

## Biography:



Melissa Jensen works for the Simcoe County District School Board as a full time teacher-librarian at Trillium Woods E.S. in Barrie. She has enjoyed her 18 years as an elementary teacher- especially the last nine as teacher-librarian. She has been an active participant as a member of the Simcoe County Teacher Librarian Association and the Ontario Library Association since 2001. In the past, Melissa has made media literacy presentations at the OLA Superconference, the Simcoe County Teacher-Librarian conference and by webconference hosted by the Education Institute (EI). She continues to find ways to work with other teacher-librarians to learn more about information communication technology. Most recently, she participated in two different Ontario Teacher Federation funded projects about critical literacy. She is the course instructor of Librarianship Part 1 for Nipissing University in the Barrie area. As part of her Masters of Education degree, she completed a thesis where she designed an action research project to learn effective ways to teach reading strategies to struggling readers.

# Improving reading comprehension of junior division students as the teacher-librarian: An action research study

by  
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I conducted this research for my thesis project as part of my Masters of Education degree. I designed an action research study to investigate how I, as a teacher-librarian, could positively influence literacy development in my school. In my opinion, the teacher-librarian is a potentially excellent literacy resource for students and staff.

I believe that a successful teacher-librarian is an agent of change. As an agent of change, I must keep current with new ways to teach effectively and encourage others to improve their literacy development.

## ***Research Questions***

The following questions formed the basis of my study:

1. How can I, as teacher-librarian, help improve reading comprehension levels of junior-aged students in my school?
2. What can I learn about teaching reading strategies to struggling readers?
3. How can I positively influence students' attitudes about reading?
4. How can I incorporate what I learn into my daily practice?

## *The Role of Teacher-Librarians*

There is research to support the idea that trained teacher-librarians can make a difference in students' reading achievement.

Ruth Small (2008) found nearly a ten-point difference in grade 4 students' achievement in the English Language Arts test when there was a certified media specialist at the school. Lance (2002) indicated that trained teacher-librarians improve the test scores of students in the United States.

In Ontario, a Queen's University study found a "positive correlation between the presence of a trained full-time teacher-librarian and students' reading enjoyment" (2006, p.8).

Recently, Judi Moreillon reported that teacher-librarians can be co-teachers of reading strategies. She outlined how reading strategies are closely related to the research skills we teach in the library (Moreillon, 2008). Her case studies demonstrated how effective team teaching in literacy improved the students' achievement and also captured classroom teachers' and the administrator's attention.

## Method

I conducted my action research from October 2007 to April 2008, in the elementary school library in which I am the teacher-librarian. Ten students who received D grades on their June 2007 reading assessments were invited to participate. I investigated my ability to use teaching strategies effectively to improve reading comprehension levels with these Grade 5 students. The group met twice a week to see if I could improve their reading comprehension levels through modelled, shared and guided instruction of the key reading strategies.

I collected a variety of qualitative data about the students' learning. These included reading interest surveys, genre inventories, and anecdotal notes about reading behaviours.

I collected a variety of quantitative data about the students' learning during the course of the study. These include students' circulation statistics, CASI (Comprehension Attitude Skills Interests) assessment results, report card grades, over the shoulder miscue analysis results, and school attendance records.

## Findings

I noticed the boys shared similar attitudes and patterns when it came to the process of reading. As I collated the data, I discovered that I could categorize these findings about the boys' reading behaviours into six areas.

### *Students' definition of reading*

All of the students in this study described reading as a mechanical activity. When asked what good readers do, the participants stated, "good readers read quickly or read thick books." These students sometimes use reading as a tool to discover things of interest, but they did not connect this to their role as readers in an academic setting.

### *Reading Attitude*

Reading was not a habit for any of the students. All of the boys signed out many books that they were neither interested in nor capable of completing. Many students did not select books that matched their interest or ability at the beginning of the project. Some of the boys preferred to stay with the same familiar series to make reading easier. Reading was considered boring and was an activity forced upon them at school.

### *Genre*

The boys had a limited range of genres from which they chose to read. Fantasy, sports, and humour were among their favourites. Most of the boys stated that they enjoyed non-fiction more than fiction. All but one student increased his appreciation for different genres. These students did not have a lot of experience with a variety of genres when compared to avid readers' experiences.

### *Fluency*

Most of the boys lacked fluency when they read aloud. They read at a rate that was too fast for their level of comprehension. Their reading sounded mechanical and they struggled to retell the main idea. They did not slow down their

rate of reading when they encountered difficult words. Often, the boys selected material above their reading comprehension level and then found it very difficult to continue. Abandoning a book is a good idea if it is not the right choice, but then it is important to find another suitable book. After repeatedly selecting and failing to complete “hard” books, it is easy to see why the boys might want to give up on reading.

#### *Metacognition skills*

These students were exposed to a wide range of reading strategies in their school careers, yet when asked to describe how they handle reading challenges they provided simplistic reading strategies. All of the boys claimed that they sound out words. They were unable to articulate how and why they read. The students did not apply many of the reading strategies they had seen in class; they seemed unable to apply these strategies independently.

#### *Behaviours*

Many of the boys demonstrated behaviours that made reading difficult. As a group they were quick to get off task when asked to read independently. Absenteeism interfered with the flow of the lessons for two students and all of the students showed a high level of activity and distractibility.

### ***Findings Pertaining to the Research Questions***

1. How can I, as teacher-librarian, help improve reading comprehension levels of junior-aged students in my school?

When I compared the students in my study with other Grade 5 students there was not enough evidence to conclude that the students in my group had improved any more than the students who were not part of the study.

2. What can I learn about teaching reading strategies to struggling readers?

*Lack of fluency—checking for understanding.* During the miscue analysis assessments, some students did not stop to check for understanding when they lost the sense of what they were reading. They read quickly with little expression, and did not adhere to punctuation cues. They did not associate reading with a need to think about what they were reading.

*Visualization strategies.* The students practiced the visualization technique of “seeing a movie in your head as you read.” A few of the boys were able to use this strategy to adjust their reading pace with success.

3. How can I positively influence students’ attitudes about reading?

*Timely feedback.* Four of the students’ increased their engagement when they received positive feedback immediately after completing a skill. The boys attempted to write more and speak more in the discussions when given positive feedback. An added negative within the group was that - two other students were negatively affected if they received criticism from other students.

*Oral discussion.* Seven of the boys were able to complete a written retell of a passage independently after we talked about the passage as a group. This oral discussion or “accountable talk” was a helpful strategy to organize their thoughts about what they read.

*Use of technology.* Five of the boys showed engagement to initiate and complete tasks when they used technology. Reading along with a CD helped with the

comprehension of the material. The engagement level of the boys was also greater when they could use a computer to complete their retells.

### ***Conclusions***

The students showed improvement in their reading comprehension during their participation in my study, but the improvement could not be attributed solely to my efforts. Reading requires a wide range of skills, and the students learned a variety of skills from others during the research period.

I developed a definition of the struggling reader. Ineffective readers struggle to understand because of these traits:

- struggling readers have a narrow view of the reading process
- they read within a small range of genres, which limits their interest in reading
- they lack fluency and critical thinking skills that reduce their level of comprehension
- they lack metacognition skills to self-assess how to deal with reading challenges
- the struggle to understand attributes to negative attitudes about reading and avoidance behaviours around reading are observed
- they rarely read for pleasure, which reduces their fluency and comprehension so they do not get the same positive reinforcement, from reading, as avid readers do.

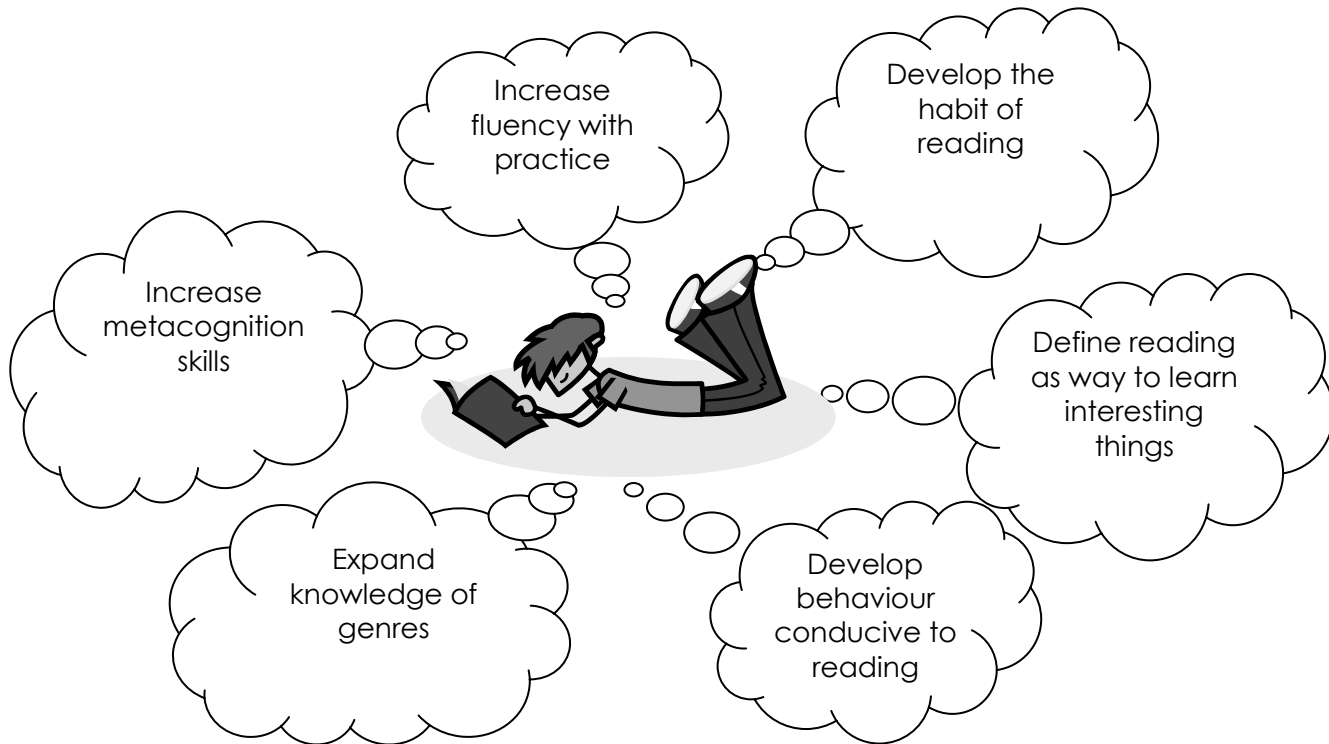
Developing a definition of the struggling reader from the findings was valuable, as it highlighted the areas that I, as the teacher-librarian, should focus on to improve reading achievement.

Teacher-librarians must find ways to reach struggling readers, as they are most at risk of failure. We know from research that the presence of a qualified, full-time teacher-librarian is positively correlated with the enjoyment of reading (People for Education, 2006).

Evaluating my teaching style helped me recognize some ineffective habits, which I can change. I also developed some effective teaching techniques to assist students to improve their reading comprehension. The readers in my study demonstrated more understanding when we incorporated visual cues, used audio formats, and used oral discussions in the lessons. As they engaged with the texts, the students' comprehension of the material improved; this resulted in a positive reading experience. These strategies helped me to influence the students' reading attitudes in a positive way.

My conclusions relate back to this definition as I focused on the six areas required to be an effective reader. I decided to make these six areas of concern into goals for teaching reading. They are stated in Figure A. I will have a positive impact on the reading attitudes of students when I incorporate these goals into my library program planning.

Figure A. Six Goals for Teaching Reading



### **Implications**

How can I incorporate what I learned into my daily practice?

As I learned more about the struggling readers, I developed ways to adapt my lessons to meet their needs. I gained more expertise in the effective way to teach reading strategies, which I will apply to future lessons.

As the teacher-librarian, I make the library a welcoming space that is conducive to reading, and I organize the library so students can find resources independently. I select a variety of formats and genres to complement classroom-reading goals. Although the library is a busy place, it is still a place to browse for books or to ask for reading suggestions.

I provide opportunities for readers to join programs such as the Ontario Library Association's Forest of Reading program, and the Barrie Public Library's Battle of the Book program. For the last three years, I have also organized a "Boyz Read" club in my school for "reluctant boy readers." Participation in these programs is a way to increase encourage students to develop positive reading habits and attitudes. Providing interesting material, at the appropriate reading level, benefits the students in my school, because it gives them opportunities to improve their fluency and comprehension. Thus, I plan to use what I have learned to build upon the vibrancy and efficacy of my library.

### **Collaboration**

The six characteristics of ineffective readers, identified in my study, led me to develop my goals to improve the teaching of reading. I have incorporated these teaching goals when I developed my four planning priorities. When planning, with my colleagues, we will integrate students' interests, checks for understanding, opportunities to think critically, and time to develop metacognition skills into the lessons (see Figure B). The diagram depicts the four planning priorities for team teaching as jigsaw pieces; they are interconnected and equally important strategies for supporting all readers.

#### *Make it interesting*

Discover what students' interests are and find resources to promote their interests. Wilhelm (2009) asked, "If the assignment is not interesting to you as the teacher, then why are you giving it to the students?" When teachers provide carefully planned projects and students become genuinely engaged, their behaviour towards reading improves.

#### *Check for understanding*

Take more time with oral explanations and check that students understand the task. Taking more time to prepare the students for what they are about to read is valuable. I will engage in more oral discussions and track more carefully during research classes to ensure that the "quiet" students do not go unnoticed. I will incorporate these strategies into my lessons.

#### *Teach critical thinking skills*

Critical thinking is the thoughtful response to what one reads. It is the ability to question and evaluate the authority of the text while reading (Booth, 2008, p.11).

The research process encourages students to think their way through a problem. Sharing in the selection and processing of resources is an excellent way to help students to think deeply about the world around us. I have established a school-wide research model based on the four-step research model from the Ontario School Library Association. This four-step research model incorporates many critical thinking skills.

I want to model the benefits of this research process more. Developing assignments, where students are required to use "higher-thinking skills" will develop effective critical thinking skills.

#### *Teach metacognition skills*

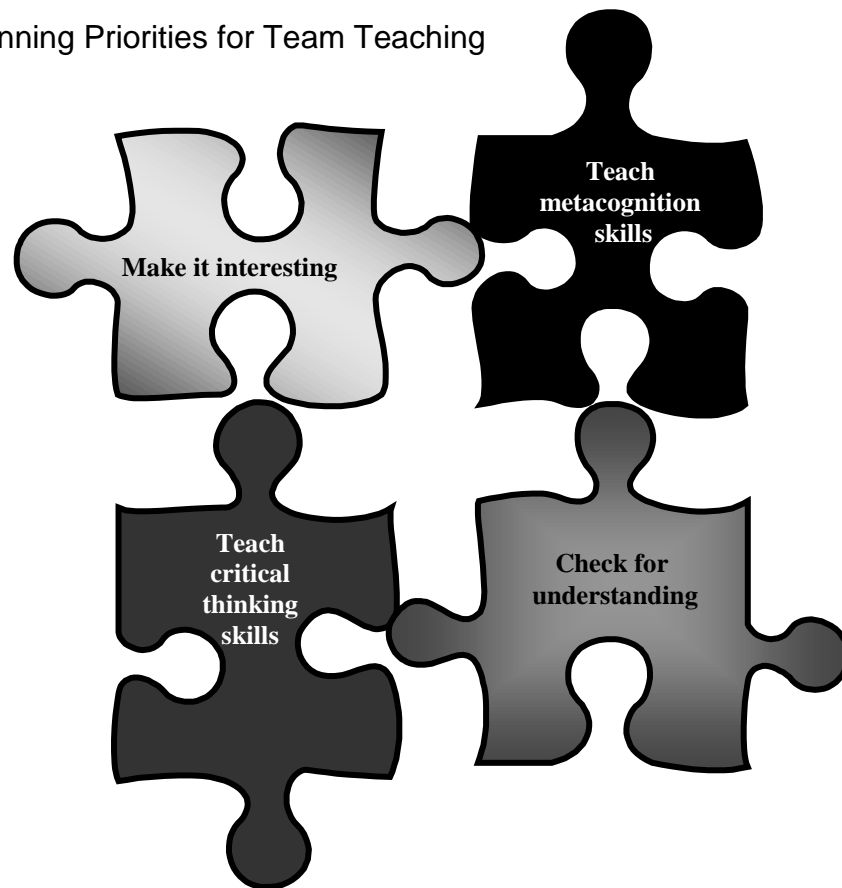
The ability to self-assess our strengths and weaknesses is fostered by the practice of metacognition skills. Successful readers constantly assess their strategies and have a sense of when they need to adjust their reading rate.

Students need time to self-evaluate the process of their learning, so they can identify where they need to go next in their learning progression. Self- and peer-assessments provide valuable feedback for teachers and students about the value of the learning experience. I will make more time for students to reflect and to assess their strengths and weaknesses when completing a research project.

Klinger, Lee, Stephenson, Deluca, and Luu (2009) observed teacher-librarians in exemplary schools to identify and define possible best practices for others. "The most successful programs were characterized by teacher-librarian and classroom teacher collaborations in terms of teaching, learning and library

use.” I feel that collaboration is important to student achievement because the quality of teaching improves when we co-teach.

Figure B. Four Planning Priorities for Team Teaching



### **Implications for my future professional development**

I have found many effective ways to teach reading strategies but there is always more to learn. Here are the things that I will work toward to become more effective:

#### *Seeking feedback*

I learned that I am reliant on feedback and require it to keep me engaged in personal and professional pursuits. I must remember that effective feedback is equally important for all students but, even more so, for those who do not ask for it. Struggling readers benefit from small group teachings, because immediate feedback provides the encouragement required to persevere. Students' engagement increases when timely feedback is given. Research has shown that feedback has the greatest influence on student achievement (Katz, 2008).

The use of Davenport and Lauritzen's (2002) over the shoulder miscue analysis assessment was one of the best ways for me to assess the fluency and comprehension level of a student in the junior grades. The feedback from this informative test may guide the strategies I use with a specific student.



### *Improving questioning techniques*

I discovered that I relied on low-level basic comprehension questions when teaching this small group. Alternatively, I would ask a question requiring a high level of thinking, but I would not give the boys enough time to generate a response. The development of good critical thinkers requires me, as a role model, to use a variety of thought-provoking questions to elicit thoughtful responses. I will take advantage of the [eworkshop.on.ca](http://eworkshop.on.ca) video lessons to get me started on the road to better questioning techniques. Critical literacy is an important skill required by all learners. "Questioning is the catalyst for deep thinking" (Koechlin, 2009).

### *Strengthening my own metacognition skills*

Another effective way to teach students how to think about the way in which they learn is to model think-alouds. I found that I struggled with this strategy. I believe that this is a very powerful tool for students; it allows them to see inside an effective reader's head and to understand that all readers actively work to make sense of what they read. Think-alouds provide a framework for students to model their reading comprehension strategies. I intend to visit other classrooms to see examples of successful think-alouds to improve my competence.

### *Summary*

I learned a great deal about myself as a teacher of reading strategies, and about how I can apply these strategies with students. I learned more about the reading process by observing the students' efforts. I have also learned to teach reading comprehension skills in many effective ways. This year, I will work to incorporate specific reading strategies into my library program.

I discovered that many of the programs I run in the library are valuable and should continue, as they employ some of the six goals that readers need to foster literacy development. This gives me more confidence and energy to develop the programs further, and to make them relevant to students' interests and academic needs.

My confidence to help students and staff with literacy programming has increased because of this project. I can be a leader of literacy initiatives at my school and fulfill the very important role of teacher-librarian. With a focus on all students to enjoy reading, and a renewed interest to develop critical literacy and metacognitive skills, I have a clearer understanding of how I can improve the literacy skills in my school.

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