This document provides a summary of Recommendation 3 from the WWC practice guide *Improving Reading Comprehension in Kindergarten Through 3rd Grade*. Full reference at the bottom of this page.

Guide students through focused, high-quality discussion on the meaning of text

Reading

K 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 11 12

Lead students through focused, high-quality discussions to help them develop a deeper understanding of what they read. These discussions go beyond simply asking and answering surface-level questions to a more thoughtful exploration of the text, which helps students learn to argue for or against points raised in the discussion, resolve ambiguities in the text, and draw conclusions or inferences about the text.

Students in kindergarten through grade 3 can engage in these discussions if they have appropriate guidance from their teacher, and while some of the suggestions for putting this into practice apply to more experienced readers, teachers can make them applicable to very early readers and those reading below grade level. This approach can build students' ability to think more critically and independently about what they read.

How to carry out the recommendation

1. Structure the discussion to complement the text, the instructional purpose, and the readers' ability and grade level.
2. Develop discussion questions that require students to think deeply about text.
3. Ask follow-up questions to encourage and facilitate discussion.
4. Have students lead structured small-group discussions.

Potential roadblocks

1. When students are talking with peers, some teachers believe they do not have control of the classroom discussion.
2. Students do not understand how to conduct productive discussions about the text with one another.
3. It is difficult to find time to prepare for classroom discussions.
4. It is difficult to find time to devote to discussion when also teaching decoding skills, comprehension strategies, and vocabulary.

Reference: Shanahan, T., Callison, K., Carriere, C., Duke, N. K., Pearson, P. D., Schatschneider, C., & Torgesen, J. (2010). *Improving reading comprehension in kindergarten through 3rd grade* (NCEE 2010-4038). Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Education, Institute of Education Sciences, National Center for Education Evaluation and Regional Assistance. Retrieved from https://ies.ed.gov/ncee/wwc/PracticeGuide/14

Minimal

How to carry out the recommendation

1. *Structure the discussion to complement the text, the instructional purpose, and the readers' ability and grade level.*

It is important to consider how the type and content of the text will affect the discussion as the text used will determine (1) the goals of the discussion, (2) the interest level students have in the discussion, and (3) the questions used to stimulate discussion. A text is more likely to prompt rich discussion if it features either a character who faces a conflict or a real-world problem that presents a dilemma, because both give students an opportunity to support one side of an issue or the other.

Discussions and questions should be grounded in state and national comprehension standards. Many state standards for younger students incorporate versions of the National Assessment of Educational Progress standards, which include three categories of comprehension: locate and recall; integrate and interpret; and critique and evaluate.

Locate and Recall

Description	Guidance on How to Approach	Adapting for Younger Students
• Identify the main ideas and supporting details. • Find elements of a story. • Focus on small amounts of text.	Before the discussion, prepare a guide for the class that highlights which questions students should ask and which the teacher should ask. During discussion, ask questions about what the text means, what the main idea is, and which details support that idea. Ask some questions and moderate the discussion, but allow students to do most of the talking.	• Take a greater role by asking more questions when working with younger students. • Explicitly model how to think about the question: "The question asks about whether it is raining or sunny. I am going to look for a heading that talks about weather. Headings are these larger words, like this, that tell us what a part of the text is about. Here's a heading that says 'Today's Weather.' I am going to read that section and I think it will tell me whether it's raining or sunny."

Integrate and Interpret

Description	Guidance on How to Approach	Adapting for Younger Students
• Compare and contrast information or actions by characters. • Examine connections across parts of text. • Consider alternatives to what is presented in the text. • Use mental images.	Begin by reminding students of the comprehension strategies they already know. Ask them to read a small portion of the text themselves, and when they are finished, lead a discussion about what they just read. The questions asked should lead the students to summarize what happens in the text and to interpret these events in light of their own experience and knowledge or other parts of the text. Continue this throughout the entire text.	• Read aloud and periodically ask students about what's happening, what the story is about, or what they think is going to happen. • Facilitate a discussion by using a variety of higher-level questions that prompt the students to interpret the text.

Critique and Evaluate

Description	Guidance on How to Approach	Adapting for Younger Students
• Assess text from numerous perspectives, synthesizing what is read with other texts and experiences. • Determine what is most significant in a passage. • Judge whether, and the extent to which, certain features in the text accomplish the purpose of the text. • Judge either the likelihood that an event could actually occur or the adequacy of an explanation in the text.	Assign a text that poses a dilemma about which students might disagree. After reading the text, divide students into teams based on the opinions they express. Ask each team to find parts of the text that support their opinion. To facilitate this, distribute sticky notes to students and ask them to mark the points in the text. Students could also mark text they think is confusing, and teachers can use this material as the basis of a class discussion about what information is needed to make the text easier to understand.	• Read a selection of the text aloud and have students discuss it with a partner, then report back to the class. To start a discussion at that point, ask students whether they think the character did the right thing.

2. *Develop discussion questions that require students to think deeply about text.*

Move beyond having students simply recall details about the text or asking them to provide their opinions by instead developing higher-order questions that guide them to think deeply about the meaning of the text. These questions should reflect what conclusions you want students to draw from the text, including implicit as well as explicit information. Typical higher-order questions include

- Why did _____?
- What do you think _____?
- If you were the author _____?
- What does _____ remind you of and why?

When preparing questions, consider the best time to present each question to students—before, during, or after reading—as well as which questions should be asked when students first read the text and which questions should be asked after a second or subsequent reading. Additionally, determine exactly where in the text a question will be asked (e.g., after a specific page, paragraph, or illustration). For students in kindergarten and grade 1, shared reading time or read-alouds can provide opportunities to introduce higher-order questions.

3. *Ask follow-up questions to encourage and facilitate discussion.*

Reading comprehension improves when teachers ask follow-up questions that encourage students to apply the reading comprehension strategies they know. In a sustained discussion, respond to the students' answers in ways that lead them to both think about and elaborate on their answers, as well as expound on the meaning of the text. Then ask students to refer to specific portions of the text to justify their responses. Depending on the grade level, this may mean recalling events and passages in the text or pointing to illustrations. Follow-up questions should provide students with a model for thinking about the text and its meaning

more actively, as well as help them learn to construct and support opinions with textual evidence. Recommended follow-up questions include the following:

- What makes you say that?
- What happened in the book that makes you think that?
- Can you explain what you meant when you said _____?
- Do you agree with what _____ said? Why or why not?
- How does what you said connect with what _____ already said?
- Let's see if what we read provides us with any information that can resolve _____'s and _____'s disagreement.
- What does the author say about that?

Ideally, initial and follow-up questions should resemble a collaborative discussion instead of a typical cycle of teacher initiation (teacher asks a question), student response (one student answers the question), and teacher evaluation (teacher evaluates the student's response), followed by the teacher asking an unrelated question directed at the class or a different student. Although common in classrooms, this kind of discourse does not allow students to build meaning collaboratively from the text.

For younger students, follow-up questions can facilitate discussion, particularly when teachers conduct the discussion in small groups with appropriate supports. Students new to this type of discussion may have difficulty, so teachers should model the format and guide them in responding to the text while keeping them focused on both meaning and the discussion question at hand. Throughout the discussion, teachers should remind students to talk to one another and not just to the teacher.

4. Have students lead structured small-group discussions.

As students become more proficient in discussions about text, provide opportunities for small-group discussions in which students pose questions to their peers. In creating groups, include students who are relatively good at discussion in each group and allow students to direct the discussion. Teachers may select from many structures and techniques for peer-led discussions, including the following:

- Describe and assign a role to each student to ensure that all students participate in the discussion.
- Have students discuss the predictions or summaries of their peers as they use their reading comprehension strategies. (Note that this approach may be difficult for kindergarteners and grade 1 students.)
- Give students higher-order questions, graphics, or pictures, and ask them to discuss the materials with a partner. This approach is beneficial for students in kindergarten and grade 1 or as a warm-up for a more challenging discussion for students in grades 2 and 3.

- Ask students to make up questions that get them thinking. Rotate the responsibility for coming up with a "thinking question." For younger students, provide question stems orally or use word banks or picture clues to remind them how to build questions that make them think.
- After students read a text or a section of a text, guide them to reflect on the text by asking them to draw or write in a journal as preparation for a discussion the next day. Explain that entries should be questions or concerns they want to raise with their peers in discussion. Teachers can support younger students by providing sticky notes with symbols (e.g., question marks, smiley faces, or exclamation points) to mark sections of the text they want to talk about.

Students in kindergarten through grade 3 will need extensive modeling and practice to be successful in peer-led discussions. The discussions should start out short and become longer as students get older and have more practice. Introducing the entire activity and its rules (e.g., taking turns, not dominating the discussion, and staying on task) before group work begins will prepare students for it. Teachers can then use simple tools such as the ones listed below to encourage students to participate fully and fairly:

- Give students a chart of rules (with picture clues for younger students) to remind them of appropriate behavior in peer-led discussions.
- Consider setting a rule that no one can talk more than three times until everyone has spoken once. To keep track, consider giving students chips before the discussion begins and having them turn one in each time they talk.
- Require students to prepare ahead of time. Ask them to reflect on specific questions about the text by drawing a picture or writing in a "reading log" before the discussion, or have them talk in small groups before the full class discussion.
- Give students time to formulate their thoughts. When moderating the discussion, wait in silence until many students raise their hands, and call on those who have not yet contributed.

Potential roadblocks and how to address them

Roadblock	Suggested Approach
When students are talking with peers, some teachers believe they do not have control of the classroom discussion.	Though discussion involves giving up some control, teachers can do things to ensure that students stay on task during a discussion. For instance, provide a clear set of guidelines for discussing the text, including the structure of the discussion and the use of discussion guides, and model higher-order questions and responses to help students stay on point. These supports can serve as "training wheels" while students strengthen their ability to take part in this kind of a discussion. They allow the teacher to monitor how well students are staying on task from outside the group and offer assistance as necessary.
Students do not understand how to conduct productive discussions about the text with one another.	Give students opportunities to observe and practice discussion techniques; what is expected of them as discussion leaders should be clearly outlined. Prepare students to lead a discussion by modeling a leader's behavior and techniques, and then gradually release this responsibility to the students. Consider setting aside time at the beginning of the year to focus on discussion skills. You may also want to keep peer discussions relatively brief at first, giving students enough time to develop the ability to lead longer discussions. For younger students, who may struggle the most with the group nature of discussions, have them turn and talk to their neighbors.
It is difficult to find time to prepare for classroom discussions.	To capitalize on limited time, teachers should collaborate with one another, taking turns preparing discussion questions and guides. Teachers should also establish regular times for discussion early in the school year. In schools where there is only one teacher per grade, teachers can plan collaboratively with teachers at other schools via email or the Internet; cross-age discussions can be valuable as well. The more practice students have with discussion, the less time teachers will need to spend teaching the activity. Finally, fully developed discussion guidelines can be used repeatedly, saving preparation time.
It is difficult to find time to devote to discussion when also teaching decoding skills, comprehension strategies, and vocabulary.	Finding enough time to teach everything there is to teach is a challenge, especially in schools that serve a diverse student population. That said, high-quality discussions should be part of the school day because they have a great deal to do with improving reading comprehension. Devoting time only to word-level skills will not sufficiently help primary grade students become effective readers. Students developing decoding skills and fluency also need to develop their knowledge of the world and their ability to think about what they read. This can be accomplished in time-efficient ways. For instance, instead of handling discussion as a stand-alone task, teachers can make it part of the process of teaching other comprehension strategies. In addition, teachers can make the most of the time devoted to guiding students through a high-quality discussion by thoroughly preparing for the discussion.

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For more information on the research evidence and references to support this recommendation, or for more detailed explanation from the What Works Clearinghouse committee who developed this recommendation, please refer to the practice guide cited at the bottom of the first page of this document.