

Reading Power

Revised and Expanded

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Introduction

“The mind, once stretched by a new idea, never goes back to its original dimensions.”

— Ralph Waldo Emerson

Influenced by the book *Strategies That Work: Teaching Comprehension to Enhance Understanding* by Stephanie Harvey and Anne Goudvis (2000), and by the work of many researchers in the field of reading, including P. David Pearson, Reading Power is an approach to comprehension instruction designed to teach students specific metacognitive strategies to use during the reading process that enable them to engage in a more interactive, thoughtful reading experience. Central to the Reading Power approach is authentic children’s literature for modeling demonstrations, practice, and independent reading.

Comprehension Research

“No matter how important code is, it is not the point of reading.”

—David Pearson

In the 1970s, an educator and researcher by the name of David Pearson, a professor at the University of Michigan, embarked on a study of proficient readers. In lay terms, he wanted to know what made “this child” a better reader than “this child.” What was it that readers exceeding expectations for their grade level were doing that enabled them to master both the code and the meaning of the text? During this extensive study, his team of researchers studied the profile of dozens of proficient readers. After several years and a careful analysis of an enormous amount of data, Pearson determined several common strategies used by proficient readers that enabled them to make sense of what they were reading. A condensed version of this research is what I describe as the “profile” of a proficient reader.

Profile of a Proficient Reader

A proficient, engaged reader is **metacognitive**—aware of and able to use and articulate the following strategies in order to interact with the text:

- 1. Make Connections.** A good reader is able to draw from background knowledge and personal experiences while reading to help create meaning from the text.
- 2. Ask Questions.** A good reader asks both literal and inferential questions before, during, and after reading to clarify and deepen understanding.
- 3. Visualize.** A good reader is able to create multi-sensory images in the “mind’s eye” while reading to help make sense of the text.
- 4. Draw Inferences.** A good reader knows that not all information is included in a text, and is able to draw conclusions from both picture and word clues, combined with his or her own knowledge to “fill in” what is not directly written.

5. Determine Importance. A good reader sifts through information in the text to select key ideas and to summarize and remember them.

6. Analyze and Synthesize. A good reader is able to break down information and to draw conclusions and acquire new thinking based on both the text and his or her own thinking.

7. Monitor Comprehension. A good reader is aware when understanding is being compromised and is able to stop, go back, and reread in order for understanding to occur.

More than thirty years later, David Pearson's research has found its way into teacher education, professional development, and classroom practice. The common strategies used by proficient readers are now being taught to readers of all grades and all levels of reading. They are integrated into Canadian curricula and are an important component in the Common Core Reading Standards in the US. Simply stated, if these strategies are what research has found that good readers do to understand text, then these are the strategies we need to be teaching to all of our students. Over 20 years of research and experience, there has been a dramatic shift in our understanding and approach to reading comprehension.

WHAT IS READING COMPREHENSION

Before

- "Read the passage, then answer the comprehension questions."
- Most questions are literal.
- Answers are found in the text.
- Answers are right or wrong.
- Lack of instruction from teacher: *assign and assess.*

After

- Interaction with a text.
- Book + Thinking = Understanding.
- A focus on constructing meaning
- "Reading happens in two places: in the book and in your brain."
- Metacognition
- Explicit instruction and teacher modeling
- Developing a common language of thinking.

I had the pleasure of hearing David Pearson speak at a conference in Vancouver several years ago. I sat in the front row, clapping very loudly. (During his presentation, I wished I had a lighter with me—as at a rock concert—to shine and wave in support of his wise words.) He spoke of his research, and of implementing change in the way we need to think about reading and to teach students to read. Reading, he stated, is not simply mastering the code. Reading is both the code and meaning behind that code. And while many teachers make the assumption that once the code is mastered, so too is comprehension, we now realize that if we want our students to acquire the ability to comprehend texts, we need to balance our reading instruction to include explicit teaching both in decoding and in comprehension. The work of Stephanie Harvey and Anne Goudvis, much of which is based on David Pearson's research, reflects the complexity of comprehension and its nature as a separate, yet equally important, aspect of reading. They state, "Reading demands a two-pronged attack. It involves cracking

1 What Is Reading Power?

The five reading strategies in the Reading Power approach are called reading “powers,” because the word “strategy” has been used to describe just about anything done in the classroom, and is often used interchangeably with the word “activity.” The five reading powers are, in fact, reading strategies. Reading Power became my catchphrase for comprehension instruction. I called it Reading Power because it is more appealing to children, when they see it on their Shape of the Day, than Comprehension Instruction.

Reading Power

- is based on research that looks at strategies used by proficient readers.
- teaches students that reading is thinking.
- teaches students to be metacognitive, or aware of their thinking.
- creates a “common language of thinking” in your classroom and school.
- teaches students five strategies to enhance their understanding of the fiction texts they are reading: the powers to Connect, Visualize, Question, Infer, and Transform.
- encourages students to have “busy brains” while they read.
- provides a concrete visual tool to help teach the five reading powers.
- exposes students to a wide range of rich, engaging literature—including both old classics and wonderful new titles.
- can be used to enhance your writing program.
- is respectful of children’s thinking and encourages them to think beyond the pages of the books they are reading.
- celebrates the students’ voices in the classroom and allows for their thinking, their connections, their images, and their ideas to make a difference.
- results in rich, engaging, and interactive lessons in which students are encouraged to share their thinking.
- will change the way you and your students read and think.

Reading, Thinking, and Teaching

A mother and son, who is not yet school age, sit facing each other on the floor in the living room, each reading a book. Their “noisy reading” time, when Mom reads aloud to her child, is over, and now they are sharing in their “quiet reading” ritual. Mom senses her son is not engaged on this particular day, and notices that he keeps looking up from his book to stare at her. After a while, she asks him what he is doing.

“I’m watching to see what happens.”

“What happens in my book?” she asks.

“No... what happens when you read.”

2 The Components of Reading Power

The Reading Powers Model

Helping Students Become Metacognitive

Good readers have busy brains when they read.

Thinking is an essential part of reading; however, it is an abstract concept and, therefore, difficult to teach. Because we can't "see" thinking, it is difficult for us to describe and explain it. Saying, "Boys and girls, when you read, you need to think" does not really cut it! Young children know that, when they read, they need to be actively using their eyes and often their mouths. But how many of them are aware that their brains also need to be active? It was important that this metacognitive awareness be somehow incorporated into the teaching of Reading Power, so that the students could have a concrete visual image of what needs to be going on inside their heads as they read.

Students will see that the brain becomes filled as their metacognitive knowledge of their thinking develops, demonstrating that active readers have many different things going on their heads while they read.

The Reading Powers Model is an interactive, visual prompt for the during-reading process; see page 28. Each poster depicts a child's head and shoulders, and the phrase "Fill Your Brain with Reading Power!" at the top. There are five separate, removable puzzle pieces that fit together and can be superimposed on the child's head. Each piece is labeled with a different reading power. As each reading power is introduced and taught, the appropriate puzzle piece is placed inside the image of the child's head. The idea behind the puzzle is that the pieces fit together to create the ideal proficient reader—"A POWER-ful brain reads well."

Because proficient readers often move from one strategy to another within a single reading experience, it is important to teach these reading powers cumulatively rather than separately. New pieces are added as new reading powers are introduced, but the pieces are never removed once placed in the head.

What Does Thinking Look Like?

With younger children, I sometimes introduce the Reading Power Model by asking, "What parts of your body do you use when you read?" They often answer "hands" first, for holding the book. Other answers quickly follow: mouth, eyes, ears. But "the brain" is not an answer very often given, because we don't often refer to the brain when we are teaching students how to read.

Early in the school year, I like to explain to my students that one of my goals for them is that they will all be better readers in June than they are in September. The way I hope to reach this goal is by giving them many opportunities to read, but also by teaching them ways they can become more proficient readers. I explain that reading happens in two places: in the book and in your head. It happens in the book when we focus on the words with our eyes; it happens in our brains when we focus on what the words mean with our brains. Depending on the grade, I will say that most have them have already learned the in-the-book reading because they know how to read the words. I explain that, for the upcoming year, the focus of some of the reading lessons will be on the in-your-head reading.

Another option for this lesson is to have the students fold their paper in half, with each side of the paper representing one of their brain pockets. The first time they listen to the music, they draw their Memory connections on one half of the sheet; the second time, they draw their Imagination connections on the other half.

"Books are mirrors: you only see in them what you already have inside you."

—Carlos Ruiz Zafón, *The Shadow of the Wind*

- Explain that there is no one right way to connect, and that two people can read the same book but make different connections. Tell students that what triggers a memory for one person might not trigger a memory for anybody else. Or two people might make a connection to the same part of the story for completely different reasons.
- Give everyone a blank piece of paper. Explain that you are going to be playing a piece of music and they will practice making connections.
- Play a piece of music and invite students to close their eyes and listen; I like to use Vivaldi's "Spring" from *The Four Seasons* or *The Flight of the Bumblebee* by Rimsky-Korsakov. While they listen, students are to think about what the music reminds them of or makes them think about.
- Invite students to draw a picture of the connection they made with the music. When everyone is finished, invite students to share their connection with a partner.
- Display the papers around the room and discuss how everyone listened to the same piece of music but made different connections.
- End the lesson by generating a Making Connections anchor chart to post in the classroom.

SAMPLE CONNECT ANCHOR CHART

Good Readers Make Connections!

We make connections to...

- Our memories, experiences, and feelings
- Facts and information we already know
- Our imagination
- Other books, movies, or TV shows

This reminds me of...

This makes me think about...

I'm making a connection to the part when...



I discovered that it is possible to buy sticky notes in the shape of a thinking bubble! This is a wonderful too to use when modeling your thinking.

Lessons 3–4 (Teacher Directed): Modeling Your Thinking

- Find your special Connect Book; i.e., a picture book that elicits strong connections and memories for you.
- Model a read-aloud/think-aloud with this special Connect book, using sticky notes to mark your connections with a C or a Thinking Bubble to hold up when you share your connection. Pause on a page, insert your sticky note or hold up your Thinking Bubble, and model, using this language: "This part of the story reminds me of..."
- Students wishing to participate while you are modeling can do so with a "quiet connections thumbs-up" (see page 39).
- Follow with at least two more similar lessons, using different books, within a few days. As you model, try to make sure that you are connecting to each of these: an event from the story, a character, and a feeling.

Finding Your Special Connect Book

My special Connect book, the one I always use to model that first Connect lesson, is Robert McKlosky's *One Morning in Maine* because it reminds me of summer holidays spent with my family on Mayne Island. The story is filled with so many fond memories of my childhood, it feels as if it was written about me. One teacher who was born in Saskatchewan uses *If You're Not From the Prairie* by Henry Ripplinger. It takes her two days to read because each page is a story from her childhood on the farm. Jodi Carson, a Literacy Mentor, searched for weeks until she finally found her Connect book: *Tales of a Gambling Grandma* by David Kaur Khalsa, because it reminds her of when her grandmother used to teach her and her sister how to play blackjack every Friday night. It may take you a few visits to the library to find your own special Connect book. The students might not remember the story you read, but they certainly will remember your connections to it!

Some primary teachers find sticky notes too distracting for their students and choose, instead, to give each student a Thinking Bubble. Thinking Bubbles can be made by cutting out a bubble shape and gluing it on a craft stick. Students hold up their Thinking Bubbles during the read aloud; once they have shared, the bubble is collected. The goal is that every student will have a chance to share a connection before the end of the story.

Lesson 5 (Guided Group Practice): Group Connect

- Explain to students that they will be participating in a read-aloud by paying attention to their thinking and by noticing when they make connections in the story.
- Pass out one sticky note to each student. Ask students to put their name and a big letter C on it.
- Read aloud a book from the Connect bin and have students listen for all their connections.
- Read the book again, and have each student come up and put his/her sticky note on the page where his/her best connection was made, or where the student's thinking voice "was the loudest." Students are not sharing at this point, simply placing their sticky notes in the book when you get to the right page.
- Continue to model by placing your own sticky note on one of the pages.
- Model how you want students to share: "I put my sticky on the page where.... This reminded me of..."
- Invite students to share their connections out loud with a partner. When partners are sharing, circulate around the room, listening for all connections. Choose one pair of students to come up to the front to model their connections. Choose the pair who really went beyond a simple statement like "This reminds me of my brother" to sharing a "chapter" of their life stories.
- Depending on time, students can choose one of the Connect templates (see pages 58–62) to write and/or draw their connections.
- Suggested books for this lesson: *Some Things Are Scary* by Florence Parry Heide; *Courage* by Bernard Waber; *The Party* by Barbara Reid; *One of Those Days*, *The OKAY Book*, or *It's Not Fair!* by Amy Krouse Rosenthal; *No, David!* by David Shannon; *My Brave Book of Firsts* by Jamie Lee Curtis; *Twelve Terrible Things* by Marty Kelley.
- You can follow this lesson with similar Group Connects and invite students to turn and share their connections with a partner. Choose one or two students to share their connections with the class. This informal sharing is an opportunity to monitor students' connections and to give praise for the strong connections, guidance for the weaker ones, and encouragement for the non-connectors.
- You might choose to have students draw and/or write about their connections: choose template Making Connections #1 or #2 on pages 61 and 62.

8 Application and Assessment

Although many teachers teach comprehension strategies one at a time, spending several weeks focused on each strategy...this may not be the best way to organize strategy instruction. (Reutzel, Smith, & Fawson, 2005)

And so we come to what is perhaps to the most important chapter in this book: application, or transfer of learning. Our goal with teaching comprehension strategies to students is that they will take what they have learned from our modeling, guiding, and practicing, and they will apply it to their independent reading. But does this actually happen? If it does, how do we know? If it doesn't, what do we do about it? And while I have celebrated over recent years the knowledge that hundreds of teachers are now explicitly teaching comprehension strategies to their students, initially in isolation as I have promoted, the next step is something that requires an equally effective job of promoting.

I wrote: "After students become familiar with all five Reading Power strategies, they are ready to apply their 'busy brains' to any book." My experienced brain now views this statement as rather naive and possibly overly optimistic. I would like to believe that it is that simple, but need to accept the fact that it isn't.

Students Using the Reading Powers

In a recent blog post, the late Grant Wiggins, renowned educator and co-author of the ground-breaking *Understanding By Design*, wrote:

The lack of transfer of learning of the strategies seems to be a function of inadequate teaching for transfer, and a failure to understand the principles behind the strategies.

If we are to meet our primary goal of supporting our students' independent understanding of texts they read, we need to ensure we are doing everything we can to promote this.

Here are some suggestions for promoting the crucial application or next steps of Reading Power:

- Ensure, by repeatedly checking over time, that students know what the goal is: to successfully apply any or all Reading Power strategies every time they read any text.
- Continually promote the transfer of learning of comprehension strategies to all classroom tasks in a variety of different contexts (different subject areas) and different texts (fiction, nonfiction, read-alouds, newspaper articles, etc.) so that students learn that the strategies of thinking can be applied to all reading experiences; e.g., they are not to just make connections with a Connect book.
- Create an anchor chart with comprehension prompts and post it in the classroom.

Song lyrics are an engaging way for students to apply their reading power strategies. Grade 6 students at my school chose a current song (with appropriate lyrics) and created PowerPoint presentations with slides showing their connections, questions, visual images, inferences, and transformed thinking.