

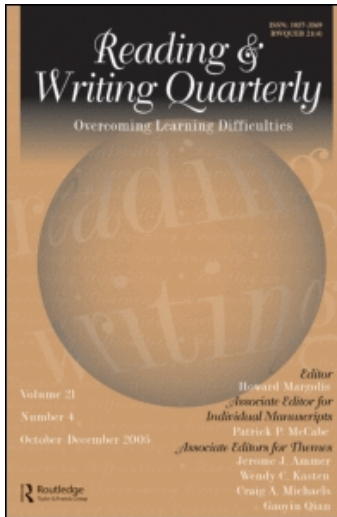
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Synthesized Comprehension Instruction in Primary Classrooms: A Story of Successes and Challenges

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Individual Article

Synthesized Comprehension Instruction in Primary Classrooms: A Story of Successes and Challenges

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This 8-month qualitative study investigated 3 primary classrooms' implementation of a synthesized approach to comprehension instruction that incorporated vocabulary development, cognitive strategies, and responsive engagement. Three themes emerged, including successes and challenges in (a) the implementation of the separate components of the synthesis approach, (b) the gradual release of responsibility, and (c) the classroom logistics involved in the implementation of the synthesis approach. Teachers became more intentional in vocabulary development, explicit strategy instruction, and the asking of open-ended questions. Students were able to use strategies flexibly and engage in high-level discussions about complex texts. Small-group discussions were initiated, but it was difficult for primary students to lead and sustain productive discussions that enhanced meaning-making.

Teachers in the early grades are facing increasing demands to incorporate the National Reading Panel's five pillars and related findings into primary reading programs (National Institute of Child Health and Human Development, 2000). Historically, early reading instruction has focused on decoding and learning how to read words fluently, rather than taking an aggressive approach to comprehension and text interpretation. Current theories of reading comprehension emphasize the important role of social interaction

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and critical analysis (Luke, Comber, & O'Brien, 1996; Muspratt, Luke, & Freebody, 1997; Rosenblatt, 1976). Little research has been conducted on how teachers in primary classrooms incorporate comprehension instruction and small-group student-led interactions into a balanced literacy program for novice readers. Recent research on reading development seems to indicate that fluency and comprehension may be dependent early in the process of reading acquisition but become independent after high levels of reading fluency are achieved (Paris, Carpenter, Paris, & Hamilton, 2005). Experts are just beginning to explore the developmental influences that need to be considered in comprehension instruction for these young students.

The current study examined the successes and challenges of implementing a reading comprehension instructional framework in primary classrooms. The framework was based on a synthesis of three independent bodies of research indicating that intentional vocabulary instruction (Beck, McKeown, & Kucan, 2002; S. A. Stahl & Fairbanks, 1986), cognitive strategy instruction (Palincsar & Brown, 1984; Pressley et al., 1992), and responsive engagement (Maloch, 2002; McMahan & Raphael, 1997; Saunders & Goldenberg, 1999) each make unique contributions to the process of comprehension. (The instructional principles that provided the framework for the synthesis approach used in the study are listed in the Appendix.) This case study was part of a larger mixed design study that spanned multiple years and that included older students, three other geographical sites, and six other schools (K. A. D. Stahl, 2006; Taylor, Pearson, Garcia, Stahl, & Bauer, 2006). The present study addressed the considerations in adapting the comprehension framework to two second-grade classrooms and a third-grade classroom of below-level novice readers in a high-poverty, low-performing school.

Two research questions guided the analysis and presentation of the findings:

1. What aspects of synthesized comprehension instruction were the teachers and students able to demonstrate successfully and in keeping with the goal of improved reading comprehension?
2. What were the challenges faced by the teachers and students in the application of synthesized comprehension instruction?

THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVE

The RAND Reading Study Group (2002) noted that many third graders, even those who were reading at grade level, later met with difficulties with reading comprehension. To offset this problem, they suggested that comprehension instruction might profitably begin in the primary grades and continue throughout the upper grades.

A large body of research has indicated that effective vocabulary instruction has a significant impact on comprehension (see Baumann, Kame'enui, &

Ash, 2003; S. A. Stahl & Fairbanks, 1986). These studies implied that effective vocabulary instruction should include both definitional and contextual information about the words; provide multiple exposures; and require deep processing involving association, comprehension, and generation. Beck et al. (2002) advocated an instructional structure that helps teachers incorporate these components and brings intentionality to the word selection process when teaching vocabulary to increase text comprehension.

Evidence indicates that strategy instruction improves comprehension (National Institute of Child Health and Human Development, 2000). Although most studies have been conducted with readers in the intermediate grades who have mastered fluent reading, a few studies have looked at the implementation of a repertoire of comprehension strategies in primary classrooms.

Palincsar (1988, 1991) implemented reciprocal teaching (RT) in first-grade classrooms as a listening activity surrounding expository text. During RT, teacher and students engage in a discussion about a segment of text structured by four strategies: summarizing, questioning, clarifying, and predicting (Palincsar & Brown, 1984). Initially, the teacher models each of these strategies individually for the students. After the strategies have been modeled, the students take turns leading the discussion about each segment of text. In Palincsar's 1991 study, the RT group made significantly greater gains than the control group in answering comprehension questions and solving novel problems based on text information. The treatment group also made significant gains on strategy use (making a prediction, generating questions, clarifying, and summarizing) while listening to an expository text being read to them. As a result of both studies, Palincsar concluded that teacher belief systems influence student dialogues. Additional studies have reported the successful implementation of RT using many developmental accommodations for young students (Coley, DePinto, Craig, & Gardner, 1993; Marks et al., 1993). The first-grade teacher in both of these studies extended explicit strategy instruction, assigned leadership roles for small-group discussions, and assisted with note card preparation to support fruitful RT interactions. The emphasis of RT is always on students assuming increasing responsibility for leading the small-group discussions and personal meaning-making.

Transactional strategy instruction is a term used to describe a body of practices investigated by Pressley in the Students Achieving Independent Learning program (Schuder, 1993) and in the Benchmark School's cognitive strategy program (Gaskins, Anderson, Pressley, Cunicelli, & Satlow, 1993). These programs are transactional in three senses: (a) Readers link the text to prior knowledge; (b) meaning construction reflects the group and differs from personal interpretations; and (c) the dynamics of the group determine the responses of all members, including the teacher. Transactional strategy instruction is long term, the strategies are taught explicitly, and the strategies act as the vehicle for text discussions. The programs employ a gradual release of responsibility (Pearson & Gallagher, 1983), with the goal being the

development of independent, self-regulating readers. The second-grade students who received transactional strategy instruction were able to verbalize their strategies and scored significantly higher than a control group on comprehension measures on a standardized test.

Each of these studies describes the difficulty in situating teacher, student, and text conditions for a successful repertoire program. Implementation can be a cognitive juggling act for teachers as well as students (Duffy, 1993; Hilden & Pressley, 2007). It requires that teachers believe in collaborative, constructive meaning-making. After an overview of RT and strategy instruction, Rosenshine and Meister (1994) suggested that deep processing and a reading engagement that focuses on making sense, not the particular strategies, were the key elements of strategy instruction that were yielding improved reading comprehension.

Taylor, Pearson, Clark, and Walpole (2000) and Taylor, Peterson, Pearson, and Rodriguez (2002) found that teachers who used more “higher level” questions had significantly higher comprehension achievement than those who used lower level questions. In these high-poverty primary classrooms that beat the odds, there was little evidence of strategy instruction. Taylor et al. (2000, 2002) surmised that high-level discussion was enabling the children to process the text more deeply. The conversation in these classrooms shared characteristics with what Saunders and Goldenberg (1999) identified as an instructional conversation. Instructional conversations focus on story theme, relating a story to personal experience, and embedded (as opposed to explicit) strategy instruction. In their experimental study, Saunders and Goldenberg found that fourth- and fifth-grade students, both English language learners and non-English language learners, engaging in instructional conversations outperformed students in control classrooms.

The present comprehension synthesis framework consisted of a set of instructional principles (see the Appendix) that incorporated vocabulary development, explicit strategy instruction, and responsive engagement within a lesson series construct. This was embedded in a social constructivist model. Students were engaged in whole-group, small teacher-led group, and small student-led group discussions about text. It was expected that over time students would assume more responsibility for applying strategies in flexible ways, leading the conversation groups and asking questions that would help them make sense of the text as well as generating big, juicy questions for which there were no right or wrong answers.

METHOD

For this article, I draw on qualitative data collected over 8 months that documented implementation of the synthesis approach in three primary classrooms. The study was guided by the assumptions of interpretive/constructivist research (Lincoln, 1997; Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Setting

This study took place during the third year of a larger investigation of reading comprehension funded by a federal grant. During Year 3, the larger project involved four sites, seven schools, and 28 classrooms. All schools had participated in the project the previous year, however they had each implemented only one component of the comprehension synthesis approach. In Year 2, the schools had been randomly assigned to one of the three interventions: strategy, responsive engagement, or vocabulary. Some Year 3 teachers had participated the previous year, but other teachers were new to the project. This model enabled teachers to gradually adapt to a complex instructional model and it enabled the research team to distinguish unique contributions of each intervention within a general comprehension theory. The model can be likened to Slavin's (1984) strategy of "component building," allowing one to introduce and study separate elements of complete programs. The larger project and this case study demonstrate the realities (and often messiness) of implementing research-based practice in complex school settings over extended periods of time. This is in opposition to a short-term experiment implemented in controlled isolation by the research team.

As part of the larger study, the teachers participated in one 3-hr and six 90-min professional development sessions spread across the school year on the implementation of the synthesis approach. The professional development sessions were conducted in a study group format. I facilitated the professional development sessions, and a research assistant took notes and recorded each session on audiotape for later transcription. The sessions included a discussion of classroom implementation, a discussion of a reading related to the synthesis approach, a video clip of two teachers' classroom implementation, and protocol-based discussion of the video. The sessions twice included a lesson planning component. All teachers were asked to implement the synthesized comprehension instruction for at least 45 min three times each week as part of their literacy instruction. Additionally, I visited classrooms monthly for a 45-min lesson observation and provided individual written and oral feedback to each teacher.

Westside Elementary is a high-poverty school in a small city in the Midwest. According to 2006 school records, 86% of the students received free or reduced lunch. Of the students, 32% were Caucasian, 49% African American, 10% Hispanic, 3% Asian, and 1% Native American. Westside Elementary had been randomly assigned to the strategy intervention during Year 2 of the large study. One second-grade teacher (Casey) and one fourth-grade teacher (Ella) returned as participants in Year 3. One second-grade teacher (Laura) and the third-grade teacher (Jo) were new to the project. (All names used throughout this article for the school, teachers, and students are pseudonyms. Although this article focuses on the three

primary classrooms, some data from Ella's classroom are introduced for developmental comparisons.)

This school used a basal series literature anthology as the foundation for its literacy program. Grades 2 and 4 applied the Joplin Plan for a 1-hr reading block to provide differentiated reading instruction, albeit whole group. In the Joplin Plan, the students in the grade-level cohort were divided according to particular reading criteria, and each teacher in that grade level taught reading to students within a particular ability band. Other aspects of the language arts program (spelling, writing, Accelerated Reader) were applied with the homeroom group. Each second-grade teacher applied the synthesis approach with her heterogeneous homeroom group, not the homogeneous reading group. This resulted in the second-grade teachers applying the synthesis approach in a way that was not integrated into their comprehensive literacy program, often during teacher read-alouds or as a mini-lesson before students engaged with Accelerated Reader texts. The third-grade classroom was a self-contained classroom. However, the teacher divided her students into two instructional-level reading groups and applied the intervention with both groups.

Participants

Casey taught second grade and was a third-year teacher in her second year of the project. Of the 20 students in her classroom, 80% were considered "at risk" according to the fall Dynamic Indicators of Basic Early Literacy Skills (DIBELS) Oral Reading Fluency criteria. Laura had 12 years of teaching experience and was in her first year of the project. A total of 60% of Laura's 20 students were considered at risk. Neither Casey nor Laura had advanced degrees. Jo had a doctorate and more than 20 years of teaching experience. After several years out of the classroom, this was her first year teaching third grade after serving as the school's literacy coach. As a result of Jo's teaching experience and literacy expertise, many struggling readers and special needs students had been assigned to her class. Of the 16 students in her classroom, 75% were considered at risk based on a fall Oral Reading Fluency score of fewer than 77 correct words per minute. Ella was a second-year teacher in her second year of the project. Information related to her fourth-grade class of 27 students provides a preliminary basis for comparing some differences of the implementation of the intervention between the primary and intermediate grades rather than basing the discussion solely on observations in primary classrooms.

Data Sources

WEEKLY LESSON PLANS

All teachers submitted weekly lesson plans that outlined objectives, daily procedures, and reflections describing their implementation of the synthesis

approach. The reflections incorporated information regarding what went well for the teacher and students, what was a challenge for the teacher and students, and future teaching directions.

CLASSROOM OBSERVATIONS

Six times throughout the school year, I observed each teacher's instruction, recorded field notes, and provided each teacher with a written feedback summary sheet based on her adherence to the principles of the synthesis approach. In addition, research assistants observed each teacher's instruction three other times during the year, using field notes to document their observations. Because I was the professional development facilitator at this school, the research assistant observation provided a means of triangulation and increased the reliability of the observations. Artifacts, including literature response logs, photographs of classroom posters, and other curricular materials, were also collected.

TEACHER INTERVIEWS

I interviewed each teacher for about 45 min in a structured interview toward the end of the study. Each of the interviews was recorded on audiotape and later transcribed. In addition, informal conversations with the teachers throughout the study were recorded through retrospective field notes.

Data Analysis

I used Glaser and Strauss's (1967) constant-comparative method to guide the coding of data and identification of themes. I analyzed individual cases and then used techniques of cross-case analysis (Merriam, 2001) to identify similarities and differences across cases. Throughout data collection and analysis, I wrote analytic memos detailing developing hypotheses and documenting the generation of themes. Theme identification yielded the three prongs of the synthesis approach (vocabulary, cognitive strategy, responsive engagement), the gradual release of responsibility to the students, and general classroom logistics.

Interviews and lesson reflections were charted by month and later coded to reflect each teacher's observations to determine the themes. Each teacher's lesson plan reflections specific to student successes and challenges were also charted on a different summary sheet by month and coded to determine a progression of student abilities within each prong of the synthesis approach.

Analysis of the classroom observations was more complex and involved two phases. The feedback summary sheets were recorded in a table that listed the month of the observation and each of the general synthesis principles (see the Appendix). This table simply provided a way to determine if

and when each basic principle of the synthesis approach had been observed in each classroom. Additionally, the detailed components of each prong of the synthesis approach were used to code the field notes of all nine observations for each classroom. A research assistant who had not performed any of the observations and I independently coded each observation. Differences in coding were resolved by discussion and agreement. This refined coding identified grouping format and when and how often each specific aspect of strategy instruction (8 aspects addressing individual strategies, level of teacher–student responsibility), responsive engagement (6 aspects addressing themes, questioning, level of teacher–student responsibility), and vocabulary instruction (10 aspects addressing vocabulary selection, instructional attention, level of teacher–student responsibility) occurred within each observed lesson. This coding was recorded in a monthly table for each teacher. This table provided more information on the type and frequency of the interactions. It also provided a lens for observing and categorizing the teacher and student moves that the trained research assistant or I observed throughout each month of the study. Reliability of the coding process was enhanced by a duplicate coding of each set of field notes by a research assistant who had not participated in the large-scale study. The coding of monthly teacher and student moves and of classroom observation field notes allowed me to view the progression of instruction within each prong of the synthesis approach and to determine whether responsibility was being released to students over time. To investigate classroom differences, I looked at the total incidence of occurrence for each specific category by classroom.

FINDINGS

This investigation explored the ways in which three primary teachers implemented a comprehensive comprehension program in their classrooms. These teachers faced successes and challenges in this long-term process. Analysis of the data revealed that these successes and challenges could be addressed in relation to three themes: (a) the implementation of the synthesis approach, (b) the gradual release of responsibility, and (c) the classroom logistics involved in the implementation of the synthesis approach.

Implementation of the Synthesis Approach

Laura, an experienced second-grade teacher who was new to the project, was most faithful when it came to incorporating all aspects of the synthesis approach. She was masterful at synthesizing strategies, responsive engagement, and vocabulary efficiently and seamlessly. Quantitatively, her classroom interactions looked quite different than those of the other two teachers. Within an observation of a single lesson, it was common to see

her introduce unfamiliar vocabulary, incorporate cognitive strategies, and mention vocabulary during a teacher read-aloud; or use scaffolds for children to apply strategies during shared reading, ask children to write a response to a high-level prompt in a log, and then discuss their response after reading. A review of vocabulary would often occur before the 45-min lesson closed. The researchers observed her doing 14 instances of explicit strategy instruction compared to 7 and 5 instances in the other two classrooms. The other big differences in Laura's teaching were related to the amount of modeling and scaffolding that she provided in all three areas. As an experienced teacher, she seemed to know how to model and release in a natural way. For example, during the reading process she taught 14 vocabulary words compared to 3 for Casey and 1 for Jo. After reading, the researchers observed her involved in 14 instances of vocabulary work compared to 0 in the other two classes. Of the three teachers, Laura had the most consistent recent classroom experience and the highest performing class (60% at risk). Casey was a third-year teacher and Jo was returning to a classroom with many special needs students after being out of the classroom for several years. These differences might explain Laura's ability to integrate the synthesis approach in her classroom in a more cohesive and seemingly effortless manner than the other two teachers.

Casey, the second-grade teacher in the second year of the project, was able to begin her school year with a clear sense of how to teach strategies. Although I did not observe her doing as much explicit strategy instruction with her children as Laura did after November, I observed Casey's children initiating application of the appropriate strategies in flexible ways to help them make sense of the text during her teacher read-alouds. It was evident that Casey had front-loaded the strategy instruction and was working to add the other two prongs to her existing routines.

However, the transition from strategy only to a synthesis approach was difficult for Casey. In her interview, she described her frustration:

It was difficult for me [to vary the attention devoted to each of the three prongs]. I felt as though I had to rush through the strategies to get to vocabulary and responsive engagement. I never felt as though I was able to provide thorough, full attention to the strategies because I was trying to fit in all three components.

Unlike Laura, who seemed able to integrate all three prongs in a cohesive manner, Casey found it more difficult to glide between the three prongs during a single lesson. Despite her concerns, quantitatively there was evidence that her students could implement the strategies and that she was providing explicit teaching of the vocabulary and responsive engagement components in a more compartmentalized way than Laura. Casey provided less modeling and scaffolding than Laura in all three areas of the synthesis approach, but the amounts were comparable to those provided by Jo.

Quantitatively, the coding charts provided evidence of a balance of elements of the synthesis approach in the instruction in the primary classrooms. Although less vocabulary instruction was observed in Jo's class than in the second-grade classrooms, there was evidence of vocabulary instruction in her weekly lesson plans. All three primary teachers became intentional in selecting and teaching vocabulary, including providing multiple exposures to high-utility words used by mature language users, also known as Tier 2 words (Beck et al., 2002). The teachers engaged their students in the discussion of high-level, authentic questions. However, in their interviews, all three teachers independently identified the explicit teaching of strategies as the most important element in improving the comprehension of their students. In this study, students were explicitly taught purposeful predictions, clarification, questioning, summarization, and creating imagery. Jo's experience led her to describe the function that strategy instruction fulfilled with her young readers, including many with special needs:

I have never been a big fan of reciprocal teaching, but I have to say that it worked very well for these students to stop and clarify and summarize. They really needed that periodic summary to keep the story in mind, and they had genuine questions to be addressed at the stopping points.

The primary students engaged successfully in several aspects of the synthesis comprehension approach. Throughout the year, they improved in their ability to independently and flexibly apply strategies across the curriculum to make meaning from a wide range of texts. Teacher lesson plans and related reflections indicated that in September the second-grade students were engaged in explicit strategy instruction. However, even predictions tended to be teacher directed, and students often made wild guesses. Laura noted, "Several students did well. Some just guessed. They did not use story clues." More generally, Jo reported, "It was a victory for students to realize they were supposed to understand what they read and that they could stop and think when they didn't." In October, students generated purposeful, justifiable predictions in response to teacher prompts. Summarization instruction was initiated. Students worked well as partners. They made personal connections to the texts and answered teacher-generated juicy questions. Casey remarked, "They are very good with clarification and prediction. They are also starting to get that they can use these tools all the time, not just during our reading time after lunch." Classroom observations and teacher lesson plan reflections consistently reflected that in November students generated predictions without teacher prompts, but they overused the strategy in ways that did not contribute to meaningful reading. Summarization was effectively performed as a teacher-led guided activity. Throughout the next few months, the teachers and students worked to refine strategy application in flexible ways to enhance meaning-making. During classroom observations it was

common to hear the children verbalize their application of the strategies. Instead of ignoring unfamiliar vocabulary, students used clarification to identify and discuss it. Casey observed, "I feel that my students are using the tools more naturally during the story. They are also pointing out and discussing unknown vocabulary." Considering that 80% of her classroom could be considered at risk, it was an accomplishment for these children to be engaged meaning-makers. During my classroom observations, there were 28 instances when Casey's students independently initiated the use of strategies in flexible ways to make sense of text. The following excerpt is derived from a teacher read-aloud of the text *The Big Orange Splot* (Pinkwater, 1977) that occurred in December. It demonstrates spontaneous, flexible use of strategies that was initiated by the children to unblock their hurdles to comprehension. Although this lesson was conducted as a whole-group activity with the children sitting around Casey on a rug, it was conversational, with children responding to the text without raising their hands.

Endy: Why did the bird drop the paint?

Brianna: It might have been too heavy.

Casey: (continues reading) "In the morning the other people on the street came out of their houses. Their houses were all the same. But Mr. Plumbean's house was like a rainbow. It was like a jungle. It was like an explosion."

Jose: What does explosion mean?

Casey: In this sentence, it means that the color was all over the house. It means all over.

Freddy: I predict everybody will want to paint their house like Mr. Plumbean's.

Courtney: His neighbors might think that looks messy.

Casey: (continues reading) "...That day Mr. Plumbean bought carpenter's tools. That night he built a tower on top of his roof, and he painted a clock on the tower. The next day the people said, 'Plumbean has gushed his mush, lost his marbles, and slipped his hawser.' They decided they would pretend not to notice."

Marla: This reminds me of the book we read yesterday.

Casey: What do the people think about Mr. Plumbean?

Oliver: He has gone crazy.

Keith: I have a question. Why did he put the clock on his house?

Rae: To tell time.

Casey: Is it a real clock?

Jaelyn: No, he just did it for decoration.

Carlos: He is making his house look like an extravaganza.

Casey: What is an extravaganza?

Carlos: A big show.

Casey: Great. You are right. We had that word yesterday.

Shea: It's like the book yesterday.

Even summarization, which is typically not introduced until the intermediate years, was mastered and refined by these novice readers throughout the year. As early as November, these primary-grade students were routinely summarizing text and were familiar with the term. "There was a lazy lion who orders other animals to build a house for him," is one second-grade student's succinct summary of the story *Lazy Lion* (Hadithi & Kennaway, 1990). In April, Jo's class was studying environmental protection. After reading *Using Energy Wisely* (McClellan, 1999), the students were asked to summarize what the author said about using coal and oil for electricity. Sharae included all key points in her summary of four pages of text:

He says burning lots of coal and oil can put smoke and gases into the air that can cause problems for air pollution. Air pollution can make it hard for people to breathe. It can also hurt plants and people and water because it's dirty and we need to keep our air clean.

All three teachers reported an increase in their young readers' awareness of the purpose of reading and reading as a meaning-making activity. These novice readers demonstrated the ability to make connections, identify themes, and respond to high-level questions. Jo had many special needs students who had reading difficulties and required high levels of emotional support. In addition to teaching content, it was necessary for Jo to spend time supporting students' emotional needs and establishing a nurturing classroom climate. In her interview, Jo described the transformation that occurred in her classroom:

In the beginning it was crazy, but the atmosphere changed during the year. They became willing to read and talk about a book. They were disappointed on days that we didn't go back to the rug. Now they like to tell me what's happening in their books. They also like to get the same book and put their heads together to help each other.

There were unique challenges in the primary classrooms. Text selection and reading format required the teachers' deliberate attention (K. A. D. Stahl, 2008). The researchers encouraged the teachers to look for multicultural texts with rich themes. The teachers had trouble finding texts with enough complexity for the synthesis approach, and often those texts were difficult for the children to read. Early in the year, most instruction was conducted with teacher read-alouds. As the students' reading ability improved, teachers engaged the students in shared reading. In these classrooms, shared reading took two forms. Sometimes a small group of children read the text together.

Alternatively, the teacher read the text aloud as children read along in their own copies, followed by the children rereading the text with a partner or small group. Even with the acceptance of a supported reading format, teachers found it difficult to find complex texts, especially controversial informational text, at reading levels that were accessible to their students.

These students had difficulty writing responses to text in their response log. During one of the early classroom visits, I observed several children becoming hostile and refusing to write a brief personal response to a text. Although the response log activity improved across the year, the responses were typically short and superficial. Often the students expressed concerns about spelling and conventions. This school did not apply a writer's workshop as part of its literacy program. Limited experience with a writing process approach may have caused this to be a unique problem for these students. However, the lack of writing fluency seems to be a necessary developmental consideration for children in the primary grades.

The generation of high-level, juicy questions by students was rarely observed in the primary classrooms. The children were able to answer these questions, but they had difficulty formulating them even with instruction, posters of question stems, and encouragement by the teachers. During my classroom observations, there were 13 instances of fourth-grade students generating their own open-ended juicy questions compared to either 4 or 5 instances in each of the three primary classrooms.

Gradual Release of Responsibility

Literacy instruction in Westside Elementary School was built around the utilization of a basal reader anthology series. Before classrooms engaged with the project, almost all instruction was conducted with the whole group. The comprehension synthesis approach required a gradual move to small student-led groups for both application of strategies and high-level discussion of themes and personal connections. The teachers were encouraged to introduce small-group discussions using a modified RT format and to use response logs to support small-group conversations.

Early in the year, the teachers modeled conversational interactions during teacher read-alouds and shared reading to prepare students for the small-group discussions. For example, after reading a passage the teacher might ask the students to discuss a juicy question with a partner or students at their table and then conclude with a whole-group community share that reflected the small-group conversations (McMahon & Raphael, 1997). The community share addressed both the content of the conversations and the small-group discussion process. Also, explicit lessons were conducted on how to have a discussion. Despite the explicit instruction, modeling, and guided practice, most of the small-group conversations that I observed in the primary classrooms were generally unproductive or chaotic. The teachers

in the primary grades released responsibility much more slowly to their students than did the fourth-grade teacher, who began small student-led groups in December.

What seemed to be difficult for the teachers was applying intermittent steps in the gradual release of responsibility to the students. Although the second-grade conversations were student led beginning in February, I never observed an intermediate phase in which the teacher sat in with a single small group to listen to the entire conversation as a way to provide on-the-spot coaching. In each classroom, multiple small-group conversations were held simultaneously as the teacher circulated and dropped in to listen and facilitate for a few minutes. During those teacher drop-ins the quality of the conversation was elevated as the teacher prompted deeper thinking and facilitated conversational strategies. In the third-grade class, all small-group conversations were teacher led except for two discussions of informational text during the last two observations in April. These issues were addressed during professional development sessions and as individual feedback of ongoing observations. Because of reservations about student behavior, the teachers were hesitant to work intensively with a single group while the other groups worked on something else or had unsupervised conversations. Most of the conversations took place for a 10- to 15-min portion of the 45-min lesson. In fourth grade, the small-group conversations typically lasted for 20 to 30 min.

Additionally, the small-group discussions in the primary classrooms tended to be dominated by one or two group members. The most challenged readers were least likely to be engaged in the small-group discussions. The students seemed unsure of how to use their response logs to generate a rich and cohesive conversation. Often they would take turns reading the logs without listening or responding to one another. Turn-taking was dominated by one or two students or occurred as a result of hand-raising, as a result of passing props to indicate the speaker, or in a round-robin manner. The utilization of these methods seemed to be motivated by the teacher's desire to influence the talk by the group members. The following excerpt from an April observation demonstrates some of these difficulties and the students' inefficiency at collaboratively making sense of text. The small-group task for these second graders was to discuss some questions they had written the previous day about an informational book on animal record holders.

Mary: I would like to know what a record holder is.

Group: No response.

Mary: Nobody knows what is acrobat?

Jane: I had that question, too. Let's look in the book. I think it was on the fourth page. (She flips through the book.)

Jessica: I have a question.

Mary: Do you know what a bird spider is? It eats birds.

Jessica: The snail is the slowest animal.

Mary: No, the turtle is the slowest animal. The snail is one of the slowest animals.

In sum, the teachers did make the transition from all whole-group instruction to increased opportunities for students to engage in small-group conversations about text. However, the transition to student-led conversation groups was difficult for the teachers and the students in these primary classrooms. Despite explicit lessons on the content of a conversation about text; conversational moves; modeling; guided practice; and the utilization of scaffolding techniques such as strategy cheat sheets, response logs, and self-evaluation guidelines, the transition from a teacher-led conversation to a student-led small-group conversation was challenging, and the conversations were often unproductive.

Classroom Logistics

In conversations and the interviews, all three teachers expressed the challenge of meeting their students' broad developmental reading needs and fitting in all three prongs of the synthesis approach. The Joplin Plan prevented second-grade teachers from integrating their regular literacy program with the intensive comprehension instructional model. In the primary grades, time and attention must be devoted to phonics and fluency, especially with so many at-risk readers. There is always concern that an aggressive approach to comprehension and the time it demands may hinder progress on alphabets and word recognition abilities. Evidence indicated that in these three classrooms, the time devoted to comprehension did not compromise (and may have enhanced) general reading ability as measured by DIBELS Oral Reading Fluency criteria (see Table 1). The percentage of children achieving the established benchmark for proficiency increased from fall to spring.

Because of the students' developmental decoding abilities, all texts had to be read together during class time as a teacher read-aloud or shared reading. In classrooms with older students, often the reading can be done independently, and the comprehension work and conversation is done together.

TABLE 1 DIBELS Oral Reading Fluency Progress Summary

Progress	Casey		Laura		Jo	
	Fall	Spring	Fall	Spring	Fall	Spring
At risk	80	70	60	50	75	69
Proficient	20	30	40	50	25	31

Note. Values represent the percentage of children from each class with test results in each category. *At risk* denotes children that DIBELS denoted "at risk" or "at some risk." DIBELS = Dynamic Indicators of Basic Early Literacy Skills.

Similarly, writing in the response logs was typically a time-consuming, frustrating process for these nonfluent writers. Overall, these younger children had fewer self-help skills. More teacher guidance and supervision was needed.

Finally, the teachers wanted to do more to help their lowest level readers benefit from the synthesis approach. The study group had read and discussed Maloch's (2005) article describing some ways to prevent the marginalization of the struggling reader and the student with behavior issues. However, during this first year of implementation of the synthesis approach the teachers focused on learning how to orchestrate the three prongs of the approach and trying to balance whole-group and small-group instruction. The effective differentiation of instruction within small groups is a refinement that may take more time.

DISCUSSION

This case study examined the implementation of a theoretically based, comprehensive reading comprehension instructional frame in three primary classrooms. The intention was to explore the successes, challenges, and developmental considerations of introducing a synthesized comprehension program to novice readers. A discussion of the findings related to each research question follows.

Successful Aspects of Synthesized Comprehension Instruction in Primary Classrooms

The teachers were able to expand their teaching repertoires to include deliberate, elaborated vocabulary instruction; incorporate explicit strategy instruction; and engage their students in high-level discussions surrounding themes and authentic issues. There was a gradual shift from the exclusive use of whole-group instruction to initiating students into the occasional small-group conversation.

Over time the students were increasingly able to apply the strategies without teacher prompting and in flexible ways to respond to the challenges of the text. Strategy language became part of their discourse during reading experiences. Clarification of vocabulary, prediction, and the creation of a mental image were easier strategies for novice readers to apply than clarification of ideas, questioning, and summarization. However, students continued to refine all strategies throughout the year. Earlier research has provided evidence that children can use strategies to enhance meaning-making (Palincsar, 1988, 1991; Schuder, 1993). This research demonstrates that novice readers can initiate the strategies, applying them flexibly and across the curriculum when reading a wide range of reading material without teacher prompting.

The students were able to participate in high-level teacher-led discussions about complex texts. They discussed thematic issues and answered authentic, juicy questions. All three teachers commented that these students seemed to be more aware of the purposes of reading than previous novice readers they had taught who had focused solely on accurate decoding. The introduction of complex texts with interesting themes, often ones that tapped into multicultural issues that the children could identify with, enabled these students to connect to books in new and enthusiastic ways (Luke et al., 1996; Rosenblatt, 1976). These texts hooked these novice readers in ways that books at their very easy reading level were unable to do. This is an important instructional implication for young readers and struggling readers. Too often, the reading diet of readers with limited decoding ability consists of "little books," books with an easy instructional level of less than 100 words or decodable text. Complex texts and high-level discussion need to be valued elements in a primary literacy curriculum.

In light of these successes, it seems important for teachers of novice readers to find opportunities to introduce students to complex texts and incorporate the components of the synthesis approach in a balanced literacy program. The teachers read the texts aloud or provided scaffolding, such as partner reading and small-group reading, to make difficult texts accessible to all students. These students achieved levels of comprehension that were beyond the earlier expectations of their teachers, especially because the majority of the students would traditionally be considered struggling readers. However, the road was not always smooth. The next section details the challenges that the teachers and students faced and makes recommendations for ways that others might avoid these obstacles.

Challenging Aspects of Synthesized Comprehension Instruction in Primary Classrooms

Having the time to make the successful transition to small student-led discussion groups was the most glaring challenge. In general, the student-led small-group discussions were chaotic and unproductive. Conversation was stilted, superficial, and parallel rather than interactive. The writing difficulties that these children experienced prohibited the response logs from being as helpful in promoting discussion as they were in other studies with older students (Maloch, 2002; Saunders & Goldenberg, 1999). The professional development sessions nudged the teachers to move away from whole-group instruction and provided research-based suggestions for gradually releasing responsibility to the students. The teachers in these classrooms did many of the things that other teachers and researchers have found essential to making the transition from teacher-led discussion to student-led conversation (Maloch, 2002; Palincsar, 1988, 1991; Saunders & Goldenberg, 1999). They provided explicit instruction in the content and characteristics of a

small-group conversation. They modeled conversation, provided videos of conversations, and taught students to self-evaluate the conversations according to established criteria. They used scaffolding techniques such as assigning student leaders, applying an RT routine, providing cheat sheets with the strategies or juicy questions for the group to discuss, and providing response logs. However, teacher lesson plans, classroom observations, and informal conversations with the teachers seemed to indicate that repetition and intensity was not devoted to any of the supports consistently enough to result in improved student conversation. The scaffolds seem to have been tried once or twice and abandoned rather than refined with persistence.

The intermediate phase of a student-led small-group conversation, facilitated or coached by the teacher, was completely omitted from all three primary classrooms. For young students, after explicit teaching and modeling, it may be necessary for the teacher to be positioned to provide on-the-spot coaching of the student-led group. This may require the teacher to sit outside the circle during the entire conversation (Maloch, 2002). This degree of extensive support may not be necessary for students who already possess sophisticated conversational strategies or for older students who can make effective use of the scaffolds. The results of this study seem to indicate that the drop-in visit to multiple groups engaging in simultaneous conversations is for students in a more advanced phase than these nascent primary students. However, consistent with the findings of Hilden and Pressley (2007), organizing and managing this is a challenge for teachers.

Because of the nonlinear, nonmastery nature of comprehension, it is important to keep in mind that the gradual release of responsibility of comprehension instruction (including productive conversation) is not intended to be a completely linear process (Paris, 2005). It requires ongoing refinement and sliding back and forth along the continuum. Teachers must lead the dance and let go while still supporting the student, resume leading and let go with less support, then resume leading with more support as the complexity and demands of the task increase.

The complexity of the process makes it especially difficult to negotiate in a classroom (Duffy, 1993; Gaskins et al., 1993; Hilden & Pressley, 2007). Complex process-oriented comprehension instruction seems to require an evolution occurring over the course of 2 to 3 years, with continuous modifications for improvement (Coley et al., 1993; Duffy, 1993; Hilden & Pressley, 2007; Marks et al., 1993). Evidence in this study is also consistent with earlier findings that more experienced teachers may be able to balance process-content instruction more efficaciously than novice teachers (Gaskins et al., 1993).

An important part of the balance is creating a setting that will enable children with special needs to be successful. These teachers worked in a setting where a majority of the children had reading difficulties. They had to find ways to make the texts accessible to the children. Maloch (2005) found

that in addition to providing the academic setup before literature discussion groups, it is important for teachers to provide a degree of student agency and to actively establish conversational norms that will result in all students being viewed as powerful, legitimate participants.

This study and the existing research seem to indicate that teachers find it difficult to incorporate comprehension instruction into a comprehensive curriculum; gradually release responsibility to the point of student regulation; and find appropriately leveled, complex texts. Future research needs to study longitudinal development of comprehension in schools that have a comprehensive plan and vision for sustained growth in their teachers and students. Comprehension is complex. We as experts need to see how teachers change their instruction over time as their knowledge increases and what impact this has on the progress of students. We also need a lens for viewing how students who have sustained and deliberate comprehension instruction beginning in kindergarten evolve as meaning makers, text users, and text critics over time (Muspratt et al., 1997).

Concluding Remarks

This investigation provides evidence that novice readers do benefit from an intensive synthesis approach to comprehension. A limitation of this study was the utilization of the Joplin Plan in the second-grade classrooms. The implications of this model cannot be ignored, because it is a means employed by many schools as a way to differentiate instruction. Unfortunately, it often results in a diluted curriculum, limited text exposure, and a minimum of complex content for struggling readers, thus contributing to broadening rather than narrowing the achievement gap (Stanovich, 1986). Despite this limitation, intentional vocabulary development enhanced the students' understanding of the texts they read and of their world. The students were able to apply cognitive strategies in flexible, independent ways to help them make sense of text. They engaged in high-level discussions that helped them view reading and books in new ways—ways that made connections to their lives. Compared to the findings in earlier research with older students, the findings of this study show that the reading comprehension instruction of novice readers requires more time, more explicitness, more guided practice, and more teacher support.

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APPENDIX

Comprehension Synthesis Instructional Principles

- Effective comprehension instruction for rich text includes instruction in vocabulary, strategy, and responsive engagement.
- To effectively provide comprehension instruction, teachers need to select and preread text and decide on the vocabulary, strategy, and responsive engagement emphases appropriate to each text.
- The amount of attention devoted to each of the three approaches (vocabulary, strategy, responsive engagement) will vary according to student needs and instructional goals.
- Each of the approaches requires some explicit instruction.
 - For vocabulary instruction, students need to learn how to identify unfamiliar words and unlock the meanings of these words.
 - For strategy instruction, students need to learn and apply a range of strategies to resolve comprehension problems and enhance their comprehension.
 - For responsive engagement instruction, students need to learn how to respond to and identify themes, answer and ask big “juicy” questions, make relevant personal connections, and state and elaborate their reasoning.
- Teachers need to vary the support and amount of responsibility given to students based on their ongoing assessment of students' progress toward independence.
- A key component of the comprehension framework is small-group discussions about texts. Teachers need to provide students with explicit instruction on how to participate in and hold strategic and rich conversations about texts.