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Comprehension Strategy Instruction of Narrative Texts in Elementary Language Arts (Project)

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by
Edwin Lee Vaandering
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Abstract

Methodologies to address reading comprehension of general education students at the elementary level have been the topic of decades' worth of educational research in literacy. Despite the proliferation of material on theory and instruction of comprehension strategies, as with narrative texts, teachers still struggle to find effective techniques to reach the low-achieving students, those who demonstrate little to no proficiency or autonomy with meaning-making skills.

Critiques of current literacy programming point to a number of concerns relating to comprehension instruction. In this document, five key components of instruction are investigated, including motivation and engagement, comprehension strategies and a conceptual framework for learning, the role of teacher and instructional framework, peer collaboration, and assessment. Reflections on current teaching practices, contemporary thinking by theorists and experts in the field of literacy education, and promising approaches to instruction shape the series of professional development workshops proposed here.

Table of Contents

Chapter One: Project Proposal

Problem Statement

As an early elementary teacher engaged in professional dialogue with colleagues, I have discovered something remarkable about the substance of our conversations: they focus, almost exclusively, on the students' attainment of literacy, or, more specifically, the lack thereof. Understanding that comprehension is the ultimate goal of reading, we work tirelessly to devise lessons and activities to bring students past the stage of surface-level decoding to more in-depth exploration of stories. Some teachers are quick to share their personal successes, while a great many others commiserate about their students' blank stares, shrugged shoulders, and I-don't-knows. Despite the breadth of the literacy program adopted by our district, the number and quality of our interventions, and the numerous assessment tools we utilize, we still find that many students remain "on the outside looking in," observing, rather than *experiencing,* the texts they read.

To be sure, the majority of students quickly and effortlessly adopt the comprehension strategies they are taught. For them, the reading and thinking process has become automatic, and their ability to respond meaningfully to a text is a given. However, it might be surmised that even these students are merely demonstrating proficiency with the component strategies teachers have deemed important for comprehension. In *Making Meaning with Texts*, Louise Rosenblatt points out, "Precisely because for experienced readers so much of the reading process is, or should be, automatic, aspects of the reading process tend to be described in

impersonal, mechanistic terms" (2005, p. 9). For those struggling few, however, the students for whom the process of reading has not become automatic, our current methods of instruction and guidance seem to be short-changing them from experiencing fully the possibilities of the written word. It is this group of students for whom I suggest that a change is needed. Needless to say, what benefits some may benefit many.

When it comes to engaging students in strategies to aid comprehension of narrative texts, we must first begin by defining what, ultimately, our goal really is. At what point can we conclude that the students have come to make meaning for themselves from what they have read? Put simply, what does comprehension look like? "Despite the extraordinary extent of the reliance on testing in our schools, there seems to be little interest in clarifying the criteria that enter into evaluation of 'comprehension'" (Rosenblatt, 2005, p. 22). Are we imposing our own biases, our own personal construct of understanding, on our students, or are we giving them the opportunities to develop an understanding of their own? Furthermore, we must ask whether we are giving students ample and appropriate opportunities to present their viewpoints. Take a walk through any elementary classroom and you will surely find bulletin boards, posters, and samples highlighting various strategies that help students "make meaning." Whole chunks of literacy instruction are devoted to making connections: text-to-text, text-to-self, and text-to-world. Read-alouds are interrupted so that predictions can be made and later verified. Worksheets are given to break down natural comprehension processes into discreet exercises, such as inferring,

questioning, drawing conclusions, comparing and contrasting, and identifying plots, settings, and characters. Yet, when presented with the simple question, "Why do you think the author was motivated to write this?" many students do not have the capacity to answer. It is then we recognize that we have failed our objectives. In *Making Meaning with Texts*, the author argues, "The danger is that many current teaching practices may counteract the very processes presumably being taught. The organization of instruction, the atmosphere in the classroom, the kinds of questions asked, the ways of phrasing assignments, and the types of tests administered should be scrutinized from this point of view" (Rosenblatt, 2005, p. 27). Indeed, we are compelled to question whether the ends (our students' achievement) have justified the means (our instructional practices).

For those students who cannot naturally comprehend text, or who, at least, are not able to effectively communicate their understanding, we recognize that a new approach must be pursued. The tools that we educators currently use are not, in and of themselves, the problem. Certainly, comprehension skills can be taught in small steps and arguably at times in isolation. However, are we presenting these tools as individual concepts, separate from one another, or are they presented within the context of the bigger picture? Have we as teachers assessed *our* role in this process? Are we helping students understand that any number of skills and strategies can assist in arriving at meaning? Finally, are we taking the time to identify what the students themselves are bringing to the text, and are we building upon *their* current level of understanding, or are we merely following our preplanned curriculum maps? This

important last question frames the purpose and heart of this project. Rosenblatt (2005), in *Making Meaning with Texts,* eloquently states the role of effective teachers of reading, and what I intend to be this project's driving force:

> The teacher in such a classroom is no longer simply a conveyor of ready-made teaching materials and recorder of results of ready-made tests or a dispenser of ready-made interpretations. Teaching becomes constructive, facilitating interchange, helping students to make their spontaneous responses the basis for raising questions and growing in the ability to handle increasingly complex reading transactions. (p. 28)

Importance and Rationale of the Project

There is no question that the society in which our students are growing up is exponentially faster-paced, more technologically advanced, and more globally connected than the world of our own past. Now, information of virtually any kind can be accessed anywhere and at any time at the push of a button. Communication has become mobile, wireless, and instantaneous. "Progress," and everything this term implies regarding the advancement of our society, has become increasingly sophisticated. The scope and range of problems with which our students will be faced may render current educational approaches obsolete.

Because "knowledge" is now resting at our fingertips, the antiquated knowledge-acquisition model of learning ought to be replaced with a more strategic, problem-solving focus. Naturally, for education to provide relevance to our students' lives, it must recognize and cater to their unique needs, not only personally but also

within the larger social community. Literacy, because it is the foundation upon which all other curriculum-based learning transpires, should come first in aligning with this new pedagogical mindset. One analogy that comes to mind references the field of robotics; for several years now, certain software developers have been working towards creating authentic artificial intelligence (AI), the capacity of computers to think (i.e., to problem-solve) and to carry out solutions for themselves. While cautious not to equate students with computers, or to trivialize human intelligence, the similarities are clear: educators, too, should work with the goal of creating students with the ability to think, comprehend, and problem-solve autonomously.

With an increasingly complex world facing our students upon graduation, we have an ever increasing demand for highly skilled and literate students, and thus a profound obligation to provide effective teaching of literacy skills. RAND, a non-profit organization that aids in literacy policy, published a report in 2002, *Reading for Understanding: Toward an R&D Program in Reading Comprehension*. In this report, the first in a list of issues of concern was this point precisely: "The U.S. economy today demands a universally higher level of literacy achievement than at any other time in history, and it is reasonable to believe that the demand for a literate populace will increase in the future" (p. 4).

In terms of relevance to this writer's personal experience, within the context of my current teaching position, comprehension has become a key concern to be addressed in our school improvement plan. Core literacy assessments and

intervention programs alike, for the past several years, have tracked a consistent deficit in "comprehension" of both narrative and expository texts. The quotes in the previous sentence acknowledge that the systematized view of comprehension, as our current literacy program holds, is narrow in scope in that success is determined by achievement of constituent skills, not by genuine engagement with text. Naturally, the first approach in analyzing these discrepancies has led to rigorous critique of our literacy program. While comprehension strategies are certainly part and parcel of the overall curriculum, they are hardly given sufficient time or attention. Furthermore, the program neglects to serve students appropriately in allowing for individual interests, motivation, or learning styles. Practice with the strategies is limited and not presented in a larger context, preventing students from developing any sense of perspective or purpose. Finally, assessments are ready-made, with shallow questions, and virtually no opportunity for personal interpretations. Beyond the program itself, however, we have also acknowledged that there has been a lack of effective professional development in terms of fostering comprehension in our students.

Where, then, does comprehension, or rather "comprehension instruction," fit into this alternative outlook on learning? If we recognize that comprehension of written text represents the highest state of literacy, the highest level of thought, awareness, and personal connection, then our aim must be to assist students in becoming skillful and strategic in arriving at this state whenever possible. Frank Smith (2004), in *Understanding Reading*, suggests that "comprehension and learning are fundamentally the same, relating the new to the already known" (p. 13). It is

important to recognize that this state of understanding, this "relating" of the new to

the known, occurs within the learner, but can be fostered through thoughtful

scaffolding by the teacher. "Good instruction is the most powerful means of

promoting the development of proficient comprehenders and preventing reading

comprehension problems" (RAND, 2002, p. xvii). We come to view comprehension

as not just something to be merely passed on from teacher to student, but rather

actively constructed by the learner. Therefore, the skills and strategies we use to

promote deep understanding of texts are not the final goal but rather a means to an

end. More specifically, our goal should be to create strategic and independent

students who are capable of self-regulating their own learning processes. Pressley

(2006) points out that "The task of comprehension strategies instruction can become

manageable, in part, by developing the understanding in teachers that very effective

readers actually use a small repertoire of strategies" (p. 18). It should be stressed,

however, that strategies alone are not the absolute determiners of comprehension. It

would be a mistake to assume that strategies instruction stops upon proficiency with

them. However, when comprehension breaks down, readers can begin to problem-

solve, to repair misunderstanding, through the use of proven strategies.

Background of the Project

The issues of student comprehension and effective strategy instruction are

certainly not new. A report by the National Reading Panel (2000), for The National

Institute of Child Health and Human Development, refers to the history of research on

this matter when it states, "Reading comprehension strategy instruction has been a

major research topic for more than 20 years" (p. 4-119). Susan Dymock (2007) in her article, "Comprehension Strategy Instruction," concurs by beginning with this point as well, "For more than three decades there has been considerable research on comprehension strategy instruction" (p. 161). One of the earliest studies occurred in 1978 by Dolores Durkin (1978/1979), which notably reported that instruction in the use of comprehension strategies was virtually non-existent. Since then, several other studies have attempted to assess such matters as time spent in classrooms on strategy instruction, student achievement on comprehension assessments, and teacher effectiveness and satisfaction of comprehension programs. During a presentation at an International Reading Association conference, Pressley (2006) commented on the dismal state of comprehension instruction in America's classrooms: "The bottom line is that there is no evidence of much comprehension strategies instruction occurring extensively now and certainly no evidence of children being taught such strategies to the point that they use them in a self-regulated fashion" (p. 17). Although Pressley's view of strategy instruction is somewhat shortsighted of the overall range of mental processes that go into higher-level comprehension, the point he makes about the extent of instruction in America's classrooms is noteworthy.

Because the National Reading Panel was commissioned by Congress, and because their findings have been responsible for steering policy through the U.S. Department of Education, we view its report as a significant source, albeit slightly outmoded now, of literacy research in American education. In its report, it highlights data on comprehension instruction and teacher preparation. Specifically, it analyzes

two approaches to strategy instruction that differ primarily in the amount of peer collaboration and teacher interaction during the instruction. The report acknowledges that, "Reading comprehension is extremely complex and that teaching reading comprehension is also extremely complex. The work of the researchers discussed here makes this clear" (p. 4-125). Nevertheless, it goes on to say that, "Intensive instruction of teachers can prepare them to teach reading comprehension strategically and that such teaching can lead students to greater awareness of what it means to be a strategic reader and to the goal of improved comprehension" (p. 4-125). While the merits of the NRP report have undergone much scrutiny and criticism, it nonetheless "contributes to our understanding of reading and related language processes" (Farstrup, 2002, p. 6).

For a concise summary of the historical background to reading research, Farstrup (2002), in *What Research Has to Say About Reading Instruction,* lays out the various factors that have influenced educational policy in literacy. In it, he states that "Much of the basic reading research done during the past 50 years has focused on language and cognitive processes. These studies have added greatly to our understanding of how we learn to read and how we comprehend what we read" (p. 2). The more recent focus shift from equity to quality in public education, he points out, has put the spotlight on instructional practices grounded in research-based evidence (Farstrup, 2002). In their article, "Effective Practices for Developing Reading Comprehension," Duke and Pearson (2002) add that "Most of what we know [about effective reading comprehension] has been learned since 1975" and suggest that the

swift progress in this area of literacy can be attributed to a "lack of controversy about teaching comprehension" (p. 205). They go on to state that "Much work on the process of reading comprehension has been grounded in studies of good readers" (p. 205). In fact, much of the available literature on comprehension instruction, and there is a great deal, specifically analyzes the mental processes used with automaticity by successful readers and comprehenders.

Statement of Purpose

Throughout the remaining two chapters of this document, my intention is to lay out a plan for designing a professional development workshop for general elementary teaching staff which addresses students' reading comprehension achievement. Specifically, I wish to narrow the topic to comprehension of narrative texts only. There are two underlying beliefs that will characterize the decisions that go into the development of this workshop: first, students must have ownership of their learning, with careful and appropriate teacher intervention; secondly, lasting change must begin with research-based knowledge and reasoning, as well as ongoing practice and support.

The literature reviewed in the following chapter will attempt to pinpoint the most current and relevant theories on comprehension instruction with regards to five key areas. These include: student motivation and engagement, strategies and a conceptual framework for learning, role of teacher and instructional framework, peer collaboration, and assessment. This investigation will consequently shape the primary components of the professional development workshop. Naturally, there are

many more facets of teaching that warrant exploration here, such as differentiation, special needs instruction and accommodation, and classroom management. It is the opinion of this writer, however, that such aspects of teaching would be in effect nullified provided careful attention is given to the effective teaching practices as delineated in the research included here.

The final chapter outlines the elements that will comprise the professional development workshop. The general education teaching staff will be invited to consider the research on comprehension strategy instruction and then to participate in a series of sessions, each devoted to one of the key areas stated earlier. Thoughtful consideration will be given to engaging staff prior to, during, and following each session, so that the concepts can take root within each teacher's personal teaching experience.

As any education administrator will report, instructional programs come and go frequently and with passion. It is not my intention here to construct another in a long list of literacy programs that will strip away the creativity and professionalism of teaching staff. Indeed, the word "program" implies a prescribed set of routines and procedures that do just that. Rather, my wish is to introduce a framework of thought and teaching practices that have been shown to produce positive results, and to support teachers in their endeavor to make constructive changes in their classroom.

Objectives of the Project

The overarching goal of this project is to ultimately improve students' comprehension of narrative texts. The avenue through which this will be

accomplished is professional development of teaching staff of general education students within my elementary school. Because assessment is one of the topics being addressed, the standard by which *improvement* is measured between the onset and the conclusion of the workshops will be brought into question and is therefore irrelevant at this time. However, by the project's completion, assessment of teacher learning and satisfaction with newly applied instructional methods will be deliberate and thoughtfully reviewed.

The professional development portion of this project will consist of a series of workshop sessions. The first of six sessions will be designed to set up the argument for the need for change. First, staff will be invited to participate in some taxing comprehension activities in order to bring some perspective to the forefront of our conversation, namely that of a challenged reading student. Next, data specific to our local school system, and then within the broader context of the state, will be presented regarding achievement in reading comprehension. Then, we will begin to explore what the professional literature says about comprehension and comprehension strategy instruction. Staff will be given the opportunity to reflect upon and evaluate their current instructional practices, and then appraise their satisfaction with the resources and programming currently available to them. Finally, they will be invited to contemplate and carry out one comprehension strategy lesson with their students, the results of which will be shared at the following workshop.

The remaining five sessions will each be devoted to a key idea in comprehension instruction, as noted earlier. Once again, these include student

motivation and engagement, strategies and a conceptual framework for learning, the teacher's role and instructional framework, peer collaboration, and assessment. As you will have noticed, "framework" appears in two different key idea descriptors, referring to a structure of thoughts or mental processes. It is my intention, during these respective sessions, to lay out an analysis of comprehension learning from both student and teacher viewpoints. Each of these sessions will begin with a sharing of strategy lesson successes or frustrations, as determined from the previous workshop. After introducing the key ideas, the staff will participate in activities and discussions that aim to shift focus onto the students and *their* engagement in literacy lessons versus teacher checklists or curriculum maps. Each concept will be presented with *problem-solving* as a guiding principle. Relevant research will again be highlighted to validate the direction instructional practices should take. The final component to each session is to contemplate and carry out a strategy lesson, now colored by the new information gleaned from the workshop.

Definition of Terms

Throughout this document, references will be made to certain concepts that may be somewhat confusing or cause some misinterpretation for those who are unfamiliar with educational jargon. While some of these terms are explained in context, several warrant clarification using more common language. Below, you will find brief descriptions of these terms, with the hope that *your* comprehension of this project may be deepened.

- Aesthetic – Rosenblatt (2005) suggests that all readers naturally approach a text in one of two ways. An "aesthetic" approach to reading is one which savors the reading experience for its artistic qualities, connects to the senses, and evokes meaningful, personal responses.

- Authenticity – In the context of literacy, "authenticity" refers to purposeful reading or purposeful tasks that serve to meet genuine goals and needs, as opposed to those which may be considered more artificial or superficial.

- Differentiation – As a teacher, it is important to shape instruction in order to most effectively meet the needs, abilities, or learning styles of *all* students. This process of tailoring instruction is referred to as "differentiation."

- Efferent – The second approach to texts, as suggested by Rosenblatt (2005), "efferent" reading refers to the purpose of getting information. In this case, the content of the text holds greater meaning than the form.

- Expository text – Any nonfiction text which serves to explicitly provide factual information or explain certain processes would be considered "expository." Examples include such items as biographies, atlases, newspapers, and encyclopedias, among many others.

- Extrinsic motivation – With regard to motivating students to participate fully in literacy instruction, "extrinsic motivation" refers to external, or environmental, factors that can be manipulated to bring about engagement.

- Framework – In the context of this project, "frameworks" suggest mental structures or systems for organizing a set of ideas.

- Intrinsic motivation – In reference to engagement in literacy instruction, "intrinsic motivation" alludes to those factors which originate within the students believed to cause a greater or lesser degree of participation.

- Metacognition – Individuals acutely aware of their own mental processes as they engage in an activity are employing "metacognition." It is, simply, thinking about one's own thinking.

- Narrative text – Any piece of writing that makes use of *story* is considered "narrative."

- Pedagogy – In its simplest sense, "pedagogy" refers to all things educational. Beliefs, theories, techniques, and methodologies that shape instruction are all components of "pedagogy."

- Scaffolding – A teacher engaged in practices that recognize the current level of abilities in students, offer new learning just within their reach, and gradually release the responsibility for the learning to students is said to be "scaffolding" instruction.

- Strategy – In order to help students become "strategic" and successful comprehenders, teachers present a number of methods for students to independently approach reading comprehension challenges. These methods are referred to as "strategies." The form and context of this instruction comprises the greater part of this project.

Scope of the Project

Despite the deluge of research on comprehension and comprehension strategy instruction, it is far too ambitious, and frankly inappropriate, to attempt to devise any sort of action plan to address it at a national, or even state, level. The purpose of this project is to encourage a new, or at least a shift of, mindset of instructional theory and practice in comprehension instruction locally. While the primary audience for this project is the teaching staff at my elementary school, the secondary audience, and ultimately the more important one, is the general elementary student body. I have not included within the scope of this project any focus on instruction of special education, English as a Learned Language (ELL), or middle and high school students, although, as Professor Nancy Patterson has aptly stated, "Good teaching is good teaching" (personal communication, 2009). It should not matter which segment of students is being taught.

Aside from the audience, it is important to note that this project aims squarely at comprehension of *narrative* texts. Understandably, many of the strategies and practices discussed here could also apply to comprehension of expository texts. Content area reading and engagement with other non-fiction material, however, bring

to bear a host of other skills and strategies that cannot be sufficiently addressed within the confines of this project.

One rather significant inadequacy of this venture regards the relatively limited amount of time and focus spent on teacher training. The report by the National Reading Panel (2000) states, "Teaching comprehension strategies effectively in the natural setting of the classroom involves a level of proficiency and flexibility that often requires substantial and intensive teacher preparation" (p. 4-126). To assert that a series of six workshops of research, reflection, and collaboration is "substantial and intensive," is unrealistic. Ideally, more time would be allotted in the future for further development of skills and knowledge of effective instructional practices for comprehension.

As this project calls for practical application, there are several factors that will require the collaboration of other individuals. In order to carry out the professional development workshops, the building administrator must grant approval. Attendance and active participation will most likely occur provided professional development requirements as outlined by the school district can be fulfilled. In addition, the administration must approve the use of time, teaching materials, and other physical resources if the workshops are to run conveniently and efficiently. The most critical element, though, will be the willingness of the attending teaching staff to entertain new ideas, embrace change, and to challenge previously held beliefs about literacy instruction in light of contemporary knowledge. This is often a large obstacle to overcome any time change is introduced.

As is clear now, and as will surely be substantiated by the completion of this project, effective comprehension instruction is messy. Farstrup (2002) captures the circumstances well when he states, "Effective and comprehensive reading instruction is about numerous intertwined factors. It is about excellent teachers, policy, politics, research, and the real and pressing needs of an increasingly diverse and complex population of students—students who deserve the very best education we have to offer" (p. 6). Those literacy programs that attempt to routinize lessons and deliver pre-determined assessments in the area of comprehension fail to account for the individuality of students, or of their instructors. Teachers truly invested in their students' intellectual welfare must learn to let go of structured and simplistic programs that are dumbed-down and fashioned with teacher convenience in mind and to instead embrace a more holistic and student-centered approach to learning. This project is just one step toward this goal.

Chapter Two: Literature Review

Introduction

For the past several years, the literacy program adopted by our school district has served us relatively well in terms of providing a fairly comprehensive and manageable structure with which to immerse our students in literacy. Including such things as a detailed Scope and Sequence, quality literature, practice sheets for every skill or concept imaginable, and a variety of assessment options, all devised within a series of thematic units, it would seem that nothing has been omitted. Yet, despite this extensive and expensive program, we continue to see many students struggling with reading comprehension, arguably the most important aspect or goal of any quality reading curriculum.

The words "comprehensive" and "manageable," as described above, suggest that our literacy program has been designed more for the benefit of teachers and administration than for true student achievement. Many questions and concerns necessarily arise. Can it be concluded that our students have become skilled comprehenders just because the literacy program covers a lot of material about comprehension? Hardly. Can we confirm that they are indeed making meaning from what they read based on their success with discreet skills? Unlikely. Do the assessments accurately reflect the degree to which our students comprehend? Surely not. With a persistent deficit in comprehension of narrative texts by many of our students, at least as is currently evaluated by our program, I have suggested that a different approach should be pursued.

To entertain an alternate methodology of comprehension instruction does not automatically imply throwing the baby out with the bath water. Much of the current program has educational merit. Strategies which are designed to help bring students past surface-level understanding of texts are valuable, but the context in which they are taught must be reevaluated. We want students to understand that strategies are tools; they are a potential means of arriving at understanding, not just more parceled-out activities to be mastered for their own sake. Furthermore, because the mental processes students use to arrive at meaning are complex and unseen, it would seem desirable for students to become *autonomous* and strategic problem-solvers of reading. To that end, we must carefully assess those aspects of learning and instruction we are able to influence. Specifically, we should acknowledge and build upon what the learner brings to the reading experience. By embracing an instructional framework that values the learners first, and uses *their* responses to literature as the springboards for further growth and teaching opportunities, we can best prepare them to successfully negotiate any reading challenges they may encounter throughout their life.

The literature contained within this chapter specifically highlights current thinking about effective practices in comprehension strategy instruction, as it pertains to narrative texts. The expertise of contemporary theorists, strategists, and professionals within the field of literacy education will be examined. From this, we can begin to draw conclusions about the efficacy of strategy instruction as it is being

accomplished now as well as practices or concepts that may not have yet been considered but offer promise for effective change.

We will begin first with a discussion of the theoretical lens through which this project is oriented. It is important to gain an understanding of the fundamental ideology about student learning upon which this research is based, or interpreted, in order to validate the findings as sound and well-reasoned in the context of this investigation. From there, we will explore the professional literature, which has been divided into five distinct topics: (1) Student Motivation and Engagement, (2) Strategies and a Conceptual Framework for Learning, (3) Role of Teacher and Instructional Framework, (4) Peer Collaboration, and (5) Assessment. The literature examined here has been drawn from numerous peer-reviewed journals and professional texts concerning literacy theory and practice in education. What follows is a summary of that research. Finally, you will find a set of conclusions that have been drawn from the findings which will ultimately help to shape the professional development workshop outlined in the final chapter.

Theory/Rationale

It is understandable that anyone working with children or within an instructional environment will most likely behave according to their preconceived notions about what is best for the learner. Indeed, no one placed in such a position of authority wishes for their charges to come away worse off than before. Those notions about what is best or most beneficial may either be driven by instinct or prior experiences, or they may be informed by those who have dedicated themselves to a

particular field of study. While there is certainly a place for the former, the latter, I would argue, holds the most promise for validly directing an individual as to the "best" or most effective courses of action. As a matter of science, personal opinions and ideas about learning are held up against the research and either affirmed or dismissed. Hypotheses are tested and reasoned conclusions are drawn. This is the tack I have chosen to follow for the purposes incorporated here.

Within virtually any profession, but especially true of education and reading theory, there are experts with diametrically opposing viewpoints. The two primary camps of learning theory that have saturated the educational vernacular, Behaviorism and Constructivism, form the two ends of the spectrum along which the proverbial education policy pendulum swings. The so-called Great Debate refers to the passionate discourse about which of these theories, in this case of reading practice, best serves students.

While the scope of either theoretical camp is too broad to sufficiently describe here in detail, it is important to gain at least some perspective of each by examining their fundamental ideas. By coming to appreciate what one theoretical framework is *not*, it will become easier to distinguish more precisely what this project's underlying theoretical orientation *is*. And in so doing, the research that follows can be more wholly perceived with clarity and purpose. I will begin with an overview of Behaviorism, followed by an outline of the key ideas in Constructivism, the theory which most closely embodies the orientation and direction of this project.

Behaviorism. As a theory of learning, behaviorism has its roots in a long history of philosophy and psychology. From its beginning, it asserted that knowledge is only defined by that which can be observed. The environment (stimuli) and an individual's interaction with it (responses) are considered the only valid elements worthy of study, and mental processes at work within the learner are entirely ignored or discredited. In his article, "Behaviorism, Constructivism, and Socratic Pedagogy," Boghossian (2006) reports, "Behaviorism's focus is on the external observation of lawful relations between and among outwardly observable stimuli and the responses that follow" (p. 715). Taken further, learning, as viewed through a behaviorist lens, is explained and manipulated by way of behavior, a process known as conditioning. Boghossian (2006) illustrates this point, "The behaviorist would interpret, for example, a student's correct answer to a question as a sign of successful conditioning, and then continue to reinforce correct responses behaviorally by assigning good grades" (p. 716). Instruction in a behaviorist environment presumes that learning occurs through orderly, structured steps without much regard to what the learner already knows or is capable of achieving. The sophistication or complexity of a student's knowledge, then, is determined by how successful she demonstrates mastery of lower-level material. It is a passive model, in that no attention is paid to the motivation, prior experiences, or readiness of the learner herself.

In view of teaching as a systematic transmission of increasingly sophisticated material, behaviorism has fittingly been referred to as a "bottom-up" approach to learning. Applied to literacy instruction, this might be characterized by a strong

emphasis on mastery of sound-letter correspondence first and building up to word-level, sentence-level, and paragraph-level understanding, with *meaning* as that ultimate, elusive goal which may or may not be reached. It is the "Phonics" side of the Great Debate.

Constructivism. What behaviorists ignore, constructivists wholeheartedly embrace. With the underlying belief that there is no knowledge but what is constructed by the learner, constructivism places heavy emphasis on the unseen internal mental processes as opposed to external stimuli and response. This learning theory asserts that students are actively engaged in their quest for knowledge and that *meaning* is essential to every stage and level of learning. "Constructing knowledge," Boghossian (2006) claims, "means that students are active participants in a learning process by seeking to find meaning in their experiences, and this result becomes knowledge" (p. 714).

By way of comparison, Bichelmeyer and Hsu (1999), in their article "Individually-Guided Education and Problem-Based Learning: A comparison of Pedagogical Approaches From Different Epistemological Views," make clear the distinguishing characteristics of constructivism as it is matched up to the behaviorist ideology:

> Where behaviorism views knowledge as resulting from a finding process, constructivism views knowledge as the natural consequence of a constructive process. Where behaviorism views learning as an active process of acquiring knowledge, constructivism views learning as an active process of constructing

knowledge. Finally, where behaviorism views instruction as the process of providing knowledge, constructivism views instruction as the process of supporting construction of knowledge. (p. 3)

Since constructivism, at its core, stresses the importance of meaning-making, with supports provided to students when meaning breaks down, this theory has been appropriately termed a "top-down" model. Intervention for struggling students becomes tailored, with the objective of "filling in the gaps" so meaning can be restored. In addition, subjectivity replaces objectivity, and the knowledge that one student constructs may differ from that of another. "Constructivism replaced the teacher as the center of knowledge (objective), with the learner (subjective). Independent of the teacher, each learner's subjective experiences now have a special and unique meaning. It is both the student's learning experience and her perceptions of those experiences that have educational value" (Boghossian, 2006, p. 715). The assertion that experience and active engagement drive construction of knowledge suggests that motivation, prior experience, and readiness play very significant roles.

With regard to literacy instruction in a constructivist environment, emphasis on meaning characterizes the starting point. The assumption that students bring meaning to their experiences naturally suggests that the teacher's role becomes one of facilitator by providing enriching experiences with literacy, specifically through authentic reading. Students are presumed competent readers and comprehenders, and breakdowns in either paragraph-, sentence-, or word-level meaning are addressed specifically with the goal of bringing the student to comprehension at least within the

context of that literary experience. This theory embodies the "Whole-Language" side of the Great Debate.

In the field of literacy, there is a third prominent theory which has been built upon the constructivist foundation. The Transactional Theory of Reading and Writing, founded by Louis Rosenblatt, asserts that the making of meaning in literacy is achieved through the relationship between the reader and the text. In her book, *Making Meaning with Texts*, Rosenblatt (2005) claims that "Every reading act is an event, or a transaction involving a particular reader and a particular . . . text, and occurring at a particular time in a particular context" (p. 7). Building upon the constructivist notion that meaning is brought to an experience, she argues that the reading experience is a mutual interaction: "The 'meaning' does not reside ready-made 'in' the text or 'in' the reader but happens or comes into being during the transaction between reader and text" (p. 7). The active engagement in the reading/thinking/learning process by the student is, in her view, supremely context-oriented. When considering instruction to enhance comprehension of texts, this concept plays a major role, as it frames the experiences in which the teacher is able to foster authentic learning.

Research/Evaluation

The Office of Educational Research and Improvement (OERI), in 1999, commissioned the RAND Reading Study Group to launch an effort to improve understanding of reading comprehension and how best to teach it. Their motivation was driven by a number of concerns dealing with the state of literacy achievement in

the U.S. at that time. One concern specifically addressed the seeming disconnect between research, regulation, and instructional programming: "Policies and programs intended to improve reading comprehension are not necessarily research-based and/or their effects are not adequately evaluated, and several approaches to reading instruction do not work for all children; at the same time, high-stakes testing affects reading comprehension instruction" (Abadiano & Turner, 2003, p. 75). Clearly, the very issues of concern embedded within this project mirror those proffered by the OERI, even though their agenda now dates back a full decade.

What follows is an examination of current literature that attempts to address key areas of reading comprehension instruction. The concepts being explored here concentrate on what I believe to be the most significant factors affecting student achievement in the area of narrative text comprehension. I will begin with a look at reasons and factors that impact student motivation and engagement in literacy activities. Next, specific strategies for addressing comprehension will be highlighted within a context for learning. From there, I will examine the teacher's frame of reference on strategy instruction and her role in the learning process. Then, literacy instruction will be investigated from a social aspect, specifically the benefits of peer collaboration. Finally, the matter of assessment will be reviewed, addressing concerns about forms and functions of testing instruments.

Student motivation and engagement. In considering the aspects of literacy learning and instruction that teachers are able to influence, it seems reasonable to begin with student motivation. Stimulating interest in reading or literacy lessons is

often the first hurdle teachers strive to overcome in order to positively set the stage for more concentrated and effortful learning experiences.

Because each student is unique, as are the factors that contribute to her personal desire to engage in any given learning situation, determining how best to motivate can seem like a daunting task. Yet, the importance of motivation cannot be overstated. Linda Gambrell (2010) points out the snowball effect of motivation in reading: "Motivation is clearly linked to the notion that the more students read the better readers they become. Students who are motivated to read will make time for reading, will read more, and as a result are likely to increase in both reading ability and intelligence" (p. 19). This improved ability to read by actively engaged students, Kelley and Clausen-Grace (2008) point out, is the natural result of a "seeking to understand what they have read" (p. 313). Motivation begets engagement, which begets understanding; the satisfaction of arriving at understanding results in increased motivation to repeat the cycle. In her article, "What Every Teacher Needs to Know about Comprehension," Laura Pardo (2004) agrees, "More motivated readers are likely to apply more strategies and work harder at building meaning" (p. 273).

To bring about conscientious involvement in literacy learning, motivation should be considered at two levels. The readiness and willingness of students to engage generally originates from *within the student*, which requires a certain affective quality to the learning environment. However, other, more concrete factors can be manipulated to *bring about* such engagement. For our purposes here, we can refer to these models as intrinsic and extrinsic motivation.

Intrinsic motivation. Establishing a supportive atmosphere in the classroom appeals to the emotional state of students and encourages a mindset of determination and self-efficacy. To this point, Cambourne (2002) asserts that there are certain Principles of Engagement to consider in "demonstrations" of literacy learning, including: (a) Learners are more likely to engage deeply with demonstrations if they believe that they are capable of ultimately learning or doing whatever is being demonstrated; (b) Learners are more likely to engage with demonstrations if they are free from anxiety; and (c) Learners are more likely to engage with demonstrations given by someone they like, respect, admire, trust, and would like to emulate. The relationship teachers establish with students, as well *between* students, is paramount in fostering effective instruction. This idea is supported by Rosenblatt (2005) when she points out that "a truly receptive attitude on the part of teacher and peers—and this requires strong efforts at creating such trust—can be sufficient inducement to children to give spontaneous verbal expression to what has been lived through" (p. 85). In addition, multiple reading experiences "accompanied by perceived competence, autonomy, or relatedness in reading activities" (Guthrie et al., 2006, p. 244) increase the level of intrinsic motivation.

The affective condition of a student or her environment is just one component of intrinsic motivation. Another element that has received much attention in the literature regards the perception of *value* students place on their learning. Cambourne (2002) argues that "Learning is unlikely if learners do not attend to demonstrations in which they are immersed. However, attention is unlikely if there is no perceived need

or purpose for learning in the first place" (p. 28). Gambrell (2010) builds on this thought when she states, "Highly motivated readers do not engage in reading 'for its own sake'—instead they read because it provides some valued benefit—for example, pleasure, satisfaction, or information" (p. 15). Reading, in the context of solving personal problems or satisfying personal hunger for enjoyment, is essential for all students (Rasinski & Padak, 2000).

   Extrinsic motivation. Aside from those factors that help *prepare* students to actively engage in learning, there are a number of external factors teachers can keep in mind when setting up literacy experiences. The orientation of tasks and their relevance to students' lives (authenticity) plays a significant role in motivation. Kelly and Clausen-Grace (2009) highlight the importance of first knowing the students: "If we want to support readers during independent reading and help them with engagement, it is critical for the teacher to identify the various types of readers in the classroom" (p. 313). They assert that, "In any given classroom, students' level of reading engagement can range from completely disengaged to obsessive, and . . . a student's engagement may waver according to the content, task, and text" (p. 313). Gambrell (2010) and Rasinski and Padak (2000) agree that literacy instruction that utilizes authentic reading for 'real life' tasks promotes the internalization of strategies and increases motivation for lifelong reading. To develop this idea further, Gambrell (2010) explains, "Literacy tasks that encourage purposeful student cognition and result in the construction of new meanings would be considered more authentic than tasks that simply require extraction and recall of information" (p. 16).

Two other aspects of instruction, with regard to extrinsic motivation, have surfaced in the literature: choices and social interaction. Guthrie et al. (2006) support the claim by Pardo (2004) that "Teachers can motivate students by providing them with interesting texts, allowing them choices in reading and writing, and helping students set authentic purposes for reading" (p. 274). Harvey and Goudvis (2000) concur by recommending that classroom libraries be filled with "books at every level, on every conceivable topic, to ensure that kids get their hands on books they want to read" (p. 29). Furthermore, they assert, "Picture books may more readily engage children in topics, themes, and big ideas than bland or difficult expository selections" (2000, p. 56). The RAND report (2002), also acknowledges the link between choice and motivation, "Teachers who give students choices, challenging tasks, and collaborative learning structures increase their motivation to read and comprehend text" (p. 41).

While peer collaboration is addressed later in this chapter, the matter of social interaction plays significantly on students' motivation to engage and learn. These interactions can take different forms and can occur between students and their peers or their teachers. Chick (2006) makes the case when she states, "The opportunity to converse, problem solve, and interact with one's peers results in elevated motivation and interest levels" (p. 156). Gambrell (2010) supports this idea by describing the context for such learning: "While skills are necessary for the cognitive process of reading, the practice of reading that prepares students for real world literacy experiences is situated in an ideological model that provides activities and

interactions that require meaningful exchanges and responses" (p. 17). In her view, motivation is supported by such interactive tasks as book discussions and pen pal exchanges (Gambrell, 2010). Diehl (2005), in her article "Snapshots of Our Journey to Thoughtful Literacy," rounds out the argument for engaging students through social interaction when she states, "Vygotsky (1978) helped us to understand that learning is embedded in social interaction. It does not evolve naturally in isolation and independence but is shaped by social processes, occurring as we interact with experts in problem-solving situations" (p. 57).

  Strategies and a conceptual framework for learning. Considering the depth of mental processes used throughout the act of reading, students who struggle with surface-level issues have a wealth of concrete strategies from which to draw in order to problem-solve. However, recognizing that comprehension as meaning-making requires higher-order thinking, difficulties with understanding require slightly more sophisticated, or more abstract, strategies. Dixie Massey (2003), in her article "A Comprehension Checklist: What If It Doesn't Make Sense?" puts it this way: "There are plenty of suggestions for students who are trying to decode an unknown word (e.g., looking for familiar chunks, looking at the picture). Strategies that students can use when their comprehension breaks down are much harder to find" (p. 81). Cunningham and Allington (2007) offer up some general guidelines to students for successfully approaching literacy events with a focus on higher-order thinking:

  To learn to think while you read, you must:

  1. Be able to identify almost all the words

2. Have sufficient background knowledge that you call up and try to connect

to the new information

3. Be familiar with the type of text and be able to see how the author has

organized the ideas

4. Have a mindset that reading is thinking and know how to apply your

thinking in comprehension strategies

The earlier work by Rasinski and Padak (2000) affirms these concepts as essential in

helping students construct meaning for themselves as thoughtful readers.

Context. Before delving into the particular strategies supported by research

for fostering reading comprehension, some consideration should be given to the

context in which the strategies are learned. "The creation of contexts that permit

purposive writing and reading," Rosenblatt (2005) argues, "can enable the student to

build on past experience of life and language, to adopt the appropriate stance for

selective attention, and to develop inner gauges or frameworks for choice and

synthesis that produce new structures of live meaning" (p. 27). "As the field moves

away from intensive attention to phonemic awareness and looks again at aiding

students with comprehension, it is important that a full range of instructional

approaches be considered within a variety of contexts that address both

developmental and cultural differences in how children best learn to comprehend"

(Smolkin & Donovan, 2001, p. 117). Cunningham and Allington (2007) also support

this argument, reiterating the notions that the thinking process is too complex and

children differ on too many dimensions to be sufficiently addressed by a narrow

range of lessons. In her article, "The Comprehension Matrix: A Tool for Designing

Comprehension Instruction," Gill (2008) begins to discuss the reading process as

occurring in distinct stages when she points out, "The process of comprehension

begins before we start to 'read' and continues even after the 'reading' is finished. For

example, good readers use prereading strategies like previewing the text and use

postreading strategies like summarizing in addition to the many strategies they use to

make meaning during the 'reading' itself" (p. 109). Massey (2003), in talking about

her "comprehension checklist," also describes the distinction between strategies as

occurring either before, during, or after the reading. The findings of the RAND

report (2002) corroborate this context of learning as well: "Reader, text, and activity

are also interrelated in dynamic ways that vary across pre-reading, reading, and post-

reading" (p. 12). As a student approaching a literacy event, viewing comprehension

strategies as fitting into one of these distinct stages may help organize thinking and

ultimately foster the effectiveness and efficiency of the meaning-making process.

Strategies. Determining which comprehension strategies to use in instruction

has been the topic of countless tomes and journal articles. In some cases, the

concepts that are presented as strategies for learning seem more akin to instructional

techniques. Moreover, many *activities* to engage students in higher-order thinking

are disguised as self-righteous comprehension strategies. The distinction between

activity and strategy must thus be delineated. An activity, for the purposes here, is

viewed as a particular series of actions at a particular time, in a particular setting, for

the intention of providing focused practice with a particular skill. Strategies, on the

other hand, are nouns; they are viewed more holistically as the subjects of learning and practice with the intent of developing proficiency with a particular concept.

While there is much debate about which strategies are proven to be most effective, or most deserving of inclusion in instructional programming, there does seem to be a great deal of overlap in the professional literature. These findings, in large part, come from examinations of what effective readers do. "Strategic readers," Harvey and Goudvis (2000) point out, "are connecting, inferring, questioning, visualizing, and synthesizing continually as they read" (p. 20). Duke and Pearson (2002) identified six research-based comprehension strategies, aligned closely with those identified by the 2000 report of the National Reading Panel: (a) prediction/prior knowledge, (b) think-aloud, (c) text structure, (d) visual representations, (e) summarization, and (f) questions/questioning. Viewing these six as an instructional foundation, many other experts in the field have either affirmed these as effective, built upon them with new insights or ideas, or have teased them apart with greater detail and specificity. Susan Dymock (2007) offers up her support for focused instruction of narrative text structure: "Research suggests that during the early grades, story comprehension is a significant component of academic performance. What's more, teaching students the structure of narrative text from grade 1 provides them with a foundation for comprehending the more complex narrative text encountered at upper primary and high school (e.g., novels, Shakespeare)" (pp. 162-163). Among her assertions about comprehension instruction, Pardo (2004) also calls attention to the importance of text structure instruction as enabling students to access schema for

narrative genre in novel reading experiences. Regarding visual representations, Fiene and McMahon (2007) emphasize that "mentally organizing information while reading is a key feature of active comprehension" (p. 415). In their article, "Responding and Comprehending: Reading with Delight and Understanding," Liang and Galda (Dec., 2009 – Jan., 2010) make the case for prediction and visualization (visual representations), but further propose that instruction be combined with engaging response activities. Although described using different language and specificity, Cunningham and Allington (2007) recognize essentially the same strategies by Duke and Pearson but also add using fix-up strategies as well as determining most important ideas and seeing how they are related (pp. 114-115). Ellery (2010) stresses the value of summarizing as "a strategy that helps the reader identify and organize the essential information found within a text" (p. 434). In their book, *What Successful Literacy Teachers Do: 70 Research-Based Strategies for Teachers, Reading Coaches, and Instructional Planners*, Glasgow and Farrell (2007) devote an entire chapter to strategies that address comprehension. In it, they similarly promote the use of think-alouds, summarization, and questions; however, their list of strategies goes on to include sharing insights, using drama techniques, providing choices, paraphrasing, using talk, scaffolding, and teaching 'radical change' characteristics in picture books.

   Metacognition. Instruction that treats comprehension strategies singularly with no frame of reference or perspective runs the risk of inducing "tunnel vision" in students. Instead, Harvey and Goudvis (2000) argue, "We want readers to keep track of their thinking as they read and to become flexible enough with strategy use to

choose the strategy best suited to their needs at the time. But all of these strategies

work together to help readers construct meaning" (p. 20).   Diehl (2005) agrees:

"Comprehension is an intricate issue, requiring the simultaneous operation of

complex strategies. These are not isolated processes but occur in a network where

one person influences and is influenced by the other" (p. 58). To orchestrate the

application of numerous strategies, and to know whether their use is productive or

not, and to self-correct until meaning is made is a process known as metacognition.

To illustrate its importance, Diehl (2005) points out, "Poor readers do not seem to

know that they are supposed to make sense of the text and do not seem to realize

when meaning breaks down. Thus, it seems that explicit strategy instruction without

focused attention to metacognition is futile" (p. 59).

Making explicit the concept of metacognition, parallel to the instruction of

strategies, fosters greater independence as students approach new reading events. In

his article, "Metacognition and Self-Regulated Comprehension," Pressley (2002)

describes: "Metacognition, which is needed to use comprehension strategies well, can

begin during direct teacher explanations and modeling of strategies but develops most

completely when students practice using comprehension strategies as they read" (p.

292). In defining further the processes at work when metacognition is activated,

Diehl (2005) explains that "reading is a highly metacognitive activity where the

reader not only thinks about the material being read but also monitors that thinking.

Ideas are integrated, inferences are drawn to fill in the gaps, emotions are evoked,

summaries are devised, meaning is monitored, and important points are related—all

in a synchronized whole" (p. 58). Suggesting that good readers use several strategies

continuously is a concept also shared by Duke and Pearson (2002). Marcell,

DeCleene, and Juettner (2010), in referring to student independence with strategies,

have the last word: "The bottom line is that we want our students to do more than

recite a list of strategies; we want them to actually use the strategies, unprompted—

and to do so without having to record the event on a sticky note" (p. 687).

      Role of teacher and instructional framework. Through a student's eyes,

deepening comprehension through thoughtfully organized strategy learning may seem

relatively straightforward, even if proficiency with strategy use in a metacognitive

way proves difficult. However, the thought processes that go into strategy instruction

from a teacher's point of view may be extremely complex, encompassing a variety of

factors to create the best learning environment possible. While certain instructional

techniques, or programs, may work for some, they may not work so well for others.

Frank Smith (2004) points out: "It is not reading that many children find difficult, but

the instruction" (p. 3). To this point, Dewitz, Jones, and Leahy (2009) state,

"Deconstructing comprehension into many skills leaves the reassembling of those

skills into some coherent whole up to the teacher and the reader, and the core

programs rarely reference an old skill when introducing a new skill" (p. 119).

Effective instruction can happen, though, as Diehl (2005) suggests, "Comprehension

instruction is a time-consuming process that is addressed effectively through

deliberate and focused techniques" (p. 58). Duke and Pearson (2002) provide

encouragement as well, referring to the research that affirms the instruction of

strategies and processes good readers use to improve overall comprehension of texts. "If we are to 'teach literature,'" Rosenblatt (2005) asserts, "certain kinds of experiences known as literary must first be brought about—that is our primary responsibility. This means helping specific students to have such experiences" (p. 63). These experiences, she argues, must help students have "personally satisfying and personally meaningful transactions with literature" (Rosenblatt, 2005, p. 63).

Principles of instruction. Before we begin examining some of the more concrete, practical aspects of effective literacy teaching, our foray into comprehension instruction should start with principles teachers should keep in mind to govern their teaching. "The first responsibility and right of all teachers and students," Smith (2004) asserts, "must be to exercise independent thought" (p. xi). This is important to consider in terms of the subjectivity students bring to a literary experience, as Rosenblatt (2005) points out, "The teaching of reading and writing at any developmental level should have as its first concern the creation of environments and activities in which students are motivated and encouraged to draw on their own resources to make 'live' meanings" (p. 27). In line with this idea, Rasinski and Padak (2000) put forth a set of beliefs and attitudes teachers should maintain, including (a) expecting all students to learn, (b) seeing the value of everything students bring into the classroom, (c) focusing on what students can do rather than what they can't, and (d) believing that learning is easiest when given choices and when instruction is based on interest and relevance. Indeed, such principles find value across the curriculum. Smolkin and Donovan (2001) point out that "recent reading comprehension research

has focused on what does/should occur during the actual readings of texts rather than on the disembedded teaching of strategies" (p. 101). Rosenblatt (2005) supports this concept, suggesting that strategies be put into proper perspective: "Exercises and readings that do not satisfy such meaningful purposes for the child, but are considered defensible means of developing skills, should be offered separately, honestly, as exercises. If needed, they should be recognized as ancillary and supplementary to the real business of reading for meaning, whether efferent or aesthetic" (p. 83).

Strategies presented deliberately and thoughtfully within a supportive classroom context encourage deeper comprehension and are more likely to transfer to new reading. Cunningham and Allington (2007) succinctly capture the teacher's role in this process: "In planning a comprehension lesson, we decide which thinking strategies will help students make sense of the text they are reading today and be better—more strategic—readers when they are reading on their own" (p. 115). They point out that these decisions take into consideration the demands of the text being read as well as the needs and abilities of the students themselves (Cunningham & Allington, 2007). In his article, "Holistic, Integrated Approaches to Reading and Language Arts Instruction: The Constructivist Framework of an Instructional Theory," Cambourne (2002) lays out a number of principles that he believes characterizes such reading instruction in a constructivist setting:

1. Create a classroom ethos/culture that supports and encourages deep
   engagement with multiple demonstrations of effective reading behavior.

2. Employ teaching activities and strategies that are a judicious mix of the four dimensions of teaching and learning (explicitness, systematicity, mindfulness, and contextualization).

3. Employ structures and processes that create continuous opportunities for the development of intellectual unrest.

4. Develop each learner's metatextual awareness of the processes and understandings implicit in effective reading behavior.

5. Design and use tasks that will coerce authentic use of the processes and understandings implicit in effective reading behavior. (p. 30)

Although their focus centered more on concrete activities in the context of a "balanced" literacy classroom, Duke and Pearson (2002) clearly support the principles put forward by Cambourne.

While these principles of instruction offer up potential for positive and successful literacy learning, teachers must remain diligent in "reading" their students throughout the process and adjusting as needs dictate. "Frank expression of boredom, or even vigorous rejection, are more valid starting points for learning than are docile attempts to feel 'what the teacher wants'" (Rosenblatt, 2005, p. 64). Smith (2004) warns against thoughtless teaching when he points out, "Problems arise when corrections and explanations sap children's confidence or stop them in their tracks for what might be quite extraneous reasons. The teacher should always ask, 'What is causing confusion here?' Children afraid of being corrected may become afraid of speaking, reading, and writing" (p. 225).

Function of teacher. Clearly, the aspects of instruction which the teacher is able to influence are largely evident in the environment, the practices, and the relationships she establishes throughout the process. These decisions stem from a set of understandings the teacher holds about how learning happens best for students. But to what standards do the teachers hold for themselves? Rasinski and Padak (2000) argue that "Authentic and engaging teachers are coaches, encouragers, and explicit models of what it means to be a literate person" (p. 7). Because good readers engage in literacy in many ways that are internally processed and thus invisible, students who struggle with comprehension depend on the teachers' abilities to make these processes explicit. "The only way that children can be privy to acts of text comprehension is when adults choose to make these acts audible" (Smolkin & Donovan, 2001, p. 99). Referencing the work of Vygotsky and his noted teaching construct, the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD), Diehl (2005) underscores the intuitive nature of teaching: "It becomes apparent that teaching that waits for development denies the very opportunity in which development occurs" (p. 57). Teachers, therefore, must be observant about each student's readiness and ability to engage. Kelly and Clausen-Grace (2009) contend, "By noticing each reader's level of engagement, determining needs, and differentiating the support provided to each student, independent reading will improve and meaningful engagement in books will increase" (p. 318).

Models of instruction. A common theme that has surfaced thus far in the literature highlights the notion that there is an extreme degree of variability in what

students bring to a reading experience in terms of readiness, experience, and ability.

A natural concern by educators, then, is how to go about setting up a model of

instruction that serves *all* students best. Laura Pardo (2004), in "What Every Teacher

Needs to Know about Comprehension," explains, "If readers have all these individual

differences, how do teachers best support elementary-age readers to become

competent comprehenders? They teach decoding skills, help students build fluency,

build and activate background knowledge, teach vocabulary words, motivate students

and engage them in personal responses to text" (p. 273). Speaking more broadly,

Williams (2002) puts it this way: "General guidelines for teachers . . . include the

suggestions that teachers help students by explaining fully what it is they are

teaching—what to do, why, how, and when; by modeling their own thinking

processes, by encouraging students to ask questions and discuss possible answers

among themselves; and by keeping students engaged in their reading by means of

providing tasks that demand active involvement" (p. 256). The collective works by

Duke and Pearson (2002), Pressley (2002), and Diehl (2005), all support this

approach for making instruction explicit, providing time for interaction, and

encouraging independent practice with strategies. Harvey and Goudvis (2000), in

Strategies That Work, delineate a similar list of concepts, but in greater detail, for

effective comprehension instruction as when teachers:

- Model their own use of the strategy repeatedly over time

- Show students their thinking when reading, and articulate how that
  thinking helps them better understand what they read

- Discuss how the strategy helps readers make meaning

- Make connections between the new strategy and what the reader already knows

- Respond in writing by coding the text according to a particular strategy

- Gradually release responsibility for the use of the strategy to the students

- Build in large amounts of time for actual text reading by the students

- Provide opportunities for guided practice in strategy application

- Show students how the strategy applies to other texts, genres, formats, disciplines, and contexts

- Help students notice how these strategies intersect and work in conjunction with one another

- Take time to observe and confer directly with students about their strategy learning, and keep records of those observations and conferences

- Remind students that the purpose for using the strategy is to better comprehend text (pp. 28-29).

Considering that strategy instruction is not intended for its own sake, but is a means to helping students become independent and thoughtful comprehenders, it is important to monitor students by following up. Kelly and Clausen-Grace (2008) suggest, "Though teaching comprehension strategies is important, it doesn't ensure

the use of those strategies when it counts the most—in the context of reading. We

have found that using goal-setting and a structured independent reading block to

follow up explicit and direct strategy instruction teaches students to be metacognitive,

requires active thinking, and enhances understanding" (p. 31).

   Text selection. One final consideration in establishing an effective

instructional framework for reading comprehension is the matter of texts themselves.

Rosenblatt (2005) sets up the argument, "We need to be flexible, we need to

understand where our pupils are in relation to books, and we need a sufficient

command of books to see their potentialities in this developmental process. Our main

responsibility is to help the student to find the right book for growth" (p. 67). In

terms of how texts are accessed for literary instruction, Rasinski and Padak (2000)

make this assertion: "By encouraging students to select their own reading material

and inviting them to react, ask questions, and seek answers, we can help students

control the purpose, content, and direction for their literacy experiences" (p. 11).

According to Duke and Pearson (2002), the "command of books," as Rosenblatt puts

it, becomes especially important when introducing new strategies: "When students

are first learning a comprehension strategy, they should encounter texts that do not

make heavy demands in other respects, such as background knowledge, vocabulary

load, or decoding" (p. 211). In addition to possessing a strong sense of the texts,

teachers must also consider the unique needs of the students. Sharon Gill (2008), in

her article, "The Comprehension Matrix: A Tool for Designing Comprehension

Instruction," offers a brief checklist of considerations for matching up texts with the

literary experiences in which the students participate:

- What do my students know about this topic?

- What specific terms or concepts do they need to understand before
  they can understand this passage?

- How can I get my students interested in this topic?

- What purposes can I provide for the reading?

- What activities will help my students engage in this text?

- What strategies do my students need to learn?

- What strategies can I demonstrate with this particular text?

- How can I help my students understand the vocabulary and concepts in
  the text? (p. 111)

The scope and complexity of such strategy lesson planning certainly does not need to

apply to *every* reading event, but those moments of focused learning should take these

ideas into account.

Peer collaboration. The learning model that removes the teacher as lecturer,

that rearranges desks into clusters so students face one another, and that relishes,

rather than squelches, the productive noise of children finds a great deal of support in

the professional literature. Cambourne (2002) asserts that "The primary mechanism

available for learners to develop their individual understandings and knowledge is

social interaction. In constructivist classrooms, the use of collaborative groups is one

of the most potent forms of this mechanism, because such groups provide a readily

available means of testing one's own understandings through listening to and reflecting on the understandings of others" (p. 29). Cambourne receives support from Smith (2004) who states, "Reading is a social activity, learned (or not learned) in a social rather than an intellectual context" (p. 51).

Socialization that is intentional, structured, and monitored in instructional settings creates an atmosphere of shared learning, shared investment, and collaboration. "Much of what children (and adults) learn," Smith (2004) points out, "they learn when they are interested in something someone else is doing" (p. 208). Chick (2006) explains, "Educators who believe that socialization is at the heart of learning are currently incorporating instructional strategies to foster collaboration among peers" (p. 157). One advantage to this type of setting is that it encourages students to problem-solve together and thus feel motivated to take risks. "Children must believe that they are in a risk-free environment, where there is support from both teachers and peers, and they can share ideas and opinions without fear" (Chick, 2006, p. 156). Rasinski and Padak (2000) concur, "In cooperative situations, students are likely to view problems as challenges for the group to consider instead of indications of their own inability" (p. 23). A term that is often used to refer to classrooms that incorporate a collaborative teaching model is "community of learners." "Successful collaborative activities—those in which students focus on the task at hand, ask good questions, and explore alternative viewpoints—typically take place in classrooms where students already view themselves as a community of learners" (Chick, 2006, p. 156). Rasinski and Padak (2000) also describe this

instructional framework as inviting learners to actively participate, share responsibility, explore common interests, and interact cooperatively. In terms of literacy instruction, Lloyd (2004) suggests that strategy instruction can be implemented collaboratively through, for example, literature-circle discussions. "When conducting group strategy instruction," Chick (2006) explains, "flexible, heterogeneous groups are most effective and provide students with the opportunity to work and develop relationships with a variety of learners" (p. 157).

Assessment. As with all curricular subjects, measuring a student's proficiency in literacy can hold great value in helping teachers determine how best to adjust instruction. Unfortunately, many measurement instruments, particularly those used to assess comprehension, are faulty and insufficient for providing the information teachers need.

Measurement difficulties. The RAND report (2002) points out that comprehension assessments currently being used are not useful to teachers and narrow the curriculum. Why is this? Perhaps one explanation is that "Reading comprehension has proven an elusive thing to measure" (Shuy et al., 2006, p. 223). Fletcher (2006) suggests that "The assessment of reading comprehension is difficult because it is not an overt process that can be directly observed. Rather, only the products of the process of comprehending are observed, and an inference is made about the nature of the processes and the quality of the comprehension" (p. 324). In their article, "Assessing Comprehension: A Classroom-Based Process," Fiene and McMahon (2007) explain, "Comprehension is complex, and samples of students'

work suggest that it changes daily, depending on texts, motivation, and students'

needs. A series of comprehension-check questions will not provide the teacher with

the full continuum of students' comprehension. Further, such questions, often

requiring students to select from a list of constructed answers, provide no insights on

learners' thinking" (p. 417). Klingner (2004) agrees, pointing out the failure of

traditional measures of testing to explain why students may struggle.

   Formal testing. Reliance on more formalized tests, from classroom-level to

state-level, ultimately serves little purpose in actually helping students become better

comprehenders. "Expectations for teachers to rely on interim or benchmark

assessments for forming instructional decisions," Risko and Walker-Dalhouse (2010)

explain, "are based on faulty assumptions. These assessments typically are aligned

with more global standards and goals and don't assess performance on the particular

skills and strategies that are taught from day to day" (p. 421). Au (2002) mirrors

these assertions, emphasizing the time such assessments take away from meaningful

instruction. Likewise, Berube (2004) cautions against using standardized tests to

"convince ourselves" that students gain proficiency, when ultimately the tests only

assess recall of facts. Furthermore, standardized tests in reading may not account for

less obvious testing factors, such as readability of texts or the particular

circumstances surrounding students on a particular testing day. "Because U.S.

national and state standards generally fail to address the grade appropriateness of text,

the text levels on the tests that are given to establish whether students have attained

standards are critical in shaping perceptions of whether students can read grade-

appropriate texts" (Hiebert, 2002, p. 357). Yet, as critical as this is, the measures used to evaluate a text's readability are severely called into question. Unfortunately, alternatives, at this time, are largely unavailable. In terms of circumstantial faults with formalized testing, Fiene and McMahon (2007) point out "Standardized tests are a snapshot depicting students' comprehension on one day. Classroom-based measures provide a series of assessments that shows their growth, regression, and stability over time" (p. 417). To round out the argument against formalized testing, Berube (2004) states, "Low costs and ease in grading are hardly valid reasons to use high-stakes tests as indications of student achievement. Achievement should not be measured by how well we train our students to take multiple-choice tests. If we are not careful, we could become a nation of people who score high on standardized tests but who cannot understand, analyze, synthesize, and evaluate what we have truly learned" (p. 267).

Form and function. How, then, does assessment of comprehension fit in best within the rhythm and flow of instruction? "Assessment tools that are manageable, informative, and easy to integrate into the ongoing instructional program are needed to help . . . teachers link instruction to assessment" (Strickland, 2002, p. 82). Klingner (2004) makes this recommendation: "Clearly, the best way to assess reading comprehension is to use a combination of different measures. Standardized tests, informal reading inventories, interviews and questionnaires, observations, retelling, freewriting, and think-aloud procedures can each contribute a unique perspective on students' strengths and areas of need" (p. 66). Shuy et al. (2006) agree, asserting that

"reading comprehension is not a unitary phenomenon, and thus it should not and cannot appropriately be measured by a single instrument" (p. 223). In terms of strategy instruction, Williams (2002) argues that such assessment be kept in perspective: "In evaluating the effectiveness of strategy instruction in the classroom, the primary focus must not be on the students' performance of the strategies themselves. The appropriate assessment is of the students' reading achievement, and, in addition, other outcome measures such as how interested students are in reading and how satisfied teachers are with their instructional methods" (p. 256). Fiene and McMahon (2007) offer their support for such ongoing and varied assessment methods as well.

Growth. Throughout the learning process, it is natural and expected to adjust the level and pace of instruction, and thus assessment, according to the needs of the students. Rosenblatt (2005) stresses, "The dependence on single instances of reading in assessing an individual's abilities is currently being called into question . . . Habits are acquired and change slowly; it may be found that the effects of a change, for example, from traditional to response methods of teaching literature, cannot be assessed without allowing for a period of transition . . . over time" (p. 33). Modifying instruction and monitoring, in an ongoing fashion, including self-monitoring by students, is a practice supported by Duke and Pearson (2002). "In short," Rosenblatt (2005) asserts, "the assessment must be based on clearly articulated criteria as to signs of growing maturity in handling personal response, relating to the evoked text, and use of personal and intertextual experience vis-à-vis the responses of others" (p.

33). Smith argues for assessments of the home-grown variety, "The best tests are 'homemade,' constructed on the spot to reassure the teacher that whatever a particular child is supposed to be learning at a particular time is making sense. Good teachers do this intuitively, and because such tests are a natural part of whatever activity the child is engaged in, they are both relevant and inconspicuous" (p. 229). Diehl (2005) offers up this warning, though: "There is an important distinction between teaching and assessing that is often blurred" (p. 58).

Monitoring thinking. Based on the assertion by Smith (2004) that reading is thinking, effective assessment practices consider ways to reveal how students are thinking as they progress through literacy events. Harvey and Goudvis (2000) explain, "The only way we can confidently assess our students' comprehension is when they share their thinking with us. Readers reveal their comprehension by responding to text, not by answering a litany of literal questions at the end of the chapter" (p. 189). Such responses to text can be monitored through a number of ways, such as by listening, as Risko and Walker-Dalhouse (2010) suggest during classroom conversations and conferences, or through a variety of forms of writing, as also proposed by Harvey and Goudvis (2000). "Many teachers are willing to try new forms of assessment that can reflect the view of reading as a process of constructing meaning, capture students' strengths and weaknesses as readers, and guide instruction. Portfolio assessment has gained popularity because it can meet all of these goals" (Au, 2002, p. 408).

Summary

The theoretical orientation which frames this project is most closely aligned with Constructivism, although certain aspects of Rosenblatt's Transactional Theory of Reading and Writing are also embraced. Through a constructivist lens, knowledge is viewed as subjective and constructed through active engagement in learning experiences (Boghossian, 2006). With regard to reading comprehension, *meaning* is essential to every stage and level of learning. Intervention for struggling students is primarily tailored to "fill in the gaps" as needed so meaning can be achieved. Literacy teachers who embrace a constructivist attitude facilitate the construction of meaning by providing enriching experiences through authentic reading and meaningful activities. Rosenblatt's Transactional Theory identifies the relationship between reader and text, and suggests that meaning is discovered through this transaction (Rosenblatt, 2005). This theory contributes to our understanding that contexts for reading play an essential role in fostering comprehension.

With respect to comprehension instruction, the literature review here serves as one attempt to help bridge the gap between research and programming by exploring current theory and ideologies in the areas of motivation and engagement, strategies and instructional frameworks, teacher role, peer collaboration, and assessment.

The importance of motivation is underscored by a perception that more motivated readers work harder to build comprehension (Pardo, 2004). Once students become motivated, their level of engagement with reading increases, as does the

likelihood that they will be successful and find the learning experience to be satisfying, thus motivating them to continue to engage in the future.

Appealing to the affective condition of students and manipulating external factors are two distinct approaches for bringing about motivation in students. When students feel self-efficacious, independent, and relaxed, in an atmosphere of trust and respect, their level of motivation to engage in learning experiences will most likely increase (Cambourne, 2002). Furthermore, students who recognize the *value* of their learning will immerse themselves with a higher level of engagement (Gambrell, 2010). Teachers can also bring about engagement by orienting literacy tasks with authenticity and purpose (Gambrell, 2010). To help students become autonomous, and to cater to particular needs and interests, choices should be offered as much as possible (Pardo, 2004). Recognizing that learning is a social process, greater engagement can be fostered by encouraging thoughtful social interaction among peers and the teacher (Diehl, 2005).

When students immerse themselves in a text and discover that meaning has broken down, some general guidelines have been suggested to repair the misunderstanding. Students should have a command of decoding skills, recognize basic sight words, be able to draw on prior knowledge and experiences, have a general knowledge of text structure, and have sufficient knowledge of how to apply comprehension strategies (Cunningham & Allington, 2007). The variety of strategies and the contexts in which they are taught should reflect an understanding that children, and their thinking processes, are very diverse. Nevertheless, strategies to

aid comprehension can fit within pre-reading, during-reading, and post-reading categories (Gill, 2008).

A great deal of professional literature has been devoted to outlining strategies for comprehension, and much of this comes from research on what good readers do. Some experts tease apart strategies so specifically that they appear more like activities, while others sort them into broader, more generalized topics of instruction. The degree of overlap, however, suggests that certain concepts are widely recognized as effective and worthwhile for instruction, such as those submitted by Duke and Pearson (2002): (a) prediction/prior knowledge, (b) think-aloud, (c) text structure, (d) visual representations, (e) summarization, and (f) questions/questioning.

Metacognition, a term which refers to a person's thinking about their own thinking, plays an important role in comprehension instruction (Pressley, 2002). To be autonomous during independent reading experiences, students must not only think about the reading, but must also recognize when meaning breaks down and employ one of a number of suitable strategies until they can make sense of the text (Diehl, 2005).

From an instructor's point of view, teaching students how to become better comprehenders can be a complex process, but research affirms that students can and do benefit through deliberate instruction (Diehl, 2005). The starting point for any literacy instruction should be to provide students with satisfying reading experiences (Rosenblatt, 2005). Beliefs and attitudes, especially those that value what the students bring to a reading experience, will positively shape the learning

environment. Cambourne (2002) suggests principles of literacy instruction that align with constructivist ideologies, which include such things as creating a supportive classroom culture, employing effective strategies, creating opportunities for challenging learning, developing students' metacognition, and designing authentic reading tasks. In addition, caution should be exercised so that instruction does not turn off students unnecessarily.

As teachers, it is imperative to model and make explicit acts of literacy (Rasinski & Padak, 2000). Observant teachers recognize the readiness and ability of students as they engage in literacy and differentiate support as needed (Kelly & Clausen-Grace, 2009). Williams (2002) provides some general guidelines for teachers including "explaining fully what it is they are teaching—what to do, why, how, and when" as well as modeling, encouraging questions, and providing engaging tasks (p. 256). To encourage the transfer of skills to independent reading, teachers should follow up instruction with goal-setting (Kelly & Clausen-Grace, 2009). One aspect of differentiation includes having a strong sense of the *texts* students are reading and recognizing how they can best encourage the use of particular strategies (Rosenblatt, 2005).

Learning in a literacy classroom occurs best when students are given frequent and deliberate opportunities to collaborate socially (Cambourne, 2002). Sometimes considered a strategy of its own, socialization removes the fear of taking risks and instead establishes a sense of shared investment (Chick, 2006). Besides

increasing motivation, a cooperative learning model can improve responsibility, the nature of peer-to-peer interactions, and relationships between students (Chick, 2006).

Current methods of comprehension assessment fail to adequately inform a teacher about how to adjust instruction. The difficulty lies in the fact that students' depth of understanding can really only be inferred by observation (Fletcher, 2006). Comprehension is complex and dynamic, as are the students themselves (Fiene & McMahon, 2007). The instruments being used currently tell nothing about the students' thinking or how well they understand the material directly addressed in the classroom. Nothing can be learned from standardized tests about why certain students struggle (Klingner, 2004). In addition, the time spent on such testing takes away from valuable teaching opportunities. They are only a "snapshot" of students on a particular day, which may be affected by any number of unknown variables (Fiene & McMahon, 2007).

The best assessments for comprehension are those that fit easily into the flow of instruction (Strickland, 2002). A wide combination of assessment types should be considered, including reading inventories, conferences, observations, freewriting, and classroom conversations (Klingner, 2004). Assessments, as with instruction, should also adjust according to the particular needs or goals of students. To gain a clear understanding of a student's growth, assessment should be ongoing (Rosenblatt, 2005). Smith (2004) suggests that "homemade" tests are best because they are "relevant and inconspicuous" (p. 229). Acknowledging that reading is thinking (Smith, 2004), monitoring a student's comprehension may be most confidently

assessed when students share their thinking, through responses to text, listening, and writing pieces, such as those created for portfolios (Harvey & Goudvis, 2000; Au, 2002).

Conclusions

By orienting instructional ideologies through a constructivist lens, it is clear that student success with narrative text comprehension is rooted in *autonomy,* to the maximum extent of the term, along with comprehension strategies. The preceding phrase, "with comprehension strategies," suggests that independence in reading experiences is *supported by* proficiency with a range of strategies designed to help students construct ever deeper meanings with texts. Strategies are appropriately viewed as mechanisms for the greater purpose of comprehension, much as vehicles are mechanisms for arriving at a destination. The "make and model" of any particular strategy is irrelevant as long as it contributes positively to a student's personal arrival at meaning. Truly autonomous readers can be defined as those who seek out reading for enjoyment or to serve a purpose, who seek to understand what they read (Kelly & Clausen-Grace, 2008), who recognize when meaning breaks down (Diehl, 2005), who draw on skills and strategies that best suit their particular needs at that time (Harvey & Goudvis, 2000), who discover personal meaning through strategic and deliberate thinking, and who find the reading experience satisfying enough to desire to engage in new reading experiences again in the future.

From an instructional standpoint, teachers who desire to engage students in efforts to improve reading comprehension must take into consideration a number of

facets of learning. Because teachers are not especially privy to the internal goings-on

of the students' minds, careful attention must be paid to their explicit personal

responses to reading events, as well as the environmental factors that contribute,

however subtly, to their responses. Moreover, these observations should compel a

teacher to respond in earnest by differentiating instruction, accepting individual

contributions, and flexibly adjusting the pace, scope, and sequence of instruction as

needed. Environmental factors can include such things as relationships (student-

student, and student-teacher), attitudes toward reading and mistakes, purpose for

reading or for tasks, choices, collaboration, organization of learning, texts,

comprehension strategies, time for independent practice, and forms of assessment.

  In order for students to take away anything from comprehension strategy

instruction, they must first be motivated to do so. Teachers have within their means a

number of strategies for maximizing the mental preparedness of their students. This

can be achieved by establishing positive relationships with students, as well as

creating a sense of community. Encouraging students to take risks, accepting

mistakes as learning opportunities (not failures), and recognizing all student

contributions as valuable are all means of creating a supportive learning atmosphere.

By demonstrating respect for students and what they bring to a learning experience,

they will in turn respect and trust the teacher. Furthermore, designing tasks that are

relevant to students' unique experiences or needs is much more engaging than tasks

that have no bearing on life outside of the classroom. If it is not immediately

apparent why a student must learn a particular concept, then it may not be worthy of

the time and effort to teach it. Communication among and with students is key for engaging them in tasks that are challenging and meaningful. Therefore, lots of opportunities to discuss, both formally and informally, are necessary in a literate environment. In addition, an excellent classroom practice that increases motivation and serves to individualize instruction is to offer choices whenever possible. Choices about which texts to read, whom to interact with, and how to respond to reading events give students a sense of control over the flow and direction of their learning.

Regardless of the choices that are offered to students, it is possible to organize instruction so that comprehension strategies make sense to students and are kept in the proper perspective. "Perspective" is important, for both teacher and students, as it maintains that strategies can be used singularly or in concert, at any time in relation to a reading experience, and that students must approach a reading experience with metacognition, or thoughtfulness about their success with the reading. One way to organize such instruction is to present the strategies as generally occurring before reading, during reading, or after reading. Strategies that may fall in the pre-reading category include ideas such as previewing, drawing on prior knowledge, making predictions, asking questions, and thinking about text structure. During the reading, students may choose to make connections (to self, to other texts, or to the world), infer, ask (and answer) questions, visualize, organize information, synthesize, think-aloud, share insights, and discuss. Possible post-reading strategies include asking and answering questions, summarizing, presenting, discussing, and acting out through drama techniques. Another possible alternative to this framework is to instead

present individual strategies as, say, puzzle pieces that, when viewed together, create the big picture. Regardless, though, it will be important to emphasize that strategies help to fill in whatever may be missing in terms of comprehension, not that they are *required* in order to arrive at comprehension. Gradually moving the learning from explicit teacher modeling to student independence requires significant chunks of time with numerous opportunities to practice newly learned concepts. Along the way, teachers should show students, through think-alouds, the mental processes they use to keep track of their thinking about their reading. In this way, students can begin to adjust their personal approach to text in pre-modeled ways that foster deeper understanding.

As the teacher, instruction of effective literacy practices must be oriented in a set of beliefs that values the students first and foremost. In order to initiate any kind of learning about reading, reading must first be shown to be pleasurable and satisfying. Students who are encouraged to think freely and independently, who are allowed to express personal, even emotional, responses about their reading experiences, even if they do not agree or align with teacher wishes, will be much more apt to seek out and engage in reading experiences in the future. Likewise, the reading tasks that teachers create should aim at evoking personal responses, rather than collecting grades. Students should be given opportunities to collaborate with their peers in ways that allow them to learn from each other, to build relationships, and to develop greater social awareness within the context of a reading experience.

To create a literacy environment that caters to students' unique experiences, responses, needs, and abilities, teachers should be extremely critical of assessment techniques. Forms of assessment that merely capture momentary snapshots of comprehension, such as high-stakes or formalized or routinized tests, should be replaced by a series of instruments that demonstrate *growth*. Greater reliance ought to be placed on teachers' intuitive understanding of their student's comprehension. Tracking growth through demonstrated proficiency of comprehension strategies as well as depth of student responses to literature has much greater potential for informing future instruction than does a single instrument at a single point in time. To that end, devices such as portfolios, freewrites, and anecdotal notes throughout response activities have great value.

The practices outlined here, especially when implemented with sincere deliberation and reflection, offer enormous potential for instilling in our students a sense of self-efficacy and a lifelong love of reading and learning.

Chapter Three: Project Description

Introduction

Many teachers, including those on staff at my elementary school, would agree that "teaching to the test" is fundamentally wrong, despite enormous pressure, at times, to do just that. However, less obvious but [very likely] as harmful is the notion of "teaching to the program." With regard to literacy programming, it is not uncommon to find teachers sticking to the manual, perhaps due to an inability to, say, find suitable or feasible alternatives. When it comes to our students' achievement in reading comprehension, particularly with narrative texts, the result has been rather unfavorable. It would seem that adherence to programming is shortchanging our students. It is true that many students are able to think deeply about their reading, as they have discovered and learned to utilize approaches to decipher text with relative ease and automaticity. However, a large number of students unfortunately demonstrate shallow comprehension consistently with little to no cognition about how to construct deeper meanings.

The strategies teachers integrate into their instruction for deepening comprehension are not necessarily to blame. Indeed, any strategy that serves to help students connect and make meaning is worthwhile versus none at all. However, the approaches teachers use with those strategies may deserve examining. In assessing the effectiveness of literacy instruction as it pertains to comprehension, defensibly the chief goal of reading, several factors should be considered. Are the students comfortable to express themselves, respond to reading, and take risks in earnest? Are

students motivated to read and engage in literacy tasks? Are strategies presented as singular skills or within a framework that promotes metacognition? Is the teaching made explicit, or is learning implied? Do students have lots of opportunities to practice, and to collaborate in meaningful exchanges with peers? Does comprehension assessment match the learning taking place and reflect student growth? A close evaluation of these concepts by teaching staff responsible for literacy instruction may reveal that certain practices currently being used do not hold up against the research. By encouraging the integration of teaching strategies proven effective by others in the field, I hope to close the gap in comprehension achievement by our lower readers, and improve the overall satisfaction of literacy instruction by staff. It is my contention that reading comprehension instruction can be done better. Perhaps it is time that teachers are reminded to teach to the *students*, not to the tests or to the programs.

In this final chapter, my intention is to lay out the design for a professional development series for general education teaching staff. The ideas incorporated into these workshops are rooted in the professional literature reviewed in the previous chapter. What follows is a detailed outline of what comprises each of the six workshops, with descriptions embedded within that justify why particular concepts are integrated. In addition, you will find sections detailing how this project can be implemented, how the effectiveness of this project can be evaluated, as well as a series of conclusions about comprehension instruction that are worth consideration for affecting lasting change.

Project Components

Within this section, you will find six sequential components that comprise the professional development workshops. Each component refers specifically to one session/workshop focusing on a particular key idea. The first session is designed to build the argument for the need for change in how comprehension strategy instruction is addressed in the classroom. Thereafter, the sessions will address student motivation and engagement, comprehension strategies and a conceptual framework for learning, the role of the teacher and an instructional framework, peer collaboration, and assessment, respectively.

Keeping in mind that each of these sessions represents a workshop with teaching staff, you will find elements to engage attendees prior to each meeting, during the workshops, and following each meeting. The opinions, beliefs, and experiences of staff will comprise a significant element of each session. Reflection of current thinking and teaching practices will hopefully contribute to open-mindedness about alternatives in comprehension instruction and more thoughtful teaching in the future. What teachers choose to implement within their own classrooms, as determined from one workshop, will become possible topics of conversation at the following session, encouraging further reflection in addition to accountability.

Each of these sessions has, at its core, two underlying beliefs. First, it is important that students, not the material, are the first consideration in literacy instruction. For students to become autonomous and strategic comprehenders, to have ownership of their learning, teachers must recognize what the students bring to

reading experiences and to build upon that. The second belief is that, for lasting change to occur, teachers must give careful thought to research-based evidence and to envision effective literacy instruction as occurring through proven ideas and strategies with ongoing practice and collegial support. Furthermore, each session will be driven by the concept of *problem-solving,* on the part of both students and teachers, as a guiding principle. Recognizing learning as engagement in problem-solving situations, students will be motivated, will feel a sense of shared investment in their learning alongside peers, and will be more apt to take risks. The point Rasinski and Padak (2000) make about cooperative problem-solving for students is equally valuable to adults as well: "In cooperative situations, students are likely to view problems as challenges for the group to consider instead of indications of their own inability" (p. 23). Participants in these workshops are encouraged to collaborate with colleagues in order to elucidate personal challenges, experience, and expertise.

One final note worth discussing is that the series of workshops proposed here is not intended to replace curricular goals, to diminish the creativity or professionalism of teachers, or to serve as a substitute for literacy programming. Rather, teachers are invited to affirm those instructional methods they currently use which are supported by research and to adapt their instruction in ways that hold the greatest potential for success.

Session 1: The need for change. Very often, educators may stick with the status quo because current methods of instruction seem to work. Unless evidence to the contrary is brought to light, keeping with what works seems reasonable and

simple. It is far too easy to dismiss the low achievement of some readers as just being typical, as following the bell curve norm, or as caused by certain personal or social factors beyond the scope of teacher influence. Furthermore, when students do perform satisfactorily on routine assessments, many teachers "call it good" and move on; after all, there is a great deal of material "to cover." Berube (2004) agrees, "As educators, we use these multiple-choice 'bubble' tests to convince ourselves that our students truly 'understand' what we teach them, as evidenced by a passing test score" (p. 264). Most would agree, however, that comprehension (narrative or expository) is far too important to simply "dismiss" or to "convince ourselves" about. *All* students, but especially our lower readers, deserve our best efforts to help them become competent comprehenders in order to experience reading success throughout their school careers.

For the purposes of this first workshop session, it will be important to raise awareness about our comprehension instruction and the degree to which our students struggle. In this way, we can begin to form the argument for a need for change in how instruction is done. Louise Rosenblatt (2005) makes the suggestion, "We must scrutinize carefully the way in which teaching methods and approaches will either foster or hinder a lasting sense of personal meaningfulness" (p. 67). Prior to this meeting, staff will receive a brief three-question quickwrite which asks: (1) What do you use to monitor your students' thinking during or following a structured reading event? (2) How do you know when your students comprehend what they read? and (3) What has been your frustration with comprehension instruction? (appendix A).

Though it is short, this five-minute quickwrite will prompt staff to consider what they currently do and to evaluate whether it is effective, without taking up too much time or compromising teacher attitudes toward this professional development. This brief reflection is designed to merely initiate greater awareness about practices that may not receive as much deliberate thought as they should. The staff is asked to bring their responses to the first session in order to contribute later to group conversation.

Once again, using a constructivist framework for orienting instruction, one which emphasizes the construction of knowledge within students, it is important that staff focus squarely on how their teaching is perceived from a student's point of view. Being competent readers, it is easy for adults to disregard the impact that challenging reading may have on students, yet this characterizes a major element of classroom learning. In order to bring this perspective to the forefront of our conversations, the teachers will be invited to participate in a couple of reading comprehension challenges. After welcoming staff and briefly outlining the goals of this workshop series, I will present the following passage:

> Cook and Campbell identified construct underrepresentation, in which a single
> variable does not adequately index the underlying constructs, as a major factor
> limiting inferences about complex human behaviors. (Fletcher, 2006, p. 328)

The staff will be invited to make their thinking audible and to work as a group to break apart the passage and to make as much sense of it as possible. Using a t-chart (appendix B), projected onto a screen for all to see, one staff member will be chosen

to record what the group thinks they know as well as what information needs to be learned in order to comprehend the text.

After the group has sufficiently analyzed the text, as students of reading, we will step back to now view our comprehension processes through a teacher's lens. This time, I will record key ideas that surface during the discussion on the whiteboard to validate the various concepts that comprise many comprehension activities. Some guiding questions to facilitate this conversation (along with possible responses in parenthesis) include:

- In what type of environment did this reading occur? (collaborative, relaxed)

- What resources did you draw on in order to attempt to make sense of the text? (prior experience with similar text structure, prior knowledge of word meanings, grammatical rules)

- What mental or strategic processes did you utilize? (ask questions, infer, make connections, summarize)

- As a student, what would you need a teacher to provide in order to aid comprehension of the text? (vocabulary, context of passage, background of author, knowledge of names)

- How might you demonstrate your comprehension of this text? (summarize, statements, concept map)

- What real-life purpose did this activity serve? Or, why was this task beneficial to you? (to gain understanding/perspective of how our students feel when presented with challenging reading)

- Would you seek out reading of this nature again? Why, or why not? (no, too difficult, didn't make sense, not enjoyable)

The second comprehension challenge is borrowed in part from Sheridan Blau (2003), in her book, *The Literature Workshop: Teaching Texts and Their Readers*. In it, she describes a comprehension experiment using a quote by Henry David Thoreau: "Sometimes we are inclined to class those who are once-and-a-half-witted with the half-witted, because we appreciate only a third part of their wit." In this challenge, staff will be presented with this quote the moment a stopwatch is begun. They will be asked to take their seats as soon as they believe they have quietly arrived at a reasonable interpretation. I will count off the time after every ten seconds. When/If everyone has been seated, they will be asked to write their interpretations on scrap paper, which will later be read aloud.

After the staff has shared their interpretations, conversation will once again turn to this comprehension activity as viewed through a teacher's lens. Clearly, the differences between these two challenges will become apparent. The same guiding questions could be used to facilitate conversation, but many of the responses will surely differ. Because the activity was timed, participation was "forced," responses were devised individually, and interpretations were exposed for peer critique, the learning environment was vastly more stressful. Since there was no opportunity to

collaborate, it is likely some participants completely shut down or gave up. A new

guiding question, "How did you feel as you participated," will surely evoke responses

that suggest the kinds of frustrations our students experience as they struggle during

reading lessons.

Having completed these two challenges and participated in group discussion

about various elements of reading comprehension, the staff will be given

approximately five minutes to record any conclusions they may have drawn

(appendix C). They will be encouraged, though not required, to collaborate

interactively and to include in their notes some insights related to the various topics of

discussion, similar to the topics that characterize the remaining five workshop

sessions.

To further set up the argument that a change in comprehension instruction

may be warranted, the staff will be presented with data on reading comprehension

achievement derived from building-level, district-level, and state-level assessments

from the most recent three academic years. At all three of these levels, it is possible

to glean reading achievement data through the Michigan Educational Assessment

Program (MEAP) as well as Measures of Academic Progress (MAP). Locally,

achievement can also be determined through such programs as Read Naturally (RN),

Developmental Reading Assessment (DRA2), core literacy program unit and weekly

assessments, and specialized reading inventories or comprehension tests designed by

teachers. Though the nature of how comprehension is assessed differs from one

instrument to the next, the trend of achievement over time will suggest that a

consistent portion of our students are failing to meet standards. It should be noted

that, because comprehension consists of numerous variables that are assessed broadly,

such analysis of data serves only as an impetus for implementing changes and does

not necessarily specify in what ways those changes should be made. What should

become clear is that improvements to instruction are needed to reach those low-

achieving students.

Clearly, the primary goal of these workshops is to encourage teachers to

consider positive changes *they* could make within their classrooms to promote deeper

reading comprehension. To that end, the last major component of this session is to

reflect on the quickwrites the staff was asked to complete prior to coming.   Forming

groups of three or four, they will be invited to share their responses to the three

questions. During the round-table discussions that follow, participants will be

encouraged to affirm the techniques and strategies colleagues are using that they

believe best serve the students, to draw on past experiences to offer professional

advice, and to support teachers with personal frustrations of comprehension

instruction. Significant or problematic issues with teaching comprehension will be

presented to the whole group, on a volunteer basis, for collaborative discussion.

These quickwrites will be collected by the presenter.

Returning to the notes form supplied earlier (appendix C), staff will be invited

to once again jot down any conclusions they may have drawn from these discussions.

The goal is to have included at least one note about each of the topics listed. Finally,

they will be asked to place a check in the box next to one idea or conclusion they

would like to consciously integrate into their classroom over the next three school days. Before leaving, the participants will locate one colleague who will "check up" with them on day four to verify whether they have followed through. An e-mail notification will go out to staff on that day as a reminder. In the second workshop session, teachers will have the opportunity to discuss how this idea integration was received by students.

Session 2: Student motivation and engagement. One of the most significant factors affecting the depth and breadth of learning is the degree to which students engage in the process. Kelley and Clausen-Grace (2009) point out, "At the highest levels [of cognitive involvement], the learner submerges in the task—mentally, emotionally, and even physically. At the lowest levels, the learner is barely aware of the task. Without engagement, learning is difficult" (p. 313). Therefore, the first key concept being addressed in these workshops deals with ways to improve motivation and encourage the highest levels of active engagement in literacy learning.

In order to get staff thinking about how motivation and engagement play into daily literacy instruction, they will be invited to complete two simple tasks prior to arriving at the second workshop. The first task will invite them to recall any recent teaching experience when they knew their students were maximally engaged. The short questionnaire will prompt consideration of various factors they believe led to the students' piqued attention and participation (appendix D). The second task, described on the same form, will invite staff to find, or bring to mind, their quintessential favorite children's picture book. Then, they will record just one short,

thoughtfully worded review of the book to illustrate why it is their favorite.   They are

asked to bring these picture books to the second session. A final cursory question

will inquire as to which cold beverage they would most like to enjoy at the coming

workshop. This assignment will be due one day before we meet so that the requested

beverages can be procured in time. While the first task clearly relates to the key topic

of this workshop, the picture book and beverage inquiries are admittedly less obvious.

In addition to sparking curiosity about the activities that will transpire during the

workshop, I also wish to associate this second meeting with feelings of comfort and

mutual investment. Beyond that, further justification for these questions will be

addressed in the following section.

Upon arriving at this session, participants will be encouraged to find their

choice beverage, enjoy some relaxing music, and to begin discussing with

surrounding neighbors the results from the idea integration they selected at the

conclusion of the first session *or* the questionnaire they completed earlier about a

recent successful lesson.   If it is not yet apparent, the provision of beverages and

quiet music is designed to establish a certain relaxing quality to the environment,

promoting greater participation in an anxiety-free atmosphere, a point supported by

Cambourne (2002). By inquiring about which beverages they would like to have,

participants are not only presented with a choice, which helps to evoke a sense of

empowerment, but are also provided an element of motivation, anticipation of

something positive that will be experienced during the meeting. The RAND report

(2002) reminds us how choice and interaction improve motivation: "Teachers who

give students choices, challenging tasks, and collaborative learning structures increase their motivation to read and comprehend text" (p. 41). During their discussions, participants will be reminded to state which idea they have chosen to integrate into their instruction, to describe how they went about it, and to express their satisfaction or frustration. Listeners will respond with personal and professional support.

Following this first activity, teachers will be asked to analyze whether they believed the atmosphere was conducive to engagement, and why. A volunteer will be asked to record on the whiteboard the types of environmental elements that are raised during the discussion. Certainly, it is not implied that beverages are necessary to motivate students, but the notion of "throwing them a bone," of supporting them in engaging in personally desirable literacy activities, certainly has merit. We are reminded of Rosenblatt's (2005) words, "The teaching of reading and writing at any developmental level should have as its first concern the creation of environments and activities in which students are motivated and encouraged to draw on their own resources to make 'live' meanings" (p. 27). At this time, the findings from the professional literature that deal with affective, or intrinsic, motivation, including those from Gambrell (2010), Kelley and Clausen-Grace (2008), Pardo (2004), Cambourne (2002), and Guthrie et al. (2006), will be illuminated.

The second component to this session refers to the second task participants were asked to complete before arriving, writing a short review about their favorite

children's picture book. The purpose of these reviews is embedded within the next activity. I will present the task as follows:

I think it is important, and I am sure you will agree, that as educators we try to encourage, and model what it means to be, a literate community. We want our students and their families to value and seek out reading for lifelong enjoyment. To that end, I have asked you to recall your favorite picture books because I would like to create a new feature for our school's website. Each month, I would like to post a Top-10 Teacher Recommended Reading List. With your help today, we can initiate this first installment, which obviously centers on picture books. I would like to invite you, as a group, to determine the top ten ranking of the picture books you have selected. The three teachers whose books top the list will have their book reviews printed along with their names and photos.

In further explaining the task, I will suggest that teachers each read aloud the reviews they have written and then engage in whole-group discussion, defending their reasoning and considering other's viewpoints. To keep the activity running smoothly, we will assign a time-keeper to assure that it takes no longer than thirty minutes, a recorder to post the decided ranking on the whiteboard, a moderator to regulate the noise and conversation, and a judge to mediate arguments. The results will, as promised, indeed be posted to the school's website.

Having completed the second activity, the staff will be asked to once again analyze the factors that helped determine its success. Some guiding questions (along with possible responses in parenthesis) might include:

- To what degree does anxiety or stress affect you in this task? Why? (low, not significant, opportunity to think or write ahead of time, no wrong answers)

- What led to your engagement in the activity? (everyone started the task ahead of time in writing, jobs during the task, desire to make the top 10 list, desire to rank as high as possible on the list, no wrong answers so no worries about speaking up)

- Why is this task beneficial? (it encourages literacy, it makes our opinions have significance, it displays our professionalism to the community, it helps us get to know each other on a more personal level)

Throughout the task, participants have the opportunity to learn more about their colleagues, more about various children's books, and more about how their personal opinions match up to those of others. Gambrell (2010) reminds us of the constructivist nature of such activities, "Literacy tasks that encourage purposeful student cognition and result in the construction of new meanings would be considered more authentic than tasks that simply require extraction and recall of information" (p. 16). Deliberate reflection of this activity will elucidate the importance of authenticity in classroom instruction. Related research findings, in addition to that

which address other extrinsic factors to motivation and engagement, will then be discussed.

To generate literacy lessons and activities that are purposeful or meaningful to individual students, it is important to gain a clear understanding of the types of readers in the classroom. Pardo (2004) supports the suggestion by Harvey and Goudvis (2000) that teachers supply "books at every level, on every conceivable topic, to ensure that kids get their hands on books they want to read" (p. 29). One method for managing such a concept is surveying students to determine their reading interests. The third component to this workshop requires that each teacher complete a short Reading Interest Inventory (appendix E), one which can easily be used with students as well. Once completed, teachers will exchange their surveys with a colleague, whose job will be to use the information provided to propose one or two books that teacher might enjoy, drawing on their personal "command of books" (Rosenblatt, 2005). Discussion will likely commence!

Before concluding this session, the participants will once more decide on an idea they would like to implement in their own classrooms, this time with an emphasis on motivating or engaging their students. Using either the picture book they brought with them, or one from a selection of books provided, the teachers will choose one book that holds promise for introducing a comprehension strategy. Suggestions for strategies include, but are not limited to, making connections, making predictions, questioning, visualizing, or inferring (Harvey & Goudvis, 2000). With this book and strategy in mind, the teachers are encouraged to develop a method for

eliciting strong student interest and/or to establish an authentic, engaging activity. They will record their ideas on a bookmark (appendix F) and will be asked to try the lesson within the next school week. On the back side of the bookmark, they will record their observations after the lesson, and then submit the book and bookmark to the workshop presenter. The presenter will compile these methods into a small, spiral-bound reference book to be made available to all teachers.

By way of example, I will suggest to the participants some possible methods to interest and engage students using the picture book, *Owl Moon*, by Jane Yolen (1987). The story is about a young girl who goes "owling" with her father on a cold winter night. The descriptive language Yolen uses throughout the story lends itself very well to the strategy of visualizing. To generate interest in the story, and to tap into the process of visualization from the onset, I will present the students with a number of physical artifacts that relate to the story. They will be invited to create a mental story in their head with each successive item I pull out, or attempt to determine how the items are related. The question, "What activity might occur that is related to all these items?" will be posed. The term "owling" could be introduced and discussed among the students as to what it means. Next, the idea behind visualizing will be introduced, and two volunteers will attempt to demonstrate what they visualize as they hear the story read aloud by acting it out. To follow up, and to engage all the students in similar practice with the strategy, they will be presented with an opportunity to submit a reader's theater video for a new collection in the media center, based on a story of their own choosing.

Session 3: Comprehension strategies and a conceptual framework for learning. The third session in this workshop series addresses the actual strategies that are learned by students to aid comprehension, as well as a focus on metacognitive discretion about when and how students should use those strategies. Implied in the concept of metacognition is an awareness of context—both of the text and purpose for reading, and of the multidimensionality of approaches to building understanding. Strategy use by the metacognitively aware reader is flexible, at times experimental, and dynamic. Harvey and Goudvis (2000) point out that "we want readers to keep track of their thinking as they read and to become flexible enough with strategy use to choose the strategy best suited to their needs at the time. But all of these strategies work together to help readers construct meaning" (p. 20). In this session, teachers will come to more fully understand which strategies are best supported by research and the contexts in which they should be learned, the importance of making strategy learning explicit, and how to promote metacognition during authentic reading tasks.

In order to prime the participants to begin thinking about instruction of effective strategies, they will be asked to briefly examine the specific roster of strategies they currently use. The week prior to meeting, they will receive a set of index cards and instructions which direct them to: (a) use their curricular resources to locate a complete list of comprehension strategies they personally address in their classroom (and to be honest!); (b) write the name of each strategy on the front sides of the index cards, one to a card; and (c) on the back sides, rate the strategies from one to five (five being the highest) as to how much those particular strategies

personally aid *their* comprehension of texts in general. They will bring these cards with them to the workshop.

Upon arriving, the teachers will discover the collection of motivation and engagement bookmarks completed by them from the previous session. They will be invited to browse the bookmarks, ask questions, and share with colleagues the results of those lessons. In addition, they will find a large collection of recipe books. They will each be directed to find one recipe they would most like to try, were a chef invited to prepare it for them.

Given sufficient time to converse and locate a recipe, I will then lead a discussion about the selection of those recipes using a series of questions that assess the thinking processes involved. These questions may include the following, along with possible responses in parenthesis:

- How did you select the particular book? (prior knowledge about the chef, quality of the binding or photographs, category of foods offered in the book, the age of the book)

- What were you looking for as you scanned the pages? (recipes with tastes or flavors I know I like, something I've never tried but am interested in)

- Why did you pick that particular recipe? (it looks delicious, it looks adventurous)

- What appealed to you more, the photograph or the description of the recipe? Why? (the ingredients matter, the picture shows the final product)

- If it was morning, do you think you would have selected something different? Why? (the time of day affects our interests or tastes)

At this point, I would highlight some of the recognized strategies that would address the very mental processes they just experienced, such as previewing, accessing prior knowledge and experience, making connections, questioning, and determining purpose. It should become evident that such strategy use, by competent readers like those assembled here, validates the need to draw attention to these concepts in our strategy instruction with students.

Next, the participants will be prompted to now each find a recipe *they* could realistically make for everyone present. After they have located these new recipes, I will address the change in mental processes involved. Once again using guiding questions, we will come to discover that this selection of recipes was characterized by previewing (to meet a new set of criteria), prior knowledge and experience (in terms of personal ability to cook), making connections (to similar recipes in other familiar books, or to personal tastes), questioning (as to whether others present would like it, as to ability to follow recipe, whether it would make enough), visualizing (imagining following the steps), among others. Clearly, this new task prompts an entirely new mindset, one that stresses practicality over personal taste.

The discussion that follows will highlight the notion that students come to reading experiences with a particular purpose or context for reading, just as we experienced with the recipes. Rosenblatt (2005) refers to these contexts as either "efferent" or "aesthetic;" or, as in this case, pertaining to ease and practicality (efferent) or taste and satisfaction of hunger (aesthetic). When presenting strategies for learning, it is important to make such contextual differences explicit so that students can better determine in what sense strategies should be applied.

Making explicit the types of mental processes used during reading by good readers plays a major role in helping students understand the when, what, and how of comprehension building. One particularly effective method for making our thinking explicit is through think-alouds. Jeffrey Wilhelm (2001), in his book *Improving Comprehension with Think-Aloud Strategies,* describes it this way:

> A think-aloud of reading is creating a record, either through writing or talking aloud, of the strategic decision-making and interpretive processes of going through a text, reporting everything the reader is aware of noticing, doing, seeing, feeling, asking, and understanding as she reads. A think-aloud involves talking about the reading strategies you are using and the content of the piece you are reading" (p. 19).

The second component to this workshop, then, involves engaging the participants in a model session of a think-aloud. In this way, teachers can begin to feel comfortable with expressing thoughts aloud during a reading and begin to see how similar practices can be implemented in their classrooms. For this activity, I

have selected the classic tale of *The Velveteen Rabbit*, by Margery Williams (1975). Though many of the teachers have likely read this story in the past, there are still plenty of elements in this book that are sure to genuinely prompt such processes as predicting, questioning, and inferencing, among others. Three volunteers will be selected to each read a few paragraphs with a focus on making every thought during the reading audible. As the volunteers comment on their reading, the remaining members in the audience will be asked to determine which strategies are being used and to set that correlating index card (requested from the pre-meeting task) aside. If they do not have that particular strategy already included in their pile, they can add it on a blank card. Each time the strategy is used again, they will mark the corresponding card with another check mark.

By the conclusion of this second activity, it should become apparent that many strategies are used, sometimes repeatedly, throughout a reading of virtually any narrative text. Because good readers, such as these teachers, orchestrate the use of numerous strategies, our students should be taught to do the same. Harvey and Goudvis (2000) illustrate, "Strategic readers are connecting, inferring, questioning, visualizing, and synthesizing continually as they read" (p. 20).

In order to solidify the concept of multi-strategy instruction, and to perceive a certain hierarchy in their usage, we will once again analyze the results from the strategy index cards. Participants will be prompted to compare the number of checkmarks now shown on the fronts of their cards with the ratings they have given them on the backsides. The teachers will be encouraged to compare their set of cards

with one or two colleagues to see if any surprises arise. Finally, they will be asked to select their top six strategies, according to their own set of criteria. As a group, we will determine, and record on the whiteboard, which six distinct strategies we believe to be most beneficial for including in our instruction. At this time, the findings by Massey (2003), Harvey and Goudvis (2000), Duke and Pearson (2002), and others will bring to light the strategies that have been shown to be effective. The overlap between the experts and from our own discussions will suggest key areas to focus on in the classroom. The teachers will clip together the cards for the specific strategies they decide are most important to focus on in their teaching and use them as reminders. Certainly, there is no official requirement as to the number or selection of strategies that must be taught. The suggestion here to key in on just six merely advocates for quality of instruction for a fewer number over scant attention to a greater quantity. In all likeliness, the natural flow of instruction over time will, by default, include consideration of a broad range of strategic approaches to reading.

If it is not yet apparent, these activities have thus far led up to a strong argument for emphasizing metacognition. Diehl (2005) reminds us that "Poor readers do not seem to know that they are supposed to make sense of the text and do not seem to realize when meaning breaks down. Thus, it seems that explicit strategy instruction without focused attention to metacognition is futile" (p. 59). The question that should drive strategy instruction is, "How do students know when to use these strategies?" Just because they have engaged in lessons about them does not mean that they will use them on their own, at the right time, or in the most effective way.

Students should be presented with a framework for perceiving strategy use appropriately. Strategies are not merely activities which earn grades. Rather, they are pieces to a comprehension puzzle. Whenever a student recognizes that something is missing in their comprehension of a text, they should identify a strategy that holds promise for filling in the gap and put it to use. Much of the time, such strategic reading can be done "on the fly." But students should also recognize that some comprehension problems may require slowing down and approaching with greater deliberation. Therefore, helping students think about their own mental processes is as important as teaching a repertoire of strategies. Pressley (2006) reminds us that "The task of comprehension strategies instruction can become manageable, in part, by developing the understanding in teachers that very effective readers actually use a small repertoire of strategies" (p. 18). Ultimately, though, we want readers to utilize them autonomously: "The bottom line is that we want our students to do more than recite a list of strategies; we want them to actually use the strategies, unprompted" (Mardell, DeCleene, & Juettner, 2010, p. 687). With this in mind, the third component to this workshop is to begin envisioning methods by which strategies can be presented as belonging to a *set* of solutions to the problem of comprehension breakdowns. Many experts have proposed introducing the strategies as falling under the categories of pre-reading, during-reading, and post-reading (Gill, 2008; Massey, 2003; RAND, 2002). Indeed, the timing of strategies must occur at one of these points during a reading experience; however, alternatives to this framework might also help to support the notion that a variety of strategies can be used repeatedly

throughout the entire reading process. One alternative, as mentioned earlier, might be to consider comprehension as a puzzle, with the strategies as possible pieces to fill in the gap (appendix G). The participants will be asked to brainstorm comparable methods to helping students visualize this view of strategy use. They will each be provided large poster boards and materials to draft a version of a bulletin board they will later create for their classrooms to illustrate this concept. Other ideas that may be proffered include presenting strategies as tools in a toolbox to "repair" comprehension, photography equipment for helping to see the "big picture," or as different vehicles to help "transport" readers to meaning. Because the actual creation of the bulletin board within the classrooms presents particular time, space, and financial challenges, the teachers will be asked to complete the draft version and to submit a photograph electronically to the presenter when completed. These images will then be returned via e-mail to the participants with reminders about creating them for the following school year, and to use the poster version right away to assist with strategy instruction.

One final consideration regards student autonomy in meaning-making. Once the strategies have been taught and their context for use has been explained, it is important that students begin practicing independently. From a management point of view, it is understandably a major challenge to monitor each child independently during each reading experience. One method for addressing this aspect of instruction is to encourage students to use a comprehension checklist (appendix H), as suggested by Massey (2003). The checklist lays out a variety of comprehension strategies for

both narrative and expository texts, organized according to when they may be used during the reading experience. When students discover that meaning has broken down, they can use the checklist to consider ways to repair it, and to record which ones they have attempted. In this way, the teacher has documentation of strategy use and can then individualize instruction and set goals. There are also extra spaces for teachers and students to add strategies not yet included. Each participant will receive a copy of this checklist for use with their students.

       Session 4: The role of teacher and an instructional framework. Now that we have analyzed the *learning* of strategies to aid comprehension by students, it is time to shift our focus to the role of the teacher and the aspects of *instruction* that affect student success. Clearly, there is a great deal of overlap between the two perspectives. However, the decisions that go into the development of effective instruction are based on a wide variety of factors that may not quite register with students. These factors are the focus of this fourth session.

       The initial component to this workshop stresses the importance of making literacy experiences matter to students. Rosenblatt (2005) reminds us that "If we are to 'teach literature,' certain kinds of [personally satisfying and personally meaningful] experiences known as literary must first be brought about—that is our primary responsibility" (p. 63). A few days prior to this session date, participants will receive an e-mail requesting they locate two items to bring with them to the meeting. The first item is any favorite photograph or picture that has special meaning, preferably one that does not contain an image of themselves, and is acceptable to put

on display. The second is any passage of text, prose or poetry, that especially strikes

a chord, or resonates personally.

When the teachers arrive to this meeting, they will be asked to place their

photographs along a table for all to see, but not to share any details about them yet.

Once the meeting gets underway, I will ask the attendees to take a few minutes to

browse the photographs and consider which one they personally find most engaging,

not including their own. After a sufficient amount of time has passed, we will begin

sharing our responses with the purpose of exploring the aesthetic qualities that drew

them in. It is possible that some may be at a loss for explaining just why they found a

particular photograph appealing. Others may allude to such things as the display of

colors, the unique moment or action captured in time, the suggestion of pleasurable

activities, or the story behind the people captured on film, among others. Then, each

person will be given the opportunity to express the reasons why their photograph was

meaningful to them. Some follow-up questions to clarify our purpose for this activity

could include: (a) Was anyone's response to a photograph unacceptable? (b) Did the

variety of responses indicate anyone's intelligence? (c) Did anyone need any help

appreciating a photograph? (d) Could the right person possibly teach us to express

more eloquently or clearly the personal appeal of these photographs? and (e) What

conclusions could we draw if these photographs were books and we were the

students? At this time, a volunteer will be asked to record on an overhead sheet

(appendix I) the main points of this discussion, which will address the importance of

allowing for individual responses to pleasurable reading events. At the conclusion of this session, attendees will receive a copy.

The second task to address the importance of personal response involves the passage of text each participant was asked to bring. In a whole group setting, volunteers will be asked to read aloud their passage. In order to savor the experience to the fullest, I will encourage the audience to close their eyes and to remain silent for a few moments after each reading is finished to process the mood and content of the piece. If the readers so choose, they are welcome to share how elements in their text resonated with them personally. When everyone has shared, I will present the question, "What have you done with this particular piece of text, or what does this text inspire you to do?" In all likeliness, responses may range from tucking it into a drawer, to framing and hanging it, to creating a new inspired piece of writing. Some reflection as to why they were compelled to embrace the text beyond the initial reading should illuminate the power of enriching literacy experiences. The range of responses from these teachers will also illustrate the breadth of personal responses our students may have when they connect to a particular text in their own reading. To deprive them of such opportunities to embrace meaningful texts beyond the reading, in their own way, would seem almost callous. At this time, the beliefs and attitudes put forth by Rasinski and Padak (2000) will be brought to light, emphasizing the purpose behind these first tasks: (a) expect all students to learn, (b) see the value of everything students bring into the classroom, (c) focus on what students can do rather

than what they can't, and (d) believe that learning is easiest when given choices and when instruction is based on interest and relevance.

Once a child has freely selected a text for reading, the teacher is presented with an opportunity to use the text to promote the utilization of strategies. Observation of the student and her approach to comprehension during the reading will reveal whether instruction is warranted or affirmation of effective thinking is due. Depending on the book, the text, or the child, the instruction may involve reviewing strategies already learned or introducing new ideas to help the student build meaning. Cunningham and Allington (2007) describe this process, "In planning a comprehension lesson, we decide which thinking strategies will help students make sense of the text they are reading today and be better—more strategic—readers when they are reading on their own" (p. 115). The second major component to this workshop session is to provide the participants with an opportunity to practice the concept of strategy selection in relation to particular texts, to envision the instructional scenario, and to role-model such instruction for the benefit of others. Working in pairs or trios, I will invite the teachers to essentially create a skit that models a learning/teaching event around the selection of a particular text. Each group will select from a collection of picture books that lend themselves well to the promotion of thinking strategies. A guiding principle for approaching this task comes from Frank Smith (2004), who asserts that teachers should always question, "What is causing confusion here?" (p. 225). Furthermore, Smith (2004) warns that teachers be wary about overcorrecting or over-explaining, as it may "stop [students] in their

tracks for what might be quite extraneous reasons" (p. 225). With such practice, the teachers can begin to frame student reading events practically, anticipate reading challenges, and gain greater proficiency in responding to reading challenges constructively. The final product for each skit should only take about five minutes to present, which will be digitally recorded for viewing at the following workshop. At this point, participants will come to process some of the findings from professional literature that highlight effective instructional techniques, such as that put forth by Rasinski and Padak (2000), who state, "By encouraging students to select their own reading material and inviting them to react, ask questions, and seek answers, we can help students control the purpose, content, and direction for their literacy experiences" (p. 11).

Having now explored an appropriate foundation for enriching literacy experiences, teachers must consider the degree to which their personal approach to literacy instruction aligns with best practices. The next component to this session involves some reflection about how the various concepts that characterize effective comprehension instruction are evident in the teachers' own classrooms. Each participant will receive a copy of A Checklist for Assessing the Comprehension Environment and Instruction in the Classroom (appendix J), borrowed from Duke and Pearson (2002). Individually and privately, they will mark how well they believe the ideas are being integrated into their own literacy instruction. Plus signs (+) indicate a belief that the concept is strongly integrated; check marks (✓) indicate that the concept is integrated but could be improved upon; and minus signs (-) indicate little

to no integration of the concept. Next, the teachers will be asked to circle whichever

of their marks represents a deficit in the particular literacy program they are currently

using. Once finished, the participants will determine just one of these concepts they

would like to improve upon in their classroom instruction over the following week.

In one or two sentences, they will submit their goal in writing to the presenter.

Within the following two days, e-mail notices will go out to each participant,

reminding them about their goals and suggesting online or textual resources to offer

relevant advice.

   Session 5: Peer collaboration. In terms of comprehension building, a

process of construction that occurs primarily within the student, the matter of peer

collaboration may seem somewhat out of context. The development of meaning-

making by students through the careful intervention of expert instructors is one thing;

it is yet another to conceive of such vital activity as being enhanced by peers who

may be "in the same boat." To be sure, there is a far slighter quantity of literature that

directly correlates these two concepts than anticipated. However, in the greater

context of effective teaching practices, peer collaboration is clearly a mainstay. Aside

from the role that collaboration plays in motivation and engagement, interaction

among students promotes solidification of knowledge structures and frameworks for

experimentation and actualization of ideas. Cambourne (2002) reminds us that "The

primary mechanism available for learners to develop their individual understandings

and knowledge is social interaction. In constructivist classrooms, the use of

collaborative groups is one of the most potent forms of this mechanism, because such

groups provide a readily available means of testing one's own understandings through listening to and reflecting on the understandings of others" (p. 29). In this fifth session, the primary goals are to communicate the importance of peer collaboration and provide some possible frameworks in which such learning can occur.

To bring the concept of peer interaction to the front and center of attention, participants will be asked to share snapshots, literally, of their students in action. Approximately one week prior to this session, teachers will be asked to consciously recognize moments throughout their school days when students are engaging in collaborative interactions and, as inconspicuously as possible, take pictures. They are requested to bring at least five photographs with them to the workshop, along with their digital cameras, if that is feasible.

Much like in session four, when the teachers arrive they will be asked to post their photographs along one whiteboard, with fairly generous spaces between, for everyone to view. Before engaging in dialogue about the activities and content of those photographs, however, we will begin first with an investigation of the lesson skits developed from the previous workshop. Having compiled all of the literacy lesson vignettes, we will review each "teacher-student" interaction, celebrating their on-screen bravado and praising their careful consideration of strategy instruction as related to the texts. The demonstrations of decision-making that recognized what the "reader" brought to the experience and how the meaning-making process could be enhanced through the strategy-text relationship will be especially affirmed.

At this time, we will return to the collaboration photographs now posted on the whiteboard. Smith (2004) makes the assertion that "Much of what children (and adults) learn they learn when they are interested in something someone else is doing" (p. 208). For this very reason, the participants will be asked to browse the photographs from the other teachers and to use a dry-erase marker to make comments in the available spaces about what they see happening. What are the visible indicators that students are learning/working collaboratively? After sufficient time has passed, the written comments will surely display a set of common attributes about what collaborative learning looks like. The discussion that follows, enhanced by the teachers' own accounts of the learning experiences that transpired, will attempt to highlight various forms and functions of purposeful student interaction. In this way, those teachers less inclined to permit such "noisier" classroom environments can begin to perceive them as acceptable, manageable, and pedagogically sound. Also embedded in this discussion will be an introduction to some of the other findings regarding the efficacy of social interaction in learning/reading experiences.

Embracing a social mindset to learning, each member of the group will be presented with a semantic map to be completed collaboratively (appendix K). The diagram depicts a set of social processes involved in effective learning environments, as put forth by Cambourne (2002), who states that, "Knowledge and meaning are socially constructed through the processes of negotiation, evaluation, and transformation" (p. 29). The participants' job will be to collectively determine and record what they believe each of the concepts means in relation to social learning

and/or provide an example. Such careful analysis will help each individual appreciate the merits of collaborative learning.

Now that the staff have reflected upon and analyzed the validity of peer collaboration, the final component to this workshop involves engaging the staff in an example of cooperative learning with relation to narrative text. In this way, teachers may see the concept in action and experience first-hand the benefits of a cooperative "community of learners." For this task, I have selected a chapter from Dan Brown's (2000) novel, *Angels & Demons*. This short passage describes a moment when the main character steps in to a Vatican restroom to compose, and relieve, himself after escaping a harrowing event. Each succeeding paragraph relates the grim thoughts and emotions felt by the protagonist, until finally the last paragraph breaks the tension with a humorous insight, that he "just took a leak in the Pope's toilet" (p. 307). The juxtaposition between those feelings of horror and dread and of sudden "relief" is an effective literary device that grips the reader and evokes an intense array of emotions in a relatively short span of text.

To begin, each participant will be given a copy of the passage (appendix L) with directions to lift the bottom edge up to the beginning so that only a couple lines of text can be seen. Before the text is read aloud, the group will be encouraged to specifically access their skill with visualizing, to mentally place themselves in the scene. A volunteer will be asked to read aloud the passage while the others follow along, moving the paper's edge down as it is being read. As the final paragraph is uttered, there will likely be a collective sigh of relief. Because this portion of the

activity emphasizes the participation of the community as one, it was desired that all

the readers experienced the text together. Through a literature circle format, the

readers will engage in community dialogue about the ideas, feelings, insights,

emotions, and questions that arose. In addition, a few jobs will be assigned in order

to keep track of time, to monitor excessive sidebar conversations, and to be sure

everyone gets the opportunity to share. Some guiding questions to propel this

discussion might include:

- What details from the passage contributed most effectively to the

  feelings of dread?

- Why do you suppose the author included that last paragraph? Or, what

  purpose did that serve?

- Are there any other examples in the passage that suggest a contrast,

  like the contrast we felt between terror and humor?

- Does the author rely on your ability to infer or to interpret, or is the

  writing overt?

- Did the details detract from your emotions, or enhance them?

- Was this an effective piece? Why?

- If you haven't yet read the full story, has this piece interested you

  enough to do so?

The following discussion will shed light on the literary device this author

used, hitting the reader with repeated examples of descriptions that evoke one set of

emotions and then suddenly shaking things up with an entirely different emotional

punch. By exploring this sharp contrast, we come to gain a much deeper understanding of the mental and physical toll on the character and the significance of these events in the context of the story. Furthermore, our intense response to the passage has now been, at least partially, explained through the use of this writing technique. As competent readers and teachers, we recognize that our strategic approach to this reading event taps into a rather sophisticated knowledge of text structure, although many other strategies had surely impacted our understanding. This reading experience clearly leaves enough of an imprint that it deserves further exploring as we look at other readings and possibly attempt to integrate the concept into our own writing.

In order to explore this idea further, I have requested that the teachers bring their digital cameras. In the interest of time, I have chosen to use pictures as the media by which the "students" will attempt, as in the example, to evoke contrasting responses, or, in other words, to experiment with similar text structure. A leading question to engage the participants might be, "How could we use these cameras to accomplish the same kind of effect Dan Brown achieved in this passage?" Depending on their responses, I will guide them to consider taking a series of snapshots. In the end, one possible outcome could be that they try to capture a series of five images that evoke one response, with a final snapshot suggesting a completely different emotion. For example, a group might choose five images of old or broken items with a sixth image portraying something brand new. The notion that students

must discuss, decide, and deliver together reinforces the benefits that peer interaction provides.

The groupings of individuals in this task may be determined by the number of cameras available or by simply requiring pairs or trios; however, allowing students to naturally pair up may not result in the most productive or beneficial outcome. In the classroom, students should be divided such that a mixture of ability and personality is achieved. Chick (2006) makes this point: "When conducting group strategy instruction, flexible, heterogeneous groups are most effective and provide students with the opportunity to work and develop relationships with a variety of learners" (p. 157). After the teachers have compiled their series of six pictures, they will submit them to me electronically to go on display at the final session.

One final assignment given to participants before they depart will involve making a decision about how to integrate the concept of peer collaboration more effectively in their teaching. On the back of their semantic maps, completed earlier, they will put in writing just one idea for encouraging deliberate peer interaction that can be accomplished in the coming week. As their students engage in this activity, the teachers will document it through e-mail or photographs and send it electronically to the presenter.

Session 6: Assessment. When teachers set out to tailor comprehension instruction to meet the various needs of students, how their learning is assessed is as important as what is taught. For teachers to best understand where the students are at in relation to texts and their proficiency in meaning-making, it is essential that a

proper method for determining growth is utilized. Formalized, and even benchmark, assessments only provide a brief and narrow snapshot of comprehension achievement, whereas ongoing measurement tools offer the greatest potential for directing future instruction. Duke and Pearson (2002) make this point precisely: "Teachers should monitor students' use of comprehension strategies and their success at understanding what they read. Results of this monitoring should, in turn, inform the teacher's instruction" (p. 212). Thus, our goal in the sixth and final session to this workshop series is to elucidate methods of comprehension assessment that support effective teaching.

In order for staff to reflect upon the practices currently being put to use to monitor student comprehension, they will be asked to locate and bring in one example each of as many *different* comprehension assessments or monitoring tools as they are able to find which they personally use as part of their teaching. A few days prior to this workshop, they will receive an e-mail requesting that photocopies of these items accompany them to the meeting.

When the participants arrive, they will find the series of photographs taken from the previous session posted on the whiteboard. Additional examples, besides those submitted by the participants, will be included. If you will recall, each series attempted to capture one certain mood or emotion within the first five photographs with the sixth representing a sharp contrast, likened to the text structure explored during that lesson. Each participant will be invited to use a marker to record under each set a number representing the degree to which they believe the "students"

demonstrated an understanding of the text structure concept. The numbering system will be explained as follows: (4) demonstrates a sophisticated understanding, (3) shows solid understanding, (2) shows an emerging understanding, and (1) suggests that understanding has not been demonstrated. The additional examples I have included have intentionally demonstrated lower-level understanding so that the participants can perceive achievement with a clearer frame of reference (assuming the participants accomplished their task with sophisticated understanding).

Having completed this activity, we will start to engage in discussion that analyzes not only the engagement and collaborative benefits built into that task from the previous session, but also the merits of our assessment of the final products. Viewing and discussing the photographs will, no doubt, be a pleasurable activity and one that acknowledges the students' creativity and careful thinking. These are the positive qualities of assessment that encourage future engagement. Furthermore, the examples that demonstrate questionable thinking will prompt meaningful discussion and explanation. In this setting, the producers of these projects are present alongside the people assessing them, and the discussions, more than the physical products themselves, illustrate their thinking involved during the task. Such methods of assessment hold much more promise for perceiving a student's comprehension than does a lone examination of the final product. There was no final exam, no bubble-sheet, no inferring needed, and no significant "waste" of time. The ratings scribed below each project merely provide a starting point for determining competence, a baseline by which to compare the results of future activities. Strickland (2002) offers

support for this approach to assessment, "Assessment tools that are manageable, informative, and easy to integrate into the ongoing instructional program are needed to help . . . teachers link instruction to assessment" (p. 82). Additional findings about the validity of assessment procedures will now be shared, such as those by Shuy et al. (2006), Fletcher (2006), Hiebert (2002), Fiene and McMahon (2007), and others.

At this time, the teachers will have an opportunity to analyze the merits of the assessments and monitoring tools they brought with them. After carefully reviewing each item, they will attempt to determine the degree to which it could inform their instruction of students. In the top right corners, they will indicate the usefulness of the assessment using one of three marks: a plus sign (+) shows the document sufficiently informs instruction, a check mark (✓) indicates that the form *could* inform discussion but may need to be adjusted, and a minus sign (-) suggests the assessment does not inform instruction whatsoever. The participants will sort their forms into the three respective piles. Using sticky notes to label each pile, the teachers will now travel around the room, comparing their opinions with those of the documents' owners, and pulling out any that raises concerns. Questions and discussion will surely commence regarding the purpose and application of these assessments. A guiding question to propel their dialogue is, "In light of the research, and your own understandings about effective assessment methods, what will you now do with these assessments?"

While reflection and critique of current practices is essential in transforming instruction, it is just as meaningful to open up to possibilities not yet considered. We

have already touched on the notion of implementing *ongoing* assessment practices, but in order to take ownership of this methodology, we must take some time to analyze what such assessment really addresses and what it might look like. Rosenblatt (2005), in *Making Meaning with Texts*, describes, "In short, the assessment must be based on clearly articulated criteria as to signs of growing maturity in handling personal response, relating to the evoked text, and use of personal and intertextual experience vis-à-vis the responses of others" (p. 33). To that end, the final task requires the participants to pair up and consider what comprehension assessment growth criteria ought to embrace, using a pre-designed form to record ideas (appendix M). For each item listed, they are to collaboratively decide upon the indicators of thinking as they relate to various aspects of comprehension learning. Interestingly, each "aspect" as listed on the form represents a potential distinct recording tool to include in the gamut of effective measurements of comprehension. Certainly, a broad range of measurement tools holds greatest promise for ascertaining the scope of a child's understanding. Klingner (2004) suggests, "Clearly, the best way to assess reading comprehension is to use a combination of different measures. Standardized tests, informal reading inventories, interviews and questionnaires, observations, retelling, freewriting, and think-aloud procedures can each contribute a unique perspective on students' strengths and areas of need" (p. 66). Student self-monitoring should also play an integral role. Through variety, validity and longevity, teachers and students can make assessments work most effectively for them.

As a parting gift, of sorts, I will supply each teacher with a copy of a Comprehension Assessment Summary Sheet (appendix N). This form lays out a design for monitoring the growth of various facets of students' comprehension, adapted from the work of Fiene and McMahon (2007). On it, teachers have a place to identify a broad range of student's abilities with building meaning by inserting comments and examples and marking the level of understanding over time. The document can clearly be customized to suit the individual needs of the teachers and students.

Lastly, this session must conclude with a celebration of learning. The demands of this professional development series, if taken seriously, are quite intense. Appreciation for commitment to participation and follow-through on the part of the teachers will be whole-heartedly expressed. Were it not for their devotion to students, the success of this workshop would not be realized.

Before leaving, each participant will be asked to fill out and turn in a brief reflection and evaluation form (appendix O) about the entire workshop series.

Plans for Implementation

The series of professional development workshops described herein is designed to promote active reflection, participation, and modification of teaching methodologies with respect to comprehension strategy instruction. The target audience for this professional development is comprised of general education teachers for grades one through six within my school building. However, invitations will go out to the remaining seven elementary buildings in our district to determine interest.

Ideally, the maximum number of participants at each workshop should number between twelve and twenty. Should outside interests dictate, a second series of workshops could be offered.

In order to provide regular, structured opportunities for each teacher to experiment and later reflect upon the effects of changes implemented within their classrooms, this professional development will require approximately ten weeks. There are six sessions, and the optimal time span between sessions is two weeks. In this way, goals determined from a workshop can be integrated during the week immediately following, while preparations for the upcoming session can be made in the second week thereafter. With the goal of promoting positive changes in the classroom as soon as possible, these sessions should occur early on in the school year. Furthermore, the adaptability of teachers and of students is likelier during a time when procedures and routines are still being developed, as opposed to the year's end when fatigue may set in. After school is typically an ideal time for such meetings, as teachers are, more than likely, present and available. The length of each meeting may vary slightly according to the degree of participation and dialogue; however, an appropriate time frame for each session would suggest one and a half hours. A schedule of meeting dates will be distributed prior to the initial meeting so that participants can arrange personal appointments accordingly.

Taking into consideration the various activities in which teachers will participate, the ideal location is a classroom, computer lab, or media center. Whatever the room, it should be equipped with a whiteboard, computer, and data

projector or overhead projector, with possible access to a television, printer, and CD player. In addition, other equipment needs include digital cameras, video recorder, stopwatch, and access to the school's website (or webmaster) and electronic mail system.

Some general office supplies will be utilized as participants engage through these workshop sessions. These include such items as paper, poster boards, post-its, index cards, tape, markers, and writing utensils. Extra materials, provided either through the school or through personal collections, include a sizable collection of both recipe books and children's picture books. Finally, refreshments, such as bottled water and pretzel packs will provide participants with needed nourishment. While this is generally not a requirement, there is one occasion during the workshops when cold beverages are integral to the lesson; some financial support may be needed for this purpose.

Project Evaluation

The process of determining the impact of this professional development on student achievement in reading comprehension is unfortunately reliant on too many variables to be adequately assessed. However, what can be considered is the degree to which the participants engage and take ownership of the material presented. The insights they formulate as well as their satisfaction with the program assist in evaluating whether this project has value. In terms of assessment, I have concluded here that ongoing indicators of growth hold the most potential for informing instruction. Therefore, the reflection and evaluation survey (appendix O) collected by

the participants after the final workshop session has been carefully crafted to provide the needed information. The first three questions thereon directly correspond to the quickwrite distributed before the first session. In this way, participants can demonstrate the learning they have absorbed throughout our work together. The remaining questions on the form directly suggest areas of strength and suggestions for improvement. In addition, the questionnaires, worksheets, and products completed throughout the workshops create a comprehensive overview of the learning that took place.

Project Conclusions

Comprehension characterizes the highest state of reading, thinking, and learning. As educators, one of the greatest gifts we can bestow on our students is our best efforts in helping them to become autonomous and proficient comprehenders. Thus, concentrated attention to the methods and frameworks for comprehension strategy instruction is an ethical and pedagogical requirement.

To recognize that reading is thinking (Smith, 2004) is to acknowledge that students participating in literacy experiences are naturally engaged in a continuous state of mental activity to build understanding. When comprehension breaks down, as when reading narrative texts, it is important for teachers to recognize that strategy instruction should not serve to *create* pre-determined meanings, but rather to help shape the mental processes already taking place within the students. There is an important distinction between teaching that meets the needs of the teacher and that which meets the needs of the students.

Comprehension strategy instruction can be structured to build upon the breadth of knowledge and experiences students bring to a reading event, to encourage authentic personal responses, and to promote the construction of meaningful interpretations. Unfortunately, certain components of many currently employed literacy programs work against these principles. Strategies for deepening understanding will be perceived only as isolated activities until they are presented within a framework that promotes flexibility, selection, and metacognition. Effective assessment of comprehension requires the use of a broad range of instruments that evaluate student growth over time, much of which rely, rightly so, on the teacher's intuition. Engagement, response, and meaning-making all rely heavily on the judicious use of social interaction and collaboration, in addition to environmental factors well within the scope of teacher influence. As educators work toward implementing changes to improving comprehension instruction, reflection on current beliefs and methodologies, literacy programming, and findings from the professional literature will help to illuminate areas of weakness.

The investigation and implementation of effective comprehension strategy instruction, as delineated in this project, do not presume to encompass all the nuances of learning that constitute classroom teaching. Nor is there any assertion that the professional development proposed here is sufficient in effecting lasting change. Rather, the hope is that by raising awareness and proposing instructional potentialities, teachers will begin to adapt their instruction in ways that hold the greatest potential for student success.

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Appendix A

Comprehension Quickwrite

Directions: Before attending Session 1 of the professional development workshop series "Comprehension Strategy Instruction," please briefly record your answers to the following questions. Your answers will form the basis of conversations during the first session. You need only to spend 3-5 minutes.

#1. In general, what do you use to monitor your students' thinking during or following a structured reading event?

_____
_____
_____
_____

#2. How do you know when your students comprehend what they read? What are the indicators?

_____
_____
_____
_____

#3. What has been your frustration with comprehension instruction, if any? Or, in what ways could *you* improve on comprehension instruction?

_____
_____
_____
_____

Please bring this with you to Session 1.

Appendix B

Comprehension Challenge #1	
What We Think We Know	**What We Need to Know**

Appendix C

Session 1: Conclusions

Use this form to record your notes. Try to include at least 1
conclusion for each item listed before you leave.

☐**Learning Environment:** _____
_____
_____

☐**Motivation/Engagement:** _____
_____
_____

☐**Strategies:** _____
_____
_____

☐**Purpose:** _____
_____
_____

☐**Role of Teacher:** _____
_____
_____

☐**Collaboration:** _____
_____
_____

☐**Assessment:** _____
_____
_____

☐**Other:** _____
_____
_____
_____

Appendix D

Motivation and Engagement Questionnaire

Directions: Before coming to Session 2 of the Comprehension
workshops, please complete this brief questionnaire.
Return this form to the presenter on or before the day just prior to meeting.

Think about the last time you were teaching when you realized your students were thoroughly engaged. See if you can jot some notes below about that lesson.

What was the subject of your lesson? _____

What physical behaviors did you notice about your students? _____
_____
_____

What was the nature of the activity(ies) they engaged in? _____
_____
_____

What do you believe sparked the students' curiosity or interest in the lesson?
_____
_____

What would you consider to be the purpose for that learning? _____
_____
_____

Please find, or bring to mind, your absolute favorite children's picture book. In the space below, please write a short but thoughtfully worded review to illustrate why this book is your favorite. (Bring the book with you to the workshop!)
_____
_____
_____
_____
_____
_____

One last question: What cold beverage would you most like to enjoy at the upcoming workshop? _____

Appendix E

Reading Interest Inventory

Name _____ Age _____ Grade _____

Help me get to know you better, as a student and as a person.
Please answer these 13 questions thoughtfully and honestly.

#1. Do you enjoy reading?   _____ **Yes**   _____ **No**   _____ **Sometimes**

#2. About how much time do you spend reading for enjoyment each week?   _____ **minutes**

#3. What is the last book you read for pleasure? _____

#4. What is your absolute favorite book or book series? _____

#5. Circle which of these genres or subjects you enjoy reading most.

adventure	*sports*	*poetry*	*cartoon/comics*	*history*
science	*humor*	*how-to books*	*mysteries*	*art*
biography	*travel*	*animals*	*fairy tales*	*gaming*
military/war	*plays*	*popular movies*	*cars*	*tall tales/legends*
supernatural	*newspaper*	*celebrities*	*magazines*	*religion*

Anything else? _____

#6. How often do you check out books from a school or community library?
  _____ **Never**   _____ **A few times per year**   _____ **A few times per month**   _____ **Weekly**

#7. What TV shows do you enjoy watching? _____
_____   _____
_____   _____

#8. How much time do you spend watching TV?   _____ **minutes per day**

#9. What kinds of activities, if any, do you enjoy doing on the computer? _____
_____   _____
_____   _____

#10. Name some hobbies or interests you like to do in your free time. _____
_____   _____
_____   _____

#11. Name some of your skills or talents.   _____
_____   _____

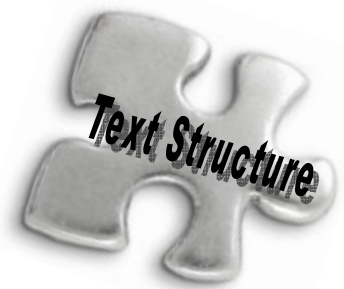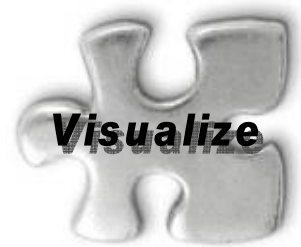**#12. What kinds of things would you really like to learn about this year?** _____
_____
_____

#13. Do you have a question for me? _____

Appendix F

Motivation Bookmark

(Front)   (Back)

Name of Book: **Date Attempted:**

_____   _____

_____

_____   **Observations:**

Comprehension Strategy: _____

_____   _____

                                                          _____

Generate interest by . . .   _____

                                                          _____

_____   _____

_____   _____

_____   _____

_____   _____

                                                          _____

**Engaging and Authentic
Activity:**   **Suggestions for Future Use:**

_____   _____

_____   _____

_____   _____

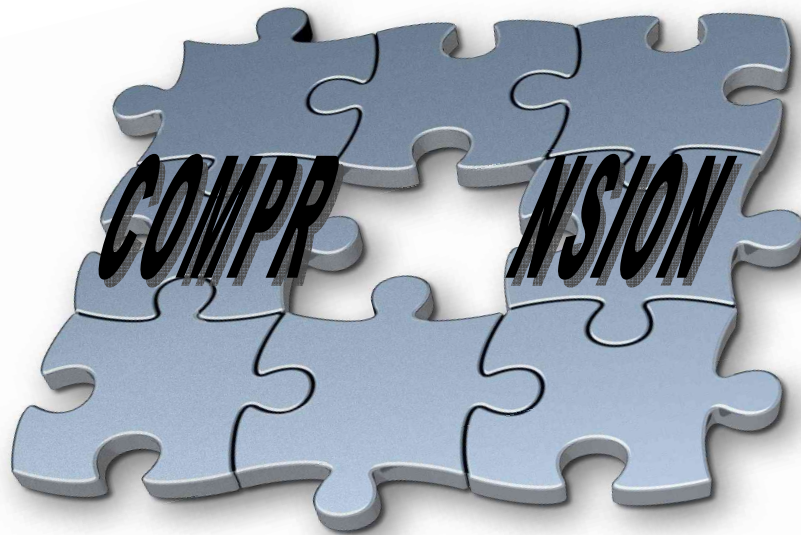_____   _____

_____   _____

_____

Appendix G

Comprehension Puzzle

Is Something Missing?

Appendix H

A Comprehension Checklist
For Students

When you read, ask yourself: Does it make sense?
If it doesn't make sense, place a check beside which of the
following comprehension strategies you used.
(You may use the extra spaces to add your own strategies.)

Prereading: Before you started reading, did you . . .
- ☐ Set a purpose for reading—what do you need to find or figure out?
- ☐ Think about what you already know about the topic—a lot or a little?
- ☐ Look at the pictures and predict what the story is going to be about?
- ☐ Read the captions?
- ☐ Read the bold words?
- ☐ Read the table of contents?
- ☐ Read any summaries?
- ☐ Read the questions at the end of the chapter?
- ☐
- ☐

During Reading: While you were reading, did you . . .
- ☐ Skip the word—is it one word that doesn't make sense? Did you try skipping that word and reading to the end of the sentence or paragraph? Did you go back to see if you knew what the word was or if you knew what it meant?
- ☐ Reread the paragraph and look for new information?
- ☐ Keep a mental picture of what's happening in your head?
- ☐ Summarize—stop every page or two pages and summarize the main points?
- ☐ Find that you could go on, or do you need more information from another student or teacher?
- ☐
- ☐

After Reading: After you finished reading, did you . . .
- ☐ Do a text check—was this text too hard, too easy, or just right?
- ☐ Reread the section, looking for new details?
- ☐ Develop questions—what might the teacher ask? What might be on a test?
- ☐ Check your predictions—were you right? If you weren't, did you decide why?
- ☐
- ☐

Appendix I

Aesthetic Responses to Texts
(Notes)

Are students ever incapable of responding aesthetically to texts? _____

Why? _____
_____
_____

Are some responses to texts *more correct* than others? Explain: _____
_____
_____

How does *choice* affect aesthetic responses to texts?
_____
_____
_____
_____

What else can you say about the teaching of students to respond aesthetically to texts? _____
_____
_____
_____
_____
_____
_____
_____
_____
_____
_____
_____

Appendix J

A Checklist for Assessing the Comprehension Environment and Instruction in the Classroom

About the overall reading program
- ➢ How much time do students spend actually reading?
- ➢ How much reading do students routinely do in texts other than those written solely for reading or content area instruction?
- ➢ Do students have clear and compelling purposes in mind when reading?
- ➢ How many different genres are available to students within your classroom? How many students read across genres?
- ➢ Do students have multiple opportunities to develop vocabulary and concept knowledge through texts? Through discussion of new ideas? Through direct instruction in vocabulary and concepts?
- ➢ Are students given substantial instruction in the accurate and automatic decoding of words?
- ➢ How much time do students spend writing texts for others to comprehend? With reading-writing connections emphasized?
- ➢ Are students afforded an environment rich in high-quality talk about text?

About comprehension strategy instruction
- ➢ Are students taught to . . .
  - ▪ identify their purpose for reading?
  - ▪ preview texts before reading?
  - ▪ make predictions before and during reading?
  - ▪ Activate relevant background knowledge for reading?
  - ▪ Think aloud while reading?
  - ▪ Use text structure to support comprehension?
  - ▪ Create visual representations to aid comprehension and recall?
  - ▪ Determine the important ideas in what they read?
  - ▪ Summarize what they read?
  - ▪ Generate questions for text?
  - ▪ Handle unfamiliar words during reading?
  - ▪ Monitor their comprehension during reading?
- ➢ Does instruction about these strategies include
  - ▪ An explicit description of the strategy and when it should be used?
  - ▪ Modeling of the strategy in action?
  - ▪ Collaborative use of the strategy in action?
  - ▪ Guided practice using the strategy, with gradual release of responsibility?
 - ▪ Independent practice using the strategy?

About other teaching considerations
- ➢ Are students helped to orchestrate multiple strategies, rather than using only one at a time?
- ➢ Are the texts used for instruction carefully chosen to match the strategy and students being taught?
- ➢ Is there concern with student motivation to engage in literacy activities and apply strategies learned?
- ➢ Are students' comprehension skills assessed on an ongoing basis?

Appendix K

Processes in Peer Collaboration

Directions: **As a group**, try to determine how each of these concepts relate to peer collaboration, the social aspect to knowledge construction.
Connect to each circle main ideas, descriptions, or examples to illustrate your thinking.
Go ahead, be messy! It's just a think-sheet.

Negotiation

Social
Construction
of Knowledge
And
Meaning

Transformation

Evaluation
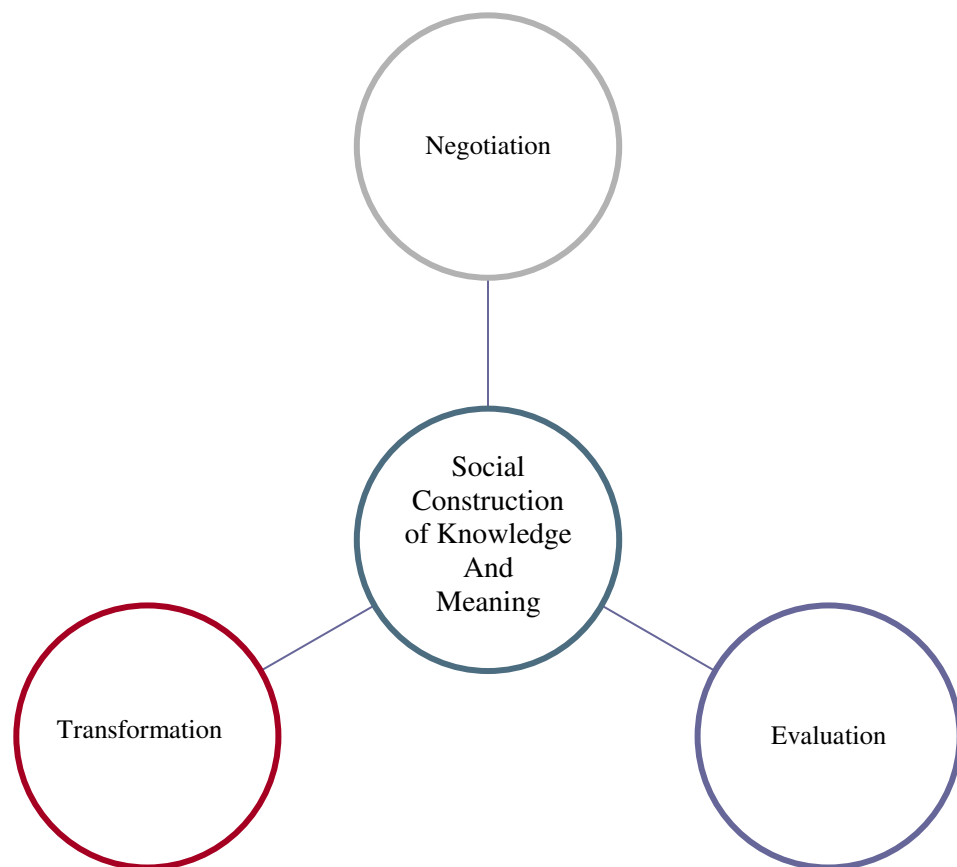
Appendix L

Narrative Text Sample

Robert Langdon staggered into the private bathroom adjoining the Office of the Pope. He dabbed the blood from his face and lips. The blood was not his own. It was that of Cardinal Lamassé, who had just died horribly in the crowded square outside the Vatican. *Virgin sacrifices on the altars of science.* So far, the Hassassin had made good on his threat.

Langdon felt powerless as he gazed into the mirror. His eyes were drawn, and stubble had begun to darken his cheeks. The room around him was immaculate and lavish—black marble with gold fixtures, cotton towels, and scented hand soaps.

Langdon tried to rid his mind of the bloody brand he had just seen. Air. The image stuck. He had witnessed three ambigrams since waking up this morning . . . and he knew there were two more coming.

Outside the door, it sounded as if Olivetti, the camerlengo, and Captain Rocher were debating what to do next. Apparently, the antimatter search had turned up nothing so far. Either the guards had missed the canister, or the intruder had gotten deeper inside the Vatican than Commander Olivetti had been willing to entertain.

Langdon dried his hands and face. Then he turned and looked for a urinal. No urinal. Just a bowl. He lifted the lid.

As he stood there, tension ebbing from his body, a giddy wave of exhaustion shuddered through his core. The emotions knotting his chest were so many, so incongruous. He was fatigued, running on no food or sleep, walking the Path of Illumination, traumatized by two brutal murders. Langdon felt a deepening horror over the possible outcome of this drama.

Think, he told himself. His mind was blank.

As he flushed, an unexpected realization hit him. *This is the Pope's toilet*, he thought. *I just took a leak in the Pope's toilet.* He had to chuckle. *The Holy Throne.*

Brown, D. (2000). *Angels & Demons*. New York: Atria Books. (pp. 306-307).

Appendix M

Comprehension Growth Assessment Criteria

Directions: Work with a partner to determine what criteria could be assessed to indicate growing maturity in comprehension of narrative texts. Consider students' *thinking* as the subject of ongoing analysis with respect to these key ideas:

Question generation and answering: _____
_____
_____

Participation in discussions: _____
_____
_____

Complexity of think-alouds: _____
_____
_____

Proficiency with multiple strategy use: _____
_____
_____

Sophistication of language: _____
_____
_____

Self-monitoring: _____
_____
_____

Goal setting/attainment: _____
_____
_____

Other? _____
_____
_____
_____
_____
_____
_____
_____

Appendix N

Comprehension Assessment Summary Sheet

Student _____ Grade_____ Year _____ School _____

This represents a summary of a student's reading comprehension from the beginning of the 1st trimester to the end of the 2nd and 3rd trimesters.

Levels of understanding
4- Sophisticated understanding
3- Solid understanding
2- Emerging understanding
1- Understanding not yet demonstrated

Areas of comprehension and student's abilities	Comments/examples	Summary Level per trimester		
		1st	2nd	3rd
Literal comprehension Restate information after reading				
Interpretive comprehension Work with ideas after reading; for example, recognize cause/effect, compare/contrast, predict, and draw inferences				
Critical thinking Express and support an opinion after reading, evaluate positions, analyze relevance and credibility, and draw inferences				
Story parts Recognize and analyze the setting, main characters, events, problems, and solutions in a story				
Word meaning Use strategies to determine the meaning of new words encountered while reading				
Organizing information Recognize how information is organized—for example, sequence, cause/effect, problem/solution, main idea/supporting detail, compare/contrast, and description				
Visualization Create mental pictures while reading; this is assessed by asking students to create artwork during and after reading—students are not assessed on art ability				
Questioning (analysis and generation) Identify the type of question being asked of them, apply an effective strategy to answer it, and ask appropriate questions as a result of reading				
Summarization Recognize, organize, and express the most important idea of a given selection after reading				
Applies reading strategies in all areas Uses comprehension strategies to understand written material in other curricular areas				
Recognizes and remedies comprehension breakdown Recognizes when what is being read no longer has meaning to make sense and then applies an effective strategy to restore understanding				
Comments and observations:				

Appendix O

Workshop Reflection and Evaluation

Please take a moment to answer these thoughtfully!

#1. What *will* you use to monitor your students' thinking during or following a structured reading event?

_____
_____
_____

#2. How *will* you know when your students comprehend what they read? What will be the indicators?

_____
_____
_____
_____

#3. In what ways *will* you improve your comprehension instruction?

_____
_____
_____
_____

#4. How satisfied are you with: (circle one)   1=least   5=most

      *the presenter? ------------------------   **1**   **2**   **3**   **4**   **5**
      *the workshop? ------------------------   **1**   **2**   **3**   **4**   **5**
      *the activities? -------------------------   **1**   **2**   **3**   **4**   **5**
      *the changes you've made ---------   **1**   **2**   **3**   **4**   **5**

#5. What one idea or concept did you find most helpful, either through the workshop material or through a colleague?

_____
_____

#6. What changes, if any, have you noticed in your classroom as a result of the ideas you've implemented from these workshops?

_____
_____

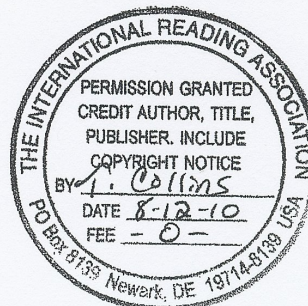**#7. What suggestions do you have to shape future workshops?**

_____
_____

July 20, 2010

International Reading Association
800 Barksdale Road
P.O. Box 8139
Newark, DE 19714-8139
www.reading.org

To Whom It May Concern:

I am currently enrolled in Grand Valley State University's (GVSU) Advanced Studies in Education Program, and I am writing a Master's Project for the completion of my Master's Degree in Education. My project is entitled "An Examination of Comprehension Strategy Instruction of Narrative Texts in Elementary Language Arts." May I receive permission to include in the appendices of my Master's Project a copy of the following item?

> Duke, N. K., & Pearson, P. D. (2002). Effective practices for developing reading comprehension. In A. E. Farstrup & S. J. Samuels (Eds.), *What Research Has to Say About Reading Instruction* (3rd ed., pp. 205-242). Newark: International Reading Association.
> Figure 10.6. A checklist for assessing the comprehension environment and instruction in the classroom (p. 235)

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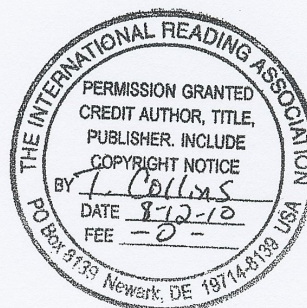
Sincerely,

Ed Vaandering
9552 Deerway Ct.
Allendale, MI 49401
Phone: 616.895.1299
E-mail: edvaandering@hotmail.com

PERMISSION IS GRANTED to Ed Vaandering to include the requested material in his GVSU Master's of Education Project.

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Permission granted by: *Marcia L. Collins*
Title: *Permissions and Contracts Associate*
Date: *8-12-10*

July 20, 2010

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> Fiene, J. & McMahon, S. (2007). Assessing comprehension: A classroom-based process. *The Reading Teacher, 60* (5), 406-417
> Figure 1 Comprehension assessment summary sheet (p. 408)

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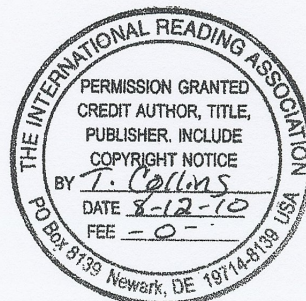Phone: 616.895.1299
E-mail: edvaandering@hotmail.com

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July 20, 2010

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> Massey, D. D. (2003). A comprehension checklist: What if it doesn't make sense? *The Reading Teacher, 57* (1), 81-84.
> Figure 1 A comprehension checklist (p. 82)

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_____ Early Child	_____ Mid & H.S.	_____ SpEd EI
_____ Ed Tech	__X__ Read/Lang Arts	_____ SpEd LD
_____ Ed Leadership	_____ School Counseling	_____ TESOL

TITLE:_____ Comprehension Strategy Instruction of Narrative Texts in Elementary Language Arts

PAPER TYPE: (Choose only 1)   **SEM/YR COMPLETED:** Sp/Su 2010

__X__ Project
_____ Thesis

SUPERVISOR'S SIGNATURE OF APPROVAL_____

1.   reading comprehension instruction   6.   teaching strategies

2.   narrative text comprehension   7.   teach comprehension

3.   comprehension strategies   8.   teaching reading

4.   reading comprehension strategies   9.   general education reading

5.   comprehension strategy instruction   10.   strategy instruction