

How a Classroom Focus on Inference and Empathy Resulted in Student Growth Heather Byington



As a teacher who has worked in high poverty schools since I began teaching in 1997, I sometimes find myself wondering how I can help all of my students meet high standards. The Common Core Standards introduce making inferences and citing textual evidence as a key reading standard in the fourth grade. Recognizing that there is more meaning that can be found about characters' feelings or motives than what a text explicitly states, and making inferences, can be challenging for fourth graders. They must closely read text, consider their own experiences, scan the text for evidence, and then utilize all of that information to make an inference, or an assumption based on evidence. So many skills come into play when making inferences to comprehend text.

At the beginning of this school year, I asked myself where I should start in teaching this complex strategy. I knew from years of experience that there were many challenges ahead, yet I felt that choosing to focus on inference-making as my student growth goal for my evaluation this year would result in information that would impact my teaching for years to come. I felt this was a worthwhile goal that promised ample opportunity for exploration and growth, for my students and for me.

I knew that some of my fourth graders had not had some of the experiences that their peers of higher economic means may have had in the way of practicing social and organizational norms outside of school. I also knew that fourth graders' social skills and ability to read social cues varied. Again, I found myself wondering how fourth graders who struggled to interpret social cues, such as noticing when two people were engaging in conversation during a class discussion and there was a need to wait their turn to talk, would be able to note subtle evidence that indicated characters' feelings or motives in a text. I knew that for my students to attain access to all opportunities that society has to offer, they needed to be able to consider others' needs and perspectives that were different from their own. To comprehend what they read, they also needed to notice characters' perspectives, based on subtle text evidence. Helping my group of students recognize others' needs and respond appropriately, while also teaching them to recognize characters' feelings and motives to make inferences, could make a lasting impression on their futures, their entire lives, in fact. The idea was intriguing, and I decided to proceed with this plan for the year, to see what growth resulted.

To prepare my students to make inferences, I knew I needed to make sure they were able to employ other comprehension strategies first. Before they were ready to make inferences, they had to access their own experiences, their schema, to make text-to-self connections. I also knew they needed to be able to make predictions about what would happen later in a text, based on evidence. We spend the first two months of school practicing these reading comprehension strategies that students have already practiced in previous grades. Once I saw evidence in their reading response journals that my students were successfully employing these strategies while reading, I knew they were ready to approach making inferences.

To begin, I provided my students with a brief introduction to making an inference. I then asked them to try to make an inference during readers' workshop that day, in their reading

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response journals. This inference would serve as their initial assessment to later show their growth in ability to make inferences. Analyzing their responses, I saw that about 11 out of 28 students were able to make inferences, but only seven students who made inferences provided evidence for their inferences. The evidence that most of them provided was vague or general but did not give convincing evidence that the inference gave the student insight to further comprehend the text. For example, a student who was able to make an inference in the fall wrote, "I infer that Grandma is lonely because she doesn't live with anyone." Of the students who were unable to make inferences, some of them attempted to make inferences but actually made predictions. One wrote, "I infer that Nate will not find him and Rosamond will be sad." Others utilized the sentence starter I provided, "I infer that _____," but did not complete the sentence. I saw that my hypothesis had been confirmed. My students DID need more instruction, and ample practice, in making inferences to comprehend text and citing multiple text evidences for their inferences. It was time for me to launch my instructional plan, cultivating an intentional class focus on empathy while simultaneously teaching students to make inferences.

There were many ways that I helped students to practice empathy to maximize their ability to make inferences about characters in their reading. I constantly verbalized my own inference-making with students. I helped them to see that based on a person's outward behavior, I could make inferences about how he or she felt. For example, if I was speaking to the class and a student was turned away from me and toward another student, I said, "Your behavior is telling me that you're not interested in what I have to say, since your knees and eyes are pointed away from me." Through my explicit communication about the concrete behaviors I saw and the conclusions I drew based on those behaviors, students began to become more aware of others' behaviors and the messages they sent, as well as the messages their own behavior sent to others. Citing the evidence I used to make inferences throughout the day also helped my students begin to cite evidence for their own inferences more naturally.

My observations of students' behavioral needs helped me to design our empathy lessons as the weeks advanced. I noticed that sometimes, when I selected students' partners rather than allowing them to select their own, some students rolled their eyes, sighed heavily, grimaced, or scowled. When I saw this happening, I held a class meeting. I modeled for students the types of reactions I'd observed them making when paired with partners they didn't prefer. After their laughter from seeing their teacher pull "teen-ager faces" died down, I asked them how they would feel if they were the one partnered with someone who reacted in that way. Students recognized that their reactions caused others to infer that partners didn't want to work with them, hurting their feelings. We talked about how, though we all have feelings and opinions, there are appropriate ways and times to share them, based on audience and location. I gave them an example, explaining that if I received a speeding ticket, I would feel frustrated, even if I knew I deserved the ticket. Even though I might feel frustrated, I would still need to communicate respectfully with the police officer giving me the citation. We talked about "straight face," and we practiced showing a straight face in response to shocking statements. For example, I tossed out statements such as, "Recess has been cancelled for the week," and



students practiced showing straight faces. Lessons on empathy such as the previous one helped students consider characters' behaviors and feelings in their reading as they realized that facial expressions and nonverbal communication can be a clue as to what someone is thinking or feeling. In subsequent partnering sessions, straight faces reigned, resulting in students who previously had never worked or played together getting to know one another better, cultivating a more empathetic classroom climate.

Alongside these discussions of social interactions, I began our inference study by introducing the term “inference” to the class. I knew that, with many current and former English Language Learners in our class, we needed a way to rehearse this new term that also conveyed the meaning of the term. Each time we said the word “inference,” we accompanied it with a gesture, pointing to our heads, pointing away from our heads, and pantomiming opening a book. As we gestured together, we said together, “When we make an inference, we take what we know from the book; we guess more; and we cite evidence from the text.” I kept the sentence frame, “I infer_because_,” on the board to ensure that students would refer to it in their speaking and writing while practicing making inferences. Including the word “because” in the sentence frame ensured that they would justify their inferences by stating their logical reasons or evidence from the text. I always felt an inward fiesta complete with mariachi band, chips, and guacamole when I observed students begin to independently apply the word “because” in their verbal and written inferences, because when they did so, I knew that they were starting to cite evidence for their inferential thinking.

I initiated our text-based study of inference making by reading a book to which students could relate, *Tales of a Fourth Grade Nothing*. Many students had an older or younger sibling, cousin, or friend who could be annoying at times. Together we laughed as we read about older brother Peter's reactions to his two-year-old brother Fudge's shenanigans, such as when he ate his mother's flowers, tried to fly, or smeared his food on the wall. Most valuably, the book provided many opportunities for us to practice making inferences, as fourth grader Peter navigates his relationships with his brother, parents, and irritating neighbor Sheila. While reading the book aloud, I paused the reading at opportunities to practice making inferences about characters' behavior or feelings. For example, at one point in the book, Peter tells a lie to his father's boss and his wife, saying that the picture dictionary they've given him is, “Just what he's always wanted.” I asked my students why Peter would say that, when in the novel it says that he already has a copy of the book and thinks it's meant for babies. They practiced making inferences with elbow partners, and then I elicited several responses. Some students said, “He doesn't want to be rude.” Others said, “He's afraid to make his dad's boss mad.” There were other inference responses. During each 15-minute read-aloud session, I stopped about five times to facilitate students' practice at inference making about characters in situations they could relate to. My students started to gain confidence and success with making inferences. Over time, students began to raise their hands and say, “I'd like to make an inference,” and it was like orchestra music to my ears.

As the year progressed and students began to gain confidence and automaticity at discovering where they could make inferences to deepen their comprehension while they were reading, I began to release more responsibility to students for making inferences in social situations in class. Instead of always explicitly stating evidence for students, I began to ask them what

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others needed from them. For example, when I was sitting at my desk checking students' journal entries, a line of four students was waiting for me to check their work. Another student brought his journal up to be checked, walking around to my other side, attempting to avoid the line. Instead of asking him, as I was tempted to do, "Are your eyes not working today? Do you not see the line?" I showed empathy and saved him from embarrassment by saying to him, "What do your classmates and I need from you right now?" This question called his attention to the needs of the community, and he got in line to wait his turn. His ability to determine the needs of the group without explicit instruction was evidence that students were beginning to notice the needs of others on their own, even if, like many of us, knowing that need did not always immediately result in addressing others' needs above their own.

Month by month, the book genres I chose to read aloud varied. When I saw that students' confidence and ability to make inferences about realistic fiction had developed, rather than stick with a book that was relatable to all students, I knew students needed practice making inferences with text that was more abstract to them. I read Patrick Carman's fantasy novel *Into the Mist*. The main characters, Thomas and Roland, are adolescent brothers who welcome a younger boy who has newly arrived at Madame Vickers' house on the hill, an orphanage in the *Oliver Twist* vein, where boys are mistreated and exploited, forced to search for valuables in a garbage dump all day, and turn in what they find to the evil Madame Vickers. The literal and emotional leader of the pack of boys, Thomas, surreptitiously drops a gold coin next to newbie Jonezy's feet, where Jonezy elatedly finds it. Seeing a prime opportunity to examine Thomas' motive and practice making inferences, I asked the class why they thought that Thomas secretly dropped the coin near Jonezy. Why didn't Thomas just hand the coin to the boy? Some students said, "He wanted the new boy to be proud of himself that he could find something valuable." Others cited text evidence from a previous chapter, inferring that Thomas was trying to gain Jonezy's loyalty, in case he needed his help later. A few still said, "It slipped out of his hand." This was evidence that, while some students were beginning to apply advanced inferential thinking, as well as citing text evidence, others were still approaching the text with a more literal interpretation. For those students, I continued to model inference making in class interactions as well as in text readings.

As the school year careened into spring, our discussions of read-aloud texts blossomed and became rich with inferential thinking, evidence-sharing, deep thinking, clarity of expression of ideas, and students responding to one another, rather than always to me. I could not get enough of these discussions, breathing them in, savoring them and holding them in like the rich fragrance of newly-blooming lilac flowers. Were these really my students who were incapable of making inferences back in November? Students made inferences as they independently read their own good-fit books during readers' workshop time. They wrote about their inferences in their reading response journals. They all grew in their ability to make inferences and cite evidence for their inferences from the text. Yet, something new occurred to me.

By focusing on making inferences as my student growth goal this year, I realized there is a whole gamut of student ability to make text-based inferences. Just as there is a difference between students being able to make an inference when the teacher identifies a place where an inference needs to be made and students being able to



screen the text themselves for inference-making opportunities, inferences also differ in levels of complexity and quality of evidence. While many students were making complex inferences independently and citing multiple pieces of evidence from the text, some were still citing only one piece of limited, unelaborated evidence. Others were choosing to make inferences about aspects of the text that were not essential for text comprehension, and I wanted them to make inferences about main ideas that would further their textual understanding. As the year wraps up and I begin to plan for next year, I plan to meet with my grade level team to further develop our rubric for scoring student inferences to identify elements that more accurately reflect students' capacities to make inferences.

The combination of practicing making inferences in an academic way and also practicing empathy in considering others' needs and feelings has resulted in my students consistently showing significant growth in their ability to make inferences independently to comprehend what they read. I've seen evidence of their ability to do so in quizzes I've designed, daily reading responses in their journals, and in their standardized reading comprehension progress monitoring tests. These multiple measures show significant growth in the whole class's ability to make inferences.

Each piece of information gives me a different insight about students' ability to make inferences and gives me information on where to go next in my instruction, based on students' needs.

The ELL student group still had fewer correct responses on inference questions on standardized tests than the class as a whole. The discrepancy in the scores seemed to lie in the vocabulary within the text that was unfamiliar to the ELL students, which prevented them from accessing all of the information they needed in order to make inferences, and sometimes in the cultural elements in the story to which they couldn't relate. In classroom reading, I pre-taught vocabulary to this group of students, accessed their prior knowledge or built their background knowledge so that they could relate to the story. In a standardized test format, it is hard to provide these scaffolds for success. I noted that the ELL students ability to make inferences independently and cite evidence in their reading response journals improved since November, with varying degrees of proficiency, yet one ELL student still struggled to make inferences at all, still making predictions. This student's inability to make inferences could still relate to underdeveloped close reading skills or lack of ability to read social cues. I still needed additional data to know exactly how to address his break down in inferential thinking.

In order for students to be ready to make inferences about characters' actions, emotions, and motives, they need to have ample opportunities to practice considering empathy and drawing conclusions about others' behavior based on concrete evidence. Practicing academic skills related to inferring, as well as practicing empathy and social skills, has led to growth in reading comprehension in my students. Of at least equal value, my students now are more capable of considering others' perspectives and adapting their own behavior to the demand of the audience and location. I see this when they decline their peer-given recognition for exemplary behavior when they don't think they've earned it or when I hear them say to one another, "Sorry for distracting you," or, "Can you please stop doing that?" This empathy is a skill that will ensure they can access all opportunities available to them in society. Seeing students' enduring understanding of skills that will improve their future opportunities and lead to more life options is seeing student growth at its best.

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