

## Inviting Primary Students to Believe in the Value of Text Comprehension

Nicole Martin  
*Ball State University*

### Abstract

Text comprehension is foundational to kindergarten through second-grade students' learning to read, and belief in its value enables their growth. In this article, classroom snapshots of three primary teachers' efforts to focus on and model comprehension are provided. Also, additional possibilities for taking action in the primary classroom are described. The classroom snapshots and additional possibilities can be used to reflect on current practice and to develop future plans for supporting primary students' belief in the importance of comprehension.

*"I could do phonics all day long and teach them how to call words. But, unless you understand what you read, what's the point in reading?" (Wendy, Grade 2)*

*"Because what's the point of reading?... Because I don't need you to be a word-caller. I need you to be a reader." (Diana, Grade 1)*

Wendy and Diana shared these perspectives during my interviews and observations of their reading instruction. The primary teachers believe kindergarten through second-grade students' comprehension is just as important as students' decoding. Their perspective mirrors what many teachers have shared with me during my years partnering with elementary schools. The teachers are worried about primary students' privileging of skilled word-reading, and one question they often ask is how to help the students to value comprehension. In this article, I share some background information and discuss two useful approaches to supporting primary students' belief in the importance of comprehension.

### What is Known about Comprehension, Reading, and Instruction

In the primary grades, students' comprehension is recognized as a central focus of reading and reading instruction. The RAND Reading Study Group (2002) defines comprehension as "the process of simultaneously extracting and constructing meaning through interaction and involvement with written language" (p. 11). As their definition highlights, comprehension entails meaning-making. Readers work actively to understand authors' ideas during encounters with texts (Almasi & Fullerton, 2012; Duke & Carlisle, 2011). Readers use a variety of comprehension strategies, such as inferencing and comprehension-monitoring. Also, readers construct and use mental models of the texts' ideas to answer questions, build knowledge, and act on personal goals (Kintsch, 2013).

The recent Science of Reading (SoR) movement recognizes the importance of comprehension (e.g., Indiana HEA 1558, 2023). Researchers' analysis of decades of published studies classifies comprehension alongside phonics, phonemic awareness, fluency, and

vocabulary as “pillars of reading” (National Reading Panel, 2000). Also, in a more recent research review, Gina Cervetti and Tanya Wright (2020) explain researchers have found “basic skills, comprehension strategies, and knowledge develop simultaneously, rather than sequentially” (p. 237). In state learning standards, comprehension is an emphasis from the start of students’ school years (Indiana Department of Education, 2023). For example, kindergarten students are expected to learn to “comprehend grade-level text, including fiction and nonfiction, and can demonstrate their comprehension orally and through writing” (p. 4). Students’ learning goals include categorizing, distinguishing importance, predicting, questioning, retelling, and textual analysis.

The potential for instruction to help students learn to comprehend from the start of their school years also is widely recognized (Shanahan et al., 2010; Stahl, 2004). Teacher read-alouds, comprehension strategy instruction, text structure instruction, text discussion, pre-reading activities, visual aids, and wide reading have shown consistent promise for enabling students’ comprehension (Duke & Martin, 2019). The instructional activities offer opportunities for students to gain insight into comprehension and to practice understanding and learning from text.

### **How Primary Teachers Can Encourage Students’ Valuing of Comprehension**

Primary teachers can take action to encourage students’ belief in the importance of comprehension. Two approaches used by the teachers with whom I have worked include (a) focusing on comprehension as the goal of reading and (b) modeling comprehension throughout the school day. The approaches draw students’ attention to comprehension, help them to see that adult readers routinely and voluntarily engage in comprehension activity, and provide frequent exposure to comprehension strategies.

During my time with Diana (Grade 1), Wendy (Grade 2), and their colleague Mary (Kindergarten), I often saw the two approaches in use. The three teachers had taught for more than five years and were judged by administrators to be exemplary teachers of reading. Their school served kindergarten through second-grade students from small-town and rural neighborhoods. The majority were Caucasian and monolingual English speakers. Students’ socioeconomic backgrounds and academic needs varied tremendously. Half of the incoming school population was classified as below-grade-level in reading, and teachers’ classrooms included both students receiving specialized educational services and those identified as gifted/talented.

Below, I share snapshots of the three teachers’ lessons, and I discuss how their teaching can be taken up in primary classrooms. The snapshots come from an analysis of primary teachers’ reading instruction which involved identifying and categorizing their comprehension-focused teaching behaviors (Miles et al., 2020). The snapshots are typical examples of what I observed throughout the research project. I feature snapshots from this analysis because students in these classrooms displayed their valuing of comprehension during encounters with texts outside of teachers’ comprehension teaching. For example, students spontaneously volunteered the meanings of words during read-alouds (e.g., “I think sniffled means he cried really bad”), shared their thinking (e.g., “This is a sad story!” and “Our names for [dinosaurs] aren’t their real names”), and publicized their questions and text-based learning (e.g., “If a person saw Earth... and went into space, there’d be water all around Earth, and then how would [the water] not fall

off?”). They responded eagerly to teacher questions and exhibited full engagement during independent reading periods. Also, students took the initiative to recruit texts ideas’ when pursuing their goals (e.g., seeking out books in the classroom library for use during independent writing, pointing to pages in books during peer discussions).

### **Focusing on Comprehension as the Goal of Reading**

Throughout the school year, Mary, Wendy, and Diana encouraged students’ belief in the importance of comprehension through teacher explanations and class discussions of the value of comprehension. They also emphasized meaning and meaning-making within lessons.

#### ***Classroom Snapshot #1: Teacher Explanations of the Value of Comprehension***

The first classroom snapshot illustrates how the first-grade teacher used direct explanation to help students to understand the centrality of comprehension to reading. The lesson featured a read aloud of *Goldirocks and the Three Bears* (Schwartz & Coulton, 2014). As Diana finished reading the final page, she transitioned into a review of the teaching point.

- 1 *Diana:* And what do you think about that book? It’s a good one.  
*Students turned and whispered to each other about their reactions.*
- 2 *Diana:* Okay, so when you are reading your books today, I want you to think about
- 3 what’s happening on each page, just like we did. That took a really long
- 4 time. Did that take a really long time?  
*Students nodded and murmured.*
- 5 *Diana:* Yeah, probably longer than Mrs. F wanted. Do I care how fast you read?
- 6 No, only if I say I’m going to time this.
- 7 *Diana:* (*Gathers students’ attention*) When you’re reading, there’s no point in
- 8 reading if you don’t know what’s happening. If you don’t know what’s
- 9 happening, you’re just looking at words. You want to understand your
- 10 books, so when you are reading, you have to stop and think. What are you
- 11 gonna do when you are reading? You’re gonna think about the words
- 12 because reading is thinking and thinking is reading.

In Lines 1-4, Diana encouraged students to practice one comprehension strategy (evaluating text) and to focus on comprehension in their reading. In Lines 5-12, the teacher reminded students of the difference between “looking at words” and “reading.” She told them “stopping and thinking” are part of reading. Her emphasis was on clarifying that comprehension is the goal of reading.

#### ***Classroom Snapshot #2: Class Discussions of the Value of Comprehension***

The classroom snapshot illustrates how Diana used discussion to help students to review the role of comprehension in reading. As students got ready to transition to independent reading, she led the discussion as she constructed an anchor chart of things to remember when reading. The first-grade teacher began by encouraging students to use the time to select a book to read aloud during their next visit with their kindergarten buddy. Diana reviewed the importance of selecting texts of interest to both reader and audience and began showcasing comprehension.

- 1 *Diana:* (*Writing on the anchor chart*) You probably want to make sure you
- 2 understand the punctuation, and that you know what is happening in your

- 3 book. I do want to write that on there. Make sure you understand the book.  
 4 Is understanding the book the same as being able to read the book? What  
 5 do you think?...
- Students turn and whisper to each other.*
- 6 *Diana:* Okay, 1,2,3 back to me. What do you think? Is reading the book the same  
 7 as being able to understand the book? Alexis?
- 8 *Alexis:* No.
- 9 *Diana:* You said that right away when I asked the question. Can you explain? Does  
 10 it make you feel better that I agree with you? Okay, reading the book, in  
 my  
 11 opinion, is not the same as understanding the book. Can you tell me why?  
*Several students attempt to articulate their thinking. Two students whisper  
 half-formed comments about reading and about not understanding.*
- 12 *Diana:* You could just read the words in the book and never understand the story  
 or  
 13 the facts you're supposed to be getting from the book. Excellent! So, when  
 14 you are doing your practice-read, you are going to use the tools for  
 15 understanding your book. If you don't understand what's happening, you  
 16 need to go back and re-read. Make a movie picture in your mind. Turn on  
 17 your brain TV. Make the words you are reading make pictures inside your  
 18 head. Keep track of who's talking.... In every book you read you will come  
 19 to words you may not know. Think about the pictures and all the words  
 20 around that word to help you understand what that word means. Will you  
 21 promise me you will do that?

In Lines 1-3, Diana suggested that reading involves understanding the text. In Lines 3-11, the teacher invited students to share their thinking about the idea. In Lines 12-13, she publicized students' attempts at sharing and confirmed the importance of comprehension during reading. Then, in Lines 14-21, Diana explained how previous comprehension lessons would apply to their preparation for the upcoming visit. Her focus was on reminding students that readers actively comprehend when reading books.

### ***Classroom Snapshot #3: Emphasis on the Value of Meaning and Meaning-Making***

The classroom snapshot illustrates how the second-grade teacher showed that meaning-making is as central to reading of words and sentences as to reading of stories. As Wendy and the students were working to put word cards in alphabetic order, she paused to lead a discussion about the words they were encountering.

- 1 *Wendy:* Why would a bicycle be called bicycle?  
 2 *Blake:* It has two.  
 3 *Wendy:* What about tricycle? (*One student raises their hand.*). Do you have  
 4 another word?  
 5 *Cassidy:* I think I know the meaning of the word. Because it has two. And dissect is  
 6 cutting it apart.  
 7 *Wendy:* (*nods head*) Let's talk about the next word.

In Line 1, Wendy drew attention to the word's meaning. In Lines 2-6, the teacher and students explored morphemes, defined the *-bi* prefix as "having two," and highlighted other words. Their focus was on meaning-making within words.

### ***Inviting Belief in the Value of Comprehension into the Classroom***

Primary teachers can encourage students to believe in the importance of comprehension by focusing on comprehension as the goal of reading during instruction. Teachers can take action in the primary classroom by:

- Telling students that the goal of reading is comprehension.
- Leading a discussion exploring how understanding of ideas helps readers read and use texts.
- Talking (and asking) about meaning-making when reading words, phrases, sentences, and paragraphs.
- Helping students to investigate the meanings of word parts, words, and phrases.
- Using meaningful passages (e.g., poems, riddles, jokes) and discussing the texts' ideas when students practice word-reading and oral reading fluency.
- Drawing attention to students' comprehension activity during read-alouds and independent reading.
- Providing positive feedback when students are actively comprehending text.
- Helping students to use texts' ideas to accomplish real-world goals (e.g., persuade someone about consequential issues, follow procedures in order to construct things).

These actions provide opportunities for students to notice and experience the value of understanding texts' ideas for themselves, their classmates, and adult readers.

### **Modeling Comprehension Across the School Day**

Throughout the school year, Mary, Wendy, and Diana also encouraged students' belief in the importance of comprehension by sharing demonstrations of their own comprehension activity during instruction, reading, and encounters with words and meanings.

### ***Classroom Snapshot #4: Demonstrations of the Value of Comprehension During Instruction***

The classroom snapshot illustrates how the kindergarten teacher helped students learn comprehension strategies by publicizing her own thinking when teaching comprehension. Mary's lesson featured a read-aloud of Dr. Seuss' (1957) *How the Grinch Stole Christmas*. At the lesson's beginning, she focused on how readers infer characters' feelings and actions.

- 1 *Mary:* Today we are going to look at how writers use their characters. And I want  
 2 you to pay really close attention to our character. Notice his facial  
 3 expressions, what he does and says, and how things go throughout the  
 4 story. So your job is to pay really close attention to the character. When  
 5 you get to know the character in your story, it helps you to understand what  
 6 is happening even better.

*She reads the first two pages.*

- 7 *Mary:* I can tell when I look at [Dr. Seuss's] character that he is very unhappy.  
 8 He's kind of got that frownish look on his face, and his mouth is turned

- 9 upside down.  
*She reads the next four pages.*
- 10 *Mary:* Oh, he's got that little mischievous grin. He's smiling because he's come  
 11 up with an idea to stop Christmas. This is one of those nasty grins, like  
 12 "Hahahaha, I know what trick to play on you."

In Lines 1-6, Mary shifted students' attention from their writing project to reading and explained how and why readers use text clues to understand characters in stories. In Lines 7-9, the teacher modeled her own usage. She inferred the Grinch's feelings (unhappiness). In Lines 10-12, Mary again modeled use of text clues (e.g., grinning). She shared her inferences that the Grinch is happy and has formulated a plan for ending the town's holiday. Her emphasis was on showing students how readers' comprehension activity supports their reading and writing.

### ***Classroom Snapshot #5: Connecting Comprehension and Reading***

The classroom snapshot illustrates how the second-grade teacher incorporated her own use of comprehension strategies into the class's reading. As Wendy read aloud *The Ant and the Dove* (Giles, 2000), she paused to lead a discussion about the fable's moral.

- 1 *Wendy:* What was the moral? One good turn deserves another?  
 2 *Caleb:* If one person does a good thing, someone else will do a good thing for  
 3 them.

*The teacher revoices their explanation and asks for examples from students'*

*lives. One student starts to answer but says they cannot remember. Wendy tells a story about one time when she wrote a check but forgot to move the money from the household savings account to her checking account.*

- 4 *Wendy:* Dr. D discovered that I had forgotten to do it. My one mistake kind of  
 5 snowballed and caused lots of problems. It took Dr. D lots of hours to fix  
 6 my mistake. He had to call lots of people on the phone. All while he was  
 7 working. He helped me fix my mistake. There was something he needed  
 8 help with this weekend, so I helped him this weekend. To pay him back for  
 9 my mistake.

In Lines 1-3, Wendy drew attention to the author's message and one student's interpretation. In Lines 4-9, she modeled her own text-to-self connection. Wendy recounted a time when she helped her husband after he went out of his way to fix her mistake. The teacher's focus demonstrated that adult readers' comprehension activity is integral to their reading.

### ***Classroom Snapshot #6: Comprehension within Readers' Reading Lives***

The classroom snapshot illustrates how Wendy showcased that readers routinely and voluntarily use comprehension strategies during reading. As Wendy read aloud a chapter from an adventure novel, she commented on the story events.

- 1 *Wendy:* I think I would have a hard time with this [the character's eating of the just-  
 2 killed-and-slaughtered meat]. (*Resumes reading*)  
 3 *Wendy:* He's teaching her a lot of things, isn't he? (*Resumes reading*)

In Lines 1-2, Wendy paused to explain how she would have reacted in the character's situation. Then, in Line 3, Wendy again paused to disclose her conclusion that the protagonist is learning a lot from the adult mentor character. The teacher's sharing demonstrated that her reading and comprehension activity constantly co-occurred.

### ***Classroom Snapshot #7: Encounters with Words and Meanings***

The final classroom snapshot illustrates how the kindergarten teacher showed students that readers actively comprehend even when reading words and sentences. As the teacher and students sorted words during a spelling lesson, Mary encouraged them to read one of the words and asked about its meaning.

- 1 *Students:* Lost.
- 2 *Mary:* Lost. What is it? I lost a toy. That would be so sad.  
*Students murmur to each other.*
- 3 *Mary:* (*laughing*) I know. I almost let my puppy go lost last night because she was
- 4 so naughty.

In Line 1, students read aloud the word card. In Line 2, Mary offered a sample sentence to help students define the word. She then publicized her evaluation of the sentence. In Line 3, Mary recounted her own text-to-self connection to the word's meaning. The teacher displayed her focus on comprehension, even during a lesson emphasizing the letters and sounds in words.

### ***Inviting Belief in the Value of Comprehension into the Classroom***

Primary teachers can encourage students to believe in the importance of comprehension by modeling comprehension throughout the school day. Teachers can take action in the primary classroom by:

- Demonstrating uses of comprehension strategies when teaching the strategies.
- Including personal and real-world connections during read-alouds and discussions.
- Talking about personal evaluations and inferences when reading aloud for pleasure and in science and social studies lessons.
- Sharing personal comprehension activity when reading words, phrases, and sentences.
- Publicizing personal thinking when students share written texts.
- Explaining when and how texts' ideas contributed to decision-making and actions.
- Recounting moments when comprehension activity resembles students' thinking.
- Asking questions when encountering written texts throughout the school day.

These actions provide opportunities for students to experience and envision how readers actively work to understand and use texts' ideas when reading.

### **Invitations to Believe in the Value of Comprehension**

School reading curricula and research-based pedagogical resources (e.g., Shanahan et al., 2010) include a great deal of useful guidance and support for helping primary students learn to comprehend the texts they encounter during instruction. Snapshots from exemplary primary teachers' lessons can offer useful ideas for encouraging students to believe in the importance of

comprehension. In this article, Mary's, Diana's, and Wendy's teaching has showcased actions that can be taken to establish a focus on comprehension and to model readers' comprehension activity. Additional possibilities for taking action in the primary classroom have been shared. Now, it's your turn. How do you already invite your students to believe? What will you do in the future to help them understand its value?

### References

- Almasi, J. F., & Fullerton, S. K. (2012). *Teaching strategic processes in reading* (2<sup>nd</sup> ed.). Guilford Press.
- Cervetti, G. N., & Wright, T. S. (2020). The role of knowledge in understanding and learning from text. In E. B. Moje, P. P. Afflerbach, P. Enciso, & LeSaux, N. K. (Eds.), *Handbook of reading research*, (Vol. 5, pp. 237-260). Routledge.
- Duke, N. K., & Carlisle, J. F. (2011). The development of comprehension. In E. B. Moje & P. Afflerbach (Eds.), *Handbook of reading research* (Vol. 4, pp. 199-228). Routledge.
- Duke, N. K., & Martin, N. M. (2019). Best practices in informational text comprehension instruction. In L. B. Gambrell and L. M. Morrow (Eds.), *Best practices in literacy instruction*, (6th ed., pp. 250-270). The Guilford Press.
- Giles, J. (2000). *The ant and the dove*. Rigby.
- Indiana Department of Education. (2023). *Indiana academic standards: English/Language Arts*. <https://www.in.gov/doi/students/indiana-academic-standards/englishlanguage-arts/>
- Indiana HEA 1558 - Science of Reading, Indiana General Assembly. (2023). <https://iga.in.gov/legislative/2023/bills/house/1558/details>
- Kintsch, W. (2013). Revisiting the construction–integration model of text comprehension and its implications for instruction. In D. E. Alvermann, N. J. Unrau, & R. B. Ruddell (Eds.), *Theoretical models and processes of reading* (6th ed., pp. 807-839). International Reading Association.
- Miles, M. B., Huberman, A. M., & Saldaña, J. (2020). *Qualitative data analysis: A methods sourcebook* (4th ed.). Sage.
- National Reading Panel. (2000). *Report of the National Reading Panel: Teaching children to read: An evidence-based assessment of the scientific research literature on reading and its implications for reading instruction: Reports of the subgroups*. National Institute of Child Health and Human Development, National Institutes of Health. <https://www.nichd.nih.gov/publications/pubs/nrp/report>
- RAND Reading Study Group. (2002). *Reading for understanding: Toward an R&D program in reading comprehension*. [http://www.rand.org/pubs/monograph\\_reports/2005/MR1465.pdf](http://www.rand.org/pubs/monograph_reports/2005/MR1465.pdf)
- Schwartz, C. R., & Coulton, B. (2014). *Goldirocks and the three bears*. G.P. Putnam's Sons.
- Seuss, Dr. (1957). *How the Grinch stole Christmas*. Random House Children's Books.
- Shanahan, T., Callison, K., Carriere, C., Duke, N. K., Pearson, P. D., Schatschneider, C., & Torgesen, J. (2010). *Improving reading comprehension in kindergarten through 3rd grade: A practice guide* (NCEE 2010-4038). <https://ies.ed.gov/ncee/wwc/practiceguide/14>

Stahl, K. A. D. (2004). Proof, practice, and promise: Comprehension strategy instruction in the primary grades. *The Reading Teacher*, 57(7), 598-609.  
<https://ila.onlinelibrary.wiley.com/journal/19362714>

#### **Author Note**

There is no known conflict of interest. I am grateful to Diane Bottomley and the primary teachers who invited us into their classrooms and shared so much with us.

#### **Author Information**

Nicole M. Martin, an associate professor, teaches literacy education courses, and serves as the Director for Graduate Programs in Elementary Education at Ball State University. She also conducts research focused on reading, writing, and disciplinary literacy and partners with schools across the country. Previously, Dr. Martin taught preschool, second grade, and fourth grade. Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Nicole M. Martin, Department of Elementary Education, Teachers College (TC), Room 319, Ball State University, Muncie, IN 47306, United States. Email: [nmmartin2@bsu.edu](mailto:nmmartin2@bsu.edu)

Nicole M. Martin 0000-0001-8035-5327