Improving middle-grades reading in urban schools: The Memphis Comprehension Framework

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Bennie sits quietly amidst rows of worn metal desks with his fifth-grade science textbook open to the pages assigned as homework. He is fully intent on doing the assignment, although limited teacher assistance has been provided for him in terms of background building or strategies for approaching the work. You see, unlike some of his fellow classmates, Bennie can read fairly well. Bennie is one of approximately 40% of urban fourth graders in the United States who are classified by the National Assessment of Educational Progress (National Center for Educational Statistics [NCES], 2004) as being at or above basic proficiency for their grade-level placement. What is unfortunate is that Bennie has not acquired the comprehension strategies essential to continue his progress toward becoming a proficient reader of expository texts.

To be fair, his teacher is faced with a multitude of urban-school hurdles, ranging from a lack of materials to limited professional development opportunities concerning content-reading skills development. In this column we describe a content-reading instruction scaffolding called The Memphis Comprehension Framework, which was found to be effective in significantly improving higher order comprehension skills for students in grades 4 through 6 in two major U.S. urban school districts. This model is especially potent in improving students' higher order comprehension of expository texts. But first, we focus on relevant conditions in urban centers, what we know from research about effective comprehension instruction, and how The Memphis Comprehension Framework addresses the evidence-based requirement teachers and administrators are seeking.

Research on content reading in urban centers

Over the past few years, numerous reports have appeared delineating and advocating the use of scientifically based teaching methods (e.g., Gersten, Fuchs, Williams, & Baker, 2001; National Institute of Child Health and Human Development [NICHD], 2000; Snow, 2002), and some research efforts are focusing particular attention on urban schools. In 2003 the second Trial Urban District Assessment (NCES, 2004) was conducted by the U.S. federal government as part of the National Assessment of Educational Progress. Nine urban school districts were included in the assessment, and each city's profile, except for one, revealed significant differences in reading achievement when compared to the United States as a whole. Of particular note was the "below basic" category. Approximately 38% of U.S. fourth graders fell into this group while, on average, over 50% of urban fourth graders were so classified. The encouraging news from the report was that some progress is evident. Average reading scores for fourth graders in some urban centers increased between 2002 and 2003, while the nation as a whole remained static (NCES, 2004). This suggests that efforts being made in urban districts to improve reading development are beginning to gain traction.

The RAND Report (Snow, 2002) provided a comprehensive look at reading comprehension instruction and the variability therein. The report found that the two basic goals of effective comprehension instruction are (1) ensuring immediate success in understanding what is assigned to be

read and (2) equipping students with a repertoire of self-regulating strategies that enables them to become active "comprehenders" of all types of text. According to the report, "exploring the instructional techniques that generate long-term improvements in learners' capacities to read with comprehension for the purposes of learning, applying knowledge, and being engaged is the highest priority" (p. 27) in successful classrooms.

To assist readers having difficulty comprehending text, as is often necessary in urban classrooms, Duke (2004) discovered several highly effective strategies for students to acquire. Among them were generating questions, thinking aloud, monitoring and adjusting, attending to text structure, activating and applying relevant background knowledge, drawing inferences, constructing visual representations, and summarizing. It is important for successful comprehension instruction to include extensive modeling by the teacher, opportunities for feedback, adjustments to the students' proficiency level, and the establishment of clear purposes for reading that keep the reader engaged (Gersten et al., 2001). Yet when reviewing what researchers find when examining comprehension instruction, we found that not much has changed since the 1970s when less than 2% of instructional time was being spent on reading comprehension development (Durkin, 1978/1979; Pressley, 2000).

Comprehension problems for some urban students seem to grow steadily worse after third grade—what is sometimes referred to as the fourth-grade slump (Chall, Jacobs, & Baldwin, 1990). The reason is not illusive: From upper elementary grades onward, many urban students face an increasing diet of expository texts—texts that follow a very different structure than narrative texts. Exacerbating the issue for many urban students can be a lack of vocabulary knowledge (Nicholson & Whyte, 1992; Tomesen & Aarnoutse, 1998) and an inability to use combinations of reading comprehension strategies with expository or content texts (Adams, Carnine, & Gersten, 1982; Anderson & Roit, 1993; Stevens, 1988). The National Reading Panel report (NICHD, 2000) concluded that there is ample research support for the notion that middle-grades students can be taught to use strategies to improve their comprehension of expository texts. The Memphis Comprehension Framework presented next incorporates these and other evidence-based research findings and has been shown to positively affect content reading comprehension in urban classrooms.

Achieving higher expository-text comprehension in three steps

Our model was inspired in part by the work of Benson and Cummins (2000). The Memphis Comprehension Framework (see Table 1) offers scaffolding for instruction embedded with the evidence-based strategies already noted in this column. An earlier version of this model was first put to the test in 30 Dallas, Texas, schools as part of a reading academy for teachers (Cooter, 2004) of grades 4 through 6, and again later in Memphis, Tennessee. When used in tandem with a process writing program, this model was credited with removing most of the schools from the state's low-performing list. The three-step structure involves preplanning, focused read-aloud and discussion, and three-level retellings.

Step 1: Preplanning

All effective instruction is preceded by the assessment of students' reading progress using screening or progress-monitoring strategies and then creating a class profile of student strengths and needs (Reutzel & Cooter, 2005). Once this is done, teachers select an appropriate comprehension skill objective from their state-approved curriculum based on individual students' needs.

A critical point in The Memphis Comprehension Framework format is that teachers must focus instruction on the selected skill objective for a minimum of three weeks. As one Texas teacher explained, "We cannot be satisfied with simply peppering students with skill lessons, or even immersing them—we need to marinate students in the new skill if it is to become permanent knowledge." Obviously, this means that not all comprehension skills to be learned are of equal value.

Focusing for such a relatively long period of class time on a single skill tells us that we must choose skills strategically. For example, if you were to go online and review the California Grade 6 English-language Arts Content Standards (www.cde.ca.gov/be/st/ss/enggrade6.asp), you would see

TABLE 1
The Memphis Comprehension Framework

Step 1: Preplanning
- Select a grade-appropriate comprehension skill objective.
- Focus on that skill objective for a minimum of three weeks, completing four minilessons per week ("marinate").

Step 2: Focused read-aloud and discussion
Read-aloud nonnegotiables
- Read story (narrative) once a week.
- Read informational texts (expository) twice a week.
- Read "bridging books" (part story and part information). This can be substituted for either of the above.
- Read aloud for a minimum of 10–15 minutes daily. (Preteach vocabulary as needed.)

Group-discussion nonnegotiables
- Invite students to respond to the read-aloud selection. (Teacher modeling needed here.) "What was this passage about?" "What did you find interesting?" "What was your favorite part?"
- Follow up with higher order questions and have students justify their responses. "What made you say that?" "How do you know that?"
- Use graphic organizers in your discussions three times a week.
- Discuss and analyze new vocabulary from the selections (unknown and "acquainted").

Vocabulary building
- Teach specific words before reading (unknown words, "acquainted" words, established words).
- Show relationships of words using graphic organizers.
- Create lists, elaborate lists, and sort words.

Step 3: Three-level retelling
Read the selection
- Set a purpose for reading.
- Students read the selection either alone or in pairs. (This is especially recommended for struggling readers.)

Retelling for comprehension
- Level 1 retelling—Guided oral retelling
- Level 2 retelling—Graphic organizer retelling
- Level 3 retelling—Written retelling (using the graphic organizer as a writing tool)

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under section 3.3 that students are expected to "Analyze the influence of setting on the problem and its resolution" in their studies of history and social science. Assuming that our assessment of the students indicates that they have a good understanding of the concept of "setting," the logical next direction for our class would be to develop an understanding of "problem and solution." To plan for depth of learning in this skill area, we might construct a three-week planning guide for problem and solution that looks something like Table 2. Note that we not only address the skill to be learned but also apply it in the history curriculum. This will

become our roadmap for planning The Memphis Comprehension Framework plan.

Step 2: Focused read-aloud and discussion

One of the more common needs of urban children, particularly those living in poverty, is oral language development. Reading aloud a variety of texts and genres daily for at least 10 to 15 minutes can help students expand their listening and speaking vocabularies (Brett, Rothlein, & Hurley, 1996). We are often asked what kind of balance between narrative and expository texts we should strive for in middle grades. While there is a dearth of research in

TABLE 2
The Memphis Comprehension Framework: Three-week planning guide for "problem and solution"

Comprehension skill	Typical questions to focus student attention	Possible lists for students to consider and analyze

Problem and solution
 	
The *problem* is the central issue or difficulty that the people involved must address. The problem is frequently caused by a sequence of critical events.
 	
A *solution* is an act or a means of solving a problem or difficulty.
	1. Who were the hunter-gatherers?
	2. What were some of the day-to-day problems in hunter-gatherer societies?
	3. What were some of their goals?
	4. What were some of the first solutions they discovered? Give examples of the problems they were trying to address.
	5. What were the initiating events that triggered their first discoveries?
	6. What were some of their failures?
	7. What could have happened differently that would have helped the hunter-gatherers succeed sooner?
	8. Choose two of the problems experienced by the hunter-gatherers. How might these problems have been solved differently?
		1. Causes of their problems
		2. Effects of their problems
		3. Compare/contrast the hunter-gatherers' situation before and after the problems were discovered
		4. Sequence of events (timeline)
		5. Graphic organizers
		  • conceptual (list causes of their problems)
		  • sequential (list the sequence of events)
		  • cyclical (list situation before problem, events, resolution of the problem[s])
		  • hierarchical (compare the causes and effects of the problem)
		6. Most important events

this area, our advice is to read narrative selections about once a week, interesting informational texts at least twice a week, and what we term *bridging books* (factually based narratives) about once a week. This kind of balance ensures that students are building content knowledge and awareness of expository text structures, and it provides a fluent model of text reading and maintains a high level of interest. Thus, read-alouds are a critical part of language building and concept building for students.

After reading aloud a selection, the teacher draws students into an active discussion of the text to further build new knowledge and vocabulary. Teacher modeling of how to organize ideas and of responding techniques is essential. Graphic organizers, such as discussion webs, can be very helpful in connecting ideas and introducing new words in print and should be used at least three times weekly.

It is also important to use key questions repeatedly and model how to answer them in order to help students anticipate what they will be expect-ed to do (Benson & Cummins, 2000). Questions we recommend to begin the discussion include What was this passage about? What did you find interesting? What was your favorite part? However, to push the discussion to higher comprehension levels, teachers should probe further with such questions as What made you say that? or How did you know that? In essence, we want students to justify their responses with new information learned from the read-aloud text experience.

A final activity in this instructional segment is to refocus attention on new vocabulary in print. The goal is to provide enough discussion and review to move vocabulary learning from the acquisition of unknown words to the acquaintance level, and then to the permanent establishment of those words in their speaking and reading vocabularies.

Step 3: Three-level retelling

Summarization through retelling has long been recognized as an effective method for assessing

reading comprehension of both narrative and expository texts (e.g., Armbruster, Anderson, & Ostertag, 1987; Rinehart, Stahl, & Erickson, 1986; Taylor, 1982). Benson and Cummins (2000) described an effective scheme for boosting comprehension development to higher levels using a three-level retelling process. These researchers emphasized the importance at each of the stages of massive teacher modeling to help students fully grasp what is expected before gradually releasing responsibility to them (Pearson & Gallagher, 1983).

The first retelling level involves guided oral retelling. At this level the goal is for students to retell the text selection fluently using spoken language. The term *guided* implies a structure that is first modeled *to* learners by the teacher, then practiced *with* learners, and eventually demonstrated *by* learners.

The second level of retelling is called graphic organizer retelling. It is based on evidence that graphic organizers can be a powerful tool for improving comprehension in expository materials (e.g., Armbruster, Anderson, & Meyer, 1992; Simmons, Griffin, & Kame'enui, 1988). This level builds on the oral retelling process by having students use written words in a graphic organizer. In this activity students learn to use written words as part of their retelling, while also developing an organizational map to connect ideas and concepts. Doing this helps learners move new vocabulary and concept knowledge from short-term memory to permanent learning. Teachers should limit themselves, preferably, to just one or two graphic organizers per semester so that students are "marinated" in their use as well and can begin using them automatically in new learning situations.

The final and highest level is written retelling. Here, students use their completed graphic organizers as a prewriting tool to construct written summaries of the text selections. Having students construct written summaries of content readings has been shown to boost comprehension and retention of new concepts (Bean & Steenwyk, 1984). As with the prior two levels, extensive teacher modeling is required. We also recommend that a writing structure be used to help students construct

their first drafts. Figure 1 is a structure for writing summaries that we have found useful.
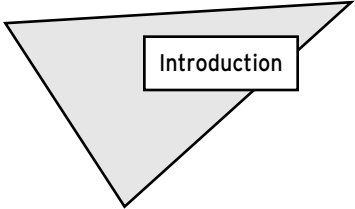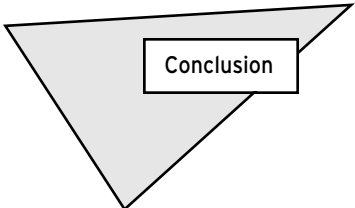
Final thoughts

Literacy instruction in the upper elementary grades is a looming issue for U.S. urban schools. Specifically, how can teachers help students read and understand expository texts? Acquisition of new vocabulary and concepts is an important key, as is helping students link new knowledge with existing schemata. The Memphis Comprehension Framework is one strategy middle-grades teachers might consider as scaffolding for content instruction and their own classroom-based action research. Furthermore, the framework incorporates extant research and has shown promise with many urban learners in two cities. Its strength lies in "marinating" students with language opportunities that move new word and concept knowledge acquired in expository text materials from simple listening comprehension to verbal and written proficiency as a demonstration of their learning.

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FIGURE 1
Structure for written retellings

Introduction

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Topic 1 (from graphic organizer)

Supporting details

Concluding sentence

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Topic 2 (from graphic organizer)

Supporting details

Concluding sentence

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Topic 3 (from graphic organizer)

Supporting details

Concluding sentence

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Conclusion

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Note. From Cooter (2003).

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