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# Promoting the Comprehension of Teachers and Students Using Young Adult Literature

*Adolescents who struggle with reading most often encounter problems with comprehension, rather than the ability to read words. Comprehension is a dynamic process that requires the reader to use multiple strategies as meaning is constructed. To improve the reading comprehension of their students, teachers must be knowledgeable about what comprehension is and be aware of their own comprehension processes as they read. Middle and high school teachers who engage in discussions with colleagues about young adult literature come to understand the importance of authentic dialogue to comprehension and dis-*

*cover more about their own comprehension processes. This article discusses what reading comprehension is and the importance of discussion in constructing meaning from text. We examine teachers' conversations about young adult texts and present suggestions for professional development that will improve teachers' understanding of reading comprehension and help them in facilitating discussion of young adult texts with their students.*

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**Y**OUNG ADULT LITERATURE (YAL) is becoming increasingly visible in secondary classrooms and with good reason. These books are rife with themes that adolescents find engaging. Teachers who understand the role motivation and reading volume plays in increasing students' reading achievement, strive to include YAL into their classroom curriculum. However,

these teachers find that even when the reading is engaging, many of their adolescent students still struggle. In a report commissioned by the Carnegie Corporation, *Reading Next—A Vision for Action and Research in Middle and High School Literacy*, Biancarosa and Snow (2006) reported that the core of adolescent literacy problems has to do with poor reading comprehension, rather than basic reading skills. Specifically, the report found that most older struggling readers “can read words accurately, but they do not comprehend what they read” and “lack the strategies to help them comprehend what they read” (p. 8).

Although teachers realize that their students struggle with comprehension, we wonder if middle and high school teachers are adequately prepared to improve the reading comprehension of their adolescent students. We and other researchers find that many teachers do not have a deep understanding of what comprehension is, how it develops, and how to best nurture it in their students (RAND, 2002). Although many teachers have been introduced to teaching comprehension strategies, these strategies are often taught in less than useful ways (Ivey & Fisher, 2005; Pressley, 2002; Sailors & Henderson, 2008). It is our belief that only when teachers come to understand their own comprehension processes and how they authentically use various comprehension strategies to understand text, can they effectively model and pass along these vital tools to their students. Reading and discussing YAL with each other is an excellent way for middle and high school teachers to not only prepare for discussions of the literature in their own classrooms, but to also deepen their understanding of comprehension processes and to discover how they, themselves, use comprehension strategies to develop an understanding of text. In this article, we will share conversations that teachers had over YAL in order to illustrate the importance of book selection and discussion in building understanding of comprehension processes in teachers and students. As these transcripts reveal, even the most skillful readers can find navigating and understanding text challenging—even when they can read and understand all the words!

### What Is Comprehension?

Comprehending text is a constructive process in which skillful readers are active before, during, and after they read. Before reading a text, they may activate their background knowledge by connecting to past experiences and perspectives as they attempt to construct meaning (Anderson & Pearson, 1984). Skillful readers know their purpose for reading (Pressley, 2002) and may ask questions and make predictions based upon their purpose and background knowledge, as well as the genre of the reading selection. During reading, good readers interact or transact with what they are reading and integrate this new information with what they already know (Anderson, Hiebert, Scott, & Wilkinson, 1985; Paris & Oka, 1986; Rosenblatt, 1938/1995). They monitor their understanding (Garner, 1988; Paris, Wasik, & Turner, 1991) and activate strategies unconsciously and automatically when the reading is particularly easy for them or when it is at their independent level (Afflerbach, Pearson, & Paris, 2008; Blachowicz & Ogle, 2001). When text is more challenging, or at an instructional or frustration level, skillful readers self-monitor and activate strategies in more conscious and controlled ways to better comprehend the selection (Afflerbach, Pearson, & Paris, 2008; Pressley, 1998; Sinatra, Brown, & Reynolds, 2002). Good readers visualize and continue to ask questions of the text and make predictions, as well as answering, rejecting, supporting, and/or refining predictions that they may have made along the way. In addition, they make unconscious and conscious inferences relating to what is stated in the text to their prior knowledge. After reading, good readers may summarize, synthesize, and/or write about what has been read. They may continue to make connections and evaluate as to whether or not they have accomplished their purpose for reading. Furthermore, skillful readers are interested, motivated, and engaged readers who have developed the task persistence to enable them to achieve their purpose and/or goals for reading.

### Can We Teach Comprehension?

For those who read well, the question “Can we teach students to comprehend?” may seem puzzling. For example, consider the following conversations posted to a public electronic discussion board created for in-service teachers (all names are pseudonyms) who finished reading *The Boy in the Striped Pajamas* (Boyne, 2006):

*Tina*: I couldn’t stop thinking about this story after I finished reading it. I realized that in a split second our lives can change, and friendship is a really important part.

*Sue*: I agree. . . . Sometimes it is so easy to get wrapped up in our own lives, consumed with what we have going on and it’s easy to forget to ask how our friends are doing, what’s going on, struggles, etc. And, if we don’t ask, we may not know some things . . . but in order to cross the fence, we need to be invested . . . Bruno was.

And another example from a teacher reading *Thirteen Reasons Why* (Asher, 2007) that deals with the uncomfortable subject of teenage suicide:

What I took away from this book was a reinforcement of remembering that children and teenagers don’t *have* perspective. Therefore, events in their lives that don’t seem like a big deal to us *are* a huge, life-changing event. Too often, when dealing with a child, we use adult logic, reason, and values to talk to them about their problems. Well, they aren’t adults, and they don’t have our logic, reason, values, and perspective. To tell a teenager that “it will get better with time” or “this really isn’t that big of a deal” or “you might be overreacting” could be a disservice and invalidation of their feelings. We need to get on their level and look at their problems from a teenager’s perspective. They don’t have to worry about taxes, or employment, or the light bill, or raising children . . . so having a friend stab them in the back, having a boyfriend break up with them, having rumors started about them . . . those things are the equivalent of our adult problems, with equal importance and weight, and we should treat them with the respect they deserve.

Once teachers think about what it actually means to comprehend, they must question much of what they ask their students to do as they read. Are we engaging our students in activities that we would never consider in our text discussions with friends or colleagues? Do we ask students to retell parts of the story or ask them to remember details from the story or about the characters? Do we ask them to answer literal-level questions to show that they have read the text? Do we ask them to identify themes or dissect the elements of the plot? Is this what we do when we understand something? Keene (2008) reminds readers that one’s understanding of a text can take many forms and reach various levels and that seldom do teachers do the types of things that they ask of their students. If we honor the idea that every student brings to the reading event individual experiences that will impact their understanding of the text under consideration, then we must also agree that comprehension will vary as a result of those experiences. Therefore, we cannot teach comprehension, as it is an invisible process that takes place in the head of the reader. However, we can promote comprehension in ways that will not only facilitate the comprehension of the text under consideration but will readily transfer to other texts undertaken by the reader and enhance literary understandings.

### Promoting Comprehension Through Discussion

Sociocultural perspectives of learning assume learners actively construct knowledge in dialogic interactions with others. According to Vygotsky (1978), students are able to perform tasks that are beyond their own independent knowledge and capability when scaffolded by a more knowledgeable other (Wood, Bruner, & Ross, 1976). As students become familiar with the task with support from an expert, assistance is gradually withdrawn from the learning situation. As the student internalizes the new task and experience, new learning and understanding is created in the mind of the student. This social interaction where

readers construct meaning together, especially when scaffolded by a more experienced adult or peer, can play a significant role in developing students' cognitive and metacognitive capabilities (Piaget, 1967; Vygotsky, 1978; Rogoff, 1990).

Discussion is a dialogic classroom event in which students and teachers are cognitively, socially, and affectively engaged in a collaborative construction of meaning to arrive at new understandings (Almasi, 2002). It provides the perfect medium for teachers to scaffold engagement, strategy use, and authentic ways to achieve deeper levels of understanding using think-alouds and modeling of what proficient readers do. Discussion also provides an opportunity for students to go deeper as they begin to consider multiple and conflicting interpretations of text and recognize that individual interpretations can coexist (Rosenblatt, 1978; Wells, 1999), while at the same time continuing to monitor their construction and apply strategies to ameliorate misconstructions and misunderstandings when they occur.

Good classroom discussions “engage students in interactions to promote analysis, reflection, and critical thinking” (Goldenberg, 1993, p. 317). In such discussions, students are active participants and the teacher's role moves from inquisitor to facilitator. Students learn to discuss their understanding of the text and to listen to the ideas of others. Teacher queries move from literal, fact-based questions with one correct answer to open-ended questions that require students to use higher-level thinking and may yield multiple interpretations. Students interact with each other as well as with the teacher, helping each other to reach an understanding of the text.

Consider how discussion helps these teachers as they construct an understanding of *The Boy in the Striped Pajamas* (Boyne, 2006):

*Brent:* Does anyone else think that Bruno's mom was having an affair with Lt. Kotler??

*Kim:* I think Gretel was having a love affair, not the mom. . . . I wonder if Lt. Kotler had to leave b/c of what he shared about his dad at dinner . . . did it ever really say?

*Tina:* I agree! I think the mother was having an affair with Lt. Kotler! There was also something going on with him and Gretel too!

And in another excerpt, teachers reveal how valuable discussion was to their understanding of the book:

*Tara:* OK, so I'm a little slow!! Wish I would have logged on earlier because it took me a while just to read the posts from everyone! Wow, how it changed my thinking or added to it though!!

*Kim:* There is so much to talk about—so many reflections—so many ways to think about this book—you have taken me to many places to think about.

*Sue:* Thanks for giving us this book, Kim. I think that I see some things through a different lens now.

### Using Teachers' Discussions of YAL to Promote Comprehension Processes

Research clearly demonstrates that skillful readers are purposeful, thoughtful, and reflective about the reading process (Dole, Brown, & Trathern, 1996). If teachers are unaware of their own comprehension processes and the types of engagements that promote (or diminish) their own understanding of texts, how can they be effective at facilitating those skills with their students who are struggling to understand?

In their 1991 study, Dole, Duffy, Roehler, and Pearson found that students constructed individual meaning in response to the teachers' instruction as much as they constructed meaning embedded in the text. Therefore, it is critical for teachers to examine their discussions of YAL to unpack what they do as skillful readers so that they are able to promote these same processes with their students in genuine ways. In our analysis of teacher discussions of YAL, we found that they engaged in myriad cognitive and metacognitive process that facilitated and sometimes appeared to hinder their comprehension of the text under consideration. Evidence of teachers using

comprehension strategies in isolation was seldom noticed. Rather, teachers intermittently combined and used strategies *strategically*, depending on the context and their purpose for reading. We also found that when working through a text, teachers did not engage in any of the types of activities that we often ask our students to complete (no teacher asked another teacher what the setting of the story was or to fill out a graphic organizer!). Nor did they ever ask each other literal, low-level questions. The questions they asked were true wonderings—pondering about what made a character do what she did or how characters would handle the challenges they faced.

### Analyzing Teachers' Discussions of YAL

The transcripts used in our analysis were taken from a public electronic discussion board of in-service teachers' conversations about YAL that took place during a semester-long graduate level reading course. Each illustrates how these teacher readers engage with text and use strategies to construct individual and collective understandings.

*Sally:* This story has lots of intrigue! Angela is a fascinating character, and I find myself liking her. I think she wants to help Chip and Jonah get to the truth. The way she vanishes outside the library really makes the reader wonder what is going to happen next!

At the end of Chapter 21, when Chip finds out all the information he's gathered on the survivors and the witnesses have disappeared from his computer, I thought of the book *1984* by George Orwell, and his famous quote "Big Brother is watching you." In this story, Angela had warned the kids that "anything could be monitored." Technology has made our lives so much easier, and yet, our privacy can be so easily invaded. The author illustrates how easy it can be for someone to retrieve information about us.

I am racing to finish the book—again!

In this excerpt from the discussion of the book *Found* (Haddix, 2008), Sally illustrates the

orchestration of several strategies and one of the outcomes of her construction. She connects with ("I find myself liking her.") and forms an opinion of the character ("Angela is a fascinating character."). She makes an inference ("I think she wants to help Chip and Jonah get to the truth.") and asks a question ("What will happen next?"). After summarizing what has happened at the end of Chapter 21, she makes a text-to-text connection to George Orwell's *1984*, and the idea that "Big Brother is watching you." This connection then enables her to connect the ideas in both books to her present life ("Technology has made our lives so much easier, and yet, our privacy can be so easily invaded.") which increases her store of knowledge related to this idea. Moreover, she is obviously engaged in the book and is excited about finding out the ending ("I am racing to finish the book.")

From this vignette, we can see that reading strategically is paramount in constructing understanding. However, there are other factors that contribute to deepening our understanding of a text. Consider these varied excerpts from individual teachers' posts of the book *My Sister's Keeper* by Jodi Piccoult (2004):

Sara is running on overdrive. She has a single focus, save Kate. Sadly, she has lost sight of the rest of her life. She has lost sight of a child, Jesse, who is crying out for her to hear him but she does not. He will find a way to be heard, to be sure. She has become so trapped in her one track focus that she can turn her back on her six-year-old while terrified and in pain and race back to the side of her true focus: Kate. Jesse isn't a match, thereby not worthy of her attention. Anna appears to be a tool for Kate's salvation, so she is worthy when needed. I wonder if/when this will all come back to haunt Sara. While I cannot judge her, as I do not have children, ill or otherwise, however, I can't imagine the turmoil that I would feel if my nieces or nephews were put in Anna's situation. I think it is sometimes hard to see the forest for the trees when you're confronted with a family crisis.

When I read that section of the book, I muttered, "You and me, too, Sister." I think, if honest,

most people can relate to a time in their life when they tried to fit into an uncomfortable situation, possibly to fit in with the self-proclaimed “in” crowd, or to impress someone. I can remember those times in my life, and sadly, can remember how miserable I felt, how out of place.

As a teacher, we deal with students who may be confronting terrifying situations at home. Sometimes, I think, we become so focused on teaching and helping the children make gains academically, that we have to remember that they may be inattentive due to loss of sleep resulting from battling parents, lack of proper nutrition, or another family crisis. I guess my point is, we may need to rethink how closely we, as adults, are listening to children.

In each of these excerpts, teachers are engaging personally with the events of the story, albeit from different background experiences. One teacher distances herself from the character in the book, but then provides the caveat that “I cannot judge her, as I do not have children;” another questions herself, “Do, I fault Sara?” and then answers herself, “No. I suspect she is spinning plates as fast as she can . . .” Another teacher responds emphatically “You and me, too, sister,” while another connects the story to the students in her classroom and questions how “we, as adults, are listening to children.” In each of these excerpts, the teachers have connected personally with the text in ways that deepen their understanding. However, even though each teacher has constructed a mental model that is aligned with the authors’ intended message, each teacher takes with her a slightly different understanding (or emphasis) based on the lens with which they viewed the reading event.

Now, examine the discourse of two teachers’ discussion of the book, *When You Reach Me* (Stead, 2009):

*Lisa:* Something I’m wondering about now (and please forgive me if I get names confused because I finished this book several weeks ago and my copy is on loan) is the part where Julia is kicked out of the deli shop at lunch. Then

later, the owner’s piggy bank full of \$2 bills is missing and the laughing man is spending them at the store. When the identity of the laughing man was revealed, I couldn’t recall a time when Marcus had been in the deli shop. However, he and Julia had married in the future because wasn’t she the drawing that had been left behind? So did she steal the piggy bank and was she also a time traveler?

*Tyra:* I would have to go back and reread to be sure. I just figured that Miranda left info about the money in the piggy bank in the note and Marcus as the laughing man stole it. Don’t you wonder why he wouldn’t go back in time and stop himself from hitting him? He wouldn’t have been running from him then. Would it have been a good story then?

In this exchange, Lisa is continuing to wonder about the book even though she finished reading several weeks previously! She is monitoring her comprehension of the story (by picking up on incongruities between events in the story and what she remembers) and is searching for meaning by posing a question (“So did she steal the piggy bank and was she also a time traveler?”). Tyra then offers up a strategy to assist in answering her question (“I would have to go back and reread to be sure.”) and then shares her thinking (“I just figured that Miranda left info about the money in the piggy bank in the note and Marcus as the laughing man stole it.”). However, Tyra doesn’t stop there. She then seeks from Lisa insight as to why “he wouldn’t go back in time to stop himself from hitting him.”

After reflecting on these teachers’ electronic posts (and over a thousand others we read), we have to wonder if teachers are aware of all that they do when they are thinking deeply about a text! In our work with teachers, we frequently ask how they engage in comprehension instruction. A common response to our inquiry is that they teach *strategy units* focused on one comprehension strategy (e.g., visualization, predicting, asking questions, inferencing, summarizing, and so forth) for 6 to 8 weeks at a time! In none of the transcripts that we examined did a teacher exhibit evidence of only using one strategy in

their attempts to construct/deepen their understanding. This realization led us to ask ourselves this important question, “If our instruction is focused on teaching strategies in isolation, how will our students ever learn to do what proficient readers (like these teachers) do to construct deep understandings of texts?”

### Concluding Thoughts

YAL provides teachers and students with a powerful medium for constructing understanding and promoting the comprehension processes necessary for skillful reading. Because the themes and content are relevant and interesting to adolescents, YAL stimulates meaningful discussions during which teachers can model what skillful readers do and scaffold students’ construction of comprehension processes. The goal is not only to deepen students’ understandings of the current text, but to provide opportunities whereby the students internalize the processes so they are able to apply them when reading independently.

Although many have participated in book groups or other conversations, not all teachers have had the opportunity to do so when reading YAL, and have missed the opportunity to discover, first hand, how these books are written to capture the attention of teen readers.

It is interesting how this book is different than older chapter books I read when I was younger. Single mothers with boyfriends is a subject that kids can identify with, but were once not included in teen readings.

When teachers engage in discussion about YAL with colleagues while examining their own comprehension processes, they develop a better understanding of what skillful readers do before, during, and after reading. These insights provide a basis from which they can work when thinking aloud and modeling these processes for their students. In addition, they are better prepared to use those particular texts in their classrooms, and most importantly, are better connected to the lives of their students.

### Suggestions for Professional Development

1. Learn more about the reading comprehension and promoting comprehension processes through discussion. The references and resources listed at the end of this chapter may serve as a starting point.
2. Begin to slow down your own thought processes as you read. Take notes when the reading becomes difficult or confusing and note how you are facilitating your understanding of the text. Think about how your actions helped you understand the text better. Consider how you think about text before, during, and after you read. In what ways does reading that text change you or your views?
3. Consider what it means for you when you understand text. What does this understanding lead you to do or believe?
4. Engage in book discussions with colleagues. Doing this in electronic format allows you to go back and “track” your thinking and use of strategies.
5. Read and engage in book discussions of YAL selections before you use them in your classroom. This gives you the opportunity to see the problems and thought processes students may encounter as they read the text. Engaging in conversation with other teachers who will also use the book allows you to think together how you might be strategic in your comprehension instruction with that particular text and can prepare you for modeling of specific strategies.

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