EVERY CHILD A READER:
A NATIONAL IMPERATIVE

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Experts agree that reading is the most important skill children must acquire. However, as the popular press often chides, there are millions of U.S. students who struggle to read and comprehend adequately. As a result, these students risk both school and workplace failure.

Research confirms that good readers actively comprehend and simultaneously interpret varying types of texts. They bring their prior knowledge to new texts and use learned strategies to uncover meanings. All students need to be taught these research-based strategies through direct instruction, modeling, and teacher-supported practice. Relevant reading research, however, is not always translated into classroom practice.

This article outlines six research-based reading strategies and demonstrates ways that these multiple strategies can be used by teachers.

"By third grade, most children who have not learned to wield comprehension processes enjoyably and profitably will have fallen so far below their peers that they will never regain their lost ground, even if they have decoding skills that are on grade level" (Block and Pressley, 2002, p. 42-43).

In an age where instantaneous communication is the norm and where readers' interaction with text frequently requires that they negotiate meaning "on the fly," young readers cannot afford to disengage themselves from this seemingly endless flow of language (Hasselbrink, 1998; King, 1994). Despite the fact that books may be yielding to technology, students still need to negotiate the meaning of narratives, expository texts, graphs, maps, and other types of written material (Guensburg, 2006). Also, as students' key understandings about reading are developed, they need to build upon their oral language and listening skills as well as extend their knowledge of writing. They have to learn to synthesize and evaluate multiple kinds of data. In other words, students need to master the tools necessary to think and read strategically because these skills are essential prerequisites for effective participation in the life of the school, the family, and the community. As the Rand Report, Reading for Understanding (2002) notes "the demand for literacy skills is high and getting higher. 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). If students fall behind, they risk both school and workplace failure. Therefore, even basic literacy levels are no longer sufficient.

The National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) defines basic as partial mastery of prerequisite knowledge and skills fundamental for proficient work at each grade. However, the present and the future demand that students function at proficient and advanced levels, that is, solid, demonstrated, or superior competency over challenging subject matter and application of such knowledge to new situations and experiences. In 2003, only 12% of 4th graders “could construct a response that gave extensive information or support” (Combs, 2006). To address this need for increased competence, it is important to focus on reading instruction and teaching/learning practices which result in positive learner outcomes.

Much has been written concerning the direct teaching of reading comprehension strategies, and studies have shown that most students benefit from direct instruction of a number of research-supported strategies (National Institute of Child Health and Human Development [NICHD], 2000; Pressley, 2000). After instruction, teacher-modeling, and ample practice, many students develop an automatic, flexible repertoire of strategies that will enable them to move along the continuum to “skilled reader.”

According to Snow, Burns, and Griffin (1998), skilled readers comprehend well by using a number of self-regulated reading strategies to grasp the meaning of text. They have wide general knowledge “to comprehend text literally as well as to draw valid inferences from texts, in their comprehension of words, and in their use of comprehension monitoring and repair strategies” (p. 62). They often review their purpose for reading and construct a plan for reading. During and after reading, skilled readers self-question, draw inferences, create mental images, reread, summarize, and seek to close any gaps in their comprehension of the text (Duke & Pearson, 2002; Kintsch, 1998).

Everyone hopes that all students become skilled readers, yet not all do. While there are no easy solutions, a great deal is known about the reading process and about how to teach it.

Comprehending text is a complex linguistic achievement. It is an active, thinking process that involves understanding the text and interpreting meaning based on the type of text as well as the purpose for reading. The background knowledge the reader brings to the text, what the text suggests to the reader, as well as knowledge of the words presented are crucial to the comprehension process. Also important are the specific comprehension strategies the reader uses to make “sense” of the text. What specific strategies are most useful to students? How can students be mindful of the strategies they use? How can students apply learned strategies effectively and appropriately? There is evidence that students benefit from instruction in a small repertoire of reading comprehension strategies (Brown, 2002; Pressley, 2002). The six sections that follow are significant research-based activities crucial to students’ comprehension of text.
Get ready to read

Students need time to prepare to read. Teachers should begin by assisting students to relate the text’s topic(s) to their existing knowledge, that is their personal experience, their knowledge of the world, and their previous experiences with texts. Students must then use their knowledge appropriately to understand the text encountered. This activity requires that teachers have a broad understanding of the knowledge students bring with them to school. Obviously, the more students know and read, the broader their prior knowledge becomes (Pearson & Duke, 2002).

Consider the structure of the text

Moustafa (1997) describes the need to learn the “language of print,” while Marie Clay (2000) notes the importance of students’ knowledge of “concepts of print.” Teachers need to direct the students to note how a text is organized. In narrative texts it means helping readers to understand the who, what, where, when, and why of stories. Further, “question answering and generation strategies can be used by teachers to draw out the content and organization of stories crucial to the student building a representation” of the structure and relationships in the story (Trabasso & Bouchard, 2002, p.182). This is particularly important with informational materials such as textbooks, magazine articles, and various types of reports. Informational materials require students to deal with sometimes difficult structures such as cause/effect and problem/solution. Students’ knowledge of how a particular text is constructed is crucial and must parallel students’ prior knowledge of the topic under consideration.

Develop questions

Students need to learn to generate and answer a wide variety of their own questions. Question generation is first demonstrated by teachers as they read a passage, “think aloud,” and model constructing both text-based and prior knowledge-based questions. Readers then practice generating answers and additional questions as they read the text. A technique found to be helpful is Raphael’s “Question-Answer-Relationship” (Q-A-R) (Raphael & Wonnacott, 1985; Raphael & Au, 1996). Q-A-R helps readers to use their background knowledge as well as search for new information. Students are encouraged to determine if the answer to a question is “on the page.” This type of literal question may require students to go back into the text to search and find a correct response.

Inferential or “between the lines” questions require students to synthesize information and make interpretations based on their prior knowledge and the information in the text.

Critical thinking questions require readers to go “beyond the page/text.” These kinds of questions demand that students monitor their thinking, make connections, present opinions, synthesize information, and think both critically and creatively.

Collaborate with others

Effective collaborative reading sessions allow young readers to talk with one another about their reading and share what they think as they read. These “groups” can consist of two students sitting knee-to-knee or
in small gatherings of 3 or 4. Groups may include students of varying abilities, thus enabling the struggling reader to interact with peer models (Klingner & Vaughn, 2000). Collaboration not only improves students’ social and communication skills, it motivates and fosters reading development and permits students to participate in discussions where alternate opinions are voiced and where they learn to question the inviolability of text as they search for additional information or opinions (Gambrell, 1996).

**Build visual images**

As skilled readers build inferences from connections made between what is on the page and what they have already read or experienced, they often create visual images. In fact “proficient readers create images from all of their senses as they read” (Harvey & Goudvis, 2000, p. 104). Asking students to focus on sights, sounds, smells, and feelings can enhance inferential thinking as they place themselves in the images they create.

**Create written, oral, and visual summaries**

Summaries can deepen readers’ understanding of how a text is structured and how ideas, concepts, and topics are related (Fountas & Pinnell, 2001; Trabasso & Bouchard 2002). This is particularly important when students encounter informational texts. After modeling the summarization process, teachers might assist students in summarizing a single paragraph at a time. Students identify important words or phrases, delete extraneous information, and write, then orally present, a synthesis statement. Next, pairs of students select a paragraph and write a summary. This can be followed by increasing the number of paragraphs and raising the summarizing activity to the level of a text section or chapter (Guthrie & Ozugungor, 2002). Again, student groups share with the entire class. These activities can be followed by groups of students discussing, planning, and creating visual reports (graphic organizers, Power Point presentations, maps, webs, etc.) of the key ideas in the text section or chapter.

**Summary**

Research shows that students benefit from using reading comprehension strategies (Pearson & Duke, 2002; Armbruster, Lehr, & Osborne, 2001; National Institute of Child Health and Human Development, 2000). The six activities noted here are far from exhaustive but, tailored to each child’s individual needs, their use can assist students in experiencing reading success. However, students need to internalize these strategies for independent use. One way to make them more aware of the strategies they use when reading is to encourage them to verbalize the strategies they use as well as how they use them. In addition, Brown (2002) suggests that they meet in small groups to “review what they did well, what they might have done differently, and what they might change next time they encounter a similar task” (p. 341). Through discussion, readers reinforce what “works” while at the same time assisting those who may struggle in comprehending text.

The future requires not minimally competent readers, but those who are proficient
and “capable of making the fullest sense of written words and written ideas in many contexts” (Gow, 2006, p. 31). They need to be engaged, competent, enthusiastic readers who continue to grow as literate, life-long, thoughtful participants in an increasingly more complex, information-rich world. Their future, the nation’s future, demands it!

References


