

The proposal of a Stage One reading-groups timetable that integrates major comprehension components

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Because reading comprehension is intrinsic to understanding curricula-content, teachers must have a clear methodology for developing reading comprehension skills. This is particularly so for children with learning difficulties.¹ Research shows, however, that many teachers do not regularly integrate skills for comprehension development into their program (Schumm, Moody & Vaughn, 2000; Moody et al., 2000).² Comprehension pedagogy frequently lacks sequential strategy practices and fails to level activities appropriately. For teachers to succeed in raising comprehension levels, they need to have a clear understanding of the problems to attend to and a method to address them. While researchers vary in their detail and emphasis, most discussion falls within specific focus areas, as outlined by Graham and Bellert (2004, p. 253). For ease of reference, their categories have been numerically listed:

1. Using Background Knowledge Appropriately
2. Decoding and Word Recognition
3. Vocabulary Knowledge
4. Fluency
5. Strategy Use and Metacognitive Skills
6. Differentiating Between Common Text Structures

It follows, therefore, that an effective comprehension program would include procedures aimed at developing strategies in each of these stated areas.

To create a timetable that would most effectively incorporate the six major components of comprehension, each component was assessed for the most significant learning tasks for children with learning difficulties and the selection of tasks that would be of value when applied to a group activity setting. The most practical way of implementing the program, in what is usually a daily two-hour literacy allocation, was to designate one of the hours to group work. Well-organised, in-class group work offers numerous advantages over both whole-class instruction and withdrawal. It is a successful method for motivating individual partici-

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1. By learning difficulties, I mean children identified by schools to have difficulties in learning.
 2. Schumm, Moody & Vaughn (2000) found that the majority of teachers they surveyed employed whole-class mixed ability instruction.

pation (Carlisle & Rice, 2002, p. 9), providing that the nature and level of instruction are determining factors (Moody et al., 2000, p. 2). Skills based interventions are also 'associated with exceedingly high outcomes in self-concept' (Vaughn, Gersten & Chard, 2000, p. 65). While the proposed model does not have to be ability based, teachers are able to provide reading material at the children's ability level if they wish and organise tasks and activities specific to their level. All groups also receive the same amount of instruction and time on skill development. The main aim is that the six components are addressed, so that group activity work is valuable at every stage, that each activity is purposeful.

The most effective breakup of the hour is into ten-minute blocks, with the class divided into five groups. Each rectangle signifies ten minutes, except for Comprehension Strategies/Text Structures, which is allocated twenty minutes. There are ten 'hidden' minutes to allow for student rotation and positive reinforcement at the end of the session.

Table 1. The Timetable

Day 1 – New Book Day	Day 2 – Repeated Day
Decoding/Naming Games when finished	Decoding/Naming Games when finished
Background Knowledge / Predicting (Reciprocal Teaching)	Fluency – Set text Read familiar text when finished
Prereading – tape	Strategies (Reciprocal Teaching)
Book Introduction with Teacher	Text structures
Vocabulary	Read to Teacher who applies Clay's self-monitoring strategies

The first day, the 'new book' day, contains activities for the group that is to be introduced to a new book on that particular day. The group will then repeat the second day until the required comprehension and fluency levels are achieved. Usually, the second day would only be repeated once, creating a three-day program that provides for a total of six readings on the one text. The program accommodates each major comprehension component, and each activity is referred to as a period.

The following guidelines to group activities can be applied:

- The teacher should have a timetable of activities for each group
- If the groups are flexibly based, one child from each group moves on to another group each week so that after a number of weeks all children will have worked with each other.
- Each group can have a 'teacher' (or leader) and a teacher's assistant who holds the position for the week. The student 'teacher' is responsible for main decisions, such as direction in board games and holds the pointer in drill work. The assistant notes who is the best worker in the group.

- State the group 'teachers' at the beginning of each 'new book' day. It is not necessary to introduce new texts to each group all on the same day.³
- Allow five minutes at the end of every reading session for positive reinforcement. Both the 'teacher' and assistant can receive praise, as well as the assistant's 'best student' choice, so at least three children in each group will get positive feedback.

The timetable's significance lies in its capacity to incorporate activities that directly target all six of the major comprehension components within a one-hour program on a consistent daily basis, while simultaneously providing for variation in tasks and content. Furthermore, the activities are organised so that all ability groups are catered for in each area of the timetable. While being challenged at their instructional reading level, the children are also being nudged more and more towards independence through the responsible roles adopted within collaborative discussion and in their application of reading and comprehension strategies. The timetable's significance, however, can only be fully understood through an overview of the major components of comprehension and how the timetable incorporates them.

1. Background knowledge

Before a child is given a text it is advisable to stimulate their memory of relevant experience and knowledge, their schemata (McCormick, 1995, p. 383). This increases interest and instigates associations that may aid comprehension. In deciding on activities, teachers need to initially categorise a text's main concepts. *Baby Bear Goes Fishing* (Randell, 1994), for example, is about fishing, going out with dad, and Baby Bear's developing independence. There are always multiple levels of understanding to be found in texts, but for teaching, it is important to keep introductory discussion simple, relaxed, and brief. An overemphasis on background knowledge may lead to children responding to text on an experiential rather than text-based level (McCormick, 1992 and Wilson, 1979, cited in Winne, Graham, & Prock, 1993, p. 64).

The following group activities are recommended for promoting background knowledge (ideas from Stage One Dawson P.S. Priority Action Schools meeting, August, 2004). While relating to the NSW English Syllabus⁴ under Learning to Read Stage 1 (Board of Studies, 1998, p. 30), most activities comply with indicators from Learning to Talk and Listen (p. 20).

3. Suggested by colleague, Kelly Newell, during Priority Action Schools program meeting, Dawson P.S., 2004.

4. The syllabus is issued to the state's teachers and provides guidelines on program methodology and content.

- Brainstorm words, ideas, experiences related to a picture – tape or write them.
- Make up questions about a picture.
- Choose words from a given list to match them to a picture.
- Choose words to match to different pictures.
- Paint or colour a ‘main concept’ picture (for example, Baby Bear fishing with Father Bear).
- Draw a picture of self in a story picture.
- Write about a time when...
- Write words or ideas about a given topic or specific text pictures.
- Listen to a story about a related topic and talk about it, using focus questions as a guide.
- Look through pictures from the text, making predictions about the story – tape or write them.

A teacher-directed orientation, if possible, however, will be more succinct than the above activities. The teacher can turn pages as children respond to pictures, prediction questions, and text language, thus instigating children to give brief personal responses. As Clay states, ‘the teacher is ensuring that the child has in his [sic] head the ideas and the language he [sic] needs to produce when prompted in sequence by print cues’ (1993a, p. 37). The timetable provides one period for any of the above activities on the first day.

2. Decoding and naming

Emphasis on decoding and word recognition aims at allowing students to attend more to comprehension than word reading (La Berge & Samuels, 1974, cited in Meyer & Felton, 1999, p. 285). Adams (1990, p. 54) asserts that ‘the most critical factor beneath fluent reading is the ability to recognise letters, spelling patterns, and whole words effortlessly, automatically and visually.’ As alphabetic sounds are learned, decoding may be taught through blending and segmenting (Jardine, 1994, p. 26), each initially requiring teacher direction and monitoring. From there, blending or segmenting can be rehearsed each day for five minutes by using board lists that are appropriate to the students’ level. Games and activities may be helpful but they do not aim for automaticity. A vc board and cv board could begin:

ab eb ib ob ub	fa fe fi fo fu
ack eck ick ock uck	ga go gu ge (gentle) gy (gym)
ad ed id od ud	ha he hi ho hu
af ef ef of uf	ja je ji jo ju

The above cv examples are pre onset-rime stage, but the same rhythm is useful for decoding. For example: a-b, ab; e-b, eb; i-b, ib ... where the vowel sound of ‘a’ in a-b is stretched to the b. At the end of the line, the students can return and only read the sound parts – ab, eb, ib, ob, ub. It

is, in effect, a breaking down and generalisation of the blending process as applied to whole words.

Phonic work is acceptable within a balanced literacy program that values reading for meaning. The sounding of word-parts helps to develop phonemic awareness, essential to continued progress. The phonics lessons can be used progressively through to more complex phonemic combinations. Progress through phonemes should be systematic and rehearsals short. Adams argues that work on morphemes – roots, syllabification, affixes, prefixes, and word endings, for example, are probably best left until later grades when students have a more substantial knowledge of letter patterns (1990, p. 156). Conversely, Clay suggests using all ‘natural’ breaks, including syllabic, inflection, prefix or suffix and onset and rime, to help six year olds ‘take words apart’ (1993a, p. 9). Word parts instruction works well with a reading program, providing it is kept brief. Decoding skills practice, like verse, works on the basis of its own rhythm and, as well, to a large extent on its own brevity! Speed, also, is an intrinsic component that can ‘prime’ fluency in contextual reading.

Fluency also evolves through the automatic recognition of high-frequency words, which can be taught through numerous games and activities:

- memory (concentration)
- fish
- snap
- bingo
- bean-bag toss
- highlighting sight-words in context
- writing sight-words in sentences
- computer programs (Dawson P.S. Priority Action Schools Stage One Staff, 2004).

Again, automaticity may be more successful through drilling sight-words. Indeed, previous conclusions that flashcards need to be practised in context to increase speed and accuracy are now in doubt (Meyer & Felton, 1999, p. 295). Researchers have found that both speed and accuracy of text reading improve with word and phrase practice.

Games, activities and phonic lessons should also attend to letter patterns, in order to speed decoding (Meyer & Felton, 1999, p. 300). The NSW English Syllabus (Board of Studies, 1998, p. 80) includes consonant and common vowel digraphs, word families and common affixes. Rimes and consonant blends could also be included in a decoding program (Meyer & Felton, 1999, p. 300). Attendance to the ‘silent e’ rule is also necessary. Often a word attack fails because there is no automatic transition of the vowel. Therefore, a flashcard style of drill of either mixed

(that is, silent e and not silent e words) or all silent e words could also be beneficial to the program.

In the timetable, Decoding and Naming are allocated for each day, because a short daily routine is highly effective. Children can take responsibility as ‘teacher’ for the board work – when students ‘serve in the role of tutor for reading ... it is associated with reliably higher effects than they are in an alternative grouping format (Vaughn, Gersten & Chard, 2000, p. 107). It is therefore beneficial if the students rotate turns as ‘the teacher’, from one week to the next, and lead their reading group through the charts. Children can play a related game, such as memory or snap, if they finish early.

3. Vocabulary

Focused activities will accelerate new vocabulary learning. If attendance to a new book’s vocabulary is written into the reading-groups program, children with learning difficulties will be more prepared for fluency on their first reading of the new text. On introducing a new book to a child, Clay recommends giving ‘opportunities for the child to hear and use the new words and structures which he [sic] will have to work out from the pictures, the print and the language context’ (1993a, p. 37). Potentially problematic words can be explained, ‘stretched’ (on the white board, in sand, etc.) and put into context. Here is the opportunity for teachers and students to enjoy open discussion about the text. Words may be selected and discussed, rewritten, put into sentences, added to personal dictionaries and compared with synonyms and antonyms.

Independent or silent reading times should also be monitored to ensure students are reading texts that are at the child’s ‘instructional’ level, which ‘stretches the reader’s knowledge and use of decoding strategies’ (Carreker, 1999, p. 175), enhancing vocabulary use and comprehension. If it is too ‘easy’, little strategy learning will occur; if it is too ‘hard’, comprehension will be lost. The correct level will accelerate learning (Clay, 1993a, p. 36). One period is allocated for vocabulary work in the timetable on the first day, after the first taped reading and the first reading with the teacher. If the teacher thinks that this is not enough, the strategy/text structure time could be used for additional work or new words could be integrated with the class’s spelling list.

4. Fluency

The term fluency refers to the speed and accuracy with which a student reads connected text orally’ (Chard, Vaughn & Tyler, 2002, p. 3). Children need to read fluently to obtain meaning (Chard, Vaughn & Tyler, 2002, p. 2). Word-level reading is inadequate (Gersten et al., 2001, p. 5) as indicated when improvements in decoding and naming have been achieved (Meyer & Felton, 1999, p. 287). Fluency has, however, been traditionally viewed as an outcome rather than as a skill to be acquired (Zuttell &

Rasinski, 1991, p. 212), and therefore not usually included in class programs (Chard, Vaughn & Tyler, 2002, p. 2). Students need to be regularly tested on a Running Record to ensure that they are working at their instructional level (Clay, 1993a, p. 36; Carreker, 1999, p. 175). Reading strategies, such as decoding skills, are best learned at a level where word accuracy is between 90–95% (Clay, 1993b, p. 23). The student is able to maintain a sense of the story's meaning, despite new words. Fluency must be maintained because it is this which 'supports comprehension and facilitates self-monitoring and self-correction' (Carreker, 1999, p. 175).

There are multiple methods for fluency development. Carreker argues that a silent reading of the text is preferable before reading aloud. When reading silently, the added burden of articulation, phrasing and expression is not present, so students are more able to work with decoding difficult words (1999, p. 179). Some researchers have further asserted that a text reading should be modelled by an adult or recording (Chard, Vaughn & Tyler, 2002, p. 8). A model pre-reading, with the teacher reading to the group, or students listening to a tape on a listening-post, will familiarise children with the text – its phrasing, new vocabulary, and its general meaning, and thereby facilitate accuracy in rereading (Meyer & Felton, 1999, p. 291).

For many children, however, more facilitation is needed. As Clay states: 'To achieve smooth integration of all the processing activities, the teacher will sometimes need to drop the difficulty level of text until things are working well' (1993a, p. 51). Repeated reading, one of the most popular strategies to increase fluency, also allows for the reading of 'easy' familiar texts. Three or more repetitions are recommended (Meyer & Felton, 1999, p. 292; Chard, Vaughn & Tyler, 2002, p. 10). There are also, however, various kinds of repeated readings – assisted, unassisted and prosodic (Meyer & Felton, 1999, p. 287) each with their own advantages. Unassisted reading promotes independence; it forces the reader to use his own strategies, to be self-reliant and thereby provides for transference. Assisted reading, such as the neurological impress method, echo reading and partner reading, help the reader with pronunciation and phrasing (Carlisle & Rice, 2002, p. 50). Students may learn to connect text more readily by learning to respond to text more quickly (McCormick, 1995, p. 473). Prosodic reading helps give meaning to the text and develops awareness of 'intonation, stress, and ... duration' (Schreiber, 1980, p. 180).

While arguments exist over which techniques are the best, they have all shown significant improvements in fluency (Chard, Vaughn & Tyler, 2002, p. 1). After the book introduction and first reading, therefore, activities to enhance fluency could include:

- reading along with a tape of the text
- rereading with a parent or older 'buddy'

- rereading text with a peer (onto tape)
- rereading text independently or to a partner
- rereading independently and timing self
- rereading from an enlarged copy of text with whole group, where one child is the 'teacher'.⁵

The first day of the timetable contains a period for children to hear a tape of the text, followed by an introduction from the teacher and a first reading of the text. The second day contains a period for fluency practice as well as a reading of the text to the teacher. If the required fluency has not been achieved by the end of the second day, the second day's activities are repeated until fluency results are achieved. (Variety in the hour will occur during the Strategies/Text Structure period.) The intrinsic success in these activities builds them all as motivating experiences.

5. Strategy use and metacognitive skills

Students with learning difficulties, in particular, need to learn strategies and how to use them (Carlisle & Rice, 2002, p. 62) and they need to be taught explicitly for metacognition to develop (Gersten et al., 2001, p. 1; Swanson, 1999, p. 521). Marie Clay's prompts are ideal for teaching students self-monitoring strategies for when they are reading. The prompts address four levels of text or sources of information. The aim is always to develop independence through fostering searching behavior (1993a, p. 42). The levels and some useful prompt examples, to be spoken at the child's pause or error, are given below:

- Meaning - Does that make sense? What would fit there?
- Visual information - Does that look right? What do you know that might help?
- Grammatical/structural - Can we say it that way? Does that sound right?
- Letters/sounds expected - What can you hear? What would you expect to see? (1993a, p. 42)

The effectiveness of the Clay prompts is that they are quickly applied during the reading, with the minimum of interference to the flow of speech. Because they are applied during the reading, moreover, they are particularly effective in teaching children what to do when they don't know a word. The timetable includes one session each day for the children to read to the teacher, thereby providing consistent exposure to the prompts.

Group activities also lend themselves to providing specific instruc-

5. Some ideas from colleagues at a Priority Action Schools program meeting, Dawson P.S. 2004.

tion in strategy use and metacognition⁶ development. There are so many strategies that it has become an area that needs to be addressed as a whole-school focus. Repetition will aid transference, so a consensus of ‘strategies language’ and ‘prompts language’ amongst the various grades, will assist children to retain their learned strategies. Comprehension strategies emphasise the need for teachers to use questioning and discussion between the teacher and students and between peers. Examples include:

- the ‘Question-Answer Relationship’ strategy based on literal, implied and inferred questions on the text
- the ‘Strategies Intervention Model’, based on following explicit rules aided by an acronym
- ‘Direct Explanation’, with emphasis on the thought processes involved
- ‘Reciprocal Teaching’, involving predicting, questioning, summarising, and clarifying with the children taking responsibility for the process
- ‘Transactional Strategies Instruction’, which targets specific strategies over a longer period (Carlisle & Rice, 2002, pp. 70–78).

Of the above strategies, reciprocal teaching appears most suited for Stage One. It does not necessitate work with inference or acronyms (more appropriate with late Stage One). It extends ‘Direct Explanation’ into broader focus areas and it is more tightly time-controlled than Transactional Strategies Instruction. Prediction tasks will naturally occur during the Background Knowledge period, while question generation, summarisation, and clarification tasks may be applied through focusing on text structures. The teacher may designate roles to assist children with orchestrating the comprehension tasks: discussion leader, reporter, harmoniser, and resourcer,⁷ or may just have the one group ‘teacher’ and assistant as previously discussed. Though a good deal of modelling and practice may be necessary to achieve independence, research indicates that the results will be significantly improved through collaborative learning (Palincsar, 1986, p. 776). Because the timetable involves children applying comprehension strategies to the text structures that are being studied in class, Strategies’ development is allocated the same twenty-minute period as Text Structures.

6. Metacognition refers to the individual’s knowledge of his own cognitive processes.

7. As outlined by staff member, Jean Leitch, inservice August 2004, Dawson P.S., NSW.

6. Text Structures

Researchers have shown that children with reading difficulties have problems with assimilating text structures and recognising main ideas (Jitendra, Hoppes & Yan Ping Xin, 2000, p. 127; Gersten et al., 2001, p. 3). Knowledge of narrative story grammars, however, increases students' ability to categorise the relevant aspects of a story (Gersten et al. 2001, p. 3). Addressing the major components – characters, setting, problem or goal, solution or achievement – facilitates comprehension and recall (McCormick, 1995, p. 412). Activities to develop Stage One students' awareness of story grammars might include:

- sequencing events using pictures and/or written statements
- acting out a story as a group
- creating graphic organisers
- underlining characters' main actions
- drawing a setting or a series of settings
- puppetry play.

Knowledge of expository text structures also aids comprehension of factual material. Student activities could include:

- reading a text-type for a purpose
- questioning on the specific text-types
- discussing/responding to a text-type, in writing or on tape
- drawing graphic organisers to help categorise information
- writing in a particular text-type format, adopting characteristics of the text
- adding onto a given text
- completing a cloze exercise after the teacher has covered up a relevant section.

The nature of the text, whether narrative or expository, is also important for comprehension in both its potential to promote fluency and its relevance to its readers. 'Authentic' narrative texts aid understanding and fluency (Gersten et al., 2001, p. 7), particularly when they contain predictable, repetitive structures (Clay, 1992, p. 53; Carlisle & Rice, 2002, p. 158). The use of 'soft expository texts', where narrative and expository styles are combined (McCormick, 1995, p. 421), also provide children with 'a way in' to understanding expository text, giving them a clearer and more natural background knowledge of the subject.

The proposed timetable gives teachers the opportunity to address all of the major components of comprehension, as they are currently understood, in a systematic and developmental way, so that students' ability to comprehend text will be more effectively improved. The timetable includes:

- a systematic and progressive attendance to cv combinations, word-parts, and magic e
- automaticity in high-frequency words
- the introduction to a text's difficult vocabulary and follow-up activities
- an opportunity to predict the text content and briefly discuss major concepts in relation to personal experience
- fluency rehearsals, preceded by a taped 'read along' on texts that are 'easy'. Students are challenged to promote more sophisticated decoding skills through progressively more difficult texts
- decoding and fluency strategies applied as students read, using Clay's short, verbal prompts.
- comprehension strategies and question and answering techniques utilised interactively with peers
- text structures explicitly discussed to aid comprehension.

Background knowledge, decoding and naming, vocabulary, fluency, strategy use and text structures are all consistently addressed within the one-hour timetable, on a daily basis, thereby optimising reading-skills development. Moreover, all students receive an equal amount of instruction, while their work may be leveled to suit their abilities. Throughout the hour, too, the teacher's role is to hear the children reading, so that the ability for on-going assessment is integral to the hour. Finally, in providing a highly organised one-hour timeframe, the program creates time for the teacher to address additional curricula needs, thus providing for a more efficient program overall.

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