RE-ENVISIONING INSTRUCTION

Mediating Complex Text for Older Readers

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How do teachers mediate complex text for all learners? By attending to motivation and engagement, intensity, and cognitive challenge while mediating word-reading difficulty, teachers increase students’ access to challenging texts.

As the newly adopted Common Core State Standards (CCSS) take effect in most states, all students at each grade level will be held to the same high standards for literacy achievement, and raising the bar for students’ literacy learning also raises the bar for teachers. Classrooms have long comprised students of varying abilities and needs, and with this range of abilities has been an expectation that meeting individual needs required differences not only in instructional approaches but also in the curriculum itself, such that some students would require easier texts to read.

With the implementation of CCSS, this expectation is no longer acceptable. The Standards call for the reading of “complex” texts at every grade level and demand that “students who struggle greatly to read texts within (or even below) their text complexity grade band must be given the support needed to enable them to read at a grade-appropriate level of complexity” (National Governors Association Center for Best Practices & Council of Chief State School Officers, 2010, Appendix A, p. 9).

The challenge for us, as teachers, is to understand (and implement) the types of instructional support that struggling readers require to achieve the CCSS. On the one hand, this does not seem to be a daunting task. We know a lot about skilled, or expert, readers. We know them to be motivated and able to use their knowledge of reading and the world to successfully navigate texts to meet their learning goals (Alexander, 2005; Pressley & Afflerbach, 1995).

As teachers, we have become familiar with an array of “best practices” for moving students toward expertise (e.g., National Reading Panel, 2000; Rand Reading Study Group, 2002). Yet, despite an upward trend, both national and state data continue to show that a large portion of students at the elementary and secondary levels fall below benchmark for reading proficiency (e.g., National Center for Educational Statistics, 2013). Furthermore, in states where students have participated in a “trial” assessment measuring their achievement of the CCSS, the results are sobering.

For example, in New York, only 31.1% of students in grades 3–8 met the proficient benchmark (New York State Department of Education, 2013), and in

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Rethinking Conceptualizations of Instruction to Accelerate

The CCSS lay out a clear case for ensuring that students exit secondary school with the ability to read and think critically about complex texts, as the ability to do so is essential to success in college and in most careers. This ability is not only an important “exit goal” for K–12 education, but it also matters throughout the school years. Why? Simply put, what we read influences the breadth and depth of what we learn. Reading complex text supports students’ acquisition of sophisticated and grade-appropriate vocabulary, concepts, and linguistic structures (e.g., Harris, 2005; Stahl & Nagy, 2006).

These textual features, along with the general knowledge acquired through reading complex text, anchor further reading and learning (Cunningham & Stanovich, 1998). When some students have access to complex text and others do not, the reading gap contributes to a knowledge gap (e.g., Stanovich, 2000; Neuman, 2006), and this knowledge gap has implications throughout students’ schooling. Moreover, grappling with complex text develops the critical thinking and analytical abilities that are requisite in our 21st century, global environment.

These enhanced demands of complex text create an additional challenge for teachers: They must continue to meet all students where they are, but they also must understand the types of teacher mediation that will bring complex texts and concepts within the range of every student—even those reading below grade-level expectations. Although many teachers are well acquainted with instructional interventions that rely on changing the curriculum to match students’ individual needs, they are often less familiar with instructional practices that support students’ reading and comprehension of texts outside their assessed independent and instructional levels.

Our observations of schools and teachers lead us to believe that there are currently two common approaches for working with below grade-level readers. First, especially in the elementary grades, students who do not meet the grade-level reading expectations often engage with curriculum that has been modified to meet their instructional needs. This means that a fourth grader reading on a second-grade level is likely to spend most of his time reading second-grade level text.

Although we agree that this approach is important for many reasons (e.g., building fluency and confidence and allowing the student to focus on new skills and strategies for becoming a proficient reader), it creates a situation in which the student is likely to continue to lag behind grade-level peers in reading ability. In fact, exclusive use of this approach may result in a widening gap over time.

Although matching texts to readers is crucial for helping students’ reading
development and achievement, we also know that there is more to developing proficiency than just lowering the text level (Ford & Opitz, 2010). We have long recognized that students who only read lower-level texts read substantially fewer in-context words (Allington, 1983; Ford & Opitz, 2010). According to Anderson, Wilson, and Fielding (1988), fifth-grade students achieving at the 90th percentile on average read about 2,357,000 words per year, whereas students achieving at the 10th percentile read only 51,000 words.

In addition to this significant difference in reading volume, lower-achieving students are asked fewer critical thinking questions, have fewer opportunities for discussion, and have fewer opportunities to write about either the texts they read or their classroom content (Allington, 1983; Hiebert, 1983). That is, meeting students where they are in terms of their skill level will help students progress in their reading skill, but it won’t close the gap and move students toward becoming the skilled and critical readers and knowledgeable learners envisioned by the CCSS.

The second common strategy for working with students reading below grade level, particularly in the upper elementary and middle school grades, is to engage in a lot of oral reading of grade-level texts. Often teachers read aloud the novel being discussed in language arts class or ask students to engage in oral reading of grade-level texts, including disciplinary textbooks. This, too, is problematic. Although students are “exposed” to grade-level text in this way, they may simply listen as the text is read aloud and not develop the skills needed to tackle similar texts independently. They are not being asked to read and comprehend more complex text.

That is, beyond developing listening comprehension skills, students are not engaged in actually reading the more complex syntactic structures or seeing less frequently occurring academic vocabulary words in text while they work to comprehend the meaning (e.g., Beck, Perfetti, & McKeown, 1982; Stahl & Heubach, 2005). Although the practices of matching readers to instructional-level texts and oral reading of grade-level texts each have a place, neither is sufficient.

Questioning these approaches to instruction is not new. In 1991, Allington cautioned teachers to consider the “legacy of slow it down and make it more concrete” (p. 19). In 1983, Shanahan questioned the validity of measuring and teaching to students’ “instructional” levels. These questions, although decades old, are well-grounded and have yet to be effectively and widely answered (Kucan & Palincsar, 2011; O’Connor, Swanson, & Geraghty, 2010). In our well-intentioned efforts to bolster students’ cognitive skills, we may have lost sight of key aspects of research that span several decades and build a strong case for how to work with readers who struggle to meet schools’ expectations. We must draw on this formidable foundation of research and practice and reconceptualize it for today’s classrooms.

**What’s Often Missing?**

In conjunction with choosing text based on students’ reading needs, instruction for students who struggle must be designed to mediate their reading and understanding of complex text and, in turn, to accelerate their progress toward achieving at higher levels. Such instructional planning takes into account students’ present needs for skills and strategies, while also emphasizing three key elements: motivation and engagement, instructional intensity, and cognitive challenge. In the sections that follow, each of these elements is described.

**Key Element 1: Motivation and Engagement.** Effective instruction for all readers takes into account motivation and engagement. Guthrie and Wigfield (2000) defined motivation and engagement as the interest, persistence, and willingness to engage in literacy activities. Instruction that attends to issues of motivation and engagement is linked to improved strategy use and reading achievement (Alexander, 2005; Taboada, Tonks, Wigfield, & Guthrie, 2008). This is vital if students are to continue to work on a task that is difficult for them.

Attending to motivation and engagement must also be considered when students are asked to read materials that are beyond their instructional reading levels, a common occurrence for students who struggle (Guthrie & Humenick, 2004). Teachers typically attend to some aspect of motivation and engagement (e.g., choosing a high-interest text or task), but often neglect to routinely attend to the full range of factors that influence students’ disposition toward reading, including knowledge goals, interests, student autonomy and choice, collaboration, and instructional congruence (Guthrie, 2011).

Although many factors may influence students’ motivation and engagement in reading tasks, four teaching actions (see Figure 1) are repeatedly and consequentially linked to students’ motivation and engagement levels

**Figure 1 Teaching Actions That Promote Motivation and Engagement**

Engaging instruction:

1. Focuses on knowledge goals
2. Taps into students’ interests
3. Ensures coherence among instructional settings
4. Engages students in collaborative work

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(Guthrie & Humenick, 2004). First, focusing on knowledge goals gives students a purpose for their reading, while also teaching students to set their own goals (Guthrie et al., 2004). Second, tapping into students’ interests, helping them discover new topics of interest, and introducing them to compelling characters and stories fosters both situational and individual investments in reading (Gambrell, 1996; Wigfield et al., 2008).

Third, ensuring that instruction provided to students throughout the day and outside of the classroom (e.g., by a reading specialist) is congruent with their classroom work helps to build motivation and transfer of skills (Harn, Chard, Biancarosa, & Kame'enui, 2011; Wonder-McDowell, Reutzel, & Smith, 2011). If students recognize that what they are doing outside of or in addition to their classroom work helps them succeed in their regular classroom, they will grow in self-efficacy and be motivated to engage with the instruction. Fourth, engaging students in collaborative work both encourages students’ epistemic beliefs about what counts as knowledge (Auckerman, 2007) and scaffolds successful task completion (Certo, Moxley, Reffitt, & Miller, 2010; Goatley, Brock, & Raphael, 1995; Reznitskaya et al., 2012).

**Key Element 2: Intensity.** Research has also demonstrated that effective instruction for readers who struggle must be more intense than the instruction provided to readers who are developing at a typical pace (Torgeson, 2004). Intensity is a function of several teaching actions, including the extent to which instruction is explicit and strategic, purposefully matched to students’ particular needs, appropriately paced, and coherent across tasks and contexts (Torgeson, 2004; Wharton-McDonald, 2011). By increasing the intensity of instruction, teachers make optimal use of instructional time, and by doing so, increase struggling readers’ opportunities to develop skills and strategies that will lead to the achievement of grade-level norms.

We highlight four teaching actions (see Figure 2) that intensify instruction for students who struggle. First, providing explicit instruction on strategic processing, in which goals and steps are clearly identified, ensures students recognize what to do, how to do it, and when and why to perform the action again (Duffy, 2009; Paris, Lipson, & Wixson, 1983). More than just teaching a particular strategy, the goal is to provide the student with a set of procedures for navigating text and thus avoiding what might otherwise be perceived by the student as isolated bits of knowledge (Brown, Pressley, Van Meter, & Schuder, 1996; Lubliner & Smetana, 2005; Palinscar & Brown, 1984).

Second, providing focused instruction that targets students’ needs within particular situational contexts ensures efficiency in moving students toward reading goals (Lipson & Wixson, 2009; Lyons, Pinnell, & DeFord, 1993). This fact makes careful assessment and analysis of results essential (Valencia, 2007). Third, providing appropriately paced instruction ensures that lesson segments are brisk and maximize the amount of time students are actively engaged in reading and writing (Clay, 2005; Torgeson, 2004). Fourth, providing coherent instruction across tasks and contexts ensures common language, a common scope of instruction, and common conceptual and thematic goals among collaborating teachers (Wonder-McDowell et al., 2011).

Furthermore, coherence provides clear links between the individual parts of a lesson and across lessons (Newman, Smith, Allensworth, & Bryk, 2001; Wharton-McDonald, 2011). Coherence increases intensity by focusing instruction on a smaller set of strategies and skills, offering multiple opportunities for practice across varied contexts, and as a result, deepening schema for a particular topic or task (Bransford, Brown, & Cocking, 2000; Parr & Limbrick, 2010; Tobias & Bromme, 2009; Wittrock, 1990).

**Key Element 3: Cognitive Challenge.** Finally, effective instruction for struggling readers takes into account cognitive challenge. We know that more and less successful readers differ in the number of words read, the difficulty of texts encountered, and the type of thinking and response they are asked to do (Allington, 1983; Cunningham & Stanovich, 1998; Ford & Opitz, 2010; Hiebert, 1983). These differences are consequential for students’ reading achievement (Anderson, Wilson, & Fielding, 1988; Stanovich, 1986). Texts and tasks that are scaffolded by the teacher and “just challenging enough” help students both cognitively and affectively.

First, they build students’ repertoires of skills and strategies as they learn to navigate texts and monitor their understanding, all while creating more complex stores of conceptual knowledge appropriate to students’ age levels (Vaughn, Swanson, Roberts, Wanzek, Stillman-Spisak, Solis, & Simmons, 2013). Second, students’ motivation increases as they successfully meet challenges, especially when teachers’ well-placed, facilitative feedback draws attention to their success (Guthrie &

Coupled with a motivating and engaging environment and intense instruction, cognitive challenge can be integrated through the creation of text sets that balance four teaching actions (see Figure 3). First, matching texts and tasks purposefully to students’ current abilities ensures that reading is challenging but not frustrating (Mesmer & Cumming, 2009). Second, in conjunction with independent and instructional-level texts, using texts that address topics and themes that are age-appropriate and thought-provoking (i.e., more complex) helps readers find the outcome of reading itself cognitively challenging (McKeown, Beck, & Blake, 2009) and ultimately, more satisfying. Third, using extended texts that encourage students to develop the ability to connect ideas and maintain focus for longer periods of time contributes to reading stamina (Valencia, Smith, Reece, Li, Wixson, & Newman, 2010). Fourth, mediating complex texts through reading aloud, reading chorally, assisted readings, and repeated readings allows students to access the concepts, vocabulary, and syntactic structures in texts that stretch their word reading abilities and build knowledge (Kuhn & Stahl, 2004).

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In this section, to help us illustrate ways to weave the three key elements (motivation and engagement, intensity of instruction, and cognitive challenge) into the fabric of routine instructional planning, we present three classroom scenarios that depict teachers mediating difficult text while working with struggling readers. Within each scenario, we follow the experiences of one fifth-grade struggling reader, Melanie, as she navigates a typical day working with a supplemental reading teacher, with her fifth-grade language arts teacher, and with her fifth-grade social studies teacher. These scenarios are fictional composites drawn from our collective experiences and research in classroom and clinical settings. All names are pseudonyms.

Melanie was first identified as a struggling reader in second grade and has received supplemental instruction both in and out of the regular classroom throughout her elementary school years. Although she has continued to grow as a reader over the years, her independent reading level is still measured at about two years below grade level. Melanie’s fifth-grade instruction is fully departmentalized; she sees four different subject matter teachers each day. The students are heterogeneously grouped in all subjects at the fifth-grade level, except for math.

Melanie receives an additional period of small-group literacy instruction each day, scheduled at the time when her peers are taking an elective class. Melanie and her classmates have language arts instruction for a “double period” each day. The language arts teacher provides reading and writing instruction using a novel-based curriculum that explores various genres throughout the year. Social studies class is held for one class period (45 minutes) each day. The fifth-grade social studies curriculum is focused on the early history of the United States, up to and including the Civil War period.

In an effort to support students reading below grade level, the school reading specialist, who provides the
supplemental instruction, has worked with the fifth-grade language arts and social studies teachers to develop a new approach to coordinating their instruction. In the supplemental reading class, the students who all read between one and three years below grade level are engaged in the reading of texts at their instructional level that address topics and concepts that will support their understanding of content area topics related to the social studies curriculum and the literary concepts addressed in language arts class. In language arts class and in social studies class, students read primarily grade-level texts, but both teachers carefully scaffold the reading of those students reading below grade level, offering those students the opportunity to “accelerate” and to begin to shrink the gap between their reading abilities and the grade-level learning expectations.

**Supplemental Reading Instruction**

We first visit Melanie as she works with her supplemental reading teacher, Ms. Allen. Melanie has been receiving specialized instruction outside of her classroom setting since second grade. Although Melanie is generally able to decode words with ease, she struggles with comprehending the text she is reading. Assessment results have shown that despite being able to answer literal comprehension questions on some classroom texts of comprehension, Melanie has under-developed vocabulary and concept knowledge, as well as a limited ability to monitor her own reading when text passages are longer or conceptually dense and require more stamina.

She also exhibits a notable lack of motivation to engage in reading and writing activities, especially when faced with the challenging texts used in her other classes. When asked about her apparent lack of motivation, she explained that she chooses not to read because she isn’t able to really understand what she reads and she doesn’t “see the point.”

Ms. Allen, the school’s reading specialist, focuses on helping Melanie engage with self-selected reading materials so that she can help her build conceptual understandings associated with important vocabulary and skills in her other classes. Ms. Allen understands the importance of choice and interest for helping students like Melanie engage with literacy. As well, Ms. Allen recognizes the need for congruence across the various learning contexts that her students experience during the school day.

With these ideas in mind, Ms. Allen is always communicating with other teachers to learn what topics, skills, and strategies they are teaching, and she regularly converses with her students to find out about them on a more personal level (e.g., their interests, hobbies, lives outside of school). Combining these two sources of information, Ms. Allen feels, is essential to accelerating her students’ achievement.

In conversations with the social studies teacher, Ms. Allen has learned that Melanie is studying the American Revolution in her social studies class. To do so, the students are reading their textbook, informational trade books, and selected websites to understand cause and effect relationships from multiple perspectives. A key concept that the social studies teacher, Ms. Harris, is trying to connect to their understanding of the American Revolution is “defiance.”

Given the complexity of her reading materials and the concepts associated with them, Melanie is struggling to make sense of it all. Furthermore, Ms. Allen has learned that Melanie is interested in animals. She wants to work with animals one day, and she has always enjoyed when her mother read aloud books that had animal characters. One of her favorite books was *Stuart Little* by E.B. White (1945).

To help Melanie develop some of the key conceptual understandings needed for her social studies class, Ms. Allen designs an instructional series that combines her interests, connects to her classroom instruction, and meets her individual needs. First, in selecting a text for their work together, Ms. Allen provides Melanie and the other members of her small group with several options of children’s novels (written at about the fourth-grade level—Melanie’s assessed instructional level) that have defiant characters. Knowing that Melanie enjoys animals and animal characters, she includes one or two selections

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that match this interest. Ms. Allen wants to connect Melanie’s interests to the key concept from her class to foster her engagement with literacy. Melanie chooses *The Tale of Desperaux* by Kate DiCamillo (2003).

As she introduces the book to Melanie, Ms. Allen also begins to build her conceptual understanding of defiance. She uses this concept as a way to help Melanie establish a knowledge goal for this particular text and as a way to help her transfer this understanding to her history class. She explicitly links the *defiant* character, Desperaux, and the defiant colonists that Melanie is learning about. The exchange shown in Figure 4 provides an example.

In this way, Ms. Allen uses a text that Melanie chose, and thus is more likely to want to read, to create opportunities for associative learning of complex concepts, while also guiding Melanie to establish her own knowledge goals.

**Figure 4** Instructional Dialogue Between Ms. Allen and Melanie

Ms. Allen: So, I have this word here. Have you ever seen that word? Can you read it?
Melanie: Defiant.

Ms. Allen: Defiant. Have you ever heard that before?
Melanie: [Nods] Ms. Harris mentioned it.
Ms. Allen: What do you think that it has to do with? What do you think that it might mean?
Melanie: I’m not sure.

Ms. Allen: Let me show you a picture here. [Shows a picture of boy covering ears when his mother is talking to him].
Melanie: Like to not listen.

Ms. Allen: Not listen. Okay, that’s some good background knowledge you’re bringing into it. I like how you used the clues in the picture. Defiant. That’s kind of exactly the kind of behavior we’re talking about when we say defiant. A defiant behavior would be not listening.
Melanie: Yeah.

Ms. Allen: So it might mean not listening, but there is more to it. Really the key part of the word is that it means to boldly challenge something. Or, to boldly resist something.
Melanie: Oh, okay.

Ms. Allen: So, you’re right, like the boy who doesn’t want to listen to his mother in the picture who’s telling him, “Go clean your room,” he is showing defiance by resisting.
Melanie: Covering his ears.

Ms. Allen: [Covering ears] I don’t want to hear this. I’m going to cover my ears so I’m not listening. Good. So, that’s why I chose that visual. It’s a good example of a child showing that, because a child is likely to show that behavior. Has there ever been a time when you were defiant?
Melanie: No! [laughing]

Ms. Allen: No, of course not [laughing].

In this book, *The Tale of Desperaux* by Kate DiCamillo, the main character exhibits defiant behavior. He falls in love with Princess Pea and breaks the strictest Mice Rule: he is seen by the humans and even talks to them. Desperaux is a character that boldly challenges the rules.

Melanie: Why is that a rule?

Ms. Allen: Great question. You are really thinking about how the story might unfold. That’s what readers do. They ask questions that they then try to answer. Why is that a rule? Well, we’re going to have to read to see if we can answer that question.

Melanie: I don’t see why that is a rule that makes sense.

Ms. Allen: Right. So, why is that a rule? And what causes people to act defiantly? Why is Desperaux breaking this rule and what happens as a result?

I know in Ms Harris’s class you are learning about the American Revolution and thinking about the causes and effects that led up to the Revolution. At that time, there were a lot of people that were being defiant against England in the same way we’ll see Desperaux being defiant towards the mice. What causes people to be defiant? And what happens as a result? We’re going to see if we can answer these questions as we’re reading, and as we’re relating what we’re reading to the colonists during the Revolutionary period. So, let’s preview a little.
understanding the concept of defiance in an easier and more engaging text, Melanie is more likely to make the leaps necessary to transfer her understanding to more complex texts and tasks. Even though they are not reading the textbook on the American Revolution, Ms. Allen is scaffolding Melanie’s understanding of the connections between the Revolution and Desperaux (see Figure 5), while also providing her practice in understanding cause and effect relationships, in this case related to people being defiant.

Although the one-on-one context doesn’t allow for collaborative learning opportunities, Ms. Allen’s use of skillful language choices and facilitative feedback (Boyd & Galda, 2011; Ford-Connors, 2011; Johnston, 2012; Paratore & Robertson, 2013), as seen in the transcript, serves as an important mediating action. Her skilled facilitation of the conversation helps develop Melanie’s self-efficacy for learning important concepts and skills, while also showing Melanie that her thinking matters. These beliefs are essential as Ms. Allen continues to foster Melanie’s motivation and engagement in subsequent lessons.

Ms. Allen also builds coherence with Melanie’s language arts instruction by incorporating the Strategies Bookmark that Mr. Williams, the fifth-grade language arts teacher, is using with all of the students. Both Mr. Williams and Ms. Allen are aware that Melanie often has trouble inferring meaning, and they make a point of checking in with her after she’s read a portion of a text that requires the reader to “read between the lines” to understand an author’s meaning.

As Melanie reads The Tale of Desperaux, Ms. Allen engages her in a discussion of the different strategies she is using to understand the text. She has selected particular stopping points within each chapter; at each of these points she engages Melanie in discussion of the story content, while reflecting on how the strategic actions she is using help her to build understanding of the text. They record these strategies on a chart and again at the end of each chapter.

Throughout this vignette, we see that Ms. Allen is attending to all three of the characteristics of instruction that accelerates. Ms. Allen considers and works to build Melanie’s motivation and engagement with reading; she allows Melanie to select a text (from a set) that matches her interests and builds Melanie’s sense of self-efficacy. She also builds motivation by building coherence with Melanie’s other teachers, with regard to both concepts (defiance) in relation to an established knowledge goal for the text and instruction (reading comprehension strategies).

The instruction is intense, both in its small group, carefully paced nature and in its focus on explicit teaching of strategies that readers use to build understanding of texts. Intensity is also fostered through instructional coherence with other teachers. Finally, the instruction offers cognitive challenge by using a rich, high-quality piece of children’s literature that matches Melanie’s current level and allows her to build understanding of sophisticated themes that are shared with other content areas.

**Language Arts**

We next follow Melanie into her fifth-grade language arts classroom. Her teacher, Mr. Williams, is aware that his students vary widely in their ability to read grade-level texts with full comprehension. Although several students in the class are still working on skills that will allow them to decode grade-level texts successfully, the main challenges posed by grade-level texts for the majority of his students are vocabulary and comprehension. For this reason, Mr. Williams provides explicit instruction on the strategic processing of text.

He follows the gradual release of responsibility model (Pearson & Gallagher, 1983) as he teaches students to strategically navigate their way
through a text. He teaches them to preview and establish their purpose for reading (i.e., their knowledge goals) so that they can read at an appropriate pace and identify important information. He teaches them to visualize, infer, and connect with the text and explains how doing so deepens their understanding of the concepts presented.

On this particular day, Mr. Williams begins by modeling as he starts a new historical fiction novel about the American Revolution. As he prepares to read aloud from My Brother Sam Is Dead (Collier & Collier, 1974), he makes his thinking visible. That is, he explains directly what he is thinking as he gets ready to dive into a new book and how he is making active use of strategic actions as he reads to monitor and deepen his comprehension. This technique is commonly referred to as a “think-aloud.”

After his demonstration, Mr. Williams begins to involve the students, asking them to share their own thoughts about the text as he continues to read aloud and to describe how these thoughts are helping them understand the characters and events as the story unfolds. Each time that a student offers an explanation of a thinking action, Mr. Williams names the particular strategy being used; he does so to enhance students’ metacognitive awareness. He knows when students are aware of and understand the connection between strategy use and text comprehension, they are more likely to see the value in particular strategies and to use them (Almasi & Fullerton, 2012; Klingner, Vaughn, Srguelles, Hughes, & Leftwich, 2004).

As lessons continue across days and weeks, Mr. Williams begins to ask the students to engage in strategy use collaboratively as they continue to read My Brother Sam Is Dead in small groups. He does so with the support of a Strategies Bookmark (see Figure 6), an anchor tool that prompts students to actively read text and facilitates students’ expanding metacognition (e.g., Blachowicz & Ogle, 2008). Although Mr. Williams circulates among all the groups to encourage active reading and to prompt discussions of important ideas and concepts, he often works with a group of students requiring extra support. By the end of the year, Mr. Williams’ students are able to describe how they use a number of strategies as they read independently and to recognize that each text requires that strategies be used differently. They understand that their strategic actions are a means to deeper comprehension. They also understand that some segments of a text might require a great deal of monitoring and summarizing, whereas other segments require the reader to visualize or infer to fully understand the author’s message.

In Mr. Williams’ teaching we again see attention to all three of the characteristics of instruction that accelerates. He builds motivation by selecting a whole-class novel that takes place during the American Revolution, the topic being studied in social studies class; he and Ms. Allen build coherence for Melanie and her classmates who receive small-group, supplemental instruction by both focusing on strategic reading and by sharing a common instructional support (the Comprehension Strategy Bookmark). He also works to build the students’ motivation and engagement with reading by demonstrating to them that their individual approaches to understanding a text are valued and powerful.

Mr. Williams’ instruction is intense through its focus on comprehension strategies across lessons and class sessions, an identified need of these fifth-grade students. Finally, Mr. Williams ensures appropriate levels of cognitive challenge through the use of a high-quality novel with themes
appropriate for students in this age group, yet with sufficient teacher scaffolding to support students like Melanie who are reading below grade level.

Social Studies Class
Melanie’s social studies teacher, Ms. Harris, is charged with teaching her fifth-grade students about the American Revolution, along with other topics related to American history. Her students have a standard social studies textbook that Ms. Harris uses along with many supplemental texts. The social studies textbook poses a significant reading challenge for some of her students, including Melanie, whose instructional reading level is at the fourth-grade level and whose independent reading level is even lower. Clearly, asking Melanie to read and comprehend the social studies textbook on her own would not be effective.

In previous years, Ms. Harris would have engaged the students in oral reading of the text, often resorting to round-robin style reading, in which each student reads the section orally. But over time, as Ms. Harris has read the evidence on the ineffectiveness of this approach (e.g., Kuhn & Stahl, 2004), she considered her observations of students in her own classroom. She knew that many students were either terribly anxious about reading aloud or were frustrated or uncomfortable with the slow, laborious oral reading of some of their classmates.

Although reading the text aloud herself eliminated these problems, Ms. Harris worried about never asking students to read grade-level expository text themselves. After investigating alternate ways of “getting the reading done” and talking with Mr. Williams, Ms. Harris implemented an approach to reading grade-level text that engages all students with the text, but provides significant scaffolding to those students who need it. This approach is displayed graphically in Figure 7.

When Ms. Harris wants the students to read a section of the textbook, she begins with a whole-class discussion that activates their prior knowledge about the topic dealt with in the particular selection. She also uses this time to introduce essential vocabulary and to demonstrate the task to be completed during or after the reading (often a graphic organizer or a written response to a prompt). Then, the students either move into partner groups to read the text orally or read the text silently.

The exception is those students who, like Melanie, read significantly below grade level. These students come together as a small group to read the text selection. On some days Ms. Harris reads the text orally to them, and on other occasions they listen to a recorded reading of the text while Ms. Harris interacts with other students in the class during the reading. This approach differs from that of a teacher or round-robin read aloud in that, after the students have listened to the text once, Ms. Harris engages the group in a supported read-aloud of just a portion of the text. She selects a piece of the text that holds information essential to the topic (or some aspect of the topic being
discussed). She rereads this selection and engages the students in echo reading. Then she asks the students to reread the selection with a partner in the small group. In this way, students gain familiarity with the linguistic structures of grade-level texts, and they deepen their knowledge of a target concept or idea, without becoming frustrated by the expectation that they read the entire text.

After the text has been read by all the students (either in their partner groups or in the teacher-led group), the students engage in the postreading comprehension activity that was demonstrated in the prereading portion of the lesson. At times, the students work on these tasks within their groups, but at other times, they move to work with other students or, occasionally, to work independently. Using this approach helps Ms. Harris assure that even students who require extra assistance are prepared to complete the same assignments and access the same grade-level content as their peers.

Engaging those students who on their own are reading significantly below grade level with reading of grade-level text in a highly scaffolded manner provides them with an opportunity to practice reading text with the types of sentence structures and vocabulary expected of students at their grade level. It is this kind of experience that makes acceleration possible. Mr. Williams, Melanie’s language arts teacher, uses a similar technique when he and the students read whole-class novels. Thus Melanie engages in reading grade-level text in a highly supported manner several times a day.

In addition to the textbook, which is used to gather the basic “facts” about the American Revolution, Ms. Harris uses a set of texts about the American Revolution that range in level of difficulty. The students read these texts in small groups and work together to identify the most important information within the text and to create a product that they will share with the class. As they focus on the causes of the Revolution, the groups read the texts listed in Figure 8 and produce posters featuring a fictitious colonist and his/her reasons for supporting or opposing the Revolution. Because the texts range in level, Ms. Harris is able to assign students to texts more closely matched to their independent reading levels; doing so ensures that with just a bit of support from her and the support of their classmates, they will be able to glean the important information from the text and positively contribute to the class’s developing knowledge of the American Revolution.

Once again, as we examine Melanie’s social studies teacher’s instruction, we see attention to the three elements that allow struggling readers to grow at an accelerated pace. Ms. Harris builds motivation and engagement through coherence by sharing a focus on the American Revolution with the language arts teacher and on the common theme of defiance with the reading specialist. Motivation is further developed as students extend their understanding of the topic of study by reading additional texts that are at their independent reading levels and work collaboratively with the information they have gathered from these texts.

Ms. Harris provides instruction that is intense by using a range of texts that build students’ understanding of the American Revolution and allowing students to explore the concepts central to this period of history across class sessions. And, because of a major shift in the way she handles the reading of the grade-level textbook, Ms. Harris is able to ensure appropriate levels of cognitive challenge by enabling all students, including those reading below grade level, to truly engage with the text.

Looking across the vignettes describing how three of Melanie’s teachers engage her in reading both instructional-level and grade-level texts, we see that each day Melanie reads some texts that she will find particularly compelling because they match her personal interests, that there is a coherence among the instructional contexts in terms of the strategies and concepts being taught, and that she is engaged in collaborative and challenging work while receiving support from her teachers, her classmates, and instructional tools (such as the strategy bookmark). Based on our understanding of related research, we believe that designing curriculum and instruction with careful consideration of motivation, intensity, and cognitive challenge will provide Melanie, and students like her, with the very best opportunity to develop the ability to handle the demands of reading, and thinking critically, about complex texts.

Maintaining Our Vision as the Goal: Concluding Thoughts

One of a teacher’s greatest challenges lies in helping students successfully access the texts and content that will
promote learning. The progressive development of skilled and strategic reading is fundamental to students’ ability to acquire knowledge and successfully participate in academic work, and these demands increase at each successive grade level. The centerpiece of traditional approaches to assisting struggling readers has been to change the curriculum, but such practices have failed to lead students to higher levels of reading and knowledge acquisition.

The nature of the challenge is critical, because without regular access to grade-level texts and content, students fail to acquire the vocabulary, concepts, and general knowledge that lay the foundation for further learning. To meet this challenge calls for a reconceptualized view of effective reading instruction that incorporates greater intensity and cognitive challenge and promotes students’ motivation to engage in literacy-based instructional activities and persist in the hard work of school. Increased understanding and incorporation of these elements in teachers’ instructional planning and enactment will help make the complex task of reading text accessible to all.

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