

# The Holy Grail:



In Search of Reading Comprehension  
in the Second Grade

This paper is less about research than it is a story. It's the story of how I, a relatively new second grade teacher, began to try to understand how my students learn to read, and how I could help them learn to read better. It's a story about failure, and learning from those failures. It's also the story of a few treasured instances of success. It's the tale, if you will, about one teacher's journey in search of that Holiest of Grails in primary teaching--reading comprehension.

At the end of the 2002 school year, I decided to move up with my first grade students to teach them again in second grade. Teaching first grade had been exciting; I had led my students on that first great expedition of schooling--making meaning out of the symbols and sounds written on a page. They had learned to read. And readers they were, vociferous and fearless.

As we rounded the bend together into second grade, the question in my teaching became--now what? How could I get my students to do more and better thinking work as they read? How could I help them understand their books better? Of course, this question was much too large to actually research, but an independent reading conference in November with Jeremy, one of my students, soon led me to a more focused one.

I approached Jeremy's reading conference that November day a little warily. I'd been teaching second grade for two months, and my reading conferences had not been going as smoothly as I would have liked. It wasn't until that day, however, that I'd been able to pinpoint why. I scooted a chair close to him, and started asking him about the book he was reading—a chapter book about two students trying to win a poetry contest.

His retelling was confused—it lacked a clear sense of the problem in the story and sequence, so I began to ask him questions, “Why are they in the library? Is there a contest about poetry? Why do they need to know what a poem means? What do they have to do for the contest? Where would it say what they have to do for the contest?” It went on like this for several minutes, me asking him questions and him struggling to pull the answers out of his brain or out of his book.

When I finished the conference, I was sweating. “*He really doesn't understand that book,*” I thought, “*And he has no idea that he doesn't understand it.*” I came away with another realization, as well, “*I did all of the work in that conference. I was trying to understand the book for Jeremy.*” I realized that day that my students had very few strategies to help themselves understand the longer, more complex chapter books they were reading, and I needed to find a way to help them.

My first thought was that if Jeremy questioned himself as he read, in similar ways to how I questioned him in our conferences, he would be able to comprehend his books more independently. He also might be able to identify on his own when his comprehension had broken down and be able to use fix-up strategies, such as rereading, without needing a prompt from a teacher.

So, my research initially focused on this question: "How does teaching second graders to question the text impact their reading comprehension?"

### **Review of Research**

Second grade has often been described as a critical year for students. According to The New York State Standards, it is the year when "the transition from 'learning to read' to 'reading to learn' accelerates." One major challenge is that second grade books are considerably harder than first grade books. As the Standards explains:

[Second grade level] books are markedly different from texts at lower levels. These books typically are longer chapter books with only a few illustrations that provide much less support for readers. The text size is smaller, and the word spacing is narrower. These books feature more characters who are involved in more complex plots. The language structures are more sophisticated, detailed and descriptive. The vocabulary is challenging. In general [second grade level] books require higher-level conceptual thinking for students to understand the subtleties of plot and character development. Students must sustain their reading over several days to finish the book. Most of the reading is done silently and independently, but some parts of the book may be read aloud for emphasis or interest. Group discussion may support readers during and after they read [second grade level] books.

This is a huge transition from what they were doing in first grade with their short, fairly simple, single-episode books. I was beginning to think that my second graders might more likely need a therapeutic support group than a reading group!

As far as standards for reading comprehension, New York State expects that by the end of second grade, students will be able to "recognize and be able to talk about organizing structures; combine information from two different parts of the text; and to infer cause-and-effect

relationships that are not stated explicitly." I knew students would need multiple of demonstrations of a variety of reading strategies in order to achieve these standards.

I was not alone in thinking that questioning might be an important strategy to help students achieve better comprehension. In their book, *Strategies That Work*, Stephanie Harvey and Anne Goudvis state, "Questions are the master key to comprehension. Questions clarify confusion. Questions stimulate research efforts. Questions propel us forward and take us deeper into reading." They note that "A reader with no questions might just as well abandon the book. When our students ask questions and search for answers, we know that they are monitoring comprehension and interacting with the text to construct meaning, which is exactly what we hope for in developing readers."

Frank Smith (1997) has also written extensively about the role of questions in reading comprehension, saying, "As we read...we are constantly asking questions, and as long as these questions are answered, as long as we are left with no residual uncertainty, we comprehend." He describes comprehension as "a state of zero uncertainty." He also claims that any definition of reading should recognize "the selective way we read all kinds of print," from telephone books to newspaper ads to street signs, by striving to gather "just the information that we need...to answer the specific questions we are asking."

The work of P. David Pearson (1994) suggests that not only do good readers ask questions when they read, but good teachers of reading teach readers to do this in explicit ways. We can help students acquire the strategies and processes used by good readers—and this will improve their overall comprehension of texts, both the texts used to teach the strategies and texts they read on their own in the future.

With the knowledge of the challenge set out by the New York State Standards, and armed with the support of so many researchers, I set out on my search for the Holy Grail—helping my readers become excellent comprehenders.

### **Setting for the Study**

This study was conducted in my second grade class of 18 students at the Future Leaders Institute (FLI), a small public school in Harlem. FLI was created in 1999 to provide a high quality education to neighborhood students, a population that has long been neglected and marginalized

by the New York City school system. FLI serves approximately 175 students in kindergarten through seventh grade. The school uses a balanced literacy approach to the teaching of reading and writing that is modeled on other successful programs in neighboring districts.

Dorothy Hall and Patricia Cunningham (1997) liken the balanced literacy approach to the way parents ensure that children have a balanced diet. Each of the food groups needs to be represented in order for children to grow, and no one food group should be overemphasized or neglected. The "food groups" of balanced literacy instruction include word study (learning about spelling patterns or high frequency words), shared reading (teacher and students reading a text together with the teacher demonstrating reading strategies), guided reading (small group reading instruction), independent reading (reading of student-selected trade books), read aloud, and writing workshop.

Using a balanced literacy approach can be challenging. There is no scripted manual in which teachers can find out what to teach each day. Much of the instruction is driven by assessment. Teachers must know their students' strengths and weaknesses and use this information, combined with their knowledge of how children learn to read and write, to decide on strategies and processes that will help the children further their growth. To help support me in teaching in this way, I was offered numerous professional development opportunities by my school directors. These included: weekly after-school meetings with a highly experienced staff developer, study groups that discussed professional readings, numerous observations by the school directors with one-on-one feedback and debriefing meetings afterward, curriculum planning meetings, and opportunities to attend multiple, full-day workshops on teaching reading using a balanced literacy approach.

### **Getting Started: Finding our Questions**

In December, I began teaching questioning techniques to my students. Borrowing from the work of Harvey and Miller, I began by modeling during read aloud how I ask questions as a reader. This teaching strategy is also sometimes called a "think aloud" and allows students to observe how a proficient reader uses a given strategy. I charted my questions for a few days, and then I invited students to join me in asking their questions. After a few days of this, we began to go back to try to answer some of our questions. Initially, I suggested to students that answers to one's questions could be found in one of three places— in the text, in one's own schema, or by using an outside source (such as a dictionary or an expert).

After a couple of weeks of modeling and practicing this process together as a group, I began to guide students to practice the strategy during small-group guided reading instruction. Students read narrative texts on their instructional level and stopped at various intervals to write their questions on post-its. During the lesson I would help them decide how to best answer their questions. Eventually, in January, students began doing the work on their own, recording their questions on post-its during independent reading and then trying to find the answers.

To help me gauge how my students were using these strategies, and how their reading comprehension might be affected, I selected three students to be case studies in my classroom. I selected one student from each of three guided reading groups—high (reading a year above grade level), middle (reading slightly above grade level), and low-middle (reading on grade level). All three happened to be boys, and I tried to select students who had consistently high attendance and were not pulled out of the classroom, so that they were present for most lessons and had the most in-class time to work on the strategies.

To help me learn more about how the students were using the strategies, I selected a few tools:

I used our school's main reading assessment, the *Developmental Reading Assessment* to get a baseline for my students' independent reading level and comprehension skills, and to assess their achievement at the end of the year. The assessment involves reading a leveled story and then retelling the story in ones' own words. It includes questions the teacher may ask if the retelling is unclear, including questions about the problem of the story, and an inference question-- generally about what the main character learned in the story. I gave these assessments to all students in October and May.

I taught the students to use *post-its* to mark places in their independent reading text where they had thinking they wanted to remember. In September, they were told to use post-its anytime they had thinking during reading that they wanted to remember. After our study of questioning began (December), there were some days (approximately twice a week) when I directed students to use post-its in very specific ways to try out a strategy I'd just taught during a mini-lesson, handing out two or three to each student as they began independent reading time. (They were free to use more if they wanted.) On other days, students were left on their own to decide how many post-its to use, if any, and to mark any thinking they desired. I collected post-its from my case study students every couple of weeks.

I used my *conference notes* from my independent reading conferences to gain even more insight

into how students were using the strategies I 'd taught. I examined them to see how often we talked about questions they were trying to answer in their reading, and what kinds of things I taught them during our conversations.

I made *recordings of some independent reading conferences* in order to be able to analyze more fully how my case study students were talking about their books and their use of strategies

I used my *teaching plans* to document what strategies I taught, as well as how and when I taught them.

I used a *journal* to record my thoughts, feelings, and questions throughout this process.

### **Giving Voice to Our Questions: The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly**

#### **The Good**

As it turned out, my students really took to this new strategy of "questioning the text." Their books oozed post-its every day after independent reading like some sort of technicolor fungus. In September, before our study of questioning began, my case study students were placing post-its in their books at an average rate of 17 per 100 pages. At the mid-point of this study, around January, those students were putting in post-its at the average rate of 42 per 100 pages.

#### **Average Rate of Post-its Per 100 Pages**

<b>September</b>	<b>January</b>
17	42

Not only were they prolific "post-iters," but they also were prolific questioners. When I analyzed the few post-its my students had used in September, approximately 10% of them were questions the students had about the text. Most were personal connections, such as "This part makes me think of when I went to the beach with my family," or predictions, such as, "I think Rosamond is going to help him find the bag." In January, the rate of questions increased dramatically, with approximately 90% of the post-its consisting of questions students had about their books.

The overall increase in post-it rate meant that students were stopping to document their thinking more often. Using post-its provided an opportunity to concretize our class mantra, "Good readers think about their books." They were excited about their questions, and spending so much time looking at and thinking about our questions helped reinforce to students the idea that questions are an important part of learning. I hoped that the increase in post-it rate meant that students were, indeed, thinking more about their books, as well as monitoring more closely than before when their comprehension was breaking down.

A second benefit to our questioning study was an immediate improvement in my conferences. The conferences went much more smoothly, and included less of me pelting students with questions and more discussion of student-generated questions. In December and January, I had 12 conferences with my case study students. All 12 of the conferences included references to the questions students were asking and how they went about answering them. While two of these conferences focused more on the technical and practical aspects of using post-its (i.e., where to put them, how often to use them, how much to write on them), the rest of the conferences focused on how students were going about answering the questions that they had. Most of these were about the importance of rereading as a strategy for answering one's questions.

### **Giving Voice to Our Questions: The Bad**

As with any good story, this one has some twists and turns. Although my students were interacting voluminously with their texts, I began to identify several problems with the work.

One problem I noticed almost immediately was that time spent writing post-its took away from time spent reading. Some children (including two of my case studies) were frighteningly overzealous with their post-its at first, stopping to put 2 or 3 on each page. Even after I asked them not to place more than one post-it on any one page, they still seemed to spend a disproportionate amount of their reading time writing post-its. I wondered if stopping so often in their reading might, in fact, be compromising their comprehension even more by breaking their momentum.

Another problem I noticed was that students asked so many questions that the questions became unmanageable. They stopped to write down one question and then rushed on to ask the

next without any thought as to finding answers. Although I had modeled for them various codes to use to show how they answered their questions (T=answer found in the text, H=answer found in our head (schema), OS=answer found in an outside source), the post-its I collected rarely were coded to show how they found the answers to their questions. And, quite honestly, the codes began to feel a little artificial to me, segmenting reading and thinking in a way I didn't really care for.

This overzealousness when trying a new strategy was something I'd come to expect from my five years of working with young children. Brian Cambourne (1988) developed a learning theory that talks about approximation being an important step in the learning process. I know that my students were simply trying hard to use the new strategy as well as to try to please the teacher, another important developmental feature of this age group. However, there were other, more important concerns arising.

### **Giving Voice to Our Questions: The Ugly**

In my journal on January 16, I wrote, "*I'm often surprised by what confuses my kids in their reading. I'm also surprised by the questions they have.*" I was not prepared for the kinds of questions students would ask, nor what my reactions would be to their questions. The problems that arose, however, resulted in my greatest learning experiences, as I sought to find ways to help students overcome their comprehension obstacles.

#### **Safe Questions**

Some students focused on asking "safe" questions, only writing down questions they already knew the answers to. Edward was a student who especially played it safe with his questions. Early in the study, on a page of *Danny and the Dinosaur* that says that Danny wanted a friend and he loved dinosaurs, Edward wrote "Why does Danny want a dinosaur?" When I asked him about that question, he replied, "Maybe he wanted a friend and he loved dinosaurs." He wasn't recording a genuine question he had about the text, but, rather, a question that would be easily answered if a teacher were to discuss it with him.

#### **"Dumb" Questions**

I noticed that many students were asking questions which seemed to me, a proficient reader, to be "dumb" questions. These were questions that didn't seem to propel students' thinking about

the story any further. For example, Edward often asked questions for which the only possible answer could be "Because." When he read *Harold and the Purple Crayon*, he wrote questions like, "I wonder why the sea ended," and "Why did Harold make a train come from the middle of the mountain?" When Jeremy read *Penguin Puzzle*, a Magic School Bus chapter book set in Antarctica, he asked, "Are they cold?" When Colin read *Arthur Writes a Story*, he wrote a post-it that read, "Why are they sitting under that tree?" Questions about small details in pictures or setting weren't helping my students put together the more comprehensive thinking about the story I felt they needed.

### **Determining Importance**

Not only were the students asking "dumb" questions, but they didn't seem to have a sense as to which questions might be more important to answer than others. When Jeremy read *Cam Jansen and the Mystery of the Circus Clown*, a mystery about stolen wallets, he asked questions that went from the more "dumb", low-level—"Where did they get that ice cream?" and "How did Cam walk with her aunt?"—to questions more integral to the story's main problem—"Is the clown trying to be sneaky?" and "How did the grandma lose her wallet?"

Students' questions weren't necessarily focused on the biggest ideas in their stories. An example of this was when Colin read *Snowflake Bentley*, a biography of the first man to photograph snowflakes, and a book I had read aloud to the class the week before. During our conference, he stopped on one page where an illustration showed Bentley holding out a black tray to catch snowflakes. He said, "I'm thinking, 'Why is he holding out a black tray? I thought he was studying snow storms. Why is he looking at snowflakes?' I guess snowflakes are a part of snow storms." Yet, when he read the next page, which focused on how townspeople ridiculed Bentley - a central idea of the story of Bentley's life--he had no questions or thinking to share about it.

I was discovering that questioning the text didn't always lead to greater comprehension. During the last chapter of Edward's book, we began talking in a conference about his question, "Who is Joey?" It turns out that Joey had been a character in a subplot throughout the entire book! The fact that he should have asked that question much earlier in the book showed that there were major flaws in relying on this strategy alone in order to help students understand their books better. They needed more.

### **My Learning**

Recognizing the limitations of the questioning study served a larger purpose than just thinking about “how to do it better next year.” As I watched students read and listened to them talk about their books, I learned more about what I wanted students to be able to say about their books. I was slowly constructing my own definition of comprehension, and it didn't include asking questions about why the sea ends or why trains come out of mountains. I realized that I wanted my students not only to be able to retell the events of a book, but I also wanted them to be thinking about such things as character traits, character motivation, and what changes happen in a story over time. I wanted them to meet the standards by being able to “infer cause-and-effect relationships that are not stated explicitly.” I wanted my students to ask questions, but more of the kind that “mattered” to proficient readers, the kind that would deepen their thinking about the story and about life.

Reflecting on what my students still could not do in their reading pushed me to think more about what my next teaching steps should be. Stephanie Harvey and Anne Goudvis point out in their book that, “It's tough to ask a substantive question about something we know...nothing about.” I was beginning to suspect that my readers needed to know more about what to expect when they came to chapter books. My students were proficient at asking questions, but they needed to be taught what to ask questions about.

### **The Plot Thickens: Second Graders Begin to Study the "What" of Their Chapter Books**

It was at this point in the study (February) when serendipity intervened and I attended a workshop at the Teachers College Reading and Writing Project on teaching second graders how to understand their books better by using story elements. The idea was that students could learn the common elements that make up a story and use those to structure their thinking about the story.

As I began implementing this Unit of Study, I broadened my research question to include this new reading work: In a second grade classroom in which questioning strategies have already been introduced, how does introducing a study of story elements impact reading comprehension?

The story elements I taught students were:

- **Characters:** the people (animals, animated objects) who are in the story
- **Setting:** when and where the story takes place
- **Plot:** what happens in a story (stated this simply on purpose)
- **Movement through time:** minutes, days, years, etc. must elapse from story beginning to story end
- **Change:** a difference has occurred in the character or setting by the time the story is complete

I presented these story elements to my students in much the same way I had taught the questioning techniques. I read a text aloud and modeled how I used post-its to note what I was learning about the different story elements as I read and how I put them together to understand the whole story. We did it together as a class with a shared text, and I worked with small reading groups to guide them in using the strategy. Eventually, they began doing the work during independent reading, and I began to notice the change in their post-its.

When I compared Edward's post-its from January (Appendix A) with his post-its from February and March (Appendix B), after the Story Element Study had been implemented, I could see more clearly the change in his thinking about texts. Whereas the early post-its are more trivial questions that touch on superficial aspects of the story, his later, story element post-its are about issues more integral to the story. While these post-its aren't necessarily questions, Edward needed to be asking questions of the text and of himself in order to write them. He was inferring, thinking about character traits and motivation, grappling with the real "why"s of the book rather than the safe and superficial ones. He was doing more of the thinking work needed in order to understand his book better.

This work with Story Elements really strengthened students' reading in other ways. Now they could follow an idea across a text, and develop stronger ideas about characters. In my conference with Colin, I asked him to identify a post-it he thought was important to understanding his book. The post-it was marked with a "C" for character and said, "Russell is feeling grown up. Everyone is looking at where his tooth was."

**Me:** Is this an important idea about your character? Tell me about it.

**Colin:** Yes, because... (long pause)

**Me:** Does it say something about what kind of kid Russell is?

**Colin:** Maybe he wants to feel special and grown up sometimes.

**Me:** Are there any other examples of when he wants to feel special and grown up?

**Colin:** (He points to another page in the story.) When he wanted to go to the parade, he tried not to cry.

**Me:** So how does that connect with your idea?

**Colin:** That he's trying to be like a grown up.

When students were asked to look for and think more deeply about story elements such as character, it brought their reading comprehension to a higher level. The work students were doing as they read finally matched my idea of what true reading comprehension work was. The difference really showed in their DRA scores, as well. While all three students scored above grade level on the baseline reading assessment in October, not a single one of them was able to answer the inference comprehension question for their reading level. When retested, in May, all three of them not only moved up to the next grade level, but they were able to answer the inferential comprehension question that accompanied that text!

### **Making Sense of It All**

Many teachers are required by their school districts to use basal readers with scripted reading comprehension questions. While this may be a way to simplify teacher preparation, it is no way to address the real work that readers do as they read. All knowledge, including teacher knowledge, must be constructed by the learner. I had to go through the process of approximating the teaching I thought my students needed, receiving feedback from them, and read Jeremy's teaching. Through that process I slowly began to understand what reading comprehension really means and how students begin to construct it.

Yes, I did a lot of professional reading and tried the things that I read about in books and

manuals. But no manual could help me instantly understand what it means to deeply comprehend a text. I had to watch how my readers were working and listen to what they were saying about their work. I spent hours talking to other colleagues at my school who were doing or had done similar studies about our observations and challenges. And I made adjustments to my instruction when I still didn't feel like my students were "getting it." Putting all of this together, steadily constructing deeper knowledge about the teaching and learning process, is the consummate work of a teacher. And it is only through doing this deep, messy work that teachers get smarter at teaching, which enables them to make smarter, more responsive teaching decisions for their students.

Another important lesson I take away from this study is how important it is to teach both the "how" and the "what" of reading. My students needed to know and practice the process of asking questions as they read, but they also needed to know what kinds of things good readers ask questions about. The Questioning and Story Elements Studies seemed to complement each other in that they focused on different aspects of reading—process and content. This study highlights how complex the reading process is, and how flexible teachers need to be in order to truly teach it well.

Finally, I learned that there is no Holy Grail when it comes to the teaching of reading comprehension. I cannot report that I've found the one magic bullet that will make all students understand all of their books deeply. But I have come to understand more than ever that learning to read is a complex and demanding process, and it requires complex and demanding teaching, so my quest continues. Though I know the Holy Grail is an illusion, I will continue the journey I've begun of constantly reflecting and adjusting my instruction, with the knowledge that every step brings my students closer to becoming the thoughtful, engaged comprehenders I know they can become.

## Policy Recommendations

❖ **Give teachers control over what to teach in the classroom.**

Yes, some of what I taught didn't work exactly as I intended. But I needed time and space to work out my failures in order to construct my own knowledge of how my students were learning. In addition, students' needs were better served by more responsive instruction.

❖ **Provide more professional development on teaching reading comprehension for lower elementary teachers.**

Upper elementary teachers spend a lot of time teaching reading comprehension because their students are being tested on "comprehension skills." But if students are to become proficient readers, they need good reading comprehension teaching from the start.

❖ **Implement balanced literacy structures to provide teachers with multiple ways to teach and assess reading strategy work.**

Without structures such as Read Aloud, Guided Reading, and Independent Reading Conferences, I might not have had the opportunity to teach and assess students in multiple ways.

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