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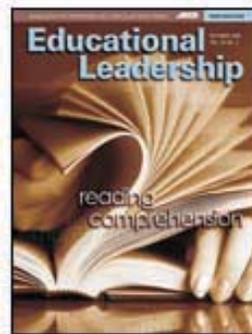
Reading Comprehension Pages 53-57

The Sweet Work of Reading

Kindergartners explore reading comprehension using a surprisingly complex array of strategies.

Andie Cunningham and Ruth Shagoury

Andie, a kindergarten teacher, sits before her class of 5- and 6-year-olds and holds up the book *Owl Moon* (Yolen, 1987) for the students to see. October 2005



"Open up the part of your brains that's brilliant," Andie tells them. "We're learning a new strategy today. You're going to use your brains to make a picture of the book. Ready?"

Andie directs her students' attention toward the fresh piece of butcher paper on the easel. She points out the sticky notes and pens. "It's time to read *Owl Moon*," she says. "As I read, pay attention to the place in your brain that makes a picture of the part of the book that's most important to you."

She starts to read, and the class enters the hushed night of owl-calling. Faces turn to the book; from time to time, the students use their "owl voices" to hoot with the owls in the story.

When she finishes, Andie asks the students to decide on the one picture in their heads that's most important to them. "When you're ready," she says, "get your pen and paper and draw your *one* picture. Be specific and detailed."

Slowly and intentionally, Megan picks up a sticky note and pen and walks to a table to draw her picture. Austin looks up at the ceiling, smiles, picks up his pen, and settles down to work. Lacey scrunches up her face, squeezing her eyes shut. "I'm still thinkin'," she says. "I gotta choose 'cuz I got five in my head."

This kindergarten is a workshop of readers and thinkers who take seriously the work of making meaning from books. Andie has set the tone for their comprehension work through deliberate instructions and by providing her students with the tools they need. Students are writing about their reading. They use fine-line black pens to make meaningful marks on large sticky notes that serve as placeholders for their thinking.

This lesson is not reproduced from a published reading program, nor is it a yearly unit trotted out for every new group of kindergartners. This particular book choice was in response to Carrie's interest in becoming an expert in trees and Kenya's desire to learn more about big birds and where they live.

Building on Interests

As a kindergarten teacher-researcher and a university researcher, we have been investigating what is possible for young children as they acquire literacy skills. Educators concerned with kindergarten curriculum are all asking the same questions: What reading comprehension skills do today's kindergartners truly require? What skills do they need to become avid learners in school and in the world, active and compassionate citizens, and their best selves?

Contemporary researchers (Harvey & Goudvis, 2000; Keene & Zimmermann, 1997; Miller, 2002) have shown how readers can explore comprehension using a range of strategies (see "Reading Comprehension Strategies," p. 55). The students in Andie's class are teaching us that kindergartners can use these important comprehension strategies to bring their home knowledge into school. Some students realize for the first time that their understanding of a book is important. As they make text-to-self connections in books that the teacher reads to them, students learn the importance of schema—what they bring to a text in terms of their background knowledge and life experiences. As they tap into their knowledge of the world and make connections, they are more prepared to go on to other important reading comprehension skills, such as text-to-text connections, inferences, questioning, and synthesis. For example, when we read *Too Many Tamales* (Soto, 1993), with its central theme of losing an important object, the students made bridges from the book to each of their schemas. Daniel remembered misplacing a screw for a toy truck headlight; Ryan relived the memory of losing a ring in a swimming pool; Bao Jun detailed her loss of a cat in China.

Student interests create our reading curriculum. Nathaniel's interest in pumpkins led to our decision to read *Pumpkin Circle* (Levens, 1999). We read *Miss Twiggly's Treehouse* (Fox, 1966) to focus on Bianca's interest in studying friendships. Building on their interests helps students make their own authentic connections, the foundation of our work together. The lesson on making mental pictures from *Owl Moon* is not isolated from the rest of the students' lives. They paint what they know, write and tell stories, and read books that link their background knowledge to this new academic world.

A Community of Learners

Andie's classroom is in a K-3 school in Portland, Oregon, that has the highest number of families living in poverty in the district. Of its 540 students, more than 85 percent receive free or reduced-price breakfasts and lunches. There are six half-day kindergarten classes, each with 20-25 students. Students speak at least 13 languages other than English; the school employs two full-time, in-house translators for Spanish and Russian families.

Many languages swirl through the classroom. During daily calendar work, for example, we usually count in Russian, Spanish, and English, thanks to the help of parents who are teaching us to count in their home languages. Sharing our home languages, experiences, knowledge, and questions is an important element of becoming a community. Comprehension and community go hand in hand as the students learn to work together and do the hard work that goes along with making meaning out of difficult texts.

Bringing each student's schema to the classroom discussion is challenging. It requires thoughtful planning on the part of the teacher and ample time for learners to grapple with meaning so they can contribute their ideas to the community.

Mind Pictures

This morning, the students wrestle with important “mind pictures” that they have in their heads as a result of listening to *Owl Moon*. Lacey shows her completed picture to Ruth, a university researcher. “This is a big tree where the man was calling out,” she says.

Benjamin shows his drawing to Andie. “This is the guy who is telling her to be quiet,” he says, pointing to the two figures on the sticky note. Benjamin shows her the arrow between the two figures, indicating from which direction the voice is coming. He points to two large orbs hovering over the people. “This is the owl's eyes,” he says. As the students finish drawing on their sticky notes, they carry them to Andie, who records their words on the notes and sticks them on the butcher paper.

Together we look at and read the individual writing and drawing on the sticky notes, noticing first the differences. For example, Carrie has drawn a picture of an owl landing on a branch, whereas Ivan focused on one of the characters, the Grandpa. Andie reinforces the idea that although everyone is bringing a different schema to the story, they have all drawn owls, trees, and people. The chart has stimulated rich new discussions of the story. With contributions from each class member secured, conversations have a grounded place in which to flourish.

Reading Comprehension Strategies

- *Making connections*— between texts, the world, and students' lives (sometimes called text-to-text, text-to-world, and text-to-self connections). Readers bring their background knowledge and experiences of life to a text.
- *Creating mental images*. These “mind pictures” help readers enter the text visually in their mind's eye.
- *Asking questions*. Readers who use this strategy actively ask questions of the text as they read.
- *Determining importance*. This strategy describes a reader's conscious and ongoing determination of what is important in a text.
- *Inferring*. When readers infer, they create new meaning on the basis of their life experiences and clues from the book.
- *Synthesizing*. Although this strategy is sometimes considered a retell, synthesizing is a way of spiraling deeper into the book. Readers might explore the text through the perspective of different characters to come to new understandings about the character's life and world.

Digging Deep

Readers who care about making sense of the books they read don't give up on stories when meaning eludes them. They come back and struggle with the text until they make sense of it. There is an excitement to uncovering layers of meaning when we spiral back to difficult texts. Few kindergartners are taught how to experience this kind of "hard fun" when they read. But when we give them a chance to play with it, they rise to the challenge.

When Andie finishes reading *Almost to Freedom* (Nelson, 2003), Austin's first words are, "There were a lot of words in there!" This book is challenging. Besides having "lots of words," it tells the painful story of a young girl fleeing slavery on the Underground Railroad.

"Yeah," Nathaniel piggybacks, "like a hundred million words. I want to keep it in the room and read it the next day and the day after that and the day after that."

Nathaniel understands that the more we revisit those tough reads with millions of words, the better our chances of discovering their riches. Throughout the year, we explore such provocative books as *The Three Questions* (Muth, 2002), a retelling of a philosophical tale by Leo Tolstoy; *The Cats of Krasinsky Square* (Hesse, 2004), set in Poland during World War II; *Where Is Grandpa?* (Barron & Soentpiet, 2001), a story of one family dealing with death and loss; and *Visiting Day* (Woodson, 2002), in which a little girl tells of looking forward to her weekly visits to her dad in prison.

Kindergartners are capable of far more sophisticated reading strategies than educators often suspect. As they write, draw, paint, and move their bodies to the stories, they dig deep to make sense. Students might use clay to portray their mental images, dramatize what is important to them in a book, or paint watercolors of their inferences. With these strategies, they have a firm foundation for building reading success.

Synthesizing Meaning

Synthesizing is one of the most complex strategies that readers use to spiral into deeper layers of meaning. Readers "hold their thinking" as they progress through a book. In other words, they keep track of how their thinking is evolving, using their schemas to make inferences. They come to view the book and the world through new lenses.

This week, we dig into synthesizing with the clever picture book *No Such Thing* (Koller, 1997), in which a human child and a monster child are repeatedly assured by their mommies that the other doesn't exist—that there is "no such thing." It's a perfect book for seeing the world through another's eyes and gaining insights about perceptions other than one's own.

Early in the week, the students hold their thinking by writing and making drawings on sticky notes of what they remember from the book. When they finish, they place their notes on Andie's anchor chart. Later in the week, on the third reading of the book, Andie tells her students to use a new lens as they read the book:

Decide who you are going to think like. The boy? His mom? The monster? Or the monster's mom? You'll be bringing your schema and using it to think like that person.

At the end of the reading, Carrie and Megan crawl under one of the tables and pretend they're lying in bed. Some boys head to the coat rack where they peer back over their shoulders. Around us, we see children pretending to be the little monster and the little boy. Bianca behaves as though she were the mother, looking in the door at her little boy.

After a few moments, the chime ringer rings the bell and the students return to the circle area. Andie tells the students that they can act out their characters for the class and that everyone will try to guess who they are.

Austin volunteers to start. He lies on the floor in the middle of the circle. It turns out he is being the monster screaming "AAAAHHHHH!" When it's his turn, José also lies in the middle of the floor, but he shakes his head *no* to all the guesses. He explains, "I was the boy at the end of the book when he was under the bed."

"Did that actually happen in the book?" Andie asks.

"No," José tells us. "They were just *gonna* switch when the book ends."

"José made a great inference!" Andie exclaims. "He used clues to figure out what was going to happen next—even after the book ends. Sweet work!"

The students take turns acting out different roles. Shy Bianca walks slowly to the center of the circle and hugs her arms tight around herself, rocking from side to side. We guess that she's the monster or the boy being scared.

"No," she says. "I'm huggin' the boy. I'm the mom huggin' the boy."

Bianca lived the book through the mom's eyes, sharing two different parts of the book as she moved: the mother looking at the boy through the doorway and the mother hugging her son. She spiraled deeper as she synthesized meaning.

Too many educators think that there's "no such thing" as kindergartners making sophisticated inferences that help them synthesize what they read. These students show what is possible.

A Nourishing Environment

Kindergartners face enormous challenges. Most of the students in Andie's class have little or no alphabet knowledge when they enter the classroom in the fall. English is a second or third language for many of the families in this impoverished working-class community. Instead of viewing kindergarten as a garden of children, we prefer the metaphor of a tide pool:

Kindergartens, like tide pools, are a meeting place of two systems. The land and the sea meet at tide pools, and organisms in tide pools must adapt to adjust to the drastic changes in environment that come with the changing of the tides each day.
(Barnhart & Leon, 1994, p. 7)

This image helps remind us of the way in which children must adjust to the differing environments of home and school at the cultural meeting place that is kindergarten. Kindergartners need specific learning tools. They need honor and respect to thrive. They need similar souls nearby, without the threat of predators. They need a climate that invites and

supports their learning, and they need plenty of time to link literacy with their lives in the challenging world of school (Cunningham & Shagoury, 2005).

Building bridges between the books in the classroom and what students have learned in their first five years takes work. A publisher-designed curriculum might not connect to these children's lives at all. By incorporating students' interests into the curriculum, we can create a community in which we learn together. Within that community, students can learn the kind of reading comprehension skills that will help them become readers who turn to books for meaning, understanding, reflection, and pleasure.

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