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From Word to World: Designing Children's Literature to Empower Thoughtful Engagement in Life and Learning

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FROM WORD TO WORLD:
DESIGNING CHILDREN'S LITERATURE TO EMPOWER THOUGHTFUL
ENGAGEMENT IN LIFE AND LEARNING

by

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SYNTHESIS*
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Abstract: In this paper, I discuss the importance of a strong literacy foundation, the challenges of acquiring that foundation, and the consequences of functional illiteracy. I emphasize the role that parents and caregivers can play in establishing a positive, engaged learning disposition and ways that adopting confident thinking habits and attitudes can help children in their early learning. To facilitate these behaviors and dispositions, I have provided the early design of three original children's stories and an accompanying parent/caregiver toolkit with questions, strategies, and activities. The aim and focus of this research is early intervention using the reading experience as an opportunity to open lifelong learning pathways through modeling, scaffolding, and practicing methods and messages presented through story.

* The Synthesis can take a variety of forms, from a position paper to curriculum or professional development workshop to an original contribution in the creative arts or writing. The expectation is that students use their Synthesis to show how they have integrated knowledge, tools, experience, and support gained in the program so as to prepare themselves to be constructive, reflective agents of change in work, education, social movements, science, creative arts, or other endeavors.

Current Situation:

The fact of having been a child is something all adults have in common. Their thoughts and feelings about the circumstances and events of that experience may be different, but those who grow into adulthood, assuredly, survived childhood in some fashion. It is one universal truth in a world full of differences. I find this common thread a worthwhile place to begin my focus because it connects all adults through a shared experience. From within that shared experience grows another: our journey into language. One of the major milestones in child-development is the acquisition of language. It marks the beginning of children's ability to communicate thought through the common vocabulary of their culture. As such, language plays a significant role in the shaping of how children interact with their world.

At some early stage, almost all people learn to communicate through the spoken language of their culture, and then, at a later stage, to communicate through written language. The English language is complex, nuanced, and full of contradictory, often unspoken, rules. Despite its complexity, “[approximately] 375 million people speak English around the world and there are more than 50 English speaking countries, where English is either the official or the primary language” including the United States (5minuteenglish.com, 2009). Acquiring English verbal communication skills is a milestone to be sure, but the skill that can determine the course of a child's life in the United States is literacy. Literacy is one of the clearest indicators of academic, social, and professional mobility, yet “[one] child in four grows up not knowing how to read” (Begintoread.com, 2019). Why should this be?

To start, the English language is made up of 26 letters used to represent approximately 44 phonemes, which are the smallest sound components used to convey spoken language (Reisberg, 2016). However, given that there are more than 50 countries in the world where English is the primary or official language, accent and regional dialect make it difficult to judge exactly how many phonemes are used in the English language, let alone establish a standard pronunciation of words or a universal spelling of common words. On top of which, the English language is made up of at least 8 languages, making it possible for all of these phonemes to be represented by at least two letters or letter combinations and some by as many as 12 combinations. This is often a child's first introduction to language: the alphabet. Seemingly simple, the alphabet is full of exceptions and alternatives that can lead to confusion: the letter "x" can produce a /z/ sound, the letter "c" an /s/ sound, and the combinations of "gh" and "ph" can both produce the sound we associate with the letter "f". The long "a" sound alone can be represented by approximately 12 standard and non-standard variations (a, ai, aigh, a_e, au, ay, ey, ea, ei, eigh, et, er). This is just letters and sounds.

Words can pose a different, but related, problem. Shortly after learning to recognize words, children are taught how to categorize words by type: nouns, pronouns, verbs, adverbs, adjectives, articles, prepositions, and interjections. No sooner have children learned parts of speech than they learn that words can be more than one type depending on usage—verbs behaving like nouns or adjectives depending on their relationship to another word in the sentence (The bird is singing (v); Singing is a bird's favorite activity (n); The singing bird sits happily in the tree (adj)).

Leaving parts of speech behind for a moment, words can present an additional challenge: multiple meanings. Many of the words in the English language carry more than one meaning

(sanguine: hopeful; rose-colored; bloody; bloodthirsty), and some can possess conflicting meanings (peruse: to look through quickly and with little attention; to look through thoroughly with careful attention). There are words that mean one thing to one profession and something else entirely to a different profession (to a bartender, a martini is a drink; to a film crew, a martini is the last shot set-up of the day). Not stopping there, some words are exclusive to a profession (often medical or healthcare fields), and some vary in meaning from one generation to the next (dope: fool; drugs; cool). Some words retire, and new words get invented and incorporated into the dictionary. Children just becoming acquainted with their language face an overwhelming onslaught of rules, deviations, and contradictions—though, the confusion does not necessarily subside in adulthood.

This is before we even start discussing sentence structure, mechanics, usage, punctuation, idiom, metaphor, and simile. This is before we start discussing poetry, literature, essay structure, argumentation, character development, themes, irony, tone, inference, SAT, ACT, PSAT, SSAT, HSPT, and every other standardized test developed to measure a student's understanding of these very simple, straightforward elements of language (tone: sarcastic). As children progress through school, their prior learning serves as a foundation for subsequent learning. What happens when that foundation is unstable from the beginning?

Implications & Consequences:

It has been my experience that frustration with reading can cause a dysfunctional relationship with language, manifesting in a reluctance to seek out words as a means to express ideas. This resistance to language can have long lasting negative impacts on a child's learning experience well beyond the early reading years. Moreover, children who struggle in reading are more likely to struggle in other content areas as a consequence "because over 85 percent of the curriculum is taught by reading" (Readingfoundation.org, 2019). Language is an essential component of understanding and identifying what interests us because it allows us to more fully understand the subjects presented to us. If a student struggles to read the content, that student stands less of a chance of grasping concepts and materials that might be of interest.

When children are limited in their vocabularies, they are limited in their thinking pathways because "words teach concepts and thereby create paths for thinking to follow" (Tishman, Perkins and Jay, 1995). The words children feel comfortable using are a reflection of the ideas they can comfortably access. Put differently: access to language and comfort with language gives children the ability to access and express their own thoughts. As such, "[a] child without adequate words is limited in his cognitive receptions when thinking"(Çer, 2016). Words provide an entry into thought because it gives form to the intangible. "The development of a child's cognitive capacity parallels his linguistic development. Hence, the vocabulary a child acquires affects his cognitive capacity. As his vocabulary expands, his cognitive capacity expands as well because words lie beneath ideas and allow children to know about life and establish purposeful relations in life" (Çer, 2016). When thoughts cannot be expressed in language form, they seek other modes of expression. While alternative forms of expression could open doorways to creative avenues like dance, music, visual art, or other healthy outlets, there is a high risk that

illiteracy and language dysfunction can give rise to detrimental behaviors and dispositions. Establishing strong literacy skills has an impact on a child's social and civic success.

Poor reading performance doesn't just create obstacles in the classroom; it impacts a child's socio-emotional development, as well. As stated by The Children's Reading Foundation, "[children] who are behind their peers in reading struggle with low self-esteem and feelings of inadequacy. Low achievement in reading is also the common denominator in school discipline, attendance and dropout problems, and juvenile crime" (Readingfoundation.org, 2019). The impacts of illiteracy can affect a struggling reader's future, such that "two-thirds of students who cannot read proficiently by the end of 4th grade will end up in jail or on welfare" (Begintoread.com, 2019) (Nces.ed.gov, 2019). The importance of a strong literacy foundation cannot be stressed enough.

Understanding that a child's ability to read at grade level is one of the indicators for future success not just academically, but socially and civically as well, is fundamental to the research behind and structure of my intervention work. The aim of this work, however, is not to teach children to read. The aim is to develop a relationship with language, its meanings, messages, uses, and users such that the child or learner can approach new words, experiences, people, challenges, and feelings with confidence.

Why is it so important that we address the disconnect between children and their language now? As children move through their educations, they are provided with skills to help them enter the world as informed, responsible adults. One of the traditional goals of acquiring an education is

securing a job. With the rate that jobs are changing due to automation or to the invention and integration of new technologies, children may find themselves at one end of their formal educations with a set of skills that doesn't correlate to the world in front of them. It's not an understatement to say that digital technology has changed the way we live, learn, and communicate. It has changed the landscape of our futures, and the paths to those futures need to change to meet the needs of a new era. "Conventional education no longer prepares us for the real world, or offers us the useful skills that we need to be successful" (Iny, 2018). I don't necessarily believe that the current educational system offers nothing of value, but I do believe students would benefit from having their curriculum preceded by tools to help shift their learning disposition at the outset to allow them to adapt to the shifting sands of their futures. In this way, learning could potentially be geared less toward employment or advancement through a system, and more toward finding appropriate paths that resonate with personal goals and values. With that in mind, I've been considering what children might need to help them get the most out of their educations so that they can adapt to their changing realities, and I've been reflecting on what has prepared me to propose the intervention I have developed.

Personal & Professional Background:

At the time of this writing, I have worked in education for just over a decade. My role has mostly been in supplemental education, tutoring students of all ages from 2 years old and to 65, with the bulk of my experience in preschool to 12th grade. I have taught all aspects of English language and literature from ABCs to SATs. I have worked with English Language Learners ranging from

preschoolers to professionals. Prior to teaching, I studied writing in my undergraduate courses and went on to get my TEFL certification (Teaching English as a Foreign Language) and a certificate in professional editing, learning how to examine language through the muscles that produce sounds, the symbols that represent them, and the mechanics of copyediting. Through these teaching and learning experiences, I feel as though I have held the English language up to a light and seen the facets, imperfections, and qualities that comprise it.

My focus on language is not just a professional one, however. I have loved playing with language since I was a child and was encouraged by my parents to participate in word play around the house as a part of our daily routines. We would make up songs and rhymes for just about everything—a habit I still carry with me. A byproduct of this behavior was an exposure to the rules and the flexibility of the English language. These games gave me an appreciation for the sounds, rhythms, meanings, affixes, expectations, and structures that make up my native language and that appreciation allows me to approach new words with curiosity and excitement. I believe that this early introduction to language flexibility is one of the main contributing factors to my ability to express myself confidently through language and to help others articulate their thoughts.

My love of words turned into a love of books, which then translated into a love of writing. From the time I was in second grade, my only goal was to become a writer. When I graduated from college, the United States was in the worst financial crisis since the Great Depression, and with the unemployment rate rising, my dream of becoming a writer seemed far too risky to pursue. Consequently, I turned to tutoring to make use of the skills I had developed as a writing student.

I do consider the role of a tutor different from that of a teacher. Where a teacher may focus more on instruction, my primary concern as a tutor is intervention. The students who have come to me have had a specific need or set of needs that required additional attention. One of the struggles that I have seen most frequently is in reading. Because reading is such an integral part of nearly all subject areas, I have become concerned about how to improve the reading experience. For many students, reading is not just a struggle, but also a chore. From listening to my students read aloud, I could hear that many lacked the understanding of how sentences were structured and how punctuation influenced the pause, pitch, and pacing of the words they were reading. I could hear how breaks in the flow of language caused breaks in processing its meaning. Without that scaffolding, there was very little to support the weight of the words.

Over my tutoring career, I have been able to look at language from many different angles and see how students use and interact with language at various stages. I also saw how students felt shut out and disconnected from their educations because they couldn't understand the words in front of them. I have seen how many students struggle not only to understand the thoughts expressed through the words they read, but also to put their own thoughts into words. There are many issues involved in getting to this point, including a general breakdown in the function of the educational system, but I am focusing primarily on how to intervene as early as possible so that children at least have some practice with language, thinking, and thinking about language before they begin their formal educations.

As a product of my job, I have also learned how to connect and create trust with my students quickly because I don't know how long I will have them in my charge, and it is often necessary

to overcome resistance to the subject area. It is therefore essential that I be able to establish open communication with children so that I may begin to understand what they know, how they think, and what they need. Accordingly, I have developed an ability to dive into deep, trusting conversations with children that I would like to share with others so that they might be able to bring new or different approaches to the dialogues they have with the children in their lives. Over the years, I have worked with countless parents and families who saw their children struggling, but felt they lacked the tools to help. This is where I feel compelled to intervene.

Intervention & Collaboration:

Generally speaking, there is no group of people who care more about children than the people who raise them. Optimistically, when it comes to a child's long-term success, parents and caregivers are the most motivated and invested support system. I would argue that after loving families, the next most invested demographic is passionate educators. Given that, as of 2016, there were 83.09 million families in the United States and 3.6 million primary or secondary school educators, I feel that there is a bank of knowledge that is not being accessed by a group of people that could benefit from it (Statista, 2019, Nces.ed.gov, 2019). From direct experience, I know how effective good teachers can be, so rather than suggest that teachers aren't doing enough to address the issue of illiteracy, I am suggesting that the learning experience be extended to include development before formal schooling begins. I have seen how determined and dedicated parents and caregivers can be about their children's educations, so I feel confident that there is an eager population willing to engage in this manner.

While parents and caregivers may have the motivation and goal of encouraging good thinking and learning, they may not have the tools and strategies that teachers, psychologists, educators, and curriculum designers have spent years researching and developing. Giving these tools and strategies to those who may value them most and have the greatest opportunity to use and reinforce them could have significant impact on children. This could help establish a learning disposition that could mean the difference between a high-school dropout and a college graduate. “Students who start kindergarten behind form the largest group of dropouts, and they have less than a 12 percent chance of attending a four-year university” (Readingfoundation.org, 2019). Giving parents and caregivers a foundation of teaching practices could help them provide their children with a greater chance of scholastic success before they even enter the classroom. I recognize that parents and caregivers already face daily challenges and may not have the time or energy to turn every moment into a teachable moment. For a child, however, there is rarely a moment that is not a learning moment. This is why the intervention I have been developing would build off of a routine that is typically already taking place: story time.

In the spirit of joining my love of language and children’s literature, my experience as an educator, and my desire to contribute to shaping generations of compassionate, self-empowered learners in the world, I am offering work that brings these missions together through story telling and collaboration with parents and caregivers. The work I am doing will give parents and caregivers an opportunity to use story time as a chance to engage with their children in practicing thinking strategies, acquiring language and vocabulary foundation, and developing mindful self-reflection by providing them with a set of sample questions and activities that facilitate thinking,

discussion, and play around what it means to be a unique critical and creative thinker. Because “[our] intellect is shaped by our participation in or social worlds” (Antonacci, 2000), it is my aim to use children’s literature as an avenue to strengthen the relationship between words and the people who use them so that they may develop deeper connections to themselves and the people in their lives.

Her Majesty, Thundercat of the Universe is an original story series that I have designed to demonstrate the behaviors and dispositions that would help orient a child to interact with the world with confidence, compassion, and curiosity. Its purpose is to provide an opportunity for children to experience and practice engaging with a range language elements, learning dispositions, and life skills through storytelling and play. The stories come with a set of questions and activities to help parents and caregivers use story time as a chance to engage with their children in practicing thinking strategies. As a character, Her Majesty, Thundercat is used to model the learning of, the use of, or the teaching of critical and creative thinking skills, including resourcefulness, flexibility, playfulness, and sensitivity. The stories in which she is featured are written with learning and discussion in mind. They are meant to provide children and their adult readers with an opportunity to explore themes, to discuss words and their meanings, and to consider perspectives other than their own. The primary objectives are to provide a dynamic reading experience that equips caregivers with the tools to support early learning and that will help position children so that they are willing to approach new concepts with playfulness, confidence and flexibility.

There are a number of principles that have informed the design of the *Her Majesty, Thundercat of the Universe* stories and the engagement strategies that go with them, central to which is that

the way children interact with learning informs the attitude they form to learning. In other words, children can feel invited into learning or left out of learning and that feeling can shape the way they learn throughout their lifetime. A child's first years are prime learning and development years, so parents and caregivers have an instrumental impact on how that learning is formed. "Along with children's natural curiosity and their persistence as self-motivated learners, what they learn during their first 4 or 5 years is not learned in isolation. Infants' activities are complemented by adult-child relationships that encourage the gradual involvement of children in the skilled and valued activities of the society in which they live" (Bransford et al., 2000). Parents and caregivers, therefore, are the primary introduction into those social worlds and have the first opportunity to shape a child's relationship with those worlds. Involving children in discussion about and around stories can enrich those relationships. "Such sustained curriculum conversations will help children's language grow and develop, bringing their personal meanings of words closer to the conventional cultural meanings" (Antonacci, 2000). By actively using story as an avenue for conversation, parents and caregivers can prepare children to use language to bridge their inner and outer worlds.

Because I see language as a gateway to thinking pathways, I have been very purposeful in crafting the language of these stories, selecting vocabulary that is deliberately above the reach of new readers, let alone pre-readers. This is done in an effort to invite a conversation between the child and the adult reader about what words mean. Using advanced vocabulary is also done to acclimate the child to asking for help and to being comfortable encountering new language. Parents and caregivers can show children how to navigate new words by thinking about them out loud and incorporating that thought process into discovery. Doing so demonstrates that language

acquisition is an active ongoing process that even adults continue to practice. It also provides context for the use and meaning of new words in relation to the child's social and linguistic world. "Language acquisition cannot take place in the absence of shared social and situational contexts because the latter provide information about the meanings of words and sentence structures (Chapman, 1978 cited in Bransford et al., 2000). Providing children with a rich vocabulary gives them access to concepts not just about the world, but also about themselves, what they can be, and what they already are.

The stories are written in a structured anapestic tetrameter, meaning that there is a set pattern and meter to each verse. Rhyme and rhythm provide an opportunity for children to see that sounds can be produced by a variety of letter combinations and that thoughts can be expressed through different sentence structures. Following the pattern provided, children should be able to anticipate that the end of the upcoming line will rhyme with the previous. In this way, children will be exposed to multiple spellings of similar sounds, which serves to prepare them to accept the complexity of reading and writing English words. As children become more proficient in their reading ability, parents and caregivers can turn this into an activity, inviting children to search for all the ways a sound is represented on the page or throughout the story. Where the *Her Majesty, Thundercat* stories provide the platform for the learning, the companion guide for parents and caregivers shows them how to extend the learning beyond story time and incorporate it in moments throughout the day. The activities, questions, and prompts are written to enhance and capitalize on the learning possibilities for the child by equipping the parent or caregiver support system with tools and strategies that may prepare children to practice flexible, independent thinking in a classroom. It is important to remember, however, that these stories

need not become textbooks. I am entrusting parents and caregivers to read these stories as stories first and to then engage with them as learning tools.

Justification:

When language is used to tell stories, those stories can serve to expand on a child's reality. Children make connections to the text by seeing how the stories are different from their own experiences or how the stories reflect something about their experiences. Stories are an opportunity for children to practice responding to a situation by trying it on through the filter of a character. Stories can be a chance for children to learn empathy, to learn how they feel about issues, and to learn more about who they are and how they see the world. A parent or caregiver can make this process visible by helping a child move their thoughts into language through the context of the story. "You must be willing to enter into a dialogue with the text, to interact and not merely extract. And through these transactions with text, we might learn how to better enter into conversations with those in the real world who offer us another perspective or present us with an idea we are reluctant to hear" (Beers and Probst, 2017). Parents and caregivers can capitalize on the power of storytelling to help their children discover and develop the deep thinking that they not only have the power to do, but will also need to navigate life's challenges with the confidence. This type of thinking can create compassionate readers who understand their own minds, how they are different or similar to those of the people around them, and how to respect and respond to differing perspectives. "Compassion should sharpen the readers' ability to see other points of view, other perspectives, and to imagine the feelings of those who hold

them. It should enable readers to take, if only momentarily, the perspective of someone else and thus better understand motivations and thinking” (Beers and Probst, 2017). The literacy experience, therefore, is not just about understanding words, but about understanding self, other, and how both fit into the context of the world.

Some may argue that children are not prepared to engage in language and learning in these ways, yet research supports that children are not only capable of this type of engagement, they benefit greatly from it. Parents and caregivers can provide literacy and learning foundations by understanding that “...literacy emerges before children are formally taught to read...literacy is defined to encompass the whole act of reading, not merely decoding...the child’s point of view and active involvement with emerging literacy constructs is featured...the social setting for literacy learning is not ignored” (Mason and Sinha, 1993). During any moment that a child is engaged in language use, exposure, or observation that child is learning. Whether that learning is active or passive is up to the parent and caregiver to construct.

Language learning should not be a static or intimidating activity. Parents and caregivers can facilitate playful learning by. “1. *Playing word games* that emphasize the structure of the language. There is evidence that introducing the alphabet along with words games can help children understand that words are made of individual sounds...2. *Reading children’s books*.

There is sound evidence that young children can learn new words introduced by an adult while looking at pictures in books, or when the adult reads the text in the book” (Sénéchal, 2009).

Language provides children with a tool to identify, explore, and inquire. Parents and caregivers facilitate their children’s language development, and dialogue around language plays a large role

in that development because “if [children] are not in a language-using environment, they will not develop this capacity. Experience is important; but the opportunity to use the skills—practice—is also important” (Bransford et al., 2000). By participating in these dialogues, the parent or caregiver is showing through practice how to think about a text and make connections to concepts outside of the text, which are skills children may not have developed at this stage but will be asked to call upon in their later schooling. “In areas the child has not yet reached developmentally, the adult acts as a “mediator” between the child and the text in the areas where the child cannot function alone (e.g., being able to predict, relating experiences to the text, and so on.)” (Mason and Sinha, 1993).

Modeling a curiosity about language in a way that communicates partnership and identifies strategy gives children the message that encountering a new word is not an indication of the limits of what they know: it is an opportunity to learn. Saying things like “I don’t think we’ve ever seen that word together. How can we find out what it means” followed by a new approach each time or a reflection of what was done the last time not only reminds children what their resources are but helps them see that there is more than one way to approach a challenge. Caregivers can expand on this as they see fit by having their child look for clues in the picture, in the context, or within the word itself.

In this way, parents and caregivers are activating different areas of a child’s brain by having them hear the words, see the words, say the words, and think of words that are connected. Children are also learning how to seek help and feel confident acknowledging when something is new. Parents and caregivers who activate learning in this way are participating in “a) adult

modeling and coaching processes, or how to learn something replaces teacher-directed instruction; b) *scaffolding* the learning environment, or setting up instructional situations that allow learners to succeed as they advance toward higher levels of understanding; and c) working within the student's "zone of proximal development," which means providing instruction that spans the region in which a learner can advance both with and without help" (Mason and Sinha, 1992). By working together and activating multiple regions of the brain, caregivers would be providing a learning experience that supports greater general intelligence, according to the Parieto-frontal Integration Theory, which posits that intelligence is formed and embedded through the interaction across regions of the brain (Reisberg, 2016), and stays within a child's Zone of Proximal Development (Trafton, 2012, Antonacci, 2000, Mason and Sinha, 1993). To paraphrase psychologist Lev Vygotsky who developed the concept of the Zone of Proximal Development, "an indisputable fact of great importance (is that) thought development is determined by language" (Antonacci, 2000, Vygotsky, 1986). If children can access the words that represent their thoughts, they can better access their thoughts.

With this in mind, parents and caregivers need not shy away from introducing their children to advanced language. On the contrary, limiting access to higher vocabulary can limit a child's thinking. "Educators and textbook writers tend to simplify language, in order to make the presentation of difficult material more attractive and accessible to children. Yet doing this prevents learners from receiving the important linguistic cues they need, in order to guide and manage their own thinking" (Tishman, Perkins and Jay, 1995). By giving children access to high range language and giving parents and caregivers access to tips to reinforce what the language represents, I am attempting to capitalize on the role of language to create connections, not just to

the text or to its related concepts, but to ourselves. “Words are precision instruments. They create categories to think with—categories to apply not only to received information, but also to one’s own thoughts” (Tishman, Perkins and Jay, 1995). If we follow the connection between literacy and social mobility, giving children access to their thoughts can mean giving them access to their long-term success.

Next Steps, Future Iterations, & Reflection:

My experience in education, my love of all things language, and my genuine desire to create positive change in the world have culminated in this research and writing. I am bringing together the threads of my life and learning to enhance the role that children’s literature can have on a child’s chance of success—be it social, academic, personal, or professional. These goals are best achieved by creating an informed, invested support system of parents, caregivers, teachers, and children. Of course, I have to acknowledge that there are a number of assumptions taking place here, not the least of which is that the caregiver has the time, resources, and literacy to provide this shared learning experience. I understand that any one of these assumptions could impede the reach of this intervention. I am working on directing my next steps to address some of these obstacles, though some of the alternatives I have been developing would mean limiting the interactive aspect of this work. Possible future iterations include creating a digital version of the *Her Majesty Thundercat* stories that would have read aloud capabilities so that children who lack access to an at-home caregiver or to a caregiver with the literacy skills necessary to engage in these stories could still hear the language at the same time that they are seeing the language. I

recognize that this invites a further issue of access to technology, though if the child has access to a school or library computer, this issue could be mitigated.

I have been developing a prototype for the *Her Majesty, Thundercat of the Universe* stories and the companion guide that currently includes the first three stories and some suggested activities and engagement strategies. As I continue to work on this product, I aim to add six more stories and additional activities for parents and caregivers. Because I am focused on the impact language has to invite or deter collaboration, I have been careful in selecting the language I use in the companion guide. As such, I have chosen to concentrate on communicating my background knowledge of teaching strategies, cognition, and child development in a user-friendly manner that gives indication to the benefits of my suggestions without exhausting the reader with unnecessary verbiage. It is as much my hope to include parents and caregivers in this learning journey as it is to illuminate the thinking paths their children will discover. Together, we can use our words to empower children's thoughtful engagement in the world.

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Her Majesty, Thundercat of the Universe

Written and Illustrated by Lauren Taub

With Foreword and Activities for Parents and Caregivers

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Foreword

Dear Reader,

I want to thank you, not only for helping me achieve a lifelong dream of sharing my stories, but also for allowing me the opportunity to collaborate with you by sharing my teaching experience. I have had the honor of working with thousands of students over the course of my career, and in that time I have found that children's confidence in reading has a significant impact on the rest of their learning, not just in early development, but throughout their education. I have also seen, both in my immediate experience and in my research, that kindergarten preparedness

makes a significant difference in long-term learning outcomes. It is with this in mind that I am offering questions, activities, and strategies to extend the experience of story-time into daily learning practice.

This is not to say that these tools must be used daily or that they are exclusive to the stories to which they are attached. This is not even to suggest that every parent needs these tips to improve their children's learning. The goal and intention of these tools is to provide additional ideas to bring learning into focus and to capitalize on the story experience to expand its impact. To the parents, guardians, caregivers, and other readers of these suggestions, I want to acknowledge the important role you have in your child's life: you have a knowledge of your child that is exclusive to you. As such, you will know best when and how to integrate these activities into your child's routine, if at all.

These stories can be read simply for the pleasure of reading, and I do encourage that they be read that way at least once. Children, as you have no doubt observed, enjoy repetition and benefit from it. I would suggest, for your benefit and theirs, that you use that repetition as an opportunity to explore different angles and insights into your child's thinking and their experience of the world around them[1]. At the end of these stories are

some ways to continue to develop your child's thinking using the story as a platform for engagement.

The suggestions provided come from years of research and practice in education and child development. My aim is to give parents and caregivers the background knowledge I have acquired over the years. I believe that children benefit from a strong, extended support system and that parents and caregivers are the first most impactful teachers in their lives. By lending my experience, I want parents and caregivers to feel confident in the ways they educate their children before classroom learning begins. When children are prepared for the classroom, they are more fully capable of accessing its purposes. This means that by giving their children the opportunity to develop learning and thinking dispositions early on, parents and caregivers are providing lifelong benefits that can influence their children's educational and personal outcomes.

On behalf of Her Majesty, Thundercat, I want to thank you for allowing us to be a part of your child's team.

With Kindness,

Lauren & Her Majesty, Thundercat of the Universe

[1] Note: I will be using variations of the pronoun “they/ them/ their” as a singular to respectfully include all children in the discussion. As a grammar and language enthusiast, I am excited about the ongoing evolution of the English language to reflect the population that uses it. I also understand that this may be a challenge to traditional grammar and language rules, but my choice is based on the understanding that language is a living system that changes incrementally to suit the needs and purposes of its time.

Introducing Her Majesty, Thundercat of the Universe

Her Majesty, Thundercat entered the world
A coat of deep blue and gold lightning-bolt-swirled.
She stood quite apart from her sisters and brothers,
Whose fluffy white fur resembled their mother’s.

Her mother was startled but instantly smitten
With her litter of white and her tiny blue kitten.
She snuggled them close and chose for them names

All but the blue cat with bright yellow flames.

There was Moonglow, and Starlight, and Snowflake, and Pearl,

But what name would she give to this little blue girl?

What name would befit her? What name for this wonder?

She's dressed up in lightning, so why not add thunder?

She thought "Thundercat" was a bit too domestic

When clearly this kitten was something majestic.

"Her Majesty, Thundercat That fits her just fine.

She may look a bit odd, but she'll always be mine."

The five little kittens grew up healthy and strong,

Though one of those five felt she didn't belong.

Her Majesty, Thundercat tried hard to fit in,

But when you're blue and bright gold, where do you begin?

Her siblings would meow where she chose to stay quiet.

They coaxed and cajoled her to “Come on” and “Try it!”

Her Majesty found all those noises confusing;

She liked looking at stars and dreaming or musing.

She’d dream of the planets and creatures upon them.

She thought each one was special: a treasure, a gem.

The thought of exploring made her little heart stir.

Out there might be someone who’s different like her.

Her Majesty’s mother took note of this matter

And talked to her softly, away from the chatter:

“You are quite different, that’s easy to see,

But each of my kittens is precious to me.

Moonglow is brave and can jump to the skies.

Starlight is shrewd and has gentle green eyes.

Pearl likes to be silly, and Snowflake to dance.

They may look alike, but that’s just at first glance.

Remember, my darling, that you are unique-
Like every one else, if you'd just take a peek.
Your blue and gold markings might make you stand out,
But we are all different, of that there's no doubt."

Her mother then gave her a crown made of gold
To remind Her Majesty of what she'd been told,
But this golden hat was much more than it seemed
It gave her the power to do what she'd dreamed!

Her Majesty's paws came away from the floor.
She floated! She flew! She could fly and explore!
Her brothers and sisters could not have been prouder
As Her Majesty's laughter grew louder and louder.

Her Majesty, Thundercat saw her family anew
And felt sharing this insight was her job to do.

She hugged Moonglow and Starlight and Snowflake and Pearl,

Said goodbye to her mother and hello to the world.

The End

Her Majesty, Thundercat of the Universe

Finds Her Own Way

When Her Majesty, Thundercat flew from her home,

She found herself wanting new places to roam.

She spotted a planet with soft grass and trees

And landed upon it with elegant ease.

The place she had chosen was vibrant and green

Completely unlike the last planet she'd seen.

She'd seen only one other planet before
The home she had left to go learn and explore.

She took in the landscape of this new domain,
Hoping that some useful insight she'd gain.
Though the spot where she stood presented a worry
With so many paths, which way would she scurry?

Her Majesty, Thundercat pondered her choice
When from softly beside her there came a small voice.
“You seem to be having some trouble deciding...”
Her Majesty asked, “Who’s that there? Who’s hiding?”

“I know a bit about making decisions,
And lots about paths made of many divisions”
“You see,” said the worm, who had made himself known,
“There are many more options than what you’ve been shown.”

“You may think that there are five choices before you,

But try to see further than what is in your view.”

“I don’t understand,” said Her Majesty, shyly.

“Let me explain,” said the worm, rather spryly.

“Yes, each of these roads leads to someplace amazing,

And you could spend your whole life here appraising

The gifts you could earn from this path or that.

But there are no wrong ways to turn, Mrs. Cat.”

“Her Majesty, Thundercat if you don’t mind.

I seem to have left my good manners behind.

What name should I call you, my little green friend?”

“Mr. Worm,” he replied with a bow and a bend.

“As a worm, I have seen what lies under the ground,

And the number of choices to make there abound!

I could turn or go straight or go back and redouble

By going where others have gone through the rubble.”

“But what I have found in the dirt down below
Is that there is much more than one best way to go.

All I can do is find what’s best for me,
And sometimes the path is one just I can see.”

“I think I am starting to see what you mean:
All of these trails show where others have been.
I could follow their lead and choose any of these,
Or I could go anywhere else that I please.”

“Of course, I may miss something precious and rare,
But I cannot sit in one spot and just stare
At the possible futures that lie in each place
I have this whole world! All the sky! All of space!”

“You’ve got it! You’re learning! You’ll find your own way.

Now on with your journey. No need to delay.”

“Mr. Worm, you have helped me see past what’s presented

And know that my own path will leave me contented.”

“So which way will you choose, Your Majesty, dear?”

What place will you venture to once you leave here?”

“No course is laid that way, so that’s where I’ll go

And see what adventures my path will bestow.”

The End

Her Majesty, Thundercat of the Universe and Her Friend, Mr. Fish

Her Majesty, Thundercat rose with a shake.

She gave a nice stretch and then felt more awake.

The Universe shone with a glow quite alluring

That Her Majesty felt the need to go touring.

She surveyed her space with an approving eye

And decided to visit some planets nearby.

She slicked back her whiskers and fluffed up her tail

And started a journey quite grand in its scale.

The stars gave a twinkle. The stars did a dance,

And Thundercat jumped right into the expanse.

She hadn't got far when she heard a small shout.

She swooped to the planet to go check it out.

Mr. Fish, her old friend, was there in his lake

Just sighing and crying, big tears in his wake.

“Your Majesty, Thundercat! I'm glad it's you!

I've found myself in a hullabaloo!

I was happy and playing with my ball of moss

When by accident I gave it too big a toss!

It's up in that tree and is just out of reach.

Please climb up and get it, of you I beseech.

I would do it myself, but I can't reach that limb.

All I can do is stay down here and swim.

Four paws would I need to go get my toy.

Your powers of climbing I want to employ.

If only I were majestic like you

There wouldn't be anything I couldn't do!"

"Oh, nonsense!" she frowned, "now don't be deterred."

Mr. Fish listened on as she quietly purred,

"Imagine if we all behaved just the same,

A world full of Majesties would be a shame.

You are exactly as you're meant to be.

Now what would you gain just from being like me?"

Think, Mr. Fish, of the way you would do it.

Use your good brain and then put yourself to it!"

Mr. Fish gave a ponder; Mr. Fish gave a think.

He swam in a circle then started to blink,

He looked at the tree and saw a solution

This brand new idea was a big revolution!

“I could do with this stone what I did with my ball.

I could throw it up there and then make my toy fall!

I’m an excellent diver and have a strong fin.

With some aim and some effort, I know I can win!”

Mr. Fish picked up speed, and he picked up the rock

Threw it up to the branch with a mighty big “THWOCK!”

Down came the ball with a splash and a splish.

“You did it! You did it yourself, Mr. Fish!

I knew that you could, and I knew that you would.

The skills of a fish are equally good

As a cat with the power to fly through the air:

When you have a problem, you need not despair:

Just look at the things that are lying around

I truly believe that yourself you'll astound.

You have all you need to grant your own wishes.

The world needs the talents of both cats and fishes.

Now if you'll excuse me, I must take to the sky,

so, goodbye, Mr. Fish." "Your Majesty, Goodbye."

The End

Engagement Activities & Suggestions for Support

A Note About the Story Design

The stories you have just read were designed to illustrate behaviors and dispositions of confident, independent learning. Her Majesty, Thundercat of the Universe is sometimes at the center of her stories, learning something new, and sometimes she is helping others understand their own abilities. In life, none of us is just one aspect of ourselves. As a teacher, I have learned so much from my students, as I imagine you have from your children. In these moments, we learn about ourselves, and we

learn about others. Throughout our journeys, we often have the opportunity to discover new things about the world, and the way we approach these discoveries can inform the way we proceed with our new information.

Your children are embarking on their own journeys through life and learning. Helping them develop positive, thoughtful dispositions can give them a strong foundation to explore their own thinking and to approach new concepts with confidence. The following activities are provided to give you some jumping off points to support your child's ongoing learning. As you get to know them, I am confident that you'll find ways to adapt and evolve these activities to meet your children's developing needs, keeping in mind that the ultimate goal is to feel good about learning and to value the uniqueness of our own thinking processes.

Happy learning!

Language & Vocabulary

Providing children with a rich vocabulary gives them access to concepts not just about the world, but about themselves, what they can be, and what they already are. My research and experience has informed my stance that the language we use when talking to children contributes to their overall cognitive development. Gentle, supportive language that offers opportunity for inquiry and partnership can mean the difference between growth and stagnation. Imagine each word you use as a rung on a ladder—the range of difficulty should help elevate your child to new heights while remaining within their (extended) reach. Now imagine that the words you use also make up the strength of each rung they stand on—supportive language helps children feel secure to explore their thinking.

In each Her Majesty, Thundercat story, there is at least one vocabulary word that is meant to be discussed. Children will encounter new words throughout their learning journeys. Encourage your child to engage positively with new vocabulary by thinking about it aloud.

If your child isn't sure what a word means, support their learning by including them in the discovery process. This could mean looking it up together or talking about the story to uncover what it might mean. Your next steps may vary based on your child's developmental stage: the intention is to give your child a sense of security with unknown words and to build a relationship to language that is interactive, rather than static.

"I like the sound of this word. Let's try saying it together."

"I don't think we've ever seen that word together. How can we find out what it means?"

"I think we just read a new word. What do you think it means? Let's find out! Are there any clues to help us understand?"

Further, when you yourself encounter a new word, model the learning

process for your child by acknowledging the unfamiliar word and finding its definition—this could mean using a dictionary, looking it up on the internet, parsing the word for affixes and bases, or using context clues from the story. Sometimes a combination of these might be appropriate. The main goal is to illustrate to your child that A) it's okay not to know what something is, B) there are resources to acquire new knowledge, and C) there is more than one way to learn.

Below the surface, by engaging with language in this way, you will be developing thinking pathways by activating the areas of your child's brain that have to do with seeing words, hearing words, saying words, and generating words.

Thinking Exercises

At the heart of the *Her Majesty, Thundercat* stories is a desire to help children develop their thinking. This could mean their interactions with others, their understanding of themselves, their ability to navigate challenges, or their willingness to explore new ideas. These stories offer an opportunity to safely try out new thinking practices. Creating learning moments that will allow your child to exercise their thinking can help further support these practices.

Throughout the story series, *Her Majesty, Thundercat* encounters characters that are different from her. This may mean they are drastically different (like Mr. Fish) or subtly different (like her sisters and brothers). Engage your child in play activities that draw on character traits and

attributes. “What would it be like to move like fish? How would the world look if we were worms? All of these flowers look the same from far away how many special differences can we find if we get closer?”

Just as some characters have different physical qualities, they also have different strengths and physical abilities. Encourage your child to think of ways each different character might solve the same problem. In a safe environment, create a challenge to address like getting something off a shelf or out of a box. “How would Mr. Fish get his ball out of the box? What if Mr. Worm needed to bring something from one place to another? How would he move it through his tunnels?”

Even if the ideas generated are not practical to act out physically such as flying up to the shelf acknowledge the ideas and the limitations constructively. “That’s a really creative idea! What would we need to be able to do that? Since we don’t have wings, what other way could we do that?” If the child is committed to the idea, but it is dangerous or impractical to perform, offer alternatives like drawing pictures of the

action of using toys to demonstrate the idea on a smaller scale.

To continue developing flexible thinking habits, try engaging with physical objects to support idea generation. Grab a safe household item: a piece of string, a paperclip, a spoon, etc. Together, come up with as many possible uses or scenarios for that object as you can. Invite family member and friends to add ideas. If an idea is repeated, frame the repetition positively to spare any feelings of frustration and redirect attention to keep the activity moving. “Isn’t it amazing that we came up with the same idea? I wonder what else we can think of!” “I love that we thought of the same thing. Maybe we were thinking alike. What made you think of that idea?”

Keep in mind that the goal is not to come up with only great ideas, but many ideas. When children explore what’s possible, they begin to trust their ability to problem solve and generate multiple strategies.

The Circle Game

- The circle game is an activity that can help promote flexible thinking and idea generation.
- Draw a circle on a sheet of paper.
- Ask your child what letter the circle looks like.
- Ask your child to change the circle to make it look like other letters (b, d, p, q....)
- When this becomes too easy, ask your child how to change the circle to look like other objects (a balloon, a happy face, a lollipop, a baseball...)

When this becomes too easy, ask your child how to change what the circle represents just by thinking about it (a hula hoop, the back of a snowman's head, a prehistoric egg...)

Circle Game

to support divergent thinking and idea generation

Stage	Adjustment	Constraint	Benefit
Beginner	Letters	Alphabet (26-52 possibilities)	Flexible Thinking
Intermediate	Objects	Physical Modifications	Lateral Thinking

Advanced	Concepts	Mental Modifications	Creative Problem Solving
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Questions to Prompt Connections

- Why didn't Her Majesty, Thundercat go get the ball for Mr. Fish?
- Have you ever needed help doing something before?
- Have you ever had a hard time making up your mind or making a decision?
- Have you ever felt like you were different?
- What's something you think you're really great at?
- What's something you think your friends are great at?
- How do you feel when you try something new?
- Why do Her Majesty, Thundercat's feelings change?

- How do you think Mr. Fish feels when he gets his toy out of the tree?
- What makes you feel proud of yourself?