improves their active processing of the text. It also teaches children that they can ask themselves questions to better understand what is being read.	▶ **Right There:** These questions are found directly in the text and usually begin with "Wh" questions. ○ *What is Peter doing? He is sliding down the hill.* ○ *What did Peter do with the snowball?* ▶ **Think and Search:** These questions are in the story, but the answers are across different pages. ○ *What caused Peter to be sad?* ○ *How did...* ▶ **Author and You:** These questions require students to use their schema or prior knowledge to make inferences. ○ *What will happen to the snowball if Peter takes it into the house?* ○ *Predict what will happen...* ▶ **On Your Own:** These questions require students to use their schema and share their opinions. ○ *How would you feel if your snowball melted?* ○ *Have you ever?*
SUMMARIZING requires students to identify the central or main ideas and to remember what they have read. In early literacy, students will "*retell*" the story in their own words.	▶ *Tell me about Peter's adventures in Snowy Day.* ▶ *Tell me what happened after Peter put the snowball in his pocket.*
MAKING CONNECTIONS helps students make use of **PRIOR KNOWLEDGE** to improve comprehension. Students connect the text to self, to other text, and to the world.	▶ *What happens to ice when it sits out?* ▶ *What do people do on snowy days? Have you seen a movie or read a book about people playing in the snow?*
MAKING INFERENCES enables students to draw conclusions from textual evidence or clues and prior knowledge. It helps students learn when information is not directly stated in the text but is only implied.	▶ *Do you think Peter will be sad when he realizes that the snowball melted?* ▶ *How do you know that?*

Conclusion

This Dialogic Reading toolkit serves as an evidence-based resource for improving early literacy skills. The student-centered strategies engage emergent readers as active participants in their own literacy learning journey through print and alphabet knowledge, listening and reading comprehension development, and most importantly oral and expressive language development. By implementing the strategies in this toolkit, teachers, teacher candidates, families/caregivers, and community partners can engage in meaningful conversations about books with emergent readers that will make a lasting impact on their future academic and social emotional growth.

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