

Teachers' Perceptions of Strategy Based Reading Instruction for Reading Comprehension

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ABSTRACT

Strategy based reading instruction helps teachers differentiate the teaching of reading. It also supports many types of readers by explicitly teaching and modeling reading comprehension strategies. The purpose of this study is to explore the effectiveness of strategy based reading instruction for improving student reading comprehension. Additionally, it examines teachers' perceptions of the effectiveness of this approach.

The review of the literature supports the idea that strategy based reading instruction is an effective way to improve reading comprehension. Teachers in kindergarten through eighth grade were surveyed on their perceptions of strategy based reading instruction's effectiveness for improving reading comprehension. Results indicated that the teachers enjoy using this method and that it is an effective way to improve reading comprehension.

## CHAPTER 1 INTRODUCTION

It was winter of 2007, and part of my class was reading *Stone Fox*. There were students in my group who had struggled with fluency and comprehension earlier in the year due to the fact that they were reading books above their reading level. After an entire fall of using the strategies of Stephanie Harvey, I could see my students' faces light up as they read. The connections they made were powerful, and many of their predictions were accurate. In the last chapter of the book, the protagonist's dog dies. There was not a dry eye in my class. Students were saddened and upset with the ending. They wanted to know why the author chose to do this and what would Little Willy do without his dog. When students connect to a text, and their comprehension is deeply rooted, they can experience the same emotions those characters are feeling.

During my first year of teaching, my mentor teacher guided me through the entire process of strategy based reading instruction, and modeled how to use the different strategies with the students. Stephanie Harvey, literacy advocate, has coined the term "reading is thinking", and that is exactly what strategy based reading instruction promotes: thinking about the texts. Strategy based instruction is teaching the reader, not merely the reading (Harvey, S. & Goudvis, A., 2007). Harvey describes strategy based instruction as teaching kids to use strategies purposefully when reading any text for any reason and to walk away from their reading experiences with new understandings that may generate more learning (2007).

I was intrigued that a teacher could use the same strategy with emergent readers and proficient readers. I was first introduced to Stephanie Harvey's reading strategies in

the fall of 2005, and today, I am still inspired with her teaching philosophies. I have been able to attend several of her workshops across the country. She has come twice to San Domenico School, where I teach. I believe in her reading strategies that are supported by many other literacy advocates.

### Statement of Problem

Depending upon the school or school district, teachers are not always given the flexibility of deciding which type of reading program they would like to use. A strategy based reading instruction program is not an option for all teachers even though it teaches students how to think critically, monitors their comprehension levels, and instills a love of reading by using real books. The outcome of this project provides greater support for implementing strategy based reading instruction in more schools.

### Purpose

The purpose of this study is to show that strategy based reading instruction is an effective way to improve reading comprehension. Additionally, it evaluates teachers' perceptions of its effectiveness. The study identifies the strategies that good readers use when they read, how teachers should explicitly teach these strategies, and how to scaffold their students through this process. When teachers explicitly teach such reading strategies to their students from kindergarten through high school, students are able to develop higher-level thinking skills. This allows students to improve their reading comprehension.

### Research Question

Strategy based reading instruction can play a role in encouraging student comprehension of reading material. Teacher attitude plays an important part in what gets translated to the teaching practice. What are teachers' perceptions of the effectiveness of implementing strategy based reading instruction in their classrooms?

### Theoretical Rationale

Flavell's theory of metacognition (Livingston, 2003) compliments and supports strategy based reading instruction. Metacognition refers to a higher-order of thinking in which individuals have control over the cognitive processes in which they are engaged. Whether we realize it or not, we engage in megacognitive activities everyday, and it is metacognition that enables us to be successful learners (Livingston, 2003). In tying this to reading, it is helpful for readers to be able to monitor their inner conversation while they are reading. By actively engaging with the text, they are aware of how well they understand what they are reading.

El-Koumy (2004) has studied metacognition in relation to reading trends. With the support of many other scholars, El Koumy argues that metacognition involves two major types of knowledge: (1) knowledge about one's own cognition and (2) knowledge about self-regulation of one's own learning. Metacognitive knowledge involves not only monitoring one's own cognition, but also monitoring one's own learning (El-Koumy, 2004). Strategy based instruction teaches readers to monitor their comprehension while engaged with texts.



It was in the 1980s that cognitive psychologists developed the term schema theory. Schema theory helps explain how our previous experiences, knowledge, emotions, and understandings have a major effect on what and how we learn (Anderson, et al, 1984). Our schema is our background knowledge and it is different for everyone. And, everyone brings his or her schema to reading. It is our schema that allows us to connect with text and understand texts in different ways. If readers have no prior knowledge or experience to hook new information to, it's pretty hard to construct meaning. Connecting what readers know to new information is the core of learning and understanding (Harvey, S. & Goudvis, A., 2007).

Stephanie Harvey is a leading literacy specialist in the United States, and author of the book, *Strategies that Work*. Harvey travels around the country to train educators about strategy based reading instruction. Harvey, along with Susan Zimmermann and Chryse Hutchins, believes there are seven reading strategies that will boost reading comprehension. This approach to reading instruction is not exclusive to Harvey, Zimmermann and Hutchins. These strategies are supported in many studies conducted by researchers Pearson, Dole, Duffy and Roehler (Harvey, S. & Goudvis, A., 2007). Heinemann, a leading and well-respected educational organization, promotes these reading strategies. Harvey believes that reading is thinking. By incorporating the seven reading strategies in the classroom, she believes that students will be able to better comprehend texts.

### *Assumptions*

Starting in pre-K or kindergarten, children begin their journey of reading. Strategy based reading instruction is an effective way for teaching students of all ages to read, from their earliest ages throughout their schooling years. Educators are able to use strategies with all age groups, and with students of all levels of proficiency. Younger children, who cannot read texts themselves, are able to apply these strategies during read aloud sessions to begin to develop critical thinking skills.

Strategy based reading programs promote and foster critical thinking of students. These strategies require students to dig deeper in order to deepen their understanding of the text. This is because students are thinking when they're reading. Students are monitoring their thought processes and asking questions while they're reading.

When using strategy based reading programs, students are engaged with picture and chapter books. In fact, students of all ability levels are even able to apply these strategies when reading from newspapers, magazines, etc. By using real, authentic texts, students are enjoying the act of reading.

### *Background and Need*

A study by Taylor, Pearson, Peterson, and Rodriguez, (2003) focusing on how teaching affects students' reading achievement, discovered that teachers who emphasized higher-order thinking promoted greater reading growth in their classrooms. What is significant about this study is who the researchers observed. The focus was on 88 teachers and 9 randomly selected students per classroom in 9 high-poverty schools across the United States. Literacy instruction, specifically reading, was the target curriculum

area. The findings concluded that teachers who emphasized critical thinking, either through the questions they asked or the tasks they assigned, resulted in improved reading comprehension.

Educators in these classrooms utilized many of Harvey's reading strategies. Some of the strategies that were explicitly taught and modeled to the students were: making connections, questioning, and inferring while being engaged with the text. Taylor et al. (2003) determined that effective reading instruction encompasses teachers who challenge their students with higher-level thinking, and the application of reading strategies to their reading and writing. Effective teachers use coaching and modeling to help students learn, as well as to help them assume responsibility for their own learning (Taylor, et al, 2003).

In addition to the Taylor et al. (2003) study, there are many other studies and research findings that compliment the notion that strategy based reading instruction can improve reading comprehension. Recent research, such as *7 Keys of Comprehension* by Zimmerman and Hutchins (2003), has been able to identify what good readers do while reading. Literacy researchers have been able to extract from those studies and have agreed upon the seven key strategies that encourage reading comprehension and growth. Those strategies are: creating visualizations, making connections, asking questions, inferring, determining importance and synthesizing, and monitoring one's comprehension while engaged with texts (Zimmerman, C. & Hutchins, C., 2003).

## CHAPTER 2 REVIEW OF LITERATURE

### Introduction

Strategy based reading instruction has many components. The literature review provides background information on these major areas. The topics discussed in this section are ones that had a strong presence in the research pertaining to strategy based reading instruction.

In order to lay a foundation, a well-balanced reading program will be outlined and cover what it entails. Moving from this section, the term “active reader” will be defined. Many of the resources used in this research noted the importance of students actually being engaged with the text. Research refers to this as higher-level thinking. Students who are using higher level thinking skills are also using specific strategies. Then effective strategies that good readers use when comprehending texts are identified. This section will demonstrate that teaching those strategies to students, and scaffolding them through the process, results in stronger reading comprehension. Following the explanation of the strategies, a special collections piece, and an administrative record will be highlighted. Both pertain to strategy based reading instruction at a specific elementary school.

The final section in the literature review addresses standardized testing and the history of reading instruction in the United States. Standardized testing is a reality, and sometimes a primary focus, in many schools across our country. Students who receive strategy based reading instruction in the classroom, are able to carry over those strategies on standardized tests, and produce strong reading comprehension testing results.

Thoughts on reading have evolved through history; however, there is much research that supports that reading is in fact an active process that involves cognitive processes and specific strategies.

### A Balanced Reading Program

In order to improve a student's reading comprehension, the reading program should be well balanced. Based on research by Pressley (2001), reading comprehension can be improved if teachers teach students decoding skills, vocabulary, active comprehension strategies, and by encouraging students to monitor their comprehension while reading. By encompassing multiple components, a balanced reading program will be in place. Many teachers choose a blended approach that incorporates decoding skills as well as the strategy work. It is those teachers whose students perform better as readers (Harvey, S. & Goudvis, A., 2007).

According to David Pearson, there are several practices that are effective for developing reading comprehension (Duke & Pearson, 2002). In order to understand what those practices are, researchers first had to identify, and study good readers. The question researchers sought to answer was: what do good readers do when they read? The answer is that good readers have strong reading habits, and apply effective reading strategies when they engage with text (Frey, 2006). The next step for researchers is to identify the reading strategies that go hand in hand with becoming a strong and active reader.

### The Active Reader

A good reader is an active reader (Duke, 2002). In order for students to become active readers, rather than passive readers, students need to be given the tools. According to the National Reading Panel, “explicit, or formal, instruction on these strategies is believed to lead to improvement in text understanding and information use” (Adams et al., 2000, p. 232).

According to Zimmerman and Hutchins (2003), there are two elements of reading. The first part is the external element of reading. This is decoding words. Many students can decode words, but students do not always understand what decoded words and sentences mean. To an outsider, students look as though they are reading when they are decoding words. They are reading the words in front of them; however, there is more to reading than just decoding. There is also the internal element of reading (Zimmerman, C. & Hutchins, C., 2003). The internal element of reading is the actual understanding of the text that allows students to comprehend the content; it is when readers engage with the text, and truly think about what it is that they are reading. When readers are engaged, they are actively reading, and monitoring the conversation in their head.

### Higher and Lower-Level Thinking

There is a difference between higher-level and lower-level thinking. When students are engaged in lower-level thinking, they are usually answering questions that require little thought. Often these types of responses can be answered in a few short words. An example of lower-level thinking would be answering a question similar to this, “What did Charlie have for breakfast?” Teachers who use lower-level thinking

skills may do this by giving their students worksheets on a specific skill. The worksheet might focus on the main idea, predictions, or facts/opinions from a story. The reason that this is considered lower-level thinking is because the skill activities are likely to require less cognitive effort than when students are trying to apply comprehension strategies to actual reading (Taylor et al., 2003).

When students are engaged in higher-level thinking while reading, they are making connections to their prior knowledge, monitoring their comprehension level, asking questions, inferring, etc (Taylor et al., 2003). A teacher who uses higher-level thinking skills may do this by reading a passage aloud to her class, and then asking students to visualize what she read. Students would then draw in full color what they visualized. Higher-level thinking incorporates the seven strategies supported by many literacy advocates, including Stephanie Harvey.

### Reading Strategies

In the 1980s a major breakthrough occurred: researchers identified the specific thinking strategies used by proficient readers (Zimmerman, C. & Hutchins, C., 2003). The study determined that reading is an interactive process in which good readers engage in a constant internal dialogue with the text. It is the inner conversation that one has with oneself that helps one understand and be able to elaborate on what was read (Zimmerman, C. & Hutchins, C., 2003). Stephanie Harvey and Anne Goudvis share Zimmerman and Hutchins' beliefs that there are seven key strategies to reading comprehension. Zimmerman and Hutchins' seven strategies, as described below, are:

making connections, asking questions, making inferences, determining importance, synthesizing information, and visualizing while reading (2003).

*Strategy One: Connecting*

The first strategy that a good reader uses is being able to make connections between what the reader knows and the texts the reader is reading. Readers are able to activate their background knowledge by connecting new information to what they already know. Good readers use their relevant prior knowledge before, during, and after reading to enhance their understanding of what they're reading (Zimmerman, C. & Hutchins, C., 2003). Harvey points out that when students have had an experience similar to that of a character in a story, they are more likely to understand the character's motives, thoughts, and feelings. In addition, when readers have a general understanding of different genres of text, they comprehend more completely (Harvey, S. & Goudvis, A., 2007).

There are three types of connections that readers have when they are engaged with texts (Zimmerman, C. & Hutchins, C., 2003). The first type of connection is text-to-text. This means that the reader is able to connect big ideas and themes across different texts. When a student is engaged with one book, they might be able to connect to another book they have read that has a similar theme, character, plot, etc. The second type of connection is text-to-self. This is when a reader is able to link the text to his or her own personal life. Text-to-self occurs when what you read reminds you of something from your own life.

*These types of connections are particularly important because brain research shows that "emotions drive attention, create meaning, and have their own memory pathways" (Eric Jensen, Teaching with the Brain in Mind, p. 72). Making an emotional connection helps us remember what we read. (Zimmerman, C. & Hutchins, C., 2003, p. 51)*



The third type of connection is text-to-world. This is when what you read reminds you of something in the world.

*Strategy Two: Questioning*

The second strategy that good readers use is asking questions of themselves, the author, and the text while they are reading. According to Harvey (2007) schools have focused for too many years on the answers to questions, rather than promoting and fostering students' own questions. Questions are the heart of teaching and learning because it is how human beings make sense of their world. This is why it is important to teach students to generate questions before, during, and after reading in order to construct meaning from what students are reading (Harvey, S. & Goudvis, A., 2007).

*Strategy Three: Inferring*

The third strategy that a good reader uses is being able to make inferences during, and after he or she reads. Inferring is reading between the lines, and for many students, it is a difficult strategy to master. Inferring involves drawing a conclusion or making an interpretation that is not explicitly stated in the text.

*Students infer when they take what they already know, their background knowledge, and merge it with clues in the text to draw a conclusion, surface a theme, predict an outcome, arrive at a big idea, and so forth. If readers don't infer, they will not grasp the deeper essence of texts they read. (Harvey, S. & Goudvis, A., 2007, p. 18)*

*Strategy Four: Determining importance*

The fourth strategy that a good reader uses is being able to determine importance. Good readers are able to identify key ideas or themes as they read and they can distinguish between important and unimportant information (Zimmerman, C. & Hutchins, C., 2003). Harvey and Goudvis point out that determining what is important in a text may

not be easy for students (2007). By explicitly teaching students how to determine what is important, students will have an easier time comprehending texts.

*Strategy Five: Synthesizing*

The fifth strategy that good readers use is being able to synthesize information within and across texts. When readers are able to synthesize information, they are able to see the bigger picture as they read. “When readers synthesize, they reach a more complete understanding” (Harvey, S. & Goudvis, A., 2007) p. 19. Readers are able to track their thinking as it evolves during reading, to get the overall meaning (Harvey, S. & Goudvis, A., 2007).

*Strategy Six: Monitoring Comprehension*

The sixth strategy that good readers use is monitoring their understanding and repairing faulty comprehension. Frequently students will read page after page without stopping to monitor their understanding. During that time a reader’s mind can wander. If teachers explicitly teach problem-solving strategies to use when students get stuck on unknown words, confusing passages, etc. then students will be able to better comprehend texts. Listening to one’s inner voice while reading helps one keep track of his or her thinking, clarify confusion, and allow one to stop, think and react to the information they read (Harvey, S. & Goudvis, A., 2007).

*Strategy Seven: Visualizing*

The seventh strategy that good readers use in reading comprehension is being able to visualize and create mental images of the ideas in the text. Good readers are able to create a wide range of visual, auditory, and other sensory images as they read, and they become emotionally involved with what they read (Zimmerman, C. & Hutchins, C.,

2003). Visualizing helps readers comprehend by merging prior experiences and the text together to create visual images. Visualizing can also help fill in informational gaps in the text (Harvey, S. & Goudvis, A., 2007).

### Special Collections

Literacy has been, and continues to be, a focus at San Domenico School. In the winter of 2007, the school formed a literacy committee. The literacy committee is composed of teachers from all three divisions in the school: primary (prek-5<sup>th</sup>), middle (6<sup>th</sup>-8<sup>th</sup>) and upper (9<sup>th</sup>-12<sup>th</sup>). In addition to the teachers that serve on this committee, there is also a representative from each division who serves as the literacy coordinator. One of the objectives of the committee is to collaborate about reading across different subject areas and grade levels in order to create spiraling curriculum.

One of the outcomes of the committee was creating a literacy library available to all of the teachers at San Domenico. The literacy library is found in the all-school library that is centrally located on campus. It contains different books that pertain to reading. A teacher from any division can walk into the literacy library, and find a book that for her grade level and/or subject matter. Numerous books written by Stephanie Harvey, Harvey Daniels, Ellen Keene, Lucy Calkins, Linda Hoyt, and additional authors are available. One of the topics that it primarily covers is strategy based reading instruction.

The literacy library is constantly growing. Each time professional development workshops have been hosted at the school, books by the presenter are added to its library. The same occurs when teachers attend external workshops that are relevant to literacy. When teachers attend workshops, they return and give a presentation for the rest of the

faculty to educate others on what was presented. Teachers who did not attend have the ability to check out books purchased from the workshop in order to learn more about the topic and ways to expand their own teaching.

The literacy library at San Domenico School is one form of collaboration at the school. It is a location where teachers are able to exchange knowledge and research on strategy based reading instruction. Collaboration on strategy based reading instruction happens on a daily basis whether it is formal or informal. Teachers are engaged with one another. By being part of a community that is focusing on strategy based reading instruction, teachers incorporate it into their daily teaching practices and have a positive association with it. This positive outlook on strategy based reading instruction is in return passed on to the students in the classroom who receive its instruction.

#### Administrative Record

The fall of 2007 was a significant period at San Domenico because all three divisions of the school (primary, middle and upper) came together to become unified in terms implementing literacy in the classrooms at all three levels. This led to the development of a shared language and philosophy. These foundations focused on Stephanie Harvey's strategy based reading instruction.

The minutes from a literacy meeting in November of 2007 focused on short-term and long-term goals for the school in regards to reading. Short-term goals from the meeting asked teachers in all three levels to observe one another to see firsthand how the seven reading strategies could be implemented in the classroom. Long-term goals were made to further train teachers on strategy based reading instruction. In addition, the

literacy committee realized the importance of getting parents on board with this vision, and created a parent book club that would read *7 Keys to Comprehension*, by Susan Zimmerman and Chryse Hutchins.

Minutes from this literacy meeting demonstrate how teachers across divisions and grade levels believe in this mode of instruction. San Domenico School not only wants to educate teachers on how to successfully implement strategy based reading instruction, but also to educate parents. In order to provide a successful education to the child, there needs to be a partnership between the school and families.

### Testing Scores

Some schools use scripted reading programs which do not always provide a range of texts to meet the needs of each student in the classroom. These programs are used because schools want to improve their testing scores (Ede, 2006). In a classroom of twenty students there are 20 different types of readers. When the same book is put into the hands of every student in a class, a portion of the class may find the book too easy, a portion will find it just right and the rest will find it too hard.

A study by Buly and Valencia (2002) examined the profiles of students who failed state reading assessments. The study found that the United States of America is looking for ways to improve students reading scores, but the programs that many school districts have in place do not meet the needs of struggling readers. The only certain conclusion was that students who had failed the test had not correctly answered comprehension questions. Many school districts are mandating “scripted curriculum” especially for new teachers (Goodnough, 2001). One response to scripted curriculum that Goodnough received was:

“The beauty of these types of programs,” as one mentor teacher put it, “is that you don’t have to think about it. Everything is spelled out for you...”

(p. 233).

Not all teachers have a positive response to scripted curriculum, as it frequently gives only one resource for a whole class, regardless of their ability. Buly and Valencia argue that just because specific grade level teachers are teaching their grade level standards, doesn’t mean they are providing appropriate instruction for all students.

In looking at strategy based reading instruction, there is a correlation between teachers who use this method and how their students perform on standardized tests. Trabasso and Bouchard (2002). Trabasso and Bouchard discuss how it is beneficial to teach multiple strategies to students. With direct instruction, readers will know when and how to use specific strategies. By modeling the strategies and allowing for student practice, students will internalize how to use them. Trabasso and Bouchard conclude:

*There is very strong empirical, scientific evidence that the instruction of more than one strategy in a natural context leads to the acquisition and use of reading comprehension strategies and transfers to standardized comprehension tests. Multiple strategy instruction facilitates comprehension as evidenced by performance on tasks that involve memory, summarizing, and identification of main ideas. (p. 184)*

One can infer from this that strategy based reading instruction is an effective way to teach reading which will also benefit standardized tests.

### National and State Reading Test Scores

Each school across the United States has at least one item on its agenda in common: standardized testing. Students of all ages are tested in many areas, one of which is in reading. Since 2001, the importance of standardized testing has increased due

to the No Child Left Behind act. With a stronger focus on testing results, it is easy to understand why schools want to test as well as they can.

The Nation's Report Card is an official website that releases results from national assessments. The Reading Report card takes a look at reading scores across the United States. In 2007, 52% of 4<sup>th</sup> graders were able to correctly answer multiple-choice questions that assessed students' ability to understand the meaning of a word within the context of a story. 54% of 4<sup>th</sup> graders were able to correctly form constructed responses that required the students to answer questions from the story passage (The nation's report card, 2007).

In California, STAR (Standardized Testing and Reporting) assesses student achievement in public schools. In 2007, 51% of California 4<sup>th</sup> graders were considered proficient or above in the category of English-Language Arts. This is a jump from 39% in 2003 (O'Connell, 2008, p. 6).

The Nation's Report Card and STAR testing both provide statistics for reading achievement. Nationally, and in the state of California, just over half of 4<sup>th</sup> graders are considered proficient or above. This means that just under half of our 4<sup>th</sup> graders are performing below grade level. It is crucial that educators continue to work to bring all students to performance at grade level.

### Historical Context

“Moving From the Old to the New: Research on Reading Comprehension Instruction” by Janie A. Dole, Gerald G. Duffy, Laura R. Roehler, and P. David Pearson provides the history of reading comprehension instruction from the 1920s through the end

of the century. The article traces its origins and explains how those origins conflict with the current cognitive views of the reading process today. “Reading is a far more complex process than had been envisioned by early researchers; above all, it is not a set of skills to be mastered” (Dole & Others, 1991, p. 240). Traditionally, it was viewed that readers acquire a set of ordered sub skills. Once readers master those skills, they are able to comprehend what they read. However, current research has challenged this theory.

Current research has identified traditional reading comprehension instruction as passive. “Cognitively based views of reading comprehension emphasize the interactive nature of reading and the constructive nature of comprehension (Dole & Others, 1991, p. 241). This article compares and contrasts traditional skills and current reading strategies that promote stronger reading comprehension.

### Summary

The information in the literature reviews clearly demonstrates that strategy based reading instruction is an effective way to improve reading comprehension. Educators need to teach students how to become active readers who engage with each text they come across. Strategy based reading instruction encourages students with all levels of reading abilities to do so, whether they are reading picture books, chapter books, newspapers, magazines etc. In addition, it is important that teachers are promoting higher-level thinking from our students. One clear way for teachers to do so is by implementing strategy based reading instruction inside their classrooms. By explicitly teaching the seven reading strategies (creating visualizations, making connections, asking questions, inferring, determining importance and synthesizing, and monitoring one’s



comprehension) students are given the tools to improve their reading comprehension (Zimmerman, C. & Hutchins, C., 2003). Students who have been taught reading strategies are able to carry these skills over when completing standardized tests. Students who have been explicitly taught these strategies are able to perform strongly on the reading comprehension portion of standardized tests.

The literature review also focused on San Domenico School that recently adopted strategy based reading instruction at all grade levels, kindergarten through twelfth. The school has modeled a partnership between the teachers in different divisions by instilling a literacy library. The literacy library is a common source teachers can refer to for expertise. In addition to the literacy library, there has been an all school literacy committee created which meets monthly. It has been developed to ensure strategy based reading instruction continues to evolve.

The research covered in the literature review provides significant support for using strategy based reading instruction in a classroom; however, there is a lack of research that focuses on teacher's perceptions of it. Limited research was available which highlighted teachers' thoughts on its effectiveness for improving reading comprehension. The purpose of this study is to gather a sense of teachers' perceptions of strategy based reading instruction in regards to reading comprehension.

## CHAPTER 3 INTERVIEW WITH AN EXPERT

### Sample and Site

For this study, I decided to interview Mary Altshuler, the Literacy Coordinator at San Domenico School. Ms. Altshuler, has had extensive experience implementing strategy based reading instruction, and training new teachers on how to incorporate strategy based reading instruction in their classrooms. She is also constantly educating herself in this arena of reading instruction.

### Ethical Standards

This study conforms to all ethical standards of research as determined by the American Psychological Association. This project was reviewed by the Dominican University of California Institutional Review Board and assigned IRB Approval Number 7092.

### Summary

Mary Altshuler is the Literacy Coordinator for PreK-5<sup>th</sup> grade at San Domenico School, as well as a third grade teacher and member of the school's literacy committee which incorporates grades PreK-12<sup>th</sup>. Ms. Altshuler has been teaching for most of her life and has always had a passion for literacy. She continues to educate herself and evolve as an educator.

“Strategy based reading instruction is just one component of a balanced reading program” (Altshuler, 2009). She believes that in addition to using this form of

instruction, it is important to also incorporate phonics, word work, guided reading, and independent reading in one's reading program. This is true especially at younger grade levels where students are still developing their reading skills.

There are many benefits to using strategy based reading instruction. For teachers, it is useful because the teacher can use the same strategy with a wide range of readers in one classroom. Interestingly, these strategies were developed after researching the brains of proficient readers to see how they best make sense out of text (Altshuler, 2009). From the brain-based studies, it was concluded that all proficient readers unconsciously use the seven strategies identified in this method. By implementing these strategies students are able to connect to texts deeply and engage in higher-level thinking.

When introducing the strategies to students it is important to focus on one strategy at a time, rather than working with all of them at once. This way, students are able to have a strong understanding of each one before being introduced to the next strategy. According to Ms. Altshuler, strategies should be introduced in a sequential order, starting with creating mental images, and moving (in the following order) to using background knowledge, asking questions, making inferences, determining importance, synthesizing information, and finally introducing using fix-up strategies (Altshuler, 2009). She also noted that, "different strategies seem to be easier for different readers" (Altshuler, 2009). In her experience, there does not seem to be one strategy over another that is easier to implement.

## CHAPTER 4 TEACHERS' PERCEPTIONS

## Sample and Site

The participants of this study made up a purposive sample. All participants currently teach reading in a private school north of San Francisco. The school itself has a homogenous student body. Students come from middle to upper class families whose parents are college educated. The school supports and implements strategy based reading instruction at all grade levels, kindergarten through 8<sup>th</sup>.

The nine participants surveyed ranged from two to thirty years of reading instruction experience; however their experience using strategy based reading instruction has a narrower range of two to eight years. Their experience utilizing this mode of instruction represents their most recent years of teaching. All nine participants are female and currently teach reading by implementing the strategies found in strategy based reading instruction.

Six of the participants surveyed teach 1<sup>st</sup>, 2<sup>nd</sup> or 3<sup>rd</sup> grade. Their reading groups can range from eight to thirteen students in one class. These participants have reading groups that are also ability based: emergent, meeting grade level, and more proficient. The other three participants currently teach reading in 5<sup>th</sup>, 6<sup>th</sup>/7<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> grade. These classes are larger and range from having sixteen to twenty students in one class. Those classes are not ability based.

### Data Gathering Strategies and Analysis

An online questionnaire was used as the instrument to measure teachers' perceptions of strategy based reading instruction in relation to reading comprehension. Participants were asked to participate in an online survey. Thirteen participants were invited to participate, of which nine completed the survey in whole. Participants were able to answer the online survey at their own pace and were given two weeks to complete it. In order to maintain confidentiality, the author of this study only analyzed the survey's results, and names were not included with each participant's submission.

Teachers' perception of strategy based reading instruction as an effective way to teach reading comprehension was measured using an online survey. It contained eight questions for each participant to answer, five of which provided relevant information for this study. The first question gathered background information on each participant's experience with reading instruction. The second question measured how effective strategy based reading instruction is to improve reading comprehension. Participants were able to rate it as: very effective, effective, somewhat effective, or not effective. The third and fourth questions measured how well one can differentiate instruction in a class using strategy based reading instruction, and how engaged students are when being taught using strategy based reading instruction. Participants were able to answer these questions with the following responses, either: all of the time, most of the time, some of the time, or never. The fifth question measured participants' attitude using this mode of instruction by asking if they enjoy teaching this way. Participants were able to answer

yes or no. The sixth seventh and eighth questions were deemed irrelevant to this study by the researcher.

### Data Analysis and Approach

Responses to the online survey yielded quantitative and qualitative results. Question one produced qualitative results that gathered background information on each participant. Questions two thru five produced quantitative results that allowed the researcher to analyze the answers by calculating the mean for each response.

Question two asked the participants to rate how effective they felt strategy based reading instruction is in regards to helping students improve their reading comprehension. 77.8% of participants answered that it was very effective, and 22.2% of participants answered that it was effective.

Question three asked participants how well they were able to differentiate instruction to an entire class using strategy based reading instruction. Responses indicated that 55.6% of participants felt they could differentiate all of the time; 33.3% of the participants felt they could differentiate most of the time; 11.1% of the participants felt they could differentiate some of the time. No participant felt they could never differentiate. Of the 55.6% of participants who feel they can always differentiate instruction, those participants currently teach 1<sup>st</sup>, 2<sup>nd</sup>, 3<sup>rd</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> grades. The participants in 1<sup>st</sup> thru 3<sup>rd</sup> grade have ability based reading groups where the span of readers is not as great; however, the 5<sup>th</sup> grade participant has a wide span of readers in her class. Of the 33.3% who responded they could differentiate most of the time, those participants

currently teach 1<sup>st</sup>, 6<sup>th</sup>/7<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> grade reading. The 1<sup>st</sup> grade reading group is ability based, but 6<sup>th</sup> through 8<sup>th</sup> has a wide span of readers. One participant felt that she could only differentiate some of the time, and she is a kindergarten teacher. With 88.9% of the participants agreeing that they are able to differentiate at least most of the time, strategy based reading instruction is clearly an effective way to reach the majority of readers in one class.

Question four measured how frequently students seem to be engaged when strategy based reading instruction is being used. The results were tabulated as follows; 66.7% of respondents answered students seem to be engaged all of the time, 33.3% of respondents answered that students seem to be engaged most of the time. The responses from this question produced favorable results showing that most, if not all of the time, students are engaged with picture or chapter books.

As indicated earlier in this study, a teacher's attitude plays a role in what gets translated to teaching practices. Question five of the survey asked participants if they enjoy teaching reading when implementing strategy based reading instruction. All participants indicated that they enjoy it. Because all of the participants enjoy using this method of reading instruction, one can assume that those participants are putting much effort into their teaching practices because it is something they find enjoyable.

### Summary of Major Findings

The purpose of this study was to measure teacher's perceptions of strategy based reading instruction in relation to reading comprehension. In general, the results suggest that the participants have a favorable perception of this mode of reading instruction.

Teachers' perceptions are often translated to their students during instruction. When teachers are interested and excited about a topic, it is often carried over in their teaching practice (Harvey, S. & Goudvis, A., 2007). In return, students often have a higher likelihood of being engaged in the topic. This notion is supported in this study. All participants enjoy teaching when implementing strategy based reading instruction. The students who receive this instruction are engaged with each lesson; 66.7% of the participants responded that their students are engaged all of the time, and 33.3% of the students are engaged most of the time.

It is crucial that a teacher is able to differentiate when teaching, as there are many types of learners in one classroom. When teachers are able to differentiate, they are able to effectively reach their students. From this study, one can conclude that the majority of teachers are able to differentiate while using strategy based reading instruction. 88.9% of the participants agreed that they could differentiate most, if not all, of the time.

The participants in this study all agree that strategy based reading instruction is an effective way to improve reading comprehension. Results indicated that 77.8% of the participants believe that is very effective, and 22.2% believe that is effective. Because all of the participants believe it is either effective or very effective, one can conclude that the participants' perception of strategy based reading instruction is an indeed favorable way to improve reading comprehension.



## CHAPTER 5 DISCUSSION

## Comparison of Findings with Existing Studies

In general, the findings from this study are consistent with existing research. This study concluded that the majority of the participants, 77.8%, believe strategy based reading is a very effective way to improve reading comprehension. It also found that 22.2% of the participants believe it is an effective way to improve reading comprehension. In using strategy based reading instruction, you are incorporating higher level thinking skills. In a study by Taylor, et al (2003), its findings were similar to this current study. They found that teachers who use higher order thinking skills promote greater reading growth among their students. The skills mentioned in Taylor et al's study are the same strategies found in strategy based reading instruction, such as questioning.

A study completed by Trabasso and Bouchard (2002) found that "readers who are given cognitive strategy instruction make significant gains on comprehension compared with students who are trained with conventional instruction procedures" (p. 177). Trabasso and Bouchard (2002) work is also consistent with this study's findings because the participants are aware of how effective it is to teach the seven strategies to students in their class.

In regards to participants' feelings towards strategy based reading instruction, all of the participants enjoy teaching this way. I was unable to find current research that measured how well teachers like using strategy based reading instruction in their classrooms.

### Limitations of the Study

There are several limitations to this study. First, the survey drew from a small sample size. There were only nine participants who completed this survey. Of those nine participants, there was a wide range of teaching experience. The majority of the participants have had over eight years of teaching reading. Of those teachers, prior to being trained and educated on the seven strategies, they used alternative methods to teach reading comprehension. A smaller number of the participants surveyed have only taught using strategy based reading instruction.

Another limitation also relates to the small sample size. The participants represent a range of grades; however, there is only one participant for most grade levels. For this study: one participant teaches kindergarten, one participant who teaches 1<sup>st</sup>, two participants who teach 2<sup>nd</sup>, one participant who teaches 3<sup>rd</sup>, one participant who teaches 5<sup>th</sup>, one participant who teaches 6<sup>th</sup> and 7<sup>th</sup>, and one participant who teaches 8<sup>th</sup> grade reading.

This study also only invited participants who teach in a private school. Teachers in this specific school do not have to follow a scripted curriculum, and have more flexibility in their teaching methods. In addition, the participants were only representing one private school.

### Implications for Future Research

The results from this study support existing research on strategy based reading instruction. The findings indicate that teachers enjoy teaching using strategy based

reading instruction, and they feel that it is an effective way to improve reading comprehension.

There are several ways in which one could extend this research. First, a similar study could occur, but with a larger population for the sample. A researcher could use participants from more than one private school, and ensure there are more than one or two participants from each grade level. One could also survey private schools in different areas of the country to see if demographics play a role in teachers' perceptions to strategy based reading instruction. Another way the research could be extended would be to do a similar study in a public school north of San Francisco. If a researcher were able to find a public school in close proximity, its student body may have a similar student body to those in the private school used in this study.

Implications for future research could also examine how a school's administration perceives strategy based reading instruction in regards to comprehension. An administrator may have slightly different objective in regards to its effectiveness to reading comprehension. Some schools may focus on testing score results due to the No Child Left Behind Act (Guilfoyle, 2006).

In addition, gathering information how parents and students perceive this form of reading instruction would be informative. Unveiling how effective both of those parties view strategy based reading would be useful especially when considering adopting this method. Do students find it as an enjoyable way to engage with texts? Do parents feel as though their child's reading comprehension improves by using these strategies? I was unable to find research that focuses on the parents and students' point of view, so this could be a new avenue to pursue.

### Overall Significance of This Study

There are two outcomes that are significant in this study. The purpose of this study was to measure teachers' perceptions of strategy based reading instruction in relation to reading comprehension. All of the participants surveyed have positive feelings towards strategy based reading instruction. They all enjoy using it as a teaching method. This correlates to the second major finding: all of the teachers find strategy based reading instruction an effective way to improve reading comprehension. In fact, the majority of the participants find it to be very effective.

## CHAPTER 6 CONCLUSION

Strategy based reading instruction is an effective way to improve reading comprehension. In order to truly understand how this form of instruction can improve reading comprehension, it is necessary to understand what exactly it means to read.

There are two parts to reading: external and internal. The external portion is the actual decoding of words. Often, adults believe students understand what they are reading because they are reading the words aloud correctly; however, this is not always the case. Students do not understand what they are reading even though they are reading the words aloud. This is where the second part of reading factors in. It is the second part, internal reading, which ties into reading comprehension. The internal part of reading is the actual comprehension of it. It is the voice inside your head that is engaged with what you are reading. When you are engaged with a text, you are actively reading it. This is one of the outcomes of using strategy based reading instruction.

In order for students to become actively engaged with texts, students must be taught how to do so. Teachers must explicitly model and explain the reading strategies that good readers use when comprehending texts. After teachers have given their students explicit and formal instruction, students must be given the opportunities to practice using these strategies over and over again. Slowly, teachers will pull away until readers are able to use the strategies on their own. These strategies are using higher-level thinking skills because it is truly requiring readers to think deeply about the text.

Strategy based reading instruction can be used with all levels of readers and in mixed ability based classrooms. The same strategy can be used with a first grader and an eighth grader. The results from the survey given to teachers at a private elementary

school confirm that strategy based reading instruction is an effective way to differentiate instruction. This is an important benefit that should be highlighted because in one classroom there is always a span of reading abilities.

The participants of the survey all agreed that it is enjoyable to teach using strategy based reading instruction. When teachers are passionate and excited about what they are teaching, students are going to be more engaged with the actual lesson. In addition, all of the participants felt that strategy based reading instruction is an effective way to improve reading comprehension. Many of the teachers surveyed had used other methods to teach reading comprehension, but felt that strategy based reading comprehension was more effective.

The first moment I knew that strategy based reading instruction was an effective way to improve reading comprehension was during my first year of teaching. It was sitting with my reading group as we finished the last chapter in *Stone Fox*. It was during this chapter that the main character's dog, Searchlight, died. There wasn't a dry eye in sight. I knew that each one of my readers connected to the main character on a personal level. I knew that some of them had shared a similar experience of a pet passing away, and what that loss felt like. I knew that my readers had questions about why he died. It was a powerful moment because I knew strategy based reading instruction was working right in front of me. Each student was an active reader fully engaged with the text. They had used the strategies that they had been taught. From that moment on, I knew that it was an effective way to improve reading comprehension.

The research and studies discussed in the literature review supports this notion. The interview conducted with the literacy specialist and the survey answered by teachers

who currently use strategy based reading instruction all agree that it is an effective way to improve reading comprehension. Each teacher who participated in this study enjoys using strategy based reading instruction, and each teacher believes it is an effective, if not very effective, way to improve reading comprehension.

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