It is well documented that the demands for reading proficiency go far beyond accurate decoding. Students who struggle to read at grade level are usually unable to demonstrate the highly complex thinking that reading requires. As achievement data continues to show little improvement in reading scores, an alarming trend of weak or limited comprehension abilities has become pervasive in our nation’s classrooms.

As schools are quickly adapting to the Common Core State Standards, strong instructional practices and intervention will be needed to help millions of struggling students in grades 3–8 develop strategic thinking actions to deepen their comprehension abilities.

Q. What causes the breakdown in reading comprehension?

Gay: There are many literacy development issues that can cause a breakdown in comprehension. But, I suggest, the greatest problem is never having achieved a habit of thinking deeply about text from the very beginning. This can be the result of instruction that is solely directed at letter, sound and word emphasis, where students focus simply on reading books, and not thinking about them. As text becomes more and more complex, it can be an undermining factor.

Irene: We believe reading is thinking; and when treated as a complex process, it goes far beyond reading words.

Gay: We also know that there is a high correlation between engagement, motivation, and comprehension. Engagement is achieved when students are interested in what they read, and when they have a chance to talk with other people about what they read. It is a necessary and critical factor in the comprehension of text. If students don't have the opportunity to read a great deal of continuous text that’s engaging and interesting, they will not be engaged enough to really experience that deep comprehension that we are looking for as educators.
Many educators are concerned about students’ comprehension performance on standardized tests. How can these concerns be addressed?

Gay: The first consideration in deepening student comprehension of text is to assure that they are engaged in deeply understanding text every single day. That means reading text, listening to text, talking about them, writing about them, so that deep comprehension, in complex ways, is a part of their everyday lives in the classroom. Of course, we want them to perform well on comprehension tests, but the first step is to be sure that they are active in their comprehension when they read. Unfortunately, many students simply read through the words and achieve only a very superficial understanding. This can be the product of poor instruction, and it may even be the result of some of the testing that has gone on.

Irene: It helps to spend a little time helping students understand the test genre, so that they know how to show their understandings in that format. But a daily diet of deep comprehension of texts will result in higher performance on any test.

How is reading comprehension taught in classrooms today, and what does it look like?

Irene: Reading includes students’ ability to take words apart efficiently, and use the language of the text. Students should show their ability to think literally about the text; to think beyond the text in terms of what the writer means, and to think analytically and critically about craft. Teachers must continuously utilize intentional instructional practices that help students develop competencies of this complex reading process on all of these fronts to become highly competent readers.

Gay: We believe that close reading—which is reading a small selection of a text, and thinking more deeply about it, and noticing its components and attributes—is a key strategy for deepening student comprehension. For example, what helps students know what a character is like? What helps them predict what a character will do? How does the writer reveal what the character is like? That is inferring and analyzing on a very active, deep level, in a way that is meaningful. Students can continue to grow their ability to do this with more and more complex texts.

For teachers, how is understanding text complexity key to this process?

Gay: Text complexity deepens student comprehension. To support students in their reading of higher level, or more complex text, teachers must ask themselves that seemingly simple question, what does the reader have to do to read this text with accuracy and deep comprehension? And, by that, I mean the three levels we are always referring to—literal comprehension, inferential or thinking beyond the text, and analytic—so that he or she is noticing what the writer does in the text and its structure.

Irene: We have helped teachers with this process in The Continuum of Literacy Learning. But, I think it is also important to make the distinction between text complexity and text difficulty.

“We want to see intervention and small-group instruction that includes close reading—where the teacher selects a book and scaffolds the reading, so that students can competently read and successfully process a more difficult text than they could on their own.”
Gay: Yes, that’s correct. A book that a second grader might read, for example, requires inference, requires bringing background knowledge, prediction, and all of those analytic acts of the brain. It is only by processing the text that the reader can develop the strength to move to more and more complex texts. So, as teachers, we are always giving kids complex texts, but we want to increase the complexity gradually to a point that the reader can take it on.

Q: The Fountas and Pinnell Text Level Gradient™ is a rigorous and thorough system for measuring text complexity. Why is this tool so essential for effective teaching?

Gay: We created this gradient of text difficulty as a teacher tool to help in assessing the demands of the text on readers. Each level on the gradient captures the characteristics and demands that readers will meet at that level. For example, for level N, the demands placed on the reader include: ability to infer, to deal with print features, to cope with different fonts and punctuation. Each of these reading actions gets factored into the analysis of text along the gradient. From there we can ask, what are the behaviors and understandings that a reader must have to process a whole variety of text, fiction and nonfiction, at this level? This gives us a kind of road map for our teaching. As teachers, we are always thinking about the demands of the text and what the readers need to effectively process and comprehend what they are reading.

Q: Can you offer an instructional approach that might help struggling middle grade students process more complex texts and deepen their comprehension?

Irene: Teachers can create many more opportunities for students to talk about texts. Their talk is their thinking. When students have more opportunities to read and to talk about what they’ve read, they will learn from each other. They will build richer meanings from the texts because they will benefit from each other’s perspective as well as the teacher’s careful scaffolding of their learning. So increased amount of talk is one key factor. I would also recommend more classroom opportunities for students to write about reading. Students should write about their thinking for different audiences, and in different forms. We know that their writing is also their thinking. Writing about reading is a powerful tool to support deeper comprehension of text. We have also talked about the critical importance of close reading—the importance of really attentive reading, and rereading segments of texts in an analytical way—with appropriate teacher-support.

Gay: We don’t imply that just giving kids books to read and time to talk is going to do the job. A great deal of intentional instruction goes into what we are recommending. For example, we want students to read texts that are ever changing in the demands they offer. We want them to reach for more challenging texts. We want to see intervention and small-group instruction that includes close reading—where the teacher selects a book and scaffolds the reading, so that students can competently read and successfully process a more difficult text than they could on their own.

Q: How can teachers help to develop a sense of agency in reading for struggling students?

Irene: Developing a sense of agency in readers has everything to do with how a teacher mediates and scaffolds learning, provides opportunities, and creates a culture of inquiry around texts. Students learn that their thinking...
is valued, their perspectives are valued, and there is not a single answer to a question. Students are not merely jumping through a teacher’s hoops. That is a great shift in the middle grade classroom that relates directly to agency.

Gay: I’d add that middle school students will only develop a sense of agency in reading if they’re reading material they feel competent about, powerful over, that builds something relevant to their lives. It might be nonfiction that offers them something really interesting they can talk about with their friends. It might also be fiction that explores some of the problems or issues that are out there for teenagers. The middle grades are a wonderful time to engage in some of that close reading Irene has been talking about. Where students will begin to notice narrative structure, for example. They will notice different ways that writers present ideas, as well as the structure of argument. This is a very exciting time in the development of any reader in this unique age group.

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