

- » We respectfully disagree and try to see the other view.
- » We let others finish explaining their ideas without interrupting.
- » We try to come to some agreement in the end.
- » We take turns and share air time.

Some teachers use little chants to remind students of key norms for holding effective conversations (some with hand motions), such as “Focus! Listen! Link, build, dig!” or “Value, Respect, Support, Connect!”

From the posters and chants you can create self-assessment checklists for use after conversations. See Chapter 10 for more details on self-assessment.

Five Core Skills of Academic Conversation

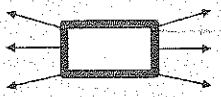
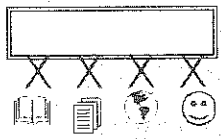
In our research and work with teachers we identified five core skills that make conversations more academic:

1. Elaborate and clarify
2. Support ideas with examples
3. Build on and/or challenge a partner’s idea
4. Paraphrase
5. Synthesize conversation points

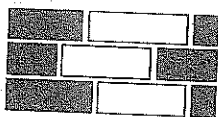
These five core skills, also called conversation moves, overlap considerably, and some are used more in certain types of conversation than in others. When conversing about academic topics, these skills usually don’t come naturally: students tend to not elaborate, not support their ideas, not build and focus on one idea, not paraphrase along the way, and not synthesize at the end. And because these skills don’t come naturally, we need to—and get to—work on them in school.

Figure 2.1 provides ideas for teaching the core conversation skills emphasized throughout this book. (The appendix contains another version of this graphic called the Academic Conversation Placemat. See Chapter 4 for more on using the placemat.) The symbols and associated hand motions reinforce each skill for all learners, especially those who like to make visual and kinesthetic connections. Some teachers, in warm-up activities, point to a symbol and have students quickly do the hand motions and practice a sentence frame or two on a current topic of the lesson. The frames eventually become automatic: when students hear them and practice them enough in various mini-lessons and activities, they will use them more and more naturally.

Figure 2.1 Core Academic Conversation Skills, with Symbols, Hand Motions, Prompt Frames, and Response Frames

| Conversation Skills (with symbols and hand motions) | Frames for Prompting the Skill | Frames for Responding |
|---|--|--|
| <p>Elaborate and Clarify</p>  <p><i>(Pull hands apart)</i></p> | <p>Can you elaborate on . . . ?</p> <p>What do you mean by . . . ?</p> <p>Can you tell me more about . . . ?</p> <p>What makes you think that?</p> <p>Can you clarify the part about . . . ?</p> <p>Can you be more specific?</p> <p>How so?</p> <p>How/Why is that important?</p> <p>I'd love to hear more about . . .</p> <p>How does that connect to . . . ?</p> <p>I wonder if . . .</p> <p>How so?</p> <p>Can you unpack that for me?</p> <p>I am a little confused about the part . . .</p> | <p>I think it means that . . .</p> <p>In other words, . . .</p> <p>I believe that . . .</p> <p>An analogy for this might be . . .</p> <p>It is important because . . .</p> <p>It's similar to when . . .</p> |
| <p>Support Ideas with Examples (from this text, other texts, the world, and life)</p>  <p><i>(Point thumb and three fingers up and place palm of other hand on top like a table; or point one index finger to the tip of the pinky of the other hand)</i></p> | <p>Can you give an example from the text?</p> <p>Can you show me where it says that?</p> <p>What are examples from other texts?</p> <p>What is a real-world example?</p> <p>What is an example from your life?</p> <p>Are there any cases of that?</p> <p>What is the evidence for that . . . ?</p> <p>Like what?</p> <p>Why do you say that?</p> <p>How do you justify that?</p> <p>What does that look like?</p> <p>Such as?</p> <p>What would illustrate that?</p> <p>Why is that a good example?</p> | <p>For example, . . .</p> <p>In the text it said that . . .</p> <p>One case showed that . . .</p> <p>An example from my life is . . .</p> <p>For instance, . . .</p> <p>According to . . .</p> <p>An illustration of this could be . . .</p> <p>On one occasion . . .</p> <p>In this situation . . .</p> <p>To demonstrate, . . .</p> <p>In fact, . . .</p> <p>Indeed, . . .</p> <p>. . . such as . . .</p> <p>Have you ever . . . ?</p> |

Build On and/or Challenge a Partner's Idea



(Layer hands on each other and build up)

What do you think about the idea that ...?

Can you add to this idea?

Do you agree?

What might be other points of view?

What are other ideas?

How does that connect to the idea ...?

I am not sure if this is relevant, but ...

How can we bring this back to the question of ...?

I would add that ...

I want to expand on your point about ...

I want to follow up on your idea ...

(To challenge)

Then again, I think that ...

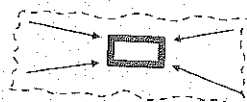
Another way to look at this could be ...

Yet I wonder also if ...

If _____, then _____

What struck me about what you said is ...

Paraphrase



(Move both palms toward each other)

I'm not sure that was clear ...

I can't remember all that I said.

How can we relate what I said to the topic/question?

What do we know so far?

What is your take on what I said?

I don't know. Did that make sense?

What are you hearing?

So, you are saying that ...

Let me see if I understand you ...

Am I right in hearing you say that ...?

In a nutshell, you are arguing that ...

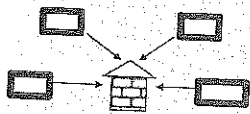
In other words ...

What I am hearing is ...

Essentially, you think that ...

It sounds like you are saying that ...

Synthesize Conversation Points



(Start both arms out wide and then cup them into a ball)

What have we discussed so far?

How should we synthesize what we talked about?

How can we bring this all together?

What can we agree upon?

What main points can we share?

What was our original question?

What key idea can we take away?

We can say that ...

The main theme/point seems to be ...

As a result of this conversation, we think that we should ...

How does this sound ...?

What if we ...?

The evidence seems to suggest that ...

Three important principles frame the five conversation skills:

1. Each skill is actually a double skill: (a) appropriately prompting the partner to use the skill *and* (b) effectively responding to a partner's prompting.
2. Each skill requires good listening. Good listening means working hard to understand what the other is saying, keeping track of ideas, being aware of the whole conversation, being aware of what is not said, and interpreting a speaker's tone and body language.
3. The overarching purpose of all the skills is to focus on, deepen, explore, negotiate, and co-construct ideas vital for content learning. Each conversation should have a destination and make progress toward it. Each conversation should apply core thinking skills and key principles of the discipline.

Skill 1: Elaborate and Clarify

Elaborating provides more important information about a topic or idea. The elaborator should be aware of the amount and detail of the information that needs to be shared to make the point clear. Likewise, a listener should know when more information is needed. This often happens when a speaker introduces a general, complex, muddy, or abstract topic without much detail. For example, when a speaker says, "She was a very important person in that time period," most adults would ask for elaboration or explanation, or would ask *why* and *how*. For younger students, prompting for elaboration often simply means saying, "Tell me more about . . .," which is fine because students thereby show that they want to hear more. Two things then happen: the listener shifts the focus from his or her own thoughts to show interest in what the partner has to say, and the listener gets to hear more language.

It is important to teach students to say, "Can you elaborate on . . ." rather than just, "Can you elaborate?" because this forces the asker to pick out a certain part of what the speaker is saying and give it a name. For example, asking "Can you elaborate on your reasons why you think he altered the documents?" demonstrates that the asker has been listening and wants to move the conversation deeper. Moreover, when an asker is not specific and instead says, "Can you elaborate on that?" you can teach the speaker to respond, "Elaborate on what?" This forces the asker to be more specific and process what he or she is listening to.

Elaborating with Analogies

One type of advanced elaboration and clarification is an analogous illustration from a different area. A recent example was a group of boys who used the analogy of playing soccer to describe a theme from a non-sport-related story. They all could relate to the feeling of having missed an easy goal, which illustrated the theme of working hard in spite of failures. No student named a particular incident, but used the helpful phrase, "It's like when . . ." for general cases: "It's like when

I was in fifth grade and . . .” In a way, using analogy is another level of connection; a more figurative and theoretical level. It is extremely common in academic speeches and texts in later grades.

Questioning to Clarify and Probe

Students need to ask good questions to get conversations going and to keep them going. In fact, one of the highly ranked skills wanted by employers is asking good questions. A good question sparks conversation, brings up issues that have not yet been addressed, looks at different perspectives, and addresses big-picture and long-run issues. Questioning also shows others that you genuinely care about what they think and say.

Train students to ask the right questions at the right time and to facilitate as teachers might do. A well-placed question at a certain time can focus and extend the conversation.

I wonder, how . . . ? (or, why . . . ?)

That's true, but how . . . ?

And how can we connect that to . . . ?

What do you think about . . . ?

Why do you think that is?

Elaborating and Clarifying with Examples

Often, when asked to elaborate, a person uses examples. Examples are concrete instances or members of a category. Examples are a natural way to explain or illustrate general, complex, or abstract concepts. These concepts and their examples are commonly accepted (i.e., generally not up for debate). For example, a student might mention independent variables, and when her partner asks her for an example, she clarifies by giving examples of independent variables from a recent lab on plant growth (e.g., amount of sunlight, amount of water, etc.). Other concepts that can be illustrated with examples include exothermic reactions, omnivores, democratic principles, alliteration, transitions, anthropomorphism, and technology.

If the concept's examples are not commonly accepted and are up for debate, then partners need to use the next skill, supporting an idea with examples.

Skill 2: Support Ideas with Examples

A student must learn to use examples to strengthen a debatable idea or argument. Examples are often used as *evidence*, the broad term used for any specific information that logically supports a hypothesis or perspective. For instance, if one student starts and says that human greed has defined the borders of many nations, his or her partner could ask for examples as evidence in support of the idea. Most of the evidence used to support ideas in academic conversations is in the form of examples.

Students should learn to use four main types of examples. The order is important here, because many students tend to jump straight to examples from their own lives and run out of time to talk about examples from texts or the world, which tend to be more powerful and challenging. Encourage students to think of examples in the order listed, at least initially.

1. Examples from the text
2. Examples from other texts
3. Examples from the world
4. Examples from one's own life

Use Examples from the Text

In schools where there aren't plenty of students who are models of proficient mainstream English, the text can serve as a model of academic language, especially if you build "going back into the text" as a habit each day, each year. Students often discuss a text that they have just read or are reading. When they prompt each other for examples to support ideas, the first place to look should be the text. This is important, because students tend to want to connect to their lives. Connecting to their lives is fine later on, but students seldom get back into the text if they launch into their own life examples first. Students should start with the text, and you can scaffold their use of text examples with sentence starters such as *Based on what the character said here, . . . , In the text, let's see, the exact wording was . . . , This means that . . . , or Remember the part where . . .*

A common challenge for students is finding the best quotations from the text to logically support their ideas. In a strategy that we call "quotation negotiation," you post several themes, opinions, or main ideas around the classroom and read them out loud to students. Each student receives a slip of paper (or two) with a quotation from the text. Students then pair up and converse with five different people to decide and justify under which theme their quotation should go. They need to argue for the best place for the quotation.

Use Examples from Other Texts

Students should learn to prompt for and provide examples from other texts read in and out of school, as well as "texts" such as TV shows, movies, Web pages, and artwork. Students can then evaluate the value of the examples as they converse. For example, we observed one student who used a photo he had seen the week before in history class as an example of the struggle described in the narrative he and his partner read in language arts class.

Use Examples from the World

Much of what teachers strive for in school is for students to connect ideas learned in school to the world outside, to how things work and how people behave. As you use and encourage the use of examples from the world, you train students to be continually observing and "reading the world" (Freire and Macedo 1987, 35) to synthesize, making links that can serve them throughout life.

For example, a student referred to a recent attack by a mountain lion as an example of the clash between people and nature in science class.

Use Examples from One's Own Life

The most natural form of example that pops up in conversations is from one's own life. It is usually easier and more interesting (at least for the talker) to use examples from one's own life than to find supporting examples from the text or world. Students knowingly or unknowingly prefer to fill talking time with summaries and personal examples. This is natural, and it can be very helpful for understanding and remembering the topic, but life examples should always stay connected to the topic and the text in some way.

Young students, in particular, can lose focus quickly when they share their life examples. Train them to take a few seconds (and give them a few seconds) to think about whether the example will help deepen the conversation or take it too far away from the text. Will it be too entertaining, distracting, or tempting for other students to make similar comments? When you lead discussions, model for students how to set aside unhelpful examples. If an idea has lots of potential, but doesn't fit in right then, teach students to write it down and bring it up later. This process of evaluating the usefulness of examples and other ideas that pop into our heads—and parking them for later—is a key skill that many people never develop.

Support an Idea with Reasons

Often, people support an idea with reasons, which are less abstract than the main argument but not as specific as examples. However, reasons usually need examples to support them as well. For instance, if a student argues against nuclear power, he or she might give reasons such as high risk of contamination, viability of other forms of energy, and high costs of waste disposal. These reasons should then be supported with specific examples and statistics.

In order to help students build their abilities to produce and evaluate solid reasons, it is helpful to have a class discussion on bias, correlation versus causation, sample size, comparing apples and oranges (e.g., lives vs. money), and basic logic (e.g., If A is a member of group B and all Bs are hungry, then A is hungry). These are common elements of reasoning that students must grasp to think critically about how well an idea is supported by a reason posed by a partner.

Explain the Strength of an Example

An important skill associated with the use of examples is explaining why the examples are used and how influential they are. Students need to evaluate and often argue the strength or "weight" of the example's support of an argument or hypothesis. You must therefore model and scaffold for students how to think along abstract continua and even how to visualize examples as weights on a balance scale. This helps students see that certain types of examples have more evidential weight than others, according to common societal and professional scales. For instance, a student

might have several weak examples for his position on global warming, and his partner should question their value and prompt him to explain their value in conversation. He might then explain how strong the correlation is between temperatures and the increases in use of fossil fuels.

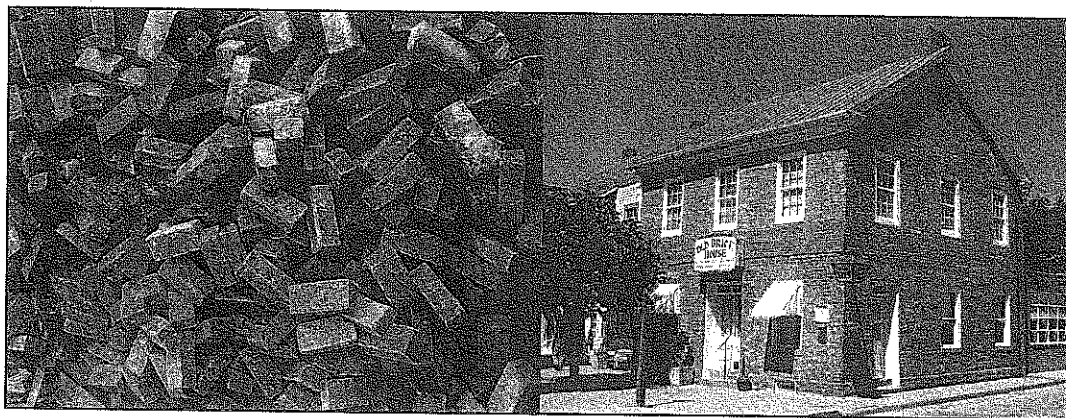
As students engage with one another and negotiate the weights of examples, their minds become sharper and stronger.

Skill 3: Build On and/or Challenge a Partner's Idea

You might have noticed that students often just “popcorn” out ideas without connecting to the ideas of other students. Students need to learn to build on a partner's idea and/or appropriately challenge it.

The *co-* in collaborate, cooperate, and co-construct means *together*. This means building up ideas, which is why we used the brick house as a symbol in Figure 2.2. In a conversation, your next idea should build on, connect to, or logically challenge what your partner just said. Your idea should not be a random idea tossed out to smother or replace your partner's idea. We must teach students to address, respect, and build on every single partner utterance. In other words, no popcorning—or brick-piling.

Figure 2.2 Piles of Random Thoughts Versus Constructed Ideas



Many students (and adults) tend to limit their perspectives to the first idea that comes to them. They then defend it with full force before considering other points of view. But much of life is subjective and full of conflicting perspectives, solutions, and opinions. Many good ideas come from others. The sooner students are taught to encourage, respect, value, and build other perspectives on any given topic, the better. Students should have the mind-set of building, not

competing or winning. They should want to know what others think, and not just fixate on saying what they themselves think. As much as possible, encourage students to *genuinely* seek to understand what others are thinking and feeling.

Zoom In and Pick a Point

Often, a conversation partner shares several points or ideas in one turn. Teach students as they listen to try to zoom in on a point that best maintains focus on the topic and moves the conversation along. This could be a point of agreement or disagreement. A partner, for example, might use a quotation from a character to support the proposed theme of denial in the story. The partner might agree and elaborate on that quotation, providing another similar line from the story to support the idea.

Connect Ideas

A student should also build by linking a partner's idea to previous ideas, thoughts, texts, other conversations, interests, world issues, and examples. Some of the links should be to ideas in the same conversation. This all requires a good working memory. Students can bring up what has happened before in class, the world, or their own lives to use as material for conversations. This might include referring to notes or graphic organizers.

As students converse, they must learn to keep track of important ideas in the class, the text, and previous statements by a partner or classmates. The ability to remember linkable ideas varies, of course, but you can train students to make more and better connections as they converse, read, and write.

Stay Relevant

When students do bring up ideas, they need to demonstrate a good "filter" for relevance and logic. They should share notions of what is relevant to the topic as they talk (Barnes and Todd 1977). This means that students must be able to discern whether the idea or example helps support or extend the topic, or whether it is off base and needs to be set aside. Students also need to self-filter and prune ideas before sharing out loud. We teachers do this more than we think. A connection pops up into our heads during class discussion, and we quickly decide if it will help or if it will distract and get students off on some wild tangent that will not end until the bell rings for lunch. One strategy, if students are not sure of the relevance, is to start with, "I don't know how this fits, but what about . . .," and then to be open to the partner saying, "Let's table that for now."

Challenge an Idea

You likely hear plenty of students challenging other students in different ways in school. The goal with classroom conversation is to teach respectful and productive challenging skills. Much learn-

ing can result from the energy of conflict and controversy, as we know, but we must be tactful. Sentence frames can help, but often when things get most interesting, the respectfulness erodes. Have students practice taking different sides in short pair-shares and practice responding. You can role-play a person who is inwardly angry but responds with respect to an opposing view. (Also see the two-sided information gap conversation activity in Chapter 7.)

Adapt an Idea

Another part of building is adapting. By this we mean that conversations are alive, somewhat like an active child: you never know where it is going, and often you have to follow, adapt, and make new plans. One middle school teacher, Erin Dillane, tells her students, “Sometimes in conversation another person says your idea, or the conversation goes in a different direction and you have to let your idea go. Be flexible.” Many students are used to saying their idea—getting it out there—but not listening to others’ ideas, not building. These students need to adapt, be flexible, be open to new ideas, and be ready to do the hard work of building on each other’s thoughts.

Skill 4: Paraphrase

Paraphrasing is the skill of keeping track of what we are hearing, organizing the speaker’s points, and describing what we understand in our own words. It requires some selection and inference. We “read” the speaker’s tone and emphasis and see what is important to them. This helps us select key points for our paraphrased version of what the speaker said. We also might highlight the points that relate most to the main topic of the conversation.

Paraphrasing serves multiple purposes. First, it helps conversation partners negotiate meaning. The listener synthesizes important points, which sometimes contradict each other, and paraphrases them back to the speaker. The speaker can then clarify if that was the intended message. And because no two people have experienced the world exactly the same way, such negotiations and clarification are much needed. “A speaker can never transmit information to a listener that will be understood in exactly the same way as the speaker conceptualizes that particular piece of information” (Raban 2001, 33). Even identical twins must negotiate meaning.

Second, the person paraphrasing can shape or guide the speaker’s key points to stay focused on the conversation’s main topic. The listener can choose a point or two that relate the most or dig the deepest and can bring those points up in the paraphrase to maintain the conversation’s focus. Third, paraphrasing is great practice for listening and creating chunks of key points. This chunking can help students’ comprehension of future oral and reading experiences. Fourth, a good paraphrase shows that a person is listening and understanding what the partner is saying. Anyone can nod their head, but to paraphrase what a partner just said shows true listening. And finally, even if a listener doesn’t paraphrase out loud, it is a great listening and comprehension habit to develop.

Skill 5: Synthesize Conversation Points

Ideas, useful and not, float around during a conversation, and it takes skill and practice to keep track of the ideas and combine the useful ones. Synthesizing conversation points means remembering, highlighting, and fitting together key ideas from the conversation into a coherent thought statement. It is the process of taking the many paraphrased chunks, fitting them together, weeding some out, and whittling them down into a shared conclusion.

A synthesis can be a rich part of the conversation, because to form it, students need to negotiate ideas that they discussed in order to come to a consensus. Or they might “agree to disagree” on the final synthesis. Both are worthy outcomes and prepare students for thinking and talking in future classes, jobs, and life. A key supporting skill for synthesizing is recognizing the unimportant points and pruning them out of the synthesis. Synthesizing also is supported by and builds skills of organizing, prioritizing, and shaping abstract ideas into a summarized form.

Leave enough time at the end of each conversation for students to think back and gather their ideas together into a synthesis. Ask them to think about the most important points and how they can apply or generalize ideas to make them interesting and useful in life. You can have them summarize on paper first, individually, then talk with each other to negotiate their synthesis. The joint synthesis can also be written down as a record of the conversation. You can circulate to see which syntheses might spark a rich whole-class conversation.

A synthesis solidifies the conversation’s purpose and greatly increases the chances of the ideas being remembered and learned.

Behaviors of Effective Conversation

Conversation is much more than talking and listening. There are many manners, behaviors, and nonverbal signals that play key roles. These behaviors tend to become habits as a result of home and community interactions. But for students who have been less immersed at home in communication behaviors valued at school, teachers need to teach such behaviors in class in order to accelerate their development. These behaviors include the following:

- » Appropriate eye contact (not always looking down or away or past the person—and not constantly staring either)
- » Facing one another (with whole body)
- » Attentive posture (leaning toward the partner)
- » Nodding head to show understanding
- » Appropriate gesturing (not rolling eyes or sighing or looking bored with folded arms, and so on)

- » Laughing, smiling, looking surprised, showing interest
- » Using “keep talking” tactics (*Uh huh, Wow, Interesting, Hmm, Yes, Okay, I see, Go on, Really? Seriously?*)
- » Silence (to allow thinking and time to put thoughts into words)
- » Prosody (changing voice tone, pitch, volume, and emphasis)
- » Interrupting (by agreeing, asking for clarification, or using nonverbal signals)

Attitudes for Effective Conversation

Perhaps the hardest conversational dimension to teach and model is attitude. The following attitudes and dispositions are needed in addition to the skills and behaviors described in the preceding sections:

Humility. It is tough to have a good conversation with a know-it-all. We prefer to converse with others who admit they have things to learn, that their knowledge is incomplete, and that they can learn from others. Humility is being open to new ideas and to having one's mind changed—it is knowing that our opinions have limitations (Brookfield and Preskill 2005). For students who have high status in a classroom and know it, humility means they might need to be less visible and more patient and to see other students as teachers.

Thoroughness. This is the attitude that keeps students exploring and deepening ideas and creatively extending conversations. It means to look at all perspectives and possible solutions and to work together to accomplish the task with the highest quality possible. “Can we do better?” should run through students' minds as they work.

Respect. It's essential to respect each other, especially when opposing viewpoints are being discussed. Respect is a foundational attitude that supports conversations at all levels. In addition, it deepens as students have more opportunities to talk with one another. We have encountered many students who report that their thoughts and attitudes towards their peers have shifted dramatically as a result of respectful academic conversations.

Positivity. The positive attitude that great learning can happen through conversation is vital. Some students approach school and their peers with a negative attitude. Enthusiasm stems from positivity.

Interest. Too many people seek to be interesting when they should seek to be more interested. Many “interesting” people know or think they are interesting, and therefore talk too much. *Interested* people, on the other hand, are interested in what other people say. They want to work with, build from, and encourage others’ ideas. And if both partners are interested, good conversation happens.

Conversation Diversity

Conversations are very diverse. No conversation between students at any given moment is the same, nor is a conversation the same between the same two people at different points in time. Yet, the conversation skills, the behaviors, and the attitudes described in this chapter are effective in most conversations. Look for the skills (which are more evident in transcripts than behaviors and attitudes are) in the following excerpt from a fifth-grade conversation on a book about the challenges faced by Ruby Bridges, one of the first African American girls to attend an all-white school, in 1960.

- 1 *Monica:* What did you like about the story?
- 2 *Luis:* I think we are supposed to talk about what it means.
- 3 *Monica:* Okay. What did it mean?
- 4 *Luis:* Ruby was brave.
- 5 *Monica:* Can you elaborate on that?
- 6 *Luis:* She was scared, but kept walking past those angry people. Then she was alone with the teacher. That’s scary, too.
- 7 *Monica:* Yeah, I don’t think I would’ve kept going. I once had some old man scream at me and I stayed away from that store for weeks. I wanted to spit on him. But then it was crazy; Ruby prayed for those people who hated her!
- 8 *Luis:* Why’d she do that?
- 9 *Monica:* I don’t think screaming back at them would’ve helped. Maybe they wanted her to yell at them so they could have reasons to not like her.
- 10 *Luis:* So you’re saying, she would’ve become like them.
- 11 *Monica:* Yeah, I guess. So, how do we sum this up?
- 12 *Luis:* Ruby was brave by walking past yelling people. She forgave them to not be like them. We should forgive people like that, like that old man that yelled at you.
- 13 *Monica:* And not give in. She could’ve stopped going to school and forgiven them, but she didn’t.