

## Chapter Three

# From Good to Memorable

## Characteristics of Highly Effective Comprehension Teaching

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Early June heat and light streamed through the narrow library windows at Bunker Elementary in Newark, California, a bedroom community on the east side of the San Francisco Bay. Thousands of immigrants and low-wage workers who serve in the hotels and restaurants, ubiquitous office parks, and construction sites of Silicon Valley have brought their families to live in Newark. Their children speak one of twenty-six languages and have flooded into a maze of temporary classrooms set up on school campuses to accommodate children in small primary classrooms (California statute stipulates a ratio of twenty students to one teacher) and terribly overcrowded intermediate classrooms.

On this morning Newark's twenty-three literacy coordinators listened as one of their own conducted a demonstration lesson with a class of twenty first-graders, many of whom were just learning English. Lynne Gurnee used Eve Bunting's picture book (1996), *Going Home*, to teach questioning, one of the metacognitive strategies researchers have suggested should be standard fare in the K-12 comprehension curriculum (Pearson, Rochler, Dole, & Duffy, 1992).

Gurnee read the first few pages in a lively animated way, pausing to think aloud when she became conscious of a question in her mind relevant to the plot. The group of twenty children was spell-

bound, watching Gurnee as she read, paused, glanced to the ceiling, and wondered aloud. Hands shot up, and voices in several languages offered answers to her question.

"How do they know what she asked?" one of the literacy coordinators murmured to a colleague. "I know those three," she pointed discreetly, "speak only Mandarin." Her colleague shrugged without looking away from the group on the floor. It was getting uncomfortably warm in the room, but no one seemed to notice.

Gurnee declined to call on anyone. "No," she said, "I don't want to answer that question. I just want to listen to it in my mind for a while. I know if I answer now, I don't get to keep thinking about it. I really want to keep thinking about my question because it makes me think about lots of answers and even some new questions." The adults in the room heard the children sigh. One of the children said, "We should wait then."

As the literacy coordinators debriefed, they asked Gurnee dozens of questions, and she fielded them with the agility of a presidential press secretary. She had given careful thought to planning the lesson; she had paid close attention to her questions as they floated into her consciousness during the lesson; she had used a think-aloud teaching strategy to show children how a proficient reader uses questions to understand more thoroughly, but there was something she just couldn't quite explain. What was it about Gurnee's lesson that seemed to transcend languages and speak directly to the children gathered before her? When Gurnee invited the children to return to their independent reading to try for themselves what they observed in her lesson, why did they scramble to their tables almost desperate for their shot at questioning? What catapulted the lesson from merely effective to memorable?

Gurnee is not alone. Throughout this country, I've been privileged to meet teachers who have read *Mosaic of Thought* (Keene & Zimmermann, 1997) and other publications on teaching comprehension strategies in K-12 classrooms and, instead of just shuffling through the pages in search of a few good ideas, have taken the charge to teach comprehension very seriously. They have studied comprehension research and discussed with colleagues ways in which they can translate it into their classrooms. They have lent their creative energy to ingenious adaptations of

concepts proposed in *Mosaic* and elsewhere and have delighted in their students' successes.

Through all those interactions, a set of questions continues to haunt me. I recorded them in order to reflect on them later.

Why are some teachers breathtakingly effective in teaching comprehension strategies?

Why is it riveting to observe?

What do they do to ensure unprecedented levels of student engagement?

What have they done to ensure their students' lasting and independent application of each comprehension strategy in increasingly difficult text and in a wide variety of genres?

What teaching tactics do they use when discussing thinking that permits their students to articulate abstract thought processes with real insight?

How is it that their students can represent their thinking in a wide variety of ways and can describe how using the strategy helped them understand more than if they hadn't used the strategy?

Why do their students ache to read and talk about their insights?

How can these small miracles happen both in first grade and in a last-chance reading course in high school?

Is it possible to identify those qualities, and are these qualities that other teachers can learn and adapt?

Recently, I sat down in silence and tried to record what I have observed in hundreds of classrooms around the country in an attempt to answer those questions. I made some progress before deciding that my questions warranted a fuller exploration. I began to go to the source, not for a formal study, but to converse and review student data with teachers whose comprehension teaching transcends good and reaches well into exceptional. My overriding question was: What characterizes highly effective comprehension teaching?

I chose seventeen teachers whom I have observed with great admiration but who also had collected a significant body of stu-

dent evidence to substantiate their effectiveness with children. Those who work with older children had norm- and criterion-referenced assessments in addition to a massive amount of student work samples they had collected and analyzed, but all had compiled evidence to satisfy themselves that their approach to comprehension instruction was not only professionally interesting and challenging but resulted in observable growth for their students.

For example, students in these classrooms had made greater than anticipated progress on a wide variety of instruments including state standards assessments and individualized reading inventories such as the Qualitative Reading Inventory III (Leslie, 2001) and on a comprehension-strategy assessment, the Major Point Interview for Readers (Keene, Goudvis, & Schwartz, 1996). Teachers also reported significant improvements in students' classroom work, level of engagement, and retention of concepts from books.

The teachers with whom I spoke teach first through twelfth grade and come primarily, but not exclusively, from low-income urban schools in six states.

From those observations and conversations, I define and describe a set of qualities all possess, despite their vastly different settings and circumstances. But I must admit that there is an elusive quality to memorable teaching. Shall we call it magic? I won't even try to pin that one down. Despite the level of student maturity in these seventeen classrooms and the wide range of schools in which they teach, these exemplary comprehension instructors shared seven common traits.

**TRAIT 1:** Superb teachers take the time to understand each strategy in their own reading.

When I queried teachers about how they get kids to think deeply using the comprehension strategies researchers have suggested are important for comprehension learning, they gave one response more frequently than others: the teachers take the time to use and understand the strategy to be taught. Research does not always define the nuances and subtleties of each strategy, so these teachers have filled this void by committing to study their own

thinking during reading. They have decided that to teach effectively they must determine all the ways in which they use every strategy to better understand the text they read.

Researchers have confirmed what teachers of reading may have observed in themselves and in their students, namely, that thoughtful, active, proficient readers are *metacognitive*: they think about their own thinking during reading.

Proficient readers know what and when they comprehend and when they do not comprehend; they can identify their purposes for reading and identify the demands that a particular text places on them. They can identify when and why the meaning of the text is unclear to them and can use a variety of strategies to solve comprehension problems or deepen their understanding of a text (Bunting et al., 1987; Paris, Cross, & Lipson, 1984).

### *Metacognitive Reader's Comprehension Strategies*

Activates relevant prior knowledge (schema) before, during, and after reading text. Proficient readers "use prior knowledge to evaluate the adequacy of the model of meaning they have developed," to enhance and make personal their interpretation of text, and to store newly learned information with other related memories (Pearson et al., 1992, p. 154; see also Gordon & Pearson, 1983; Hansen, 1981).

Determines the most important ideas and themes in a text. (Afflerbach & Johnston, 1986; Baumann, 1986; Tierney & Cunningham, 1984; Winograd & Bridge, 1986). Proficient readers use their conclusions about important ideas to focus their reading and to exclude peripheral or unimportant details from memory.

Asks questions of him- or herself, the authors, and the texts (Andre & Anderson, 1979; Brown & Palincsar, 1985). Proficient readers use their questions to clarify and to focus their reading and subsequent responses to reading.

Creates visual and other sensory images from text during and after reading. These images may include visual, auditory, and other sensory connections to the text. Proficient readers use these images to deepen their understanding.

Draws inferences from text. Proficient readers use their prior knowledge (schema) and textual information to form critical judgments and create unique interpretations from text. Drawing inferences involves literally creating a meaning as the reader reads. Inferences may occur in the form of conclusions, predictions, or new ideas (Anderson & Pearson, 1984).

Synthesizes what he or she has read. Proficient readers often combine information from different sources to create succinct re-statements of central messages or information from text. To do so, they attend to the most important information, their background knowledge, and to the clarity of the synthesis itself. Readers synthesize in order to better understand what they have read (Brown & Day, 1983).

Uses a variety of fix-up strategies to repair comprehension when it breaks down. Proficient readers select appropriate fix-up strategies from one of the six language systems (pragmatic, schematic, semantic, syntactic, lexical, or graphophonic) to best solve a given problem in a given reading situation (Garner, 1987).

To determine for themselves the ways in which they use every strategy to better understand the text they read, many teachers gather in study groups or hold informal conversations with colleagues prior to teaching a comprehension strategy. They read short challenging adult text, paying careful attention to and recording the myriad ways they use the strategy. For example, at Foster Elementary in Jefferson County, Colorado, teachers found that they had become so unaware of their own comprehension processes, they needed to read the text, highlight and code it, and discuss ways in which they comprehended before beginning to teach a particular strategy.

The Foster staff decided to focus on the same comprehension strategy schoolwide, differentiating for students' needs with a huge variety of texts and genres to which they would ask children to apply the strategy. Before beginning a long-term strategy study focused on using sensory images to better understand what they read, they spent two after-school study group sessions scrutinizing their own use of sensory images in text that was challenging to

them. As they read and discussed their reactions with their colleagues, they recorded not just specific images that came to mind as they read but the ways in which those images enhanced their comprehension. Their teacher-generated list of ways that readers form and use images to help them comprehend became a list of minilessons for the classroom. The Foster teachers focused several days' instruction on each element of the strategy, as they had described it, over the term of the strategy study—usually between six and nine weeks. Similarly, these teachers asked their students to create their own working definition of the strategy as they study it. The students added to charts around the classrooms that became compilations of ways in which using sensory images helped them comprehend more completely.

**TRAIT 2:** The most effective comprehension instruction is incorporated into a predictable daily, weekly, and monthly readers' workshop.

Teachers for whom comprehension instruction transcends the commonplace are teachers who have given careful thought to the structure of the workshops in which they engage their children. These teachers understand that there is no one perfect way to configure the time they spend with children in reading, writing, and discourse—so much, of course, depends on the needs of a particular group of learners. They have learned the hard way, though, that without a set of goals for comprehension learning and a predictable schedule to ensure that those goals are met, their classrooms feel unfocused and chaotic.

Many of the teachers with whom I have spoken about this issue tell me they find it useful to think about each component they want to include in the workshop according to how frequently it needs to be accomplished. For example, what is essential enough that it must be built into the daily schedule? Few would argue that a minilesson for the class during which the teacher demonstrates use of a comprehension strategy by thinking aloud is essential fare nearly every day. Each of the teachers with whom I spoke ensures that children have abundant time to read independently every day. (In nearly every case, the period of time set aside for independent reading far exceeded the amount of time typically set

aside for students at that grade level—perhaps this has something to do with the students' growth on classroom work and more formal assessments!) Each of these teachers made time to confer with individual students a daily priority, something I don't encounter nearly as much in other classrooms. Finally, each felt that it is critical to have some kind of opportunity for students to share their thinking every day, even if that sharing takes place only between pairs of students.

In highly effective classrooms, teachers set aside time each week to work more intensively with children in small needs-based groups. Most children meet at least twice a week in "invitational" groups, a term introduced in *Mosaic of Thought* (Keene & Zimmermann, 1997) to describe small temporary groups assembled by the teacher to address some area of shared need. For example, if six or seven children were having difficulty describing how asking questions helps them comprehend, their teacher might pull them together in an invitational group to support the development of this skill. In addition, many of the teachers to whom I spoke ensure that students read in at least two genres each week, depending on the age of the children; without exception, these teachers had set aside some time for book clubs or literature circles to meet at least once a week.

The distinction between these highly effective classrooms and many others I've visited seems to revolve around how many priorities teachers try to squeeze into each day and week. These highly effective teachers chose to address priorities that many teachers view as essential weekly or even daily tasks in great depth but on a biweekly or monthly basis. Most set aside time at least once a month for students to spend class time reflecting on their progress toward goals they had set. These teachers made it a practice to ask students to review the list of texts they had read, the responses to books they shared, the insights recorded on charts around the room, and their own written reflections on their progress as readers and to comment on their progress that month. Some teachers asked their students to collect their reflections in a portfolio; others asked students to write a letter home; still others asked the children to share their reflections with small peer groups who gave them feedback. In some way, however, each of these highly effective teachers asked children to step back and find a way to

summarize in order to understand more deeply their progress in using comprehension strategies.

Each teacher's sense of daily, weekly, and monthly essentials was slightly different, but all were clear that it is impossible to address everything one considers essential every day or even every week. These teachers preferred to engage students in more in-depth exploration of ideas less frequently. For example, they often explored students' understanding in books with weighty themes such as the Holocaust, immigration, or slavery for weeks rather than a day or two. They created time, not only to discuss the content in the books, but also to discuss the ways in which children used comprehension strategies in order to more deeply understand that content. They felt equally committed to retaining a predictable schedule. They understood that children thrive in an environment that is simultaneously predictable and rigorous. For them, setting daily, weekly, and monthly instructional priorities and sticking to them created the luxury of time for their children to think deeply and consider ideas for more than a fleeting moment.

**TRAIT 3:** Teachers ask children to apply each comprehension strategy in a wide variety of texts and text levels.

I have had hundreds of conversations with teachers about the perfect books to use when teaching a particular comprehension strategy. I emphasize that there is no perfect set of books to use for instruction on a given comprehension strategy but that they should (1) consider using texts with challenging and profound themes, even for the youngest children, (2) select texts that are beautifully written, and (3) generally choose pieces that can be read in their entirety during a minilesson. When I spoke to other teachers about this question, they emphasized two additional elements to consider.

*Text Variety.* Highly effective teachers with whom I spoke were unanimous in their belief that comprehending well means that a student can use the previously outlined strategies in a wide variety of texts, not just in the genres most familiar to him or her. The

student can determine importance in expository text as well as fiction, use sensory images not just to understand the nuances in poetry but to better understand the characters in a novel, synthesize not only in a magazine article but also in a persuasive essay, use background knowledge to better understand biography as well as a textbook.

The lesson from highly effective teachers is clear. Many of us teach students to use comprehension strategies but fail to ask them to apply the strategies in a wide variety of texts and contexts. One of the ways we can ensure that students have truly internalized the strategies we've taught is to ask them to think aloud or otherwise demonstrate how they use a strategy in several genres. We might ask them how they use a strategy such as determining importance, for example, differently in fiction than in expository text. To the degree that they are able to show and defend their use of a strategy in a wide range of texts, we can generally expect that they will continue to apply that strategy independently after our instructional focus has changed to another strategy (see Table 3.1).

**Table 3.1. How Proficient Readers Use Comprehension Strategies.**

<i>Comprehension Strategy</i>	<i>Proficient Reader's Action</i>
Sensory images	<p>Creates images during and after reading. These images, rooted in prior knowledge, may include visual, auditory, and other sensory as well as emotional connections to text.</p> <p>Draws conclusions and creates unique interpretations of text. Images from reading frequently become part of reader's writing; images from reader's personal experience frequently become part of reader's comprehension.</p> <p>Clarifies and enhances comprehension.</p> <p>Immerses self in rich detail while reading, which gives depth and dimension to the reading, engaging reader more deeply, making text more memorable.</p> <p>Adapts images in response to shared images of other readers.</p>

(continued)

**Table 3.1. (continued)**

<i>Comprehension Strategy</i>	<i>Proficient Reader's Action</i>
	Adapts images while continuing to read and revises them to incorporate new information revealed through the text and new interpretations as reader develops them.
Determination of what is important in text	Identifies key ideas or themes while reading. Distinguishes important from unimportant information in relation to key ideas or themes in text. Proficient reader can distinguish important information at word, sentence, and text level. Uses text structure and text features (such as bold or italicized print, figures, and photographs) to help distinguish important from unimportant information. Uses knowledge of important and relevant parts of text to prioritize in long-term memory and synthesize text for others.
Inferences	Uses background schema (prior knowledge) and textual information to draw conclusions and form unique interpretations from text. Makes predictions about text, confirms predictions, and tests developing meaning while reading. Knows when and how to use text in combination with background knowledge to seek answers to questions. Creates interpretations to enrich and deepen experience in a text. Develops opinions and beliefs about content of reading and may try to persuade others to share those opinions.
Schema	Spontaneously activates relevant prior knowledge before, during, and after reading text. Assimilates information from text into schema and makes changes in that schema to accommodate new information. Uses schema to relate text to world knowledge, text knowledge, and personal experience. Uses schema to enhance understanding of text and to store text information in long-term memory. Uses schema for authors and their style to better understand text.

<i>Comprehension Strategy</i>	<i>Proficient Reader's Action</i>
	Recognizes when he or she has inadequate background information and knows how to create it—to build schema—to get information needed.
Questions	Spontaneously generates questions before, during, and after reading. Asks questions for different purposes including clarifying meaning; making predictions; determining author's style, content, or format; locating specific answer in text; or considering rhetorical questions inspired by text. Uses questions to focus attention on important components of the text. Is aware that other readers' questions may inspire new questions for him or her.
Monitoring for meaning	Knows when text makes sense, when it does not, what does not make sense, and whether the unclear portions are critical to overall understanding of the piece. Identifies when text is comprehensible and degree to which he or she understands it. The proficient reader can identify ways in which a text becomes gradually more understandable by reading past an unclear portion or by rereading parts or the whole text. Is aware of the processes reader can use to make meaning clear. Reader checks, evaluates, and revises the evolving interpretation of the text while reading. Identifies confusing ideas, themes, or surface elements (words, sentence or text structures, graphs, tables, and so on) and can suggest a variety of different means to solve the problems reader encounters. Is aware of what he or she needs to comprehend in relation to the purpose for reading. Learns how to pause, considers the meanings in text, reflects on understandings, and uses different strategies to enhance understanding. Readers best

*(continued)*

**Table 3.1. (continued)**

<i>Comprehension Strategy</i>	<i>Proficient Reader's Action</i>
Synthesizing	<p>learn this process by watching proficient models think aloud and gradually taking responsibility for monitoring their own comprehension as they read independently.</p> <p>Maintains cognitive track of the major ideas, themes, and topics while reading. Reader monitors overall meaning, important concepts, and themes in text while reading and is aware of ways text elements fit together to create that overall meaning and theme. Reader uses knowledge of these elements to make decisions about the overall meaning of a passage, chapter, or book.</p> <p>Retells what he or she has read. Reader attends to the most important information and to the clarity of the synthesis itself. Reader synthesizes in order to better understand the material.</p> <p>Capitalizes on opportunities to share, recommend, and criticize books read.</p> <p>Responds to text in a variety of ways, independently or in groups of other readers. These include written, oral, dramatic, and artistic responses and interpretations of text.</p> <p>Extends synthesis of the literal meaning of a text to the inferential level.</p>
Fix-up strategies	<p>Uses the six major systems of language (grapho-phonetic, lexical, syntactic, semantic, schematic, and pragmatic) to solve reading problems. When not comprehending, reader asks self questions: Does this make sense? Does the word I'm pronouncing sound like language? Do the letters in the word match the sounds I'm pronouncing? Have I seen this word before? Is there another reader who can help me make sense of this? What do I already know from my experience and the context of this text that can help me solve this problem?</p> <p>Has and selects a wide range of problem-solving strategies and can make appropriate choices in a given reading situation (that is, skip ahead or reread, use the context and syntax, sound it out, speak to another reader, consider relevant prior knowledge, read the passage aloud, and so on).</p>

*Text Level.* Since the mid 1990s, much professional conversation has focused on ensuring that children are reading text that is at an appropriate instructional level, and I have been eager to ascertain whether highly effective teachers relied heavily on text-leveling practices. I have observed too many children reading texts far too easy or far too difficult for them, and there is consensus in the field that children make optimal progress when they read text that is challenging but not overwhelming for them, when it is at their instructional level.

The teachers with whom I spoke told me this: for children to comprehend as proficient readers do, actively and assertively, they must read text in which not just the words but also the ideas and concepts are appropriately challenging. If a child struggles with, let's say, one-seventh of the words but is completely familiar with the text structure, concepts, and ideas, is that text challenging enough for him? Probably not. If a child reads every word accurately but has no schematic (or prior knowledge) background to help her understand the concepts in the text, is that text too easy? Definitely not. This presents a challenge for young children and those who struggle at any age. What if the child finds identifying words in a particular book far too challenging but its themes appropriately complex? These teachers emphasized that we must rely more on reading aloud to such children and that it is important to select books with extremely challenging ideas. They extract small sections of those books and encourage children, following the read aloud, to "practice read" that section of text with a partner until they can more easily identify the words.

Many elements make a text readable. Highly effective teachers suggest that we must be aware of all of these components and teach children to independently identify text that is appropriately challenging in relation to most if not all those elements. When our goal is comprehension, the complexity of ideas and themes in the text is critically important if children are to deepen their understanding and interpretation of text.

What makes a text readable? Effective teachers consider the following brief list of elements when they teach children to select books wisely:

- Background knowledge or schema for the text content, structure, and author

- Text size, features, graphics (including photographs)
- Familiarity with the text's genre
- Interest in the concepts and ideas presented in the text
- Prereading discussions (or lack thereof)
- Ability to use a range of fix-up strategies to solve word problems such as pronunciation or unusual word usage

How do superb teachers ensure that every child's text is appropriately challenging? In a third-grade classroom in the Denver area, the teacher asks children to keep track of the books they read at home and at school. Each month they have a reading checkup just like an annual physical. They share their lists with a partner who asks some key questions:

Which of the books was hardest?

What made it hardest?

What "new kind of hard" can you try next month?

How many different genres are represented in your checkup this month?

What new genre will you try next month?

Do you usually get stuck on words or ideas?

Can you try books in which you get stuck in a whole new way next month?

After both partners have shared, each student writes a short plan detailing the ways in which she will diversify her reading repertoire in the coming month—in genre and text level. Then each child adds book titles and details about her recommendations to a large classroom chart. The chart has space not only for titles but for types of challenge, making it possible for any child in the classroom to consider challenges others have faced and consider new challenges for him- or herself.

**TRAIT 4:** Outstanding teachers skillfully vary the size of groupings for strategy instruction.

The most successful teachers of comprehension know when to use particular kinds of grouping strategies. They've found that

different group sizes and configurations help them focus on different purposes in comprehension instruction. These successful teachers use large group and small group instruction as well as individual conferences. They use these grouping configurations flexibly depending on their instructional goals and knowledge of the children.

Highly effective teachers know that large group instruction is particularly useful when using think alouds to model how proficient readers use comprehension strategies in order to understand text more deeply. They know they need not separate children who struggle from the others when thinking aloud. All children need comprehension strategies and instruction pertaining to those strategies—what differs from child to child and grade to grade is the text in which the child applies those strategies. They also know that the most insightful responses often come from children not considered the most able readers. They understand that all children can think effectively, and the teachers use large groups to encourage all children to take the floor to share their thinking.

Large groups are most often the appropriate venue in which to

- Introduce a new strategy
- Think aloud to show children how a proficient reader uses that strategy
- Think aloud using the same strategy in a new genre
- Allow children to share their independent use of the strategy

Small (invitational) groups are particularly effective when the goal is to

- Provide more intensive instruction for children who, after several weeks of instruction on a new strategy, are not using it independently
- Introduce children who are unusually quick in applying the strategy independently to more challenging texts and new genres
- Introduce new means that children can use to share their thinking, such as new types of maps, charts, thinking notebooks, sketches, logs, or dramatic representations of thinking



- Meet and discuss books and the comprehension strategy they are studying without teacher involvement

Conferences are particularly effective when the goal is to

- Check a child's understanding of how to apply the strategy they are studying to their own books
- Provide intensive strategy instruction in a particular text that may be unusually challenging for a child
- Coach a child in the means he or she might use to reveal thinking to others (for example, should a child use written, oral, artistic, or dramatic means to share her use of synthesis?)
- Push a child to use a strategy to think more deeply than he might have imagined he could

When I consider this range of exceptional classrooms, I note that all the teachers manipulate groupings rather than letting a rigid schedule of groupings manipulate them. They capitalize on different group sizes to capture the intellectual imagination of all students when they are learning to use a comprehension strategy.

**TRAIT 5:** Consistently effective teachers gradually release responsibility for application of a comprehension strategy to students.

I clearly recall observing a superb first-grade teacher in Denver at work early in the school year during her students' independent reading time. I watched her carefully, initially believing that she was adroitly moving around the room solving problems before they happened. The more carefully I observed, however, the more I realized that she wasn't solving or even preventing problems for children. She was reminding them that they already knew and had assumed responsibility for solving knotty intellectual problems.

When a child approached her to complain that he or she couldn't read the assigned book or, conversely, had read every book in the classroom (or the world) and just didn't know what to do next, this brilliant teacher refused to solve the problem for the child. She simply said, "I wonder how you'll solve that problem."

The bewildered six-year-old often took a few moments before replying, "Oh, I can go look on the book recommendation list or in my mailbox to see if someone has recommended a book for me, or I can . . ." How powerful those children felt—how responsible.

Reading comprehension expert David Pearson (1985) proposed a model for conceptualizing in-depth instruction that, decades later, still provides an important framework for helping children assume responsibility for using a complex new skill or strategy. The gradual release of responsibility model is a way of planning for long-term instruction that suggests that instruction on any new concept, but particularly a complex new idea such as a comprehension strategy, begins with a great deal of teacher modeling and explicit instruction that gradually gives way to student independence in using the strategy. Over several weeks (up to twelve or more in many of the best classrooms I've observed) teachers using this model create opportunities for students to practice a comprehension strategy such as using sensory images, first with a great deal of teacher guidance, then in small groups with other children, and finally independently in increasingly more challenging contexts, for example, in tougher books or in new genres.

The outstanding teachers I've observed all use some variation on the gradual release of responsibility model. They report that the model helps them plan for long-term strategy instruction. But perhaps more interesting, they also report that keeping such a model in mind helps them avoid solving kids' problems and providing too much support when the most important lesson that students can learn is that they are quite capable of solving their own learning problems. Use of the model reminds these teachers that their instruction begins intensively and ends with a light touch as children take responsibility for using a new skill such as a comprehension strategy and proving that they can do so.

**TRAIT 6:** Highly skilled teachers ask students to demonstrate their use of each comprehension strategy in a variety of ways.

Many of the finest teachers I've been privileged to observe have an enviable knack for using a wide variety of learning tools to

encourage students to record their thinking so that others might benefit from it. Not incidentally, this provides the teacher with a rich source of assessment data on the child's emerging use of the strategy being taught!

These teachers use learning tools such as two-column journals, Venn diagrams, sketches, charting, skits, book clubs, and letters to the author not as an activity that children use to fill time but as a way to record their thinking and to make that thinking permanent. They reason that if a student can capture his or her thinking long enough to analyze how using a strategy such as inferring helped him or her deepen comprehension, the chances are good that the student will continue to use that strategy independently and in a wide variety of texts.

Instead of using a double-entry diary to record a quote and a response to the quote, for example, they may first ask children to record in one column a word or phrase from text that they were reading at the moment when they became aware of using a comprehension strategy and in the second column, to record how they used the strategy to better understand the passage. Or rather than asking children to meet with a book club to discuss general impressions of a book they've all read, these teachers ask children to come to their book club prepared to discuss their use of a comprehension strategy and to defend how they used that strategy to better understand the material they read.

Several of the teachers refer to these learning tools as records of thought and divide them into three categories:

<i>Written</i>	<i>Artistic</i>	<i>Oral</i>
Post-it® notes	Sketching	Four-way share—an oral sharing strategy in which four students quickly share their thinking by moving clockwise around the group
Two-column journals	Group depictions of text concepts	Think-pair-share—a sharing strategy in which two students share their thinking,
Fluency responses—writing down as quickly as possible everything that a student thought of while he read a short section of text	Artistic metaphors	
Venn diagrams	Artistic timelines	
Column charts	Photographs of the mind—a technique in which the student completes a very quick sketch that “freezes” the action	

<i>Written</i>	<i>Artistic</i>	<i>Oral</i>
Letters to other readers and authors	in the book or in her mind like a photograph	they then join two others to extend their thinking, and the group of four joins another group of four to further the process
Highlighting to show important ideas or themes		Book clubs and literature circles
Story maps or webs		Large and small group sharing
Transparency text—copying short sections of text, making transparencies so that students can use markers to show obstacles to understanding or places in which they used a comprehension strategy		Notice and share—a sharing method in which students work alone first, noticing a telling or salient detail in their reading, and then meet with a partner to determine its significance in the text as a whole
Coding text—using letters or symbols in text or on sticky notes to indicate connections, questions, inferences, images, or an area that was difficult to understand		Strategy study groups
Timelines		Dramatic: Student-created dramatic representations of text content or particular use of a strategy
Bar and line graphs		

The teachers model the use of a record of thought once or twice and then invite the students to choose when they use that particular means to capture their thinking. Students can select which record of thought best represents their use of a strategy and submit it as part of a portfolio for analysis by other students and their teacher.

TRAIT 7: Superb teachers understand why they teach comprehension strategies and how comprehension strategy instruction fits into their overall literacy goals.

Recently, I've been relearning to play the piano after years of hiatus. I enjoy immensely the times of practicing in the living room in the quiet of the late evening. When I hear doors closing elsewhere in the house, shutting out the noise from the living room, I try not to take it personally. But when my piano teacher comes for our weekly lesson, I falter. I play what I have practiced so carefully and believe that I'm doing well until she says gently, "Remember, pianissimo. OK, now crescendo here, or the left hand really leads here." I am tempted to say, "Just let me play it!" But she has a larger purpose. She wants me to learn to understand and use the tools that proficient pianists use. Slowly I am learning to integrate them into habitual use. The names of the tools she is teaching me are important, but what matters most is what those tools permit me to do when I play.

I think the same is true with teaching. We learn a new set of skills, such as teaching comprehension strategies and become so intent on making our initial trials successful that we may lose sight of the reason for teaching the strategy in the first place. These successful teachers were unanimous in their ability to articulate to children and to me why they teach comprehension strategies. They teach the strategies not so that the children can recite them but in order that children can manipulate them to understand more deeply and consider ideas more completely than they otherwise would. Simple. Clear. No variation from that commitment.

Comprehension strategy instruction is intoxicating because we find children thinking and saying things we didn't imagine possible. The insight and depth revealed in a simple conversation between two readers astonishes us. It reminds us why we teach. Comprehension instruction has been for so many teachers a way into the complexity and sophistication of thinking, even among the youngest children.

But comprehension instruction is only part of the overall reading program, and great teachers understand that. Word learning and learning to understand must be taught simultaneously. Comprehension strategy instruction for children who aren't yet able to pronounce words independently is just as critical but is primarily listening comprehension instruction. As children become more proficient in recognizing and pronouncing words, comprehension

takes a more prominent role and is taught in the form of listening and independent reading comprehension.

Great teachers have always known that there are no silver bullets or simple answers, no packaged programs that take the place of thoughtful reflective teaching. While grounding themselves in a rich and intriguing new type of teaching, these teachers wisely remember the big picture. They take stock regularly. What activities take precious instruction time that could be eliminated? Which are absolutely essential to children's literacy learning? These teachers reserve a great deal of time for comprehension instruction, but they and their children live in a classroom community where reading, in its entirety, is well understood and where there is ample time to develop all the strategies that characterize proficient readers.

### Three Recommendations for the Future

The qualities that characterize the fine teachers whose work I observed and reflected on in this chapter bring to mind several priorities in improving comprehension instruction. First, we should consider an entirely new way of conceptualizing comprehension itself. Unlike the teachers I've described in this chapter, too many U.S. teachers still define comprehension as the ability to answer questions about text or to retell what has been read. The teachers I've described in this chapter have a very different working definition of comprehension. They want children not only to be able to retell and respond to questions but to manipulate their own thinking in order to comprehend text more deeply. They expect children to comprehend in a wide variety of texts including non-fiction, and they expect children to struggle for insight rather than being satisfied with superficial understandings. They understand that comprehension is not the use of a compendium of discrete skills but the purposeful and deliberate use of a few comprehension strategies to extend and expand meaning.

Because they define comprehension differently, these educators teach it differently. They model frequently, emphasizing that comprehension is more than completing a given assignment or understanding the book that students are currently reading. They demonstrate so that children can witness ways in which they can use

comprehension strategies later in a wide variety of texts and contexts, including other content areas. Teachers who have a more traditional definition of comprehension will inevitably teach to that definition. In order to make large-scale improvements in comprehension instruction, we must carefully reexamine our perceptions about what it is.

Second, we must weave effective comprehension instruction into the instructional program from the beginning to the end of a child's schooling. Comprehension learning is an ongoing process that deserves ample instructional attention for very young children as well as those perceived to be very competent readers in the latter stages of their high school experience. In too many U.S. classrooms, teachers postpone comprehension instruction until after children understand sound and symbol correspondence and can read fluently aloud. Children have little opportunity in these classrooms to delve into the fascinating and engaging ideas so prevalent in fine children's literature, and by the time they reach second and third grade, they are detached and unmotivated readers. Effective comprehension instruction must be carefully balanced with other instructional priorities such as word learning for young children and understanding nonfiction text elements and genre study for older students.

Primary teachers should seek a balance, as do the teachers described in this chapter, between (1) helping children learn strategies to identify and pronounce words and read fluently and (2) helping children comprehend what they read. We may wonder if children as young as five or six are developmentally ready to comprehend texts with subtle themes and powerful messages. We should be cognizant that although very young children may not yet have the language to define and describe their ideas, they are nonetheless quite capable of understanding very complex text. Our responsibility is to teach the language that proficient readers use to define and describe the thought processes associated with comprehension—comprehension strategies. Once we do, children will use that language to call the strategies into action each time they read.

Upper elementary and secondary teachers also need to balance the instructional attention they give to comprehension learning as they begin to help children read in an increasingly wide variety of

genres and as they help their students manage the staggering amount of content presented in textbooks. Ironically, comprehension instruction often takes a backseat to studying particular titles from literature and reading in a particular content area precisely at the time when it is most desperately needed. Older students faced with the need to read much more text and text that is schematically unfamiliar to them need ongoing demonstrations from proficient readers who can show them how to use comprehension strategies to help them understand more effectively. Comprehension instruction is a shared responsibility for all of us.

Finally, as I travel to schools around the country I find teachers hungry for guidance in effective comprehension instruction. Many have not enjoyed the exposure to highly effective practice that drove the teachers described in this chapter to refine their practice. Teachers need ongoing opportunities for classroom-based professional development if they are to more closely align their teaching practices with research in effective comprehension instruction. The teachers about whom I wrote in this chapter did not become effective only by taking a graduate class, reading professional books, or even participating in a study group with colleagues. Their professional learning took all these forms, and in addition they had ample opportunity to observe highly effective teachers in the classroom.

Many of the teachers described in this chapter participated in lab classroom training in which they observed in the same classroom as many as eight times during the course of a year. They were able to see how a more experienced colleague set up the classroom at the beginning of the school year and to observe the class throughout the year as the children's sophistication in using comprehension strategies increased. In lab classrooms, observing teachers spent the morning watching the host teacher at work and had the afternoon of each visit to debrief with other observers and the host teacher.

In addition, each of the seventeen teachers had at least occasional on-site support from a staff developer who modeled lessons and coached them as they attempted new practices and considered ways to refine their existing practice. They were able to coteach with a colleague whose experience in comprehension instruction exceeded their own and to learn through experimentation with

their own students while the staff developer provided feedback. These teachers describe these processes as immeasurably important to their professional growth in comprehension instruction.

Understanding is elusive. Did you fully understand *Beowulf* or the *Brothers Karamazov*? Did your high school English teacher return your response to *Death of a Salesman* with red marks all over it? For that matter, do you understand your adolescent child? Do you understand why you went into teaching or married your spouse or why your aunt has the power to annoy you as she does?

The teachers I respect so much remind us all that comprehension strategy instruction is a way to equip children with tools they can use independently, purposefully, actively, aggressively even, to understand more deeply and remember more permanently. And they would like us to know that it is hard. It takes a long time. But since when is teaching easy? And if we have the opportunity to help our children tussle with complex concepts and be tenacious in their quest to understand the world, shouldn't we take it? If we don't, who will?

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