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Kindergartners can read and understand : emergent reading strategies at work

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Kindergartners can read and understand : emergent reading strategies at work

Abstract

The need for kindergarten educators to be effective in teaching both word solving and comprehension strategies is paramount. Educators are challenged to teach even the most emergent readers to use strategies to help them read and understand what they have read. The explicit teaching of both word solving and comprehension strategies in kindergarten builds a strong foundation for literacy learning throughout a student's school career and beyond. Fostering a love of literature and an attitude of lifelong literacy learning can be achieved for all students with the proper supports in place. This paper defines each word solving and comprehension strategy taught in an average kindergarten classroom and details the process of teaching these strategies explicitly. Additionally presented are the benefits these strategies provide for students when they are introduced and reinforced in a variety of groupings allowing students to use them with increasing independence as their reading level advances from emergent to proficient.

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KINDERGARTNERS CAN READ AND UNDERSTAND: EMERGENT READING
STRATEGIES AT WORK

A Graduate Review

Submitted to the

Department of Curriculum and Instruction

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Of the Requirements for the Degree

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Abstract

The need for kindergarten educators to be effective in teaching both word solving and comprehension strategies is paramount. Educators are challenged to teach even the most emergent readers to use strategies to help them read and understand what they have read. The explicit teaching of both word solving and comprehension strategies in kindergarten builds a strong foundation for literacy learning throughout a student's school career and beyond. Fostering a love of literature and an attitude of lifelong literacy learning can be achieved for all students with the proper supports in place. This paper defines each word solving and comprehension strategy taught in an average kindergarten classroom and details the process of teaching these strategies explicitly. Additionally presented are the benefits these strategies provide for students when they are introduced and reinforced in a variety of groupings allowing students to use them with increasing independence as their reading level advances from emergent to proficient.

Introduction

Kindergarten is a time of extreme learning both socially and academically for all children. In today's educational push for more academic learning increasingly earlier in a child's education, kindergarten has also become and time and a place for reading. Pre-reading and reading skills are oftentimes taught simultaneously within the kindergarten classroom using a differentiated approach to foster the most academic growth possible for each student in the room. For this reason, kindergarten educators must carefully examine the reading strategies taught in the average kindergarten classroom. Kindergarten educators must also embrace the use of various groupings and explicit teaching to fully reap the benefits of reading strategy use in the kindergarten classroom. Both word solving and comprehension strategies are vital to students in making the progress they need to learn and thrive in the kindergarten year and the years of formal education to come.

“Reading demands a two-pronged attack. It involves cracking the alphabetic code to determine the words and thinking about those words to construct meaning” (Harvey & Goudvis, 2000). The explicit teaching and practice of word solving strategies is how students learn to use and understand the alphabetic code to read and decode words. While comprehension strategies involve how students learn to use the words they read to construct meaning and think about text. The use of these two types of strategies together is what makes proficient readers who can read to learn and read for pleasure.

Significance of the Review

Kindergarten educators are becoming increasingly aware that best practice encourages the explicit teaching of both word solving and comprehension strategies even at emergent levels of reading. Current research shows us in 2001 only one third of students came into kindergarten

not knowing the letter names of the alphabet, which suggests that kindergartners are more ready than ever to read and understand (Allington, 2012). Throughout the book *What Really Matters for Struggling Readers*, Richard Allington (2012) repeatedly makes the argument that that students need to have instructional text that they can read accurately, fluently and with good comprehension if the goal is for them to improve their reading abilities. This review will give teachers the necessary definitions and tools to implement units of study in both word solving and comprehension that will hopefully foster that all-important academic achievement for some of our youngest students.

Methodology

The topic of teaching kindergartners to read and understand has become increasingly more widely researched and written about as kindergarten has become a more academic year of schooling for students. Locating resources on this topic was completed through the ERIC database through UNI Rod Library and also through Waukee professional resources and the Area Education Agency 11. Many of the resources listed are scholarly articles on the topics of word solving and/or comprehension and other aspects of teaching kindergartners to read or improve their reading skills. The articles are all recently written, peer-reviewed with applicable relevancy to the topic. The other resources are professional teacher resources (mostly books) that provide practical information on teaching students to read. All resources listed were beneficial in detailing the process of teaching kindergarten students to use both word solving skills and comprehension strategies while reading.

Literature Review

The goal of reading educators is for students to become proficient readers who can read for both learning and pleasure. This goal is accomplished through the explicit daily instruction and use of both word solving and comprehension strategies in the classroom. This literature review will be organized around these two important aspects of early reading instruction.

Defining Word Solving Strategies

The kindergarten teacher is many times the first teacher of reading for children. It is vital that the teacher explicitly teach kindergarten students strategies they can use to figure out unknown words in text. These will be skills they use until they become proficient readers and even throughout the rest of their lives. Moats (1998) says this about students who are explicitly taught decoding (word solving) strategies early, “Students learn to rely on what they know about speech-print connections. They develop fluency and independence in word recognition with sufficient practice” (p. 8). Word solving strategies are the tools that scaffold students while they learn to read with the hope that eventually these tools can be forgotten because as a reader they are proficient enough to make the switch from learning to read to reading to learn. Moats deeply emphasizes this point and closes the article by declaring that, “Those who do read are more likely to be educated. And therein lies our responsibility: to teach with knowledge, skill, and artistry the alphabetic invention that makes all this possible” (p. 9).

Many strategies exist to help students use and understand the alphabetic code in order to be able to figure out unknown words in text. The lists of strategies are wide and varied in the various texts available to reading educators (see Appendix A). These strategies provide students the ability to read unfamiliar words as they encounter them in text with increasing accuracy and automaticity. Brown (2003) says this about student’s use of word solving strategies, “Over time,

use may become routine. Thus, word recognition prompts have the potential to shape young readers' reactions to unfamiliar words" (p. 721).

Tap Each Word Read. This is many times one of the first two word solving strategies taught to kindergartners. They are asked to place their pointer finger directly under the word as they read it. This helps students to develop the skill of one to one correspondence and also start looking at each word they are asked to read with attention to detail. Brown (2003) states the importance of this skill by saying, "beginning readers need to learn how to "track print," that is, to match spoken words to written words as they "finger point" their way through text" (p.724). This strategy begins to train their eyes to look at each word carefully, which is the basis of all the other word solving strategies that follow. If students can look carefully at each word they are much more likely to know if they come to a word they do not know or make a mistake while reading.

Check the Picture. This is the other word solving strategy usually taught to kindergartners right away. If a kindergartner taps a word and they cannot read it, they should first look to their picture to see if the picture shows them what the unknown word might be. Jessica Meacham gives a student friendly explanation of the check the picture strategy in the mini-lesson resource on her webpage. "Authors and illustrators make sure that the writing matches the picture. So, if you come to a word that you do not know, you can always use the strategy of check the picture" (Meacham, 2011).

Get your Mouth Ready. When a kindergartner comes to a word they don't know, they should look at the first letter of the word and get their mouth ready to say the sound that letter makes (Meacham, 2011). If the word does not immediately come to them when they get their

mouth ready they should try the sentence again already knowing the first sound of the unknown word.

Sound it Out. If a student is unsuccessful at getting their mouth ready for the first sound kindergartners can be taught to sound out the unknown word. Sounding it out means to make all the sounds in the word separately and then blend them back together to say the word. This strategy should be used with caution because it is a difficult one to use due to the complexity of the English language. Many times sound it out will not work and will only frustrate a child. Also, sound it out only works if a child is secure in their knowledge of consonant and vowel sounds. This is often the only strategy that parents know to use with their young readers and it often just does not work causing frustration for the student and parent so Compton-Lilly declares, "As we teach young readers, we must actively challenge the myth of "sounding out," both directly and by modeling alternative word-solving strategies" (Compton-Lilly, 2005). The idea that Compton-Lilly is vocalizing so passionately comes from the fact that for many years teachers and parents alike relied on this strategy. We now know that this is just one strategy to be used in combination with all the others depending on a student's developmental level.

Ask What Would Make Sense. Another word solving strategy for use with kindergarten students is asking them to think about what would make sense. This is a good strategy to use in combination with getting your mouth ready. If a kindergartner can get their mouth ready and think about what would make sense, many times they can figure out the word (Meacham, 2011). This will also help kindergartners start to think about what they are reading and not only read the words correctly, but also understand what they are reading which goes hand in hand with comprehension strategies.

Pick Out Chunks. Students can be taught to use chunks of words they already know to help them figure out new words. Like the “out” in “outside” or the “up” in “upstairs” or the “be” in “began”. Similar to the sound it out strategy, this word solving strategy should also be used with caution because it does not always work due to the complexities of the English language (Compton-Lilly, 2005).

Read and Reread. The read and reread strategy actually includes both stopping at the unknown word and returning to the beginning of the sentence to give it another try and skipping the unknown word, reading ahead, then going back and trying the whole sentence again from the beginning. It is one of the most simple to teach, but often one of the most effective. Meacham gives the reasoning for students using this strategy. “Readers use this strategy for two reasons (1) when they don’t know the word, and (2) when they self-corrected an unknown word. Rereading the sentence helps our brains get ready for what we are about to read” (Meacham, 2011). As explained by Meacham, many times students are able to self-correct or use one of the previously taught strategies to help them on the second try.

Teaching Word Solving Strategies

Word solving strategies need to be explicitly taught by kindergarten reading educators. They can also be reinforced by an educational partnership with parents and other instructors or volunteers that assist in reading instruction. These strategies give students the ability to read books on their own and within the group setting, leading to increased reading proficiency and comprehension in their own texts. Teachers must know the developmental reading level of each student in the classroom in order to know which word solving strategies students are ready to use. Brown (2005) encourages teachers to “offer students the most effective assistance with troublesome words, teachers should ask themselves which type of prompt is most appropriate for

a reader at this point in his or her development” (p. 722). In doing this teachers can be prepared for the dramatic changes that happen as students move through the reading process. In reference to teachers using word solving prompts with students, Schwartz (2005) states that, “Even with a complex theory of literacy learning and instruction and a clear understanding of the student's current processing, contingent teaching decisions during oral reading are a challenge (p. 440). While knowing what word solving strategies a student is ready for will always be a challenge for literacy educators, knowing a student’s developmental reading levels helps immensely in making instructional decisions in regard to prompting and word solving strategies.

Through purposeful and explicit teaching of word solving strategies teachers can provide the basis for student learning to read. After the explicit introduction of these skills it then becomes the teachers job to carefully pay attention and respond to the miscues made by the students as they read. In the article *What Do I Say When They Get Stuck on a Word? Aligning Teachers' Prompts with Students' Development*, the author states,

When readers make errors, primary-grade teachers often respond with assistance in the form of prompts. Usually, these are prompts like “Sound it out”; “What makes sense there?” and “Do you see any chunks or word parts that can help you?” Teachers often use prompts “on the fly” as they listen to students read aloud and, as such, might not consider them part of formal reading instruction. Nevertheless, as innocuous as word-recognition prompts seem, they are a form of instruction. Their consistent use may well influence students’ reading behavior (Brown, 2003, p. 720).

Understanding the importance of these word solving strategies or prompts is a crucial factor in a teacher’s behavior while listening to and instructing children in reading.

The explicit teaching of word solving strategies should be a part of the core instruction for every kindergarten student whether they are non-readers, emergent readers or well above grade level. Each student should have exposure to word solving strategies through explicit instruction followed by gradual release of responsibility to practice the strategies until students

can use the strategies independently. The instruction of word solving strategies can occur in a number of settings. Whole group, small group, and individual teaching and learning settings are all appropriate ways to explicitly teach word solving strategies depending on the developmental needs of the kindergarten student. Different strategies will be appropriate based on the reading background and developmental needs to each student as they progress in the reading proficiency throughout the year. Boushey and Moser (2006) speak to this point very passionately in their book *The café: Engaging all students in daily literacy assessments and instruction* noting that “It is intense, explicit teaching and scaffolded support with the students, developing them as strategic readers no matter what text they pick up” (p. 10).

It is therefore highly important for kindergarten educators to understand the importance of word solving strategies. Word solving strategies or reading prompts are often an afterthought to the preparations that go into each comprehension strategy lesson or shared reading experience, but Brown (2003) challenges, “as innocuous as word-recognition prompts seem, they are a form of instruction. Their consistent use may well influence students' reading behavior” (p. 720). This importance is further emphasized by the fact that many times, the kindergarten educator is a student’s first teacher. Due to this reality, it is critical that kindergarten educators know what to tell students when they come to a word they do not know in a text.

Another crucial aspect in teaching word solving strategies to kindergartners is the idea of interruption or wait time given by the teacher. This wait time should be given so that students have the opportunity to hear the error they have made and self correct if their developmental reading level allows them to do so. “Data from several empirical studies suggested that poor readers encountering unfamiliar words were much more likely to be interrupted quickly by teachers than their higher achieving peers” (Brown, 2003, p.721). Many teachers are guilty of

jumping in right away when a student makes an error in their reading when actually this hinders their progress. We want to teach students to hear their own mistakes and have the opportunity to self-correct before interrupting them. General guidelines state that a teacher should wait at least until the end of the page or sentence (depending on text level) to interrupt a child and work together to fix up their mistake. Schwartz (2005) clearly illustrates this point by stating, “We need to let students make an error and allow enough time for them to notice their error independently. Usually this means at least letting students finish reading the sentence in which the error occurs” (p. 439). If teachers allow this wait time, students will start to self monitor and be better able to self correct because they notice a break down in meaning or a disconnect with the picture clue during their guided or independent reading time.

Still another key point for teachers to keep in mind when implementing units of study on word solving strategies is that word solving strategies should only be used in accordance with a child’s developmental reading level, especially in the individual and small group settings. Moats (1998) advises,

The learner progresses from global to analytic processing, from approximate to specific linking of sound and symbol, and from context-driven to print-driven reading as proficiency is acquired. The instruction we deliver should be compatible with the emerging competence of the student (p.1).

Any and all word solving strategies may be introduced in the whole group setting, but the particular prompts used with one child in the individual setting or a group of children in the small group setting must be specifically tailored to their reading level and developmental needs.

Brown (2003) affirms that,

...the same word-recognition prompts that are appropriate for emergent readers (e.g., “What’s the first sound? Now, look at the picture.”) often are not appropriate for more advanced beginners (e.g., “Do you see a chunk you know in that word?”) and vice versa (p.723).

Because of this, skilled educators teach word solving strategies in a variety of settings including whole group, small group and individual.

In the Whole Group Setting. Word solving strategies should be taught explicitly in whole group mini-lessons. Traditionally, whole group lessons in the kindergarten classroom have been long, 20 minutes or more, and focused on a word solving strategy and the reading of an entire book. Research now supports shorter mini-lesson in which a teacher still focuses on a word solving strategy, but may only use part of a book or another shared text of some sort. Boushey and Moser (2006) confirm this idea in their book *The Café; Engaging all students in daily literacy assessment and instruction*; “We embraced the move toward mini-lessons in literacy workshop over the past two decades, in part because they dovetail so well with what brain researchers say about the limited attention spans of students in whole-class instructional settings” (p. 88). Later in the book they go on to discuss that they find it most effective to use the age of the student they are teaching as a general guideline for how long a mini-lesson should be. (Boushey & Moser, 2006) This would be a good guideline for kindergarten educators to keep in mind as they seek to provide the most engaging instruction possible for students.

In the Small Group Setting. Word solving strategies can be even more focused on student need in guided reading lessons. Word solving strategy lessons should be reinforced in need based groupings based on the information a teacher gathers from conferring with students or from previous guided reading lessons. Schwartz (2005) finds this format to be quite beneficial and says,

The guided reading lesson format provides a rich opportunity for teachers to observe and investigate early literacy. Listening to a student read a text that is only partially familiar allows us to apply and reform our theories of literacy learning and instruction (p.442).

This is what happens during guided reading to allow educators to make decisions about student needs. Schwartz (2005) goes on to address this point by stating, “Guided reading lessons are a powerful context for beginning reading instruction. But providing immediate responses to students' oral reading requires teachers to make complex and highly skilled decisions” (p. 436). These highly skilled decisions are based on which word solving strategy to provide a student with or to just give them the word so they can move on. Brown (2003) says this about one educator who uses these kinds of skilled decisions with her students each day,

If she decides the word is readable, Jean lets the child work at it and supplies prompts as needed because she believes this brief interruption of the reading process is worth the effort. However, if she decides the word is too difficult, Jean provides the word as soon as the student starts to stumble (p.731).

These skilled decisions come into play with each student that a teacher listens to during the literacy block in both the small group and individual setting.

In the Individual Setting. Brown and Schwartz both emphasize the need for teachers to know their readers thoroughly enough to be able to make quick and effective decisions about how to prompt them during the conferring process. The conferring process consists of the teacher sitting down with one student while listening and responding to their reading. Brown (2003) suggests that an expert teacher should,

Try three quick prompts and then move on. When a student stumbles on a word, Jean waits for self-correction. If it fails to occur, Jean tries two or three quick prompts in succession, and if none work she simply provides the word to preserve fluency (p.731).

Brown, Moats and Schwartz all agree that teachers must pay careful attention to a reader's developmental level. Brown states that, “To offer students the most effective assistance with troublesome words, teachers should ask themselves which type of prompt is most appropriate for a reader at this point in his or her development” (p.722). Moats (1998) agrees with the statement, “While this renewed interest in phonics is certainly a welcome development, we will make

limited progress unless decoding instruction is grounded in what we know about the stages of reading development...” (p. 1). Schwartz (2005) also weighs in with the words, “To respond quickly and effectively to teaching opportunities during oral reading, we need a tentative but elaborate theory of a particular student's literacy development” (p. 438). Thus, kindergarten educators must spend time developing their own theory of first how to assess and stay current with each student's developmental level, and then how to most effectively reach each one of their students through the use of developmentally appropriate word solving strategies.

Defining Comprehension Strategies

“A "strategy" is a plan developed by a reader to assist in comprehending and thinking about texts, when reading the words alone does not give the reader a sense of the meaning of a text” (Choice literacy, 2006). Readers may use one comprehension strategy or a combination of comprehension strategies to help make meaning in texts. “By helping students understand how these flexible tools work, teachers enable readers to tackle challenging texts with greater independence” (Choice literacy, 2006). The comprehension strategies listed below are some of the most common strategies taught at the kindergarten level. There are many others listed in the appendix, but most fit as a sub-strategy under one of the comprehension strategies listed.

Using Schema. Schema can be defined as prior knowledge or what a student already knows in their brain. Being able to activate this schema allows students to give their brain a head start on understanding the story. Debbie Miller (2002) calls this, “...all the stuff that's already inside your head, like places you've been, things you've done, books you've read – all the experiences you've had that make up who you are and what you know and believe to be true” (p. 57). If prior knowledge is activated, a student starts the story already thinking about what might be in the story or what they know about what may happen in the story, helping them to

understand. Allington (2012) weighs in on the importance of activating prior knowledge before reading by saying, “It is important that students develop the habit of reflecting on what they already know about a text or the topic of a text before they begin reading” (p. 136). If schema is discussed as a class before beginning reading together the students and teacher have a chance to build a common schema that may help students who do not have schema on the topic of the book.

Making Connections. Making connections is a student’s ability to relate a text to themselves, to another text, and to the world around them. These are called text to self, text to text and text to world connections. These connections help students interact with the text by personalizing the story for each reader. Gear (2006) says this about children and their ability to make connections, “The ability to connect to text is perhaps the easiest one for children to understand and master, yet it is singularly the most powerful” (p. 35).

Questioning. Questioning is a student’s ability to ask questions before a text is read, during the reading of a text, and after the text has been finished. Students can then develop the skill to think about where the answer to their question came from. Students can practice finding the answers to their questions in the book, in their brain, or from an outside source as needed. This helps students develop the ability to ask meaningful questions that will make them a better reader and help them understand and internalize the text on a deeper level. Students should also be taught or led to the realization that readers ask questions for many different reasons. Miller (2002) lists some of those reasons; clarify meaning, speculate about text yet to be read, determine author’s style, intent, or content, focus attention on specific components of the text, locate a specific answer in the text or consider rhetorical questions inspired by the text” (p. 140).

Visualizing. Visualizing is a student's ability to create a mental image of a text in their head. They may or may not represent that mental picture through art or writing. This helps students tune in to details in the text and make each reading experience a richer more stimulating experience. It is a very simple strategy, but can significantly assist those students who have trouble comprehending to recall and understand (Stahl, 2004). Allington (2012) also comments on the significance of visualizing or as he call it "imagery". He explains that there are two types of visualizing or imagery commonly used in the classroom. "First, fostering an internal visual image of aspects of the setting, characters, and events offered in a text." He continues with, "The second sort of imagery strategies were helping students manufacture a distinct mnemonic image to facilitate recall" (p. 136). While both types of these visualizing or imagery strategies are useful, the first is more commonly used in the kindergarten classroom.

Inferring. Inferring is a student's ability to use their schema in combination with a prediction or text feature to figure something out that is not directly stated in the text. Inferring can also be used to figure out the meaning of unfamiliar words (Miller, 2002). Many times students will be asked to infer character feelings based on either pictures or situations given in the text. This again helps students to tune into the details in a text making each reading experience richer and more stimulating. It also gives students the ability to think more deeply about a text and "read between the lines" (Gear, 2006).

Determining Importance. Determining importance is a student's ability to decide the importance of various parts or features of a text. This can include skills like predicting what they will learn from the story, knowing and analyzing story elements, fiction versus nonfiction, author's purpose, author's message and different genres (Miller, 2002). This helps students to

figure out what is really important in a text for their learning or enjoyment and what is extraneous information that they do not need to attend to at the given moment.

Synthesizing. Synthesizing is a student's ability to use all of the above strategies in combination to take what they have learned in the text and apply it to their own situations in real life. This is the most complex of the strategies because it relies on all the other strategies if it is to be done effectively. Debbie Miller (2002) says this about the process students use to synthesize information; "readers monitor overall meaning, important concepts, and themes in text as they read, understanding that their thinking evolves in the process" (p. 171). Synthesizing helps students move from learning to read to reading to learn and into proficiency in reading.

Teaching Comprehension Strategies

Like word solving strategies, comprehension strategies need to be explicitly taught by kindergarten reading educators. Stahl (2004) illustrates this point very clearly, "The research demonstrates that instruction in phonological awareness and decoding are not enough if we want students to be able to read and make sense of multiple genres for multiple purposes" (p.605). Stahl (2004) also states the overarching rationale for teaching comprehension strategies, "Comprehension strategies can be important to a reader because they have the potential to provide access to knowledge that is removed from personal experience" (p.598). This point is again emphasized in the article *Metacognitive Strategies Help Students to Comprehend All Text*; "the explicit instruction of reading comprehension strategies should begin early in reading development. It appears that the reading comprehension of students may be positively affected by explicit instruction in strategy use..." (Eilers & Pinkley, 2006, p. 28).

Comprehension is a very abstract and complex topic for teachers to address, especially when the audience is so young. Kindergarten brains are often times taken for granted when it

comes to comprehension. Their ability to understand the meaning of both simple and complex text is a skill that can be taught through a systematic introduction to and then gradual release of responsibility for various comprehension strategies. Kindergartners use their natural curiosity and desire to learn to the best of its advantages while learning to comprehend text. Debbie Miller (2002) has this to say about children and the inspirational qualities that allow them to be such deep thinkers,

Every day I know children are going to surprise me with their thinking, teach me to see and understand things in new ways, motivate me to think deeply about my teaching, and help me make thoughtful decisions about where to go next and why (p. 10).

It is the inspiration from students and the palpable energy of the classroom that allows expert teachers to really hone in on comprehension strategies and dig deeply into each text that is read, moving beyond knowing words and meanings to true comprehension.

Much like word solving strategies, comprehension strategies need to be taught explicitly in kindergarten. Gregory and Cahill (2010) suggest a clear process for introducing comprehension strategies, “She began by defining the strategy, providing a visual representation of its meaning, and asking students to use the strategy within the context of the story, through the use of anchor charts and hand signals” (p. 515). They go on to conclude their article by stating that comprehension instruction for young children is, “... more active and much more visual. However, their use of these strategies functions in a matter very similar to that of older children. The result is that they are able to better understand what they are reading” (p. 519). The implications of these statements are that it is important to start teaching comprehension strategies even in kindergarten. Though they seem very young, through explicit instruction they can learn to read and understand.

Comprehension is more than just knowing words and understanding what each single word means. Constance Weaver (2009) makes this point very clearly when she explains the idea that students and teachers often times assume that just because a student knows the meaning of a word that they will know and understand the meaning of the text itself. Because of research and experiences in the classroom, expert teachers know that there is much more to comprehension than just correct word identification. Gear (2006) also states this point very clearly in her book by declaring that “Children need to learn that reading is not simply words on a page, but what those words mean to them. Teaching how to make sense of those words is just as important as teaching them how to read” (p. 11).

For students to internalize comprehension strategies, it is important that the teacher use a gradual release of responsibility method for teaching comprehension strategies in the classroom. In the article *Proof, practice, and promise: Comprehension strategy instruction in the primary grades*, Stahl (2004) states that, “Strategies can be tools in the assimilation, refinement, and use of content. It is assumed that as children practice these strategies in a group setting, they will habituate them and transfer them to other appropriate settings independently” (p. 598). This means that the teacher first introduces and thoroughly explains the strategy, usually through carefully selected text or sections of text and the use of read-aloud think-alouds in the whole or small group setting. The teacher and students will often make an anchor chart together detailing what the comprehension strategy is and how to use it. After that the students are released to practice the strategy with their own texts first guided by the teacher and then independently. Debbie Miller suggests six to eight week units of study to achieve this full release of responsibility, knowing that some students will still need support beyond the comprehension strategy unit. The end outcome of this gradual release of responsibility is a student who can use

the strategy completely independently and apply their knowledge of the strategy to other texts, curricular areas and make connections to previously learn strategies as well.

One of the most poignant statements on the topic of comprehension instruction came from Dr. Richard Traw in an introduction to the comprehension module in his Masters class *Methods and Materials in Literacy Education*. Dr. Traw wrote;

First is the idea that teaching comprehension strategies one at a time and “practicing to mastery” may not be the most effective way. That’s not how real reading works. In real reading, all of the strategies are operating as needed, often in tandem, depending on the demands of the text and the degrees and kinds of prior knowledge possessed by the reader. This doesn’t mean that we can’t or shouldn’t pinpoint a particular strategy to emphasize for a particular lesson, but it does mean that we can’t just rule out the use of all others during that lesson. In fact, we should celebrate when our students make connections between strategies. It also means that if we allow ourselves to get too tied down to a curriculum that says “do this strategy in Week One, then this strategy in Week Two,” etc., we may be contributing to a “doing school” mentality instead of a “real reading” mentality (personal communication, March 1, 2011).

Dr. Traw makes such an important point with this statement. If we as educators truly want students to use comprehension skills, we have to combine everything we know about teaching them effectively but also be flexible to know that the end goal is for students to use them in combination and make connections between them while using them independently and interdependently with peers or others.

The authors of the article *Caution! Hard Hat Area! Comprehension Under Construction: Cementing a Foundation of Comprehension Strategy Usage That Carries Over to Independent Practice*, also find themselves quite concerned over student’s isolated and disjointed use of comprehension strategies. They make a bold statement by agreeing with Dr. Traw that as reading educators “Perhaps we are guilty of teaching a myriad of strategies in an isolated manner, rather than focusing on an integrated, more reality-based approach” (Marcell, DeCleene & Juettner ,2010, p. 1). In the article they go on to discuss that teachers need to find a balance

between the talking they do and the discussions they engaged students in with the read-aloud, think-aloud and literate conversation strategies discussed in the preceding and following paragraphs on comprehension strategies (Marcell, DeCleene & Juettner, 2010).

In the Whole Group Setting. The whole group time generally reserved for teaching comprehension strategies is shared reading time. This is the time of the day when the teacher shares a text or section of text with all of the students in the class. The mentality surrounding shared reading has changed recently from a time when students sit passively and listen to a story to a time when students and teacher engage in a discussion about the book and comprehension strategy at hand. Richard Allington (2012) calls this “literate conversation” and challenges teachers that “Reading lessons must change and begin to foster the sorts of thinking about texts that is commonly accepted as literate behavior outside of school” (p. 124). Earlier in the paragraph he describes this outside of school talk by saying,

...outside school we rely on the richness of a person’s conversation about texts to judge how well they understood it and their literateness...Outside of school settings we engage in conversations about the adequacy of texts and authors to inform, engage, and entertain us (p. 124).

These are the kind of conversations and discussions we should be having with our students about texts, not basic recall and retell. Educators can do this through the use of explicitly modeled comprehension strategies in the whole group setting.

To explicitly model literate conversations for students, teachers many times use the form of read-aloud, think-aloud. The use of read-aloud, think-aloud can be greatly enhanced by the choice of literature to go along with it. Strickland and Abbott (2010) question, “With limited funding and time, how can parents and educators carefully choose books that will encourage and motivate lifelong learners?” (p. 66). They go on to suggest that parents and educators use a framework for considering literature that involves the aspects of vocabulary, narrative

connections, print motivation, print awareness, letter knowledge, and phonological awareness (Strickland & Abbott, 2010). These are appropriate skills for kindergartners that will not only support their word solving strategies, but will also support their developing use of comprehension strategies.

Similarly to word solving strategies, comprehension strategies need to be explicitly modeled in the whole group setting and the responsibility for using the comprehension strategies gradually released to the students as they demonstrate readiness. Comprehension strategies become slightly more complex because of the importance of using them before, during and after reading. In contrast, word solving strategies can be discussed before and after but are most effectively used only during reading. Mills (2009) has this to say about proficient readers using comprehension strategies,

Proficient readers consistently use the following repertoire of strategies: (1) activate prior knowledge, (2) make inferences, (3) use knowledge of text structures, (4) visualize, (5) generate and answer questions, and (6) retell and summarize. Speaking and listening activities that apply these strategies are matched to the phases of instruction--before, during, and after reading (p. 325).

Comprehension strategies, when used as directed by Mills, clearly stimulate the most positive results and the most dramatic thinking for students if they are used before, during and after reading.

In the Small Group Setting. In the article *Help with reading comprehension: Comprehension instructional frameworks*, the authors pose these simple questions that many teachers around the country share, such as "What about my students who can read fluently but don't understand what they are reading?" "What can I do to support my stragglers?" (Liang & Dole, 2011, p. 742). In answer to these questions comes guided reading with comprehension strategy groups. Boushey and Moser (2006) talk a little bit about how to make

and run these strategy groups effectively in their book *The café book: Engaging all student in daily literacy assessment & instruction*; “Some strategy groups met for just a couple of days; others continued for two weeks or more, depending on how sophisticated the strategy was and how well the children were mastering it” (p. 109). Basically, teachers assess students on the strategies and when they notice some students are struggling as they begin to release responsibility. Then the teacher pulls these students into a small group to help support the development of the comprehension strategy with those particular students. This is a highly effective strategy because it lets teachers spend more time with the students who really need it most and can help to guide their thinking as they work, while the rest of the students can practice the skill more independently because they have shown they are ready for more responsibility with the strategy.

Another interesting point for small group instruction is discussed in the article, *Metacognitive Strategies Help Students to Comprehend All Text* by Eilers and Pinkley. The authors discuss the idea that poor readers may benefit more from small group comprehension strategy instruction because better readers are already using the strategies. “They found that these strategies provided help for poor readers and concluded that good readers were already using these metacognitive comprehension strategies. This suggests that successful readers may intuitively and independently integrate these reading comprehension strategies into their reading abilities” (Eilers & Pinkley, 2006, p. 14). This could lead to the assumption that it may be more beneficial to spend increasing amounts of time teaching lower level readers and letting higher readers work more independently during reading time.

In the Individual Setting. Comprehension strategies can also be a useful talking point for an individual conference with a child. During an individual conference with a student a teacher

might notice one of three things that need to happen with a student based on the comprehension strategy they are teaching. The first would be a student still struggles with a comprehension strategy even after they have met with a strategy group and it is time for the teacher to confer with that student in a one on one setting and really focus on the comprehension strategy with that student in their texts. The second would be that a teacher realizes that a student is not using the comprehension strategy effectively on their own and they need to be placed into a strategy group for more guided and focused practice work on the strategy. Or the third occurrence would be the celebration with a student who is using the strategy effectively on their own and then teacher could either encourage continued practice or an extension activity for that student based on the comprehension strategy. After one of these three occurrences, Boushey and Moser (2006) believe that the teacher should “begin by telling children what we’ve noticed about them as readers. Then we teach by giving an explicit explanation of a strategy and modeling it for them, or we can talk about the strategies in specific ways...” (p. 63). When using this conferring format, teachers can effectively reach each child to provide them with the scaffolding they need to continuously improve their use of comprehension strategies in independent and shared text.

Conclusions and Recommendations

“The challenge for all of us as teachers is to continue to refine our personal theories to a point where our teaching decisions can effectively support the literacy learning of all students” (Schwartz, 2005, p. 443). The literacy learning described by Schwartz can only be supported by the explicit teaching of reading strategies in kindergarten, both word solving and comprehension. In the book Reading Power Adrienne Gear (2006) illustrates this point very clearly when she states, “Children need to learn that reading is not simply words on a page, but what those words mean to them. Teaching how to make sense of those words is just as important as teaching how

to read them” (p. 11). If these strategies are taught explicitly to young children they will already be well on the road to developing the tools needed to become proficient readers who read for learning and pleasure for the rest of their school careers and if they choose, throughout the rest of their lives.

Classroom Implications for Teaching Word Solving Strategies

A large portion of the kindergarten day is generally spent on getting kindergartners ready to read and teaching them to read. Word solving strategies are a very important piece of the reading puzzle. Some of the word solving strategies that are generally taught in kindergarten are tap each word read, check the picture, get your mouth ready, sound out the word, ask what would make sense, pick out chunks, and read then reread. When taught and reinforced explicitly at developmentally appropriate times throughout the kindergarten year, kindergarten educators can be very successful in teaching kindergartners to attend to words and read successfully at their reading level.

The teaching of word solving strategies should always happen with a gradual release of responsibility followed by close attention paid to the miscues of each individual student. Word solving strategies can be introduced in whole group, but then should be differentiated for students who need more support in small group and individual conferences. When working in small groups and with individual students it is highly important for the teacher to give the student wait time and not interrupt their reading too soon, and let them develop the ability to self monitor. The teacher must strike a balance with giving the appropriate prompts for the reader, not giving too many prompts, sometimes just providing the word, and other times giving enough wait time for students to figure it out on their own. To be able to balance all these factors takes

practice and dedication, but is well worth it considering the reading benefits it will have for the students.

Classroom Implications for Teaching Comprehension Strategies

Comprehension strategies are truly the key to unlocking the power of reading. It is important to note that students do not have to be secure in word solving strategies before comprehension strategies are taught because even non-readers can use comprehension strategies with a shared text. Some of the comprehension strategies generally taught in kindergarten are using schema, predicting, making connections, questioning, visualizing, inferring, determining importance, and synthesizing (Mills, 2009). When taught and reinforced explicitly at developmentally appropriate times throughout the kindergarten year, kindergarten educators can be very successful in teaching kindergartners to think deeply about the text they are reading or the text that is being read to them.

The teaching of comprehension strategies should always happen very explicitly and generally in the whole group setting first. In this way the kindergarten educator can use the read-aloud, think-aloud strategy to make a very abstract concept (which most comprehension strategies are) very concrete. Also suggested is the use of anchor charts, hand symbols and other kinesthetic applications for kindergarten students. After the explicit whole group teaching kindergarten educators should follow with reinforcement and a gradual release of responsibility coupled with careful monitoring in small groups and individual conferences to make sure the students are using the strategies to their fullest potential.

Today educators live in the educational climate of increased reading and academic achievement as early as kindergarten. Therefore we as kindergarten educators must rise to the challenge of providing kindergarten students with the skills and strategies they need to blaze a

path towards proficient reading and lifelong learning. If we teach word solving and comprehension skills explicitly, use the gradual release of responsibility and truly believe that even kindergartners can learn to read and understand, we will succeed in teaching a generation of students who will become life long learners by learning to read and reading to learn continually.

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Appendix A

List of word solving strategies alphabetically by resources:

- Brown, K. J. *What do I say when they get stuck on a word?: Aligning teacher prompts with students' development-* tapping the words and using the first letter sound, "bulldozing" the word, which would be blending the sounds, pointing out vowel patterns and other irregular spellings, looking at parts of the word
- Kragler, S. and Martin, L. *I tried to make it not confusing by fixing it: Describing six first graders use of strategies to understand text* - focusing on words, using pictures, reading, skipping, rereading, thinking, and asking for help, sounding out words
- Schwartz, R. *Decisions, decisions: Responding to primary students during guided reading* – searching strategies – any strategy using phonics to make an initial attempt at a word - monitoring strategies – allowing wait time and letting students recognize the errors they have made, also called self-monitoring or self-correction
- Wauke Community School District– slow down to problem solve words, use predictable patterns to read poetry, nursery rhymes, and songs, demonstrates phonemic awareness, matches letter with appropriate letter sounds, read single syllable short vowel words, read identified high frequency words, use pictorial clues to determine word meaning

Appendix B

Table of word solving strategies alphabetically by resources:

Word Solving strategies alphabetically by researcher and strategy	Boushey and Moser	Brown	Kragler and Martin	Schwartz	Wauke Community School
Ask "What would make sense?"	X				
Ask for help			X		
Check the picture	X		X		X
Get your mouth ready/use the first letter sound	X	X		X	X
Pick out chunks/look at parts of the word	X			X	X
Read and reread	X		X		
Segment and blend	X	X		X	X
Sound it out	X		X	X	X
Stop and think/self- monitor			X	X	
Tap each word	X	X			
Use high frequency words	X				X
Use phonics or phonemic awareness skills				X	X
Use vowel patterns and irregular spellings		X		X	

Appendix C

List of comprehension strategies alphabetically by resources:

- Boushey, G. & Moser, J. The Café Book – Retell, prior knowledge, mental image, predictions, infer, summarize, ask questions, use text features and literacy elements, cause and effect, and compare and contrast within and between texts.
- Choice Literacy – activating background knowledge to make connections between new and known information, questioning the text, drawing inferences, determining importance, creating mental images, repairing understanding when meaning breaks down, and synthesizing information.
- Eilers, L. & Pinkley, C. *Metacognitive strategies to help student comprehend all text* – use prior knowledge to make text connections, how to use context clues to make meaningful predictions, and how to sequence the events of a story
- Gear, A. Reading Power – Connect, question, visualize, infer, and transform.
- Gregory, A. & Cahill, M. *Kindergartners can do it too!: Comprehension strategies for early readers* – schema, making connections, visualization, questions, and inferring
- Marcell, B., DeCleene, J. & Juetterm M. *Caution! Hard Hat Area! Comprehension under construction: cementing a foundation of comprehension strategy usage that carries over to independent practice* - activating background knowledge, making connections, questioning, inferring, determining importance, creating mental images, repairing understanding when meaning breaks down, and synthesizing information.
- Miller, D. Reading with Meaning – Schema, creating mental images, inferring, asking questions, determining importance in nonfiction, and synthesizing.

- Milles, K. A. *Floating on a sea of talk: Reading comprehension through speaking and listening* – activate prior knowledge, make inferences, visualize, use knowledge of text structure, generate and answer questions, retell and summarize,
- Stahl, K. *Proof, practice, and promise: Comprehension strategy instruction in the primary grades* – text structure, questioning (teacher generated), activation of prior knowledge (schema), literature webbing (prediction), visual imagery, and video
- Wauke Community School District– retelling, fiction/nonfiction, text to self connections, use information from the pictures to make predictions, generate a question before reading, answer a questions related to the text, infer character feelings using evidence in pictures, and identify the topic (story elements).

Appendix D

Table of comprehension strategies alphabetically by resources:

Comprehension strategies alphabetically by researcher and strategy	Boushey & Moser	Choice Literacy	Eilers & Pinkley	Gear	Gregory & Cahill	Marcell, DeCleene & Juetner	Miller	Milles	Stahl	Waukee Community School District
Cause and Effect	X									
Connect	X	X	X	X	X	X	X			X
Determine Importance		X				X	X			
Infer	X	X		X	X	X	X	X		X
Predict	X		X						X	X
Question		X		X	X	X	X	X	X	X
Retell	X	X	X				X	X		X
Schema	X	X	X		X	X	X	X	X	
Story Elements	X									
Summarize	X							X		
Synthesize		X				X	X			
Text Structure								X	X	
Transform				X						
Visualize/Mental Images	X	X		X	X	X	X	X	X	X