

Preface

The primary purpose of this book is to provide teachers of Grades 3–8 with a clear and concise picture of how to structure comprehension instruction for students who are not meeting grade level literacy standards. For teachers responsible for reading instruction in these grade levels, this book shares ideas for implementing the intensive, focused instruction necessary to accelerate students' reading progress. Because students who are not meeting grade level literacy standards often are also lagging in other subjects (where they are expected to be grade level readers), this book offers suggestions to content area teachers for leveraging students' literacy learning. The result can be life-changing when all teachers work together to improve a struggling reader's ability to comprehend text.

Why this book when there is so much written about reading comprehension? One answer is that within each author, research study, professional article, and book, lies a new chance to gain a new insight, another perspective, and/or confirmation of current practice. The complexities of the comprehension process and instruction are not yet fully understood so the writing must continue.

Chapter 1 consolidates much of the research-validated comprehension strategies others have written about and provides the rationale for the resulting Four Powerful Comprehension Strategies this book advocates explicitly teaching to struggling readers: *summarizing*, *creating meaningful connections*, *self-regulating*, and *inferring*. These strategies have “high utility” and transferability across all texts without overwhelming struggling readers. Focusing on four—rather than eight or ten or six—essential strategies, gives a struggling reader a tighter lens on the strategies and also the task of remembering is simplified. We know even average adults have a limited capacity to hold information in their working memories (George Miller's Classic Magical Number 7 +/- 2). The Four Powerful Strategies described in this book provide an economical and compelling way to organize and represent the essentials of comprehension. Additionally, many of the key skills embedded in these Four Powerful Strategies are identified so that teachers can help students learn how to organize their knowledge about comprehension without feeling besieged by a long list of discrete, disconnected performance expectations.

Chapter 1 concludes by examining what we know about the transfer of learning. Instruction of struggling readers needs to be carefully designed so that students are able to independently transfer their small group learning to

other reading contexts. What we know about factors that support and/or inhibit the transfer of learning from one situation to another provides a rationale for using a Gradual Release Lesson Design (Duke & Pearson, 2002) when teaching struggling readers.

Chapter 2 reminds intermediate grade teachers that struggling readers need daily, explicit, small group instruction using a Gradual Release Lesson Design. By letting go of small group reading instruction too early, these students begin the downward spiral of school failure. This book argues that struggling readers in Grades 3–8 do not fully understand the comprehension process and therefore need explicit instruction and numerous experiences applying the strategies across many different types of text in order to discover the interconnectedness of strategic reading. As these students learn how to systematically control their strategy use to understand text, they begin to believe in themselves as readers and to transfer their reading strategies to other situations. We know that, ultimately, the key to successful reading comprehension is actively understanding the strategies and applying them in combination with other reading strategies to construct text meaning (Anderson, 1991). Proficient readers, unlike those who struggle, recognize the interplay among comprehension skills and strategies throughout the process of constructing text meaning.

The Four Powerful Comprehension Strategies are covered in Chapters 3 through 6, each of which contain two sample lessons for the strategy covered. These sample lessons show teachers how to structure instructional support as students learn how reading works. The lesson design shifts gradually from teacher control to student responsibility so that the teacher can be sure students are successful during their independent practice. Most of the sample lessons in this book are designed for small groups. The lessons describe effective instruction activities/techniques that support comprehension.

A lesson suggestion for content area teachers is also offered in each of the strategy chapters. It is important that content area teachers share the responsibility for helping the struggling reader. Content area lessons, designed to leverage literacy learning, not only provide support to struggling readers but help them learn the content material as well. When subject area instruction is organized around the important concepts of the discipline, the student is better able to make connections among the knowledge and facts being taught. If students know in advance what kinds of relationships to look for and are reminded to look for them while reading their content area text, they will find it easier to identify important relationships in the material they read.

Chapter 7 concludes by bringing together the ideas discussed throughout this book and by leaving the reader with final questions and reflections to consider when planning small group instruction for struggling readers. Chapter 7 is followed by the Glossary which provides in-depth definitions of the Four Powerful Strategies and other terminology. The Glossary is a critical piece to understanding the whole. It ensures that we, reader and author, share common definitions of terms. *Although each chapter includes key terminology explained by excerpts from the Glossary, I suggest reading the Glossary in its entirety as the best way to begin this book.*

Struggling readers are at the heart of my work as an educator. During my career as a special education teacher at all school levels, classroom teacher, and districtwide reading consultant, it became clear to me that the children who leave the primary grades still struggling with reading face a dismal school future. As these students enter middle school and high school, they become further marginalized by daunting textbooks with readabilities well beyond their reach, increased writing expectations, less small group instruction, and a more fragmented school schedule. My commitment to reaching these readers never waned when I moved into school administration. In fact, I believe the literacy work I continue to do with many talented teachers is what keeps me grounded in my current position.

Continuing to learn how to help struggling readers is one thing—writing a book about it is quite another! Almost a decade ago, after presenting at an International Reading Association Conference with my good friend and mentor, Dr. Joseph Yukish, we sat in a diner in Atlanta and talked about capturing some of our ideas and beliefs in a book. We both returned to our very busy lives but continued to stay in touch and nudge each other's thinking via e-mail and occasional visits. After extending my comprehension conversations with many Connecticut teachers (most recently with the wonderful literacy teachers in Pomperaug Regional School District 15, Middlebury/Southbury, Connecticut, and in an Interdistrict Summer School Program), my understanding of this work was pushed to a much deeper level. As teachers I worked with began to implement the practices advocated in this book, success stories began to emerge. Now I am taking the plunge and sharing these ideas with other educators whose obligation is to help struggling readers. It is my sincere hope that *Four Powerful Strategies for Struggling Readers, Grades 3–8* provides readers with at least a few new ideas and understandings about comprehension instruction.