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WHITE PAPER

Too Many Skills & Strategies, It's Time For a New Approach

Basal and guided reading programs fail to adequately support the transfer of comprehension skills beyond the classroom. The problem with these popular reading programs is that they teach far too many skills and strategies, thereby limiting instruction and practice of these strategies. Learn how one program, the Read Side by Side Reading Program, offers another solution to this comprehension problem by using the design principles of text structure and transfer of skill to increase reading achievement for all.

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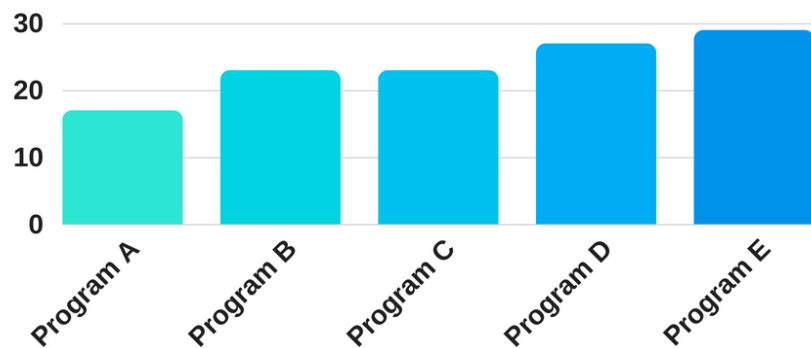
The Problem- A Decline in Reading Achievement

Reading achievement according to the National Assessment of Educational Progress has changed little since 1972, despite a flourishing of research into comprehension instruction. Recurring studies of classroom comprehension instruction suggests that classroom practices have remained more or less the same. Most schools either follow the curriculum in core reading programs or employ a skill-a-week approach, outlined in their district pacing guides. Teachers attempt to cover an average of 24 skills and strategies per year, fractionating comprehension into isolated skills. Skills and strategies are touched on, but the deep distributed practice prevents students from applying and using what they have learned.

Basal Reading Programs

The most common curriculum solution is the basal reading structure found in the core reading programs that over 73 percent of schools use or emulate in district pacing guides (Dewitz, Leahy & Jones, 2009). The design principle of a basal program is the systematic scope and sequence, in which the sequence of texts and instruction in vocabulary, comprehension and study skills are laid out over the course of an academic year. In basal programs, each weekly lesson begins by building knowledge for the main anthology selection and for the leveled books.

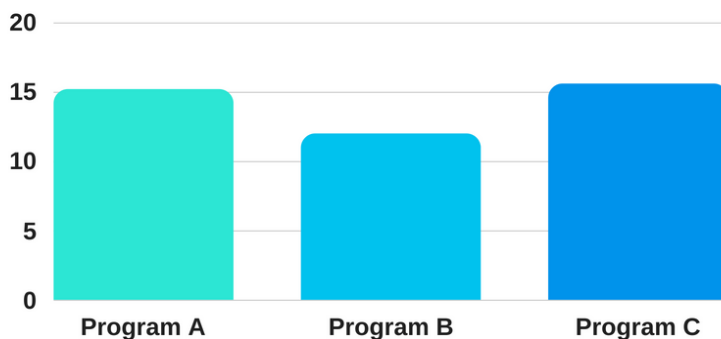
In basal programs, strategies are explained and modeled, often not well, and then applied to worksheets and other short, inauthentic texts (Dewitz, et al. 2009). Instruction in these programs often fails to explain, how, why and when to use strategies (Dewitz, et al., 2009; Salomon & Perkins, 1989). The texts that students read in basal programs are not sequenced so that concepts of text structure or strategy use transfer easily from one text to another.



These programs average 24 skill-a-week lessons, across a 36-week school year.

Analysis of strategies and skills taught in 5 popular basal reading programs (Dewitz, Jones, Leahy, & Sullivan 2009).

The focus on skill work in these programs takes away from the practice of reading. In basal programs, students average 15 minutes a day reading.



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Analysis of minutes spent reading within instruction in 3 popular basal reading programs (Brenner, Hiebert, 2010 & Dewitz, 2018).

Guided Reading Programs

Another popular instructional system today is guided reading. In the guided reading approach, teachers are directed to create gradients of texts by considering reading level, theme, language features, text structure, vocabulary and content (Fountas & Pinnell, 2001). Level seems to trump all other factors within the guided reading model. The teacher takes an opportunistic stance, modeling and suggesting strategies to solve comprehension problems as they arise. What to teach and when to teach it are left to the teacher's judgment. Mini lessons are used to share information about comprehension strategies and text structure knowledge. The mini lessons in guided reading are not robust enough to cover all the principles of how, when and why knowledge and strategies might be transferred. Guided reading seems to rely on backward bridging (Perkins & Salomon, 2012)—reminding students of a previously mentioned strategy they might use. Instruction is opportunistic, not premeditated. In *Guiding Readers and Writers*, more than 48 different skills, strategies and procedures are indexed (Fountas & Pinnell, 2001). The amount of time spent reading in the program is left to the discretion of the teacher.



A Solution- A Comprehension Curriculum Focused on Text-Structure



Students need fewer comprehension strategies than core programs and guided reading suggest (Willingham, 2010; Rosenshine & Meister, 2004, Reutzel, 2013). Teachers need to structure to their comprehension lessons by initially focusing on text structure (NICHD, 2000, RAND Reading Study Group, 2002), and then on making interpretations and inferences (Dewitz, 2015, van den Broeck, 2005). The focus on text structure guides students to construct knowledge. The focus on inference and interpretation enables students to integrate what they know with ideas in the text (Kintsch, 1998; Duffy, 2003).

Knowledge of text structure is vital to improving reading comprehension. While text structure knowledge is not strictly speaking a strategy, text structure knowledge gives rise to strategic thinking by guiding the reader's predictions and providing a scaffold for organizing, remembering and retelling information. From the first point in a novel, when the reader is sorting out characters, settings and goals, to the end point when the reader is grappling with theme, his knowledge of text structure drives his thinking.

Adler (1940, 1972) developed a system for reading a book based on a structural stage, an interpretive stage and a critical stage. In the structural stage, students learn about and use text structure knowledge. In the interpretative and critical stages, students employ comprehension and metacognitive strategies.

Similar to Adler’s system, Langer (1995, 2000) developed a process of envisionment to guide the work of reading. Her envisionment theory postulates how students learn text structures and language forms, and then use strategies to construct meaning. In this envisionment theory, “reading is an act of becoming—where questions, insight and understanding develop as the reading progresses, while understandings that were once held are subject to modification, reinterpretations, and even dismissal (Langer, 2010 p.7).”

Adler's Theory (1940, 1972)	Structural Stage	Interpretive Stage		Critical Stage
Langer's Envisionment Theory (2010)	The reader is outside the book and steps into it.	The reader moves through an envision- ment	The reader refines that envision- ment	The reader steps out of the book and reflects.

The text-structure theories of Adler (1940, 1972) and Langer (2010).

The Read Side by Side Reading Program

One program, developed during the time of the Common Core movement, offers an alternate approach to the basals and guided reading systems. This curriculum for grades 3–6 limits the number of strategies and skills taught, focusing the attention of the reader on text-structure. The program is built on two design principles. The first principle focuses on teaching students how to read a book, while the second focuses on transfer (Collinge, 2011). First, students and the teacher participate in an interactive read-aloud of a complete novel or nonfiction book. In line with the first principle, students develop knowledge, learn about text structure, and employ strategies to solve problems. The second design principle focuses on transfer. Students draw on the same instructional routines, strategies and text structure knowledge used during the read-aloud to a book club selection that they read either with partners or independently. The C.I.A. approach employs an overlapping sequence of read-aloud texts and book club experiences to move students to increasingly complex books across the school year.

Borrowing from Adler’s theory of how to read a book (1940, 1972), and Langer’s envisionment theory (1995, 2000), the Read Side by Side Reading Program teaches readers to divide the text into four quadrants, and read the text using a plan-of-action based on the structure of the text. This approach to reading, coined the C. I. A.—Collect, Interpret, Apply—approach is foundational to the program.

Collinge's Theory (2011)	Collect	Interpret (1)	Interpret (2)	Apply
<i>The Plot Line</i>	<i>Exposition</i> (Quadrant 1)	<i>Rising Action</i> (Quadrant 2)	<i>Rising Action</i> (Quadrant 3)	<i>Falling Action & Resolution</i> (Quadrant 4)

The C. I. A. (Collect - Interpret - Apply) approach teaches a 4-quadrant method that aligns to the plot line (Collinge 2011).

The C. I. A.—Collect, Interpret, Apply—Approach

Quadrant 1: Collect Critical Information

In the first quadrant of the book, the exposition, students read for details, attending to the characters, the setting, the problems and the main events. According to Langer, readers are first outside the book and, on stepping into it, must do the laborious and sometimes tedious work of collecting critical information that lays the groundwork for deeper thinking. In the C.I.A. program, readers create a character list, a setting map, and a list of problems and important events as they read the first quadrant. With nonfiction, readers focus on important concepts. At the end of the first quadrant, readers summarize in order to monitor their comprehension.

Quadrant 2: Interpret the Text (1)

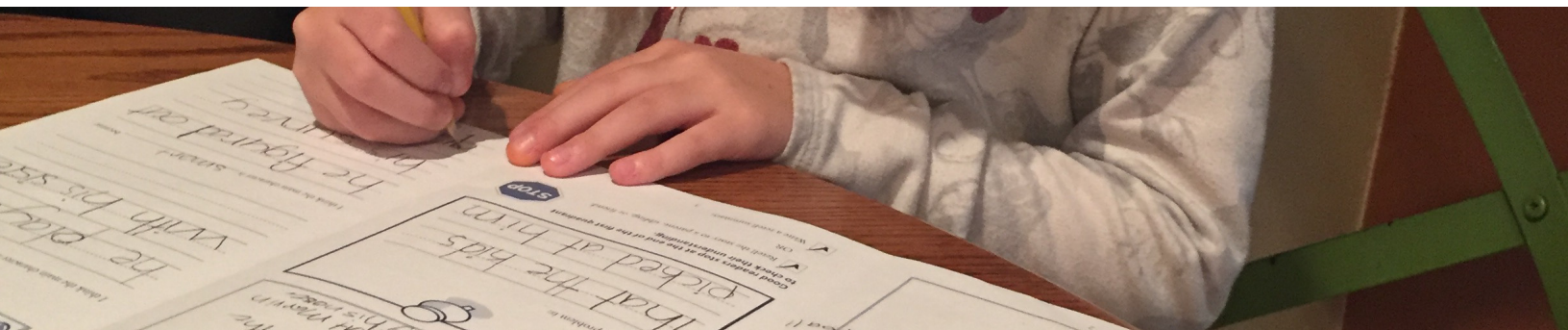
In the second quadrant, readers shift from observing what is obvious in the text to inferring what is hidden or ambiguous. The second quadrant takes the reader deeper into the text. Readers pay attention to the author's craft, including the use of figurative language and of other tools and techniques of storytelling and informing. As readers reach the halfway point in the book, they arrive at a central idea or theory that they will pursue throughout the rest of the text. This theory is termed a “line of thinking.” To develop a line of thinking—or a theory about the author's central message—readers ask, “What is the author trying to tell me?”

Quadrant 3: Interpret the Text (2)

As readers move farther into the book, they look for evidence to support their line of thinking. Readers reach the climax of the story or critical concepts in an informative text. In fiction, this is followed by the turning point—the place where the plot makes the most dramatic change. At the end of quadrant 3, readers will stop to determine the author's message and defend their thinking with textual evidence.

Quadrant 4: Apply to Your Life

In the final quadrant, readers synthesize the text, going beyond what it says and considering what it means. According to Langer, the reader steps out and objectifies, reflecting on the experiences and themes of the book. Readers think about the author's message and evaluate whether they agree or disagree with that message. They consider how the book might impact their own lives.





The second design principle of the Read Side by Side Reading Program focuses on transfer in its two-part design—Read Alouds and Book Clubs. An overlapping sequence of read-aloud texts and book club experiences move students to increasingly complex books across the school year. In the book clubs, the students move through the same four quadrants and engage in the same instructional routines followed in the read-aloud as they read and work independently or with partners. The two parts of the C.I.A. design—read-aloud and book clubs—are essential to building motivation. Motivation created by the selection of engaging books and themes is further enhanced because students approach the book club selections with a sense of efficacy (Dweck, 1986 Guthrie & Wigfield, 2000, Weiner, 1992). Students are able to read these texts independently, with limited assistance from teacher and peers.

In the Read Side by Side Reading Program, purpose and motivation drive strategy use, eliminating the skill-a-week pacing guide popular in basal programs and guided reading programs. Students learn that a thorough understanding of the text is the goal, and strategies and skills help the reader toward that goal. Strategies and skills are no longer an end in and of themselves, allowing the reader to spend more time practicing the skill of reading. Volume of reading drives the pacing calendar as students average 10 chapter books and 25 or more nonfiction articles per year within instruction.

Conclusion

Students become readers when they can deploy knowledge to comprehend the text and use strategies to solve text-processing problems. Students employ the transfer of knowledge and strategies when they have the motivation or disposition to read widely and deeply. To solve the problem of the decline in reading achievement, the focus needs to turn from strategies in isolation, as a means in and of themselves, to strategies for the purpose of understanding the text. Following a text-structure approach to comprehension, as in the Read Side by Side Reading Program, students will gain the tools to become powerful readers who know how to solve text-processing problems, and feel competent to do so.

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