Comprehension instruction for socioculturally diverse classrooms: A review of what we know

The author analyzes approaches to comprehension instruction in relation to what is known about literacy learning from a sociocultural perspective.

Our ways of thinking about what it means to comprehend a text shape the types of literacy activities available for children, as well as the types of responses that are most valued in the classroom. Specific comprehension activities, strategies, and assignments teach students lessons far beyond how to get meaning from print or how to be fluent readers; our ways of teaching comprehension also send messages to children about the possible ways in which meaning is made, including the value (or lack thereof) placed on diverse knowledges and experiences.

Today, the students in U.S. classrooms are culturally, linguistically, ethnically, and socioeconomically diverse from one another as well as from the teaching force (National Center for Education Statistics, 1997). Given this situation, it is important that we understand what messages our current methods of comprehension instruction send to students from diverse backgrounds and how these methods function in classrooms to support literacy learning among all children. To this end, I provide here an overview of sociocultural theories of literacy learning and compare that to a review of what we know about research-based “best practices” in comprehension instruction. The overall purpose is to investigate how current methods of reading comprehension fit (or don’t fit) with theories that speak directly to the social contexts of students. For teachers interested in choosing the best instructional approaches that speak to the strengths and needs of their students, this article provides a way to understand comprehension instruction in relation to sociocultural theories of literacy learning.

The sociocultural theories I review are taken from the new literacy studies (see Gee, 1996; Street, 1993) and stem from sociohistorical psychology and constructivist theories of learning (e.g., Bruner, 1996; Vygotsky, 1978, 1986). The “best practices” in reading comprehension instruction are based on the research-based instructional methods and strategies being advocated for teachers to use (e.g., Block & Pressley, 2002), gleaned from a number of sources, including “good reader” research (e.g., Pearson, Roehler, Dole, & Duffy, 1992), textbooks for teachers-in-training (e.g., Richek, Caldwell, Jennings, & Lerner, 1996; Vacca & Vacca, 1999), and professional development literature (e.g., Harvey & Goudvis, 2000; Keene & Zimmerman, 1997). Placing these two distinct areas of research side by side makes it possible to note common theoretical points between best practices in reading comprehension and sociocultural theories of literacy, thus providing a way to conceive of comprehension instruction within sociocultural contexts. In the end, we can think about what we need to do to revamp some of our instructional approaches in order to capitalize on the social, cultural, and linguistic diversity found in our classrooms. Specifically, we can begin to see that the “problems” of “severely labeled” children (Leland, Harste, & Helt, 2000, p. 106) are a function of our instructional methods and can be avoided with a socioculturally relevant approach (Ladson-Billings, 2000).
Sociocultural theories

Sociocultural theories of language and literacy (e.g., Cazden, 1988; Cook-Gumperz, 1986; Erickson, 1984; Ferdman, 1991; Gee, 1992, 1996; Heath, 1983, 1986; Pérez, 1998; Street, 1984) are not always about reading in the traditional sense of decoding a text and extracting meaning from it. Instead, literacy, in sociocultural terms, emphasizes the social worlds and cultural identities of students and views the act of making meaning as always embedded within a social context (Pérez).

In sociocultural terms, literacy is often thought of as the construction of meaning from within a sociocultural context (Erickson, 1984; Gee, 1992; Pérez, 1998). To begin to understand literacy in sociocultural terms, let’s explore what sociocultural theorists mean by (a) literacy, (b) construction of meaning, and (c) sociocultural context. By doing so, we can come away with a better understanding of what sociocultural theories have to offer teachers who are interested in capitalizing on the social, cultural, and linguistic diversity found in our classrooms.

Literacy

Sociocultural theories see literacy, first and foremost, as a social practice always embedded within structures of power (Street, 1993). Literacy here means more than just reading or writing; more than decoding or encoding; more than being able to handle a set of discrete and technical skills (e.g., knowledge of letters, words, sounds); and more than possessing the cognitive capabilities necessary to engage with a text (e.g., attention, motivation, or memory abilities). Instead, the overall context of the situation shapes what it means to be literate, depending upon the type of text, the type of reading or activity expected with that text, and the identity of the reader.

In this frame, the meanings of text, reading, and identity are somewhat distinct from most traditional understandings of these terms. For example, text may not always be a printed document; it may also include oral or visual communications (National Council of Teachers of English & International Reading Association, 1996), such as images, graphics, sign language, movement, or drama (e.g., Flood, Lapp, & Bayles-Martin, 2000; Hammerberg, 2001; Kress, 1998; Myers, Hammett, & McKillop, 2000; Short & Kaufman, 2000). A particular situation can also form a type of text, in that we need to “read” the situation in order to behave appropriately in it. We have acknowledged for some time that reading a science text is different from reading a comic book in terms of focus and purpose; but, more than this, reading a situation requires that we draw on a different knowledge base. Gee (1996) identified this knowledge base in terms of the Discourses that children draw upon to make sense of their worlds, and the world-as-text requires us to be well-versed (literate) in various language uses for various situations.

With this expanding notion of text comes an expanding notion of what it means to read. Here, reading means knowing how to be and act and think appropriately with the type of text, situation, or Discourse at hand (Gee, 1996). For example, the cultural practices of being and living in one’s own neighborhood may look different from the cultural practices of being and living on the school playground, which may look different from the cultural practices required to be and live in the classroom as a learning environment (Hammerberg, 2003). Gee noted that “children use language, behavior, values, and beliefs to give a different shape to their experience” (p. 141). To be literate in many different circumstances and with many different types of texts means to become accustomed to the rules and appropriate ways of being in each situation and with each text: a way of “reading” the conditions that lead to understanding. Ways of interpreting and finding meaning in new forms of text, whether oral or visual, printed or live, require different strategies and a knowledge of what is culturally appropriate in different circumstances (Gee; Pérez, 1998). Ways of being literate, then, change depending upon the cultural practice one is engaged in, making a notion of “multiple literacies” possible (Scribner & Cole, 1981; Street, 1984).

Because literacies are seen as multiple, changing on the basis of the social and cultural context in which communication occurs, sociocultural theories see identity as fluid and changing too. One’s identity as “literate” or “not literate,” “abled” or “disabled,” “poor student” or “good student” can shift and change according to context and task. This understanding becomes important when we think about the types of cognitive skills needed to comprehend a text. Instead of imagining that readers...
possess certain cognitive traits or attributes that can be applied in similar ways to all texts, sociocultural theories acknowledge that a good comprehender of one text might struggle with a different text. In this way, a student who is struggling with one particular kind of literacy act can be seen as having the language and abilities necessary to succeed at another one.

For example, the language, skills, and dispositions needed to be seen as someone who is becoming literate in a first-grade classroom might include an ability to move plastic letters around on an overhead projector to form word shadows on the wall (Hammerberg, 2003). This very particularized view of “being literate” would look strange elsewhere (e.g., when negotiating the rules of a game on the playground), but, as school literacy goes, it is entirely appropriate within the social context of a literacy center. Meanwhile, a literate act, such as telling a rambling fib, might seem “extra” or out of place in the same first-grade classroom, especially if the storyteller is not viewed as literate enough yet. In these cases, getting back to work (e.g., pushing plastic letters around) is the way to look literate, as opposed to constructing stories.

In the school days filled with alphabet sounds and cognitive memory skills, the experiences children bring with them to school are often viewed as something outside of the skills they are to learn. Sociocultural theories, on the other hand, overtly acknowledge that learners bring experiences with the world to any text, as well as a knowledge of the skills to use with the text as they interpret a meaning from it (Bruner, 1996; Erickson, 1984; Ferdman, 1991; Gee, 1992; Pérez, 1998). According to sociocultural theories, instead of being outside of or secondary to the symbols and texts of reading instruction, children’s identities and cultural contexts are seen as absolutely implicit and necessary for understanding the symbols and texts of reading instruction in the first place.

Construction of meaning

Alongside the idea of multiple literacies, a key concept in many sociocultural theories involves the active construction of meaning. Derived from Vygotskian (1978, 1986) theories that emphasize the social worlds of children, sociocultural theories present the act of reading as an interactive process involving the use of cultural tools, symbols, texts, and ways of thinking in an active process of “meaning making and reality construction” (Bruner, 1996, p. 20, also Pérez, 1998, p. 5).

Here, learners construct meaning by drawing on and using knowledge resources (e.g., background knowledge, knowledge of skills) as well as identity resources (e.g., cultural identity, cultural practices, cultural tools, perceived significance of the activity). This means that readers certainly use decoding skills and background knowledge as they read, but they also derive meaning from conversations, interactions, and relationships with teachers and peers (e.g., Au, 1990, 1993). In this way, the construction of meaning is an interactive process, more so than merely decoding the words, saying them aloud in your head, and assuming that comprehension “happens” when the words are heard—no matter who is doing the reading. When meaning is interactively constructed, then comprehension involves negotiating many possible meanings, not only in your own head but also with the heads of others, who all have unique backgrounds and ways of constructing meaning.

Sociocultural context

“Sociocultural context” is a way of describing the social plane and cultural practices in which the learner and learning are situated. In part, the environment and purpose provide the sociocultural context within which meaning is constructed (Pérez, 1998). The learning environment of a first-grade classroom, for example, is a sociocultural context that sets forth the possible realm of appropriate literacy acts. In this situation, the sociocultural context of the classroom situates the learner as one who keeps track of the books he or she has read during independent reading, or as one who knows which book bin to go to in order to find an appropriately leveled selection. The environment of a grocery store, on the other hand, situates the “reader” as one who might check the fat content on labels or as one who knows which check-out lane to use. The purposes of the tasks in a first-grade classroom, or in a grocery store, help to shape what one is to do when being literate, as well as the meaning that is constructed. Different sociocultural contexts yield different ways of being literate.
In addition, the social and cultural backgrounds of learners provide the sociocultural context within which meaning is constructed. Sociocultural theories of literacy acknowledge that what a reader brings to a text (even if the text is a grocery store) helps to shape the kind of meaning that is made and negotiated. Here, a reader's experiences, background knowledge, and sociocultural identity are as important (if not more so) as the decontextualized cognitive skills necessary to decipher a text. This is because literacy is neither context nor content free; instead, it is always socially and culturally situated. This framework recognizes that identities change and are socially situated in different contexts, because to be literate in a particular setting involves specific situations, purposes, audiences, texts, and tasks.

**Overarching thoughts**

To put it all together, then, when literacy is viewed as the construction of meaning within a sociocultural context, the social dimensions of being literate include but exceed the individual cognitive capabilities that are normally a part of comprehension instruction. Pérez (1998) noted that “[c]urrent positions on definitions of literacy tend to cluster around two major dimensions, 'the individual dimension and the social dimension' (Green & Dixon, 1996, p. 292)” (p. 22; italics in original). Beyond seeing literacy as a person's individual mental ability to read and write (Ferdman, 1991) or as a collection of isolated and decontextualized skills (Heath, 1986; McLaughlin, 1989; Moll, 1992), sociocultural theories clearly focus on the social dimension, and literacy becomes a complex cultural phenomenon (Cazden, 1988; Cook-Gumperz, 1986; Gee, 1992; Heath, 1983; Street, 1984).

In educational practice, ways of being literate are often thought of in terms of an individual's cognitive capabilities. In this way, if the individual appears to have specific needs, it looks as though it is not a problem of the classroom, pedagogy, curriculum content, training, or meaningfulness of the task but a problem of the individual (Popkewitz, 1998). Within a sociocultural view, however, there can be no such thing as a person who is always a poor comprehender or a poor reader, no matter the text or task, because any individual's ability to make sense of a text (or a situation) can shift and change depending upon the sociocultural context. The effect of attaching "needs" and "potential" to the individual, as opposed to the larger context, is that ways of appearing literate look as if they are disconnected from the sociohistorical contexts in which they are formed and practiced.

**Reading comprehension instruction**

As a way to think about comprehension instruction for socioculturally diverse classrooms, I present here a brief inventory of “best practices” in reading comprehension instruction and consider the extent to which current comprehension strategies and methods hold points in common with what we know about literacy and language development in sociocultural contexts. While most instructional methods have not been directly influenced by sociocultural theories of language and literacy development, our understandings of how meaning is represented in the mind have important ways of framing the kinds of instruction available in educationally diverse classroom settings. The aim here is to investigate how comprehension instruction forms the social and cultural plane of the classroom (the sociocultural context that yields specific literacy acts) and to ask whether this plane needs to be updated in any way in light of the social, cultural, and linguistic diversity found in our schools and classrooms.

I have schematically divided various instructional approaches to reading comprehension into strategies for (a) decoding and reading, (b) getting the gist, and (c) constructing knowledge. In practice, of course, comprehension strategies rarely fit so neatly into categories. Because “[s]uccessful teachers of reading comprehension must respond flexibly and opportunistically to students’ needs for instructive feedback as they read” (RAND Reading Study Group, 2002, p. 34), exceptional classroom teachers spend time teaching and modeling strategies from across the categories, and they practice them in relation to real texts. Even so, how we view literacy in the classroom—whether we see it as residing in the text, the student’s head, or the larger situation—has tremendous consequences for how students are identified in school and how they self-identify as learners.
Decoding and reading

While we know that decoding, vocabulary, reading strategies, and fluency are important aspects of reading, we also know that there is little evidence that instruction in decoding, vocabulary, and fluency will lead to better comprehension (RAND Reading Study Group, 2002). Still, at a most basic level, reading comprehension is often thought about in terms of making meaning in the head by decoding word by word, and listening to the words as they’re read (e.g., Adams, 1996; Gough, 1984; McGuiness, 1997). In this scheme, meaning is thought to lie primarily at the word level, so to read means to figure out each word in relation to the next. The text is thought to hold the message and is processed in a linear fashion, word by word.

In instruction, there is often a focus on phonics first (e.g., Adams, 1996; McGuiness, 1997), but many approaches rely on a larger notion of reading strategies as a means for providing students with the skills needed to get meaning from print (e.g., Fountas & Pinnell, 1996). Teachers spend time listening to students read aloud, assessing what they know about how to get meaning from print (e.g., Clay, 1993; Fountas & Pinnell), and providing children with books at an appropriate vocabulary and decoding level.

There are several assumptions about the nature of reading and the capabilities of readers at play within a sense of reading as strictly decoding and reading strategies. For one thing, these approaches assume that the reader will understand the words after decoding them properly. Any of us might be able to get a perfect running record score while reading a Spanish text or a physics text (in terms of pronouncing the words correctly, reading fluently, or even using good “fix-up” strategies), but it is a giant leap to assume that many of us, in the end, could understand what we just read. Instruction in decoding and reading strategies has no real use for social and cultural differences: It matters not, on some level, whether our backgrounds are different; either we are able to decode or not, which takes the act of reading out of its sociocultural context and places it squarely with the individual.

Instruction in decoding and reading strategies also assumes a linear progression through a series of developmental levels without regard for a possible shift in reader identity or capability, depending on the task. The student in need of help is perceived as failing despite all the excellent efforts of individualized instruction, but this “failure” is always already in the context of particular tasks of early literacy instruction. Although it is helpful for providing teachers with information to meet individual needs (in terms of reading strategy instruction), leveling texts and readers runs the risk of assuming that deep engagement with meaningful texts is something for students who are already decoding.

In sociocultural terms, the danger of the assumption of developmental learning is that those students who do not grow naturally along appropriate lines are seen as having a deficit of some sort. This view runs the risk of fixing the student’s identity in terms of “reading failure,” which is “the overwhelming reason why children are retained, assigned to special education, or given long-term remedial services” (Learning First Alliance, 1998, p. 3). The student who is not a “learner” according to the plan receives a series of interventions (if young) or remediations (if older) created to give the gift, to fill the holes, as if literacy were something to be transferred to the heads of individuals “in need.” It follows that, if the student still doesn’t get it, there must be something wrong with the student or something wrong within the student’s life (parents, poverty), but it is not assumed that there is a problem within the system. However, it is the system that demands specific reader capabilities be identified on a continuum from “low need” to “high need,” thus making the need a function of the pedagogy (not of the child).

Getting the gist

Being able to use decoding and reading strategies to figure out what a text “says” and to read a text fluently is fine to a point, but we know that comprehension is not just word-level processing. Beyond decoding and reading strategies, comprehension instruction in the classroom works to help children get the big ideas from text (e.g., Pressley, 1998). Here, the text is thought about in terms of its larger gist or message, contained within its structure or story grammar, and the instructional approaches in this category are meant to help students figure out the text’s essential message.
On one level, there are instructional approaches aimed at helping students extract the bigger meaning from a text: summarizing (Doctorow, Wittrock, & Marks, 1978; Taylor, 1982); synthesizing (Brown, Day, & Jones, 1983); determining the most important ideas and themes in a text to focus reading (Afflerbach & Johnston, 1986; Bauman, 1986; Tierney & Cunningham, 1984; Winograd & Bridge, 1986); and constructing mental images (Levin, 1973; Levin & Pressley, 1981; Pressley, 1976; Roehler & Duffy, 1984). On another level, there are specific instrumental techniques, charts, and activities designed to help students use comprehension strategies like K–W–L (What I know, What I want to learn, and What I have learned; Ogle, 1986). Indeed, knowing that certain strategies will lead to better comprehension increases the likelihood of using them (Flavell, 1977; Paris, Lipson, & Wixson, 1983), so instructional approaches to help readers use specific strategies involve the idea of mental modeling, where a teacher explains a comprehension strategy to children and directly teaches how to apply it by thinking aloud (Duffy & Roehler, 1989; Pressley, 1998). Such strategies include teaching students to use language systems to “fix up” and repair comprehension if it breaks down (Garner, 1987); telling students to ask questions of themselves, the authors, and the texts they read (Andre & Anderson, 1979; Brown & Palincsar, 1985; Singer, 1978); Reciprocal Teaching (Palincsar & Brown, 1984); Reciprocal Questioning (Manzo, 1969); Question-Answer Relationships (Raphael, 1986); or Questioning the Author (Beck, McKeown, Hamilton, & Kucan, 1997).

Many of these strategies and activities involve a great deal of student conversation, often in small groups, about how the students are applying comprehension strategies (Pressley, 1998). This means that a social situation for discussion is set up, but it’s for the purpose of talking about comprehension strategies. In addition, many of these strategies rely on a literal interpretation of the text and a sense that the text has a more or less fixed meaning. Drawing inferences or forming mental images certainly requires a reader to move beyond the literal meaning, but the strategies themselves are ways of helping readers to glean an author’s meaning overall, to come away with a sense of what the text “said.” Reading here is still viewed as a cognitive, in-the-head process that is more individual than social in nature.

However, the interesting question in terms of sociocultural theories of literacy is not about what the text said, it’s about what we are to do with the big and large ideas after we glean them. In culturally relevant terms, “[a] basic assumption is that what people are taught to read is as significant as the fact that they read” (Ladson-Billings, 2000, p. 141). Here, comprehension instruction within a sociocultural frame could easily apply some of the same summarizing, synthesizing, or mental imagery techniques, but for a purpose beyond getting the author’s gist. Ladson-Billings (2000) pointed out that “[t]he primary goal of culturally relevant teaching is to empower students to examine critically the society in which they live and to work for social change” (p. 142). We certainly need to understand what the text said in order to examine it (and our lives) critically; but, socioculturally speaking, comprehension instruction needs to include the kind of thinking that goes beyond a summary or synthesis.

Because it is important, in sociocultural terms, to consider what students are able to talk about together, perhaps these comprehension strategies could be updated to include a bigger purpose, socially and culturally, than merely using the strategy itself. In this sense, sociocultural models of literacy certainly include the technical aspects of reading, such as the techniques a reader might use to get an author’s meaning, but sociocultural theories understand these techniques as entrenched within the practices and power situations of education itself.

**Constructing knowledge**

Good readers actively draw on schema, prior knowledge, and social relationships to construct meaning from text (Anderson & Pearson, 1984; Au, 1990, 1993; K. Goodman, 1982; Y. Goodman, 1976; Goodman & Goodman, 1990; Mandler, 1984; Rumelhart, 1977, 1980; Weaver, 1994). We know that the meaning of a text will vary somewhat from reader to reader, because the reader has particular perspectives and makes unique connections (Harvey & Goudvis, 2000; Keene & Zimmerman, 1997; Rosenblatt, 1938, 1978).
Instructional approaches that fall into this category work to build the background knowledge students need to enter a text before reading. Ways to support students as they enter a text include introducing vocabulary ahead of time, mapping the story up front, and other prior-to-reading support activities. It is also important to teach students to activate prior knowledge before, during, and after reading (Gordon & Pearson, 1983; Pearson et al., 1992), perhaps by encouraging readers to relate to or connect with the text (Keene & Zimmermann, 1997) and using the students' own language experiences to construct texts (Van Allen, 1976).

Of all the forms of comprehension instruction available to teachers, perhaps our ways of helping students draw on prior knowledge and social contexts are most in line with sociocultural theories of language and literacy development. These techniques encourage active thinking while reading, and they acknowledge the social and cultural contexts of students as an important aspect of textual interpretation. But there is a nuance of difference as well, which is entirely dependent upon the teacher. Whether background knowledge and context work in sociocultural terms depends on how well the teacher can set up educational situations where prior knowledge and social backgrounds can be used in potentially rich ways. The relationships between culture, power, and literacy provide sites of learning through literature and discussion—beyond, again, merely “getting to” the author’s meaning. Once more, the question becomes “literacy for what?” Culturally relevant teaching involves designing lessons and curriculum “not merely to fit the school culture to the students’ culture but also to use student culture as the basis for helping students understand themselves and others, structure social interactions, and conceptualize knowledge” (Ladson-Billings, 2000, p. 142; italics in original).

**Acknowledging students’ sociocultural contexts**

After reviewing what we know about reading comprehension, perhaps we can begin to consider the kinds of comprehension instruction that might best take into account the sociocultural contexts of the students, and perhaps we can envision setting up practices in the classroom that can capitalize on social, cultural, and linguistic diversity. Comprehension instruction in U.S. schools today, while good by and large, misses a number of key elements of sociocultural theories.

In many ways, current methods of comprehension instruction are based upon a series of monocular assumptions (Hammerberg & Grant, 2001) including, but not limited to, assumptions about (a) the power and necessity of a particular kind of print literacy and (b) literacy learning as developmental and progressive. In terms of our current educational preoccupation with a particular kind of print literacy, perhaps one of the greatest difficulties we face is the educational preservation of the notion that texts have fixed and singular meanings to “get.” With this vision of texts as containing a singular meaning, the author and the reader could be gone, but the text would remain as nothing more than a system of rules and the strategies used to uncover its bare essentials.

But with a socioculturally relevant approach to comprehension instruction, texts and reading situations are always open for negotiation. The characters, plots, signs, and symbols of a text do not demand a singular interpretation, and they are not stuck to a singular meaning. Instead, they are open to many possible interpretations and meanings, and readers here are assumed to be interactive participants in creating meanings relevant for a particular situation. The many possible interpretations and meanings come from choosing how to react and interact with the text (which textual aspects to pay attention to, identify with, or explore further), and children (all children) are seen as capable of seeking these connections.

In terms of the assumption that literacy learning is developmental and progressive, an additional, though hardly secondary, difficulty occurs when children are thought to possess particular cognitive traits that enable them to be good comprehenders or poor comprehenders, no matter the text or the situation. Severely labeled children are a function of an educational system that demands we identify specific cognitive traits on a continuum from low need to high need.

But with a socioculturally relevant approach to comprehension instruction, the identities of children are not fixed so as to disable them for all times with all texts. Instead, the needs and “potentials” of any individual change, based upon the purpose,
text, and task, resting entirely within the sociocultural context of the situation.

**Recommendations**

So what can we do as teachers to support and build upon social identities and cultural contexts to improve comprehension? In many ways, it is a matter of responding flexibly to each situation and each student’s abilities with a particular text, which involves the following four recommendations.

1. **Know, respect, and empower your students.** First and foremost, a socioculturally relevant approach to reading comprehension requires that teachers view their students as capable of understanding themselves and their worlds in multiple ways, with multiple answers to the question of “literacy for what?” This entails building an atmosphere of respect, support, and academic achievement, coupled with the use of texts and reading for culturally relevant purposes.

2. **Explain what resources or knowledge a student might have to draw upon to understand a particular text.** Good comprehension instruction in general requires that teachers overtly explain the strategies a reader might use to make meaning out of a text. In a sociocultural approach, we can overtly explain to children that they have knowledge resources to draw upon (e.g., skills and abilities) and identity resources (e.g., roles in the classroom, social ways of being, cultural identities). Without identity resources, which help us to engage with the text meaningfully, we are left without an answer to the question “literacy for what?”

3. **Know that learning occurs through social interaction—skills and techniques are not enough.** Encourage conversations and connections. Here, we can think in terms of interactive learning, where conversations about the connections and links made provide the basis for understanding the value and uses of literacy for social and cultural purposes. Not only should we help children make connections to the known and use what they know to support further learning, but we should also encourage them to use what they know to answer the question “literacy for what?” We should assume that students are capable of seeking connections between a text and their lives, while always helping them to set clear purposes and contexts for reading.

4. **Open up educational notions of text.** We need to acknowledge that meanings are multiple, changing, and contextual. More than using comprehension strategies in and of themselves (e.g., when the story map becomes the entire literacy activity as opposed to a strategy aimed at improving comprehension), and more than using comprehension strategies to regurgitate an author’s meaning, we need to include discussions about the multiple answers, perspectives, and interpretations possible. Here, pragmatic cues need to include a purpose for reading beyond deciphering an author’s singular meaning. Interactive discussion is a key element, so that students can learn to comprehend beyond decoding the words. Opening up educational notions of text also allows us to think in terms of critical literacy or literacy for social change, because the author’s meaning is situated in readers’ heads in such a way that the message can be questioned, critiqued, and used in socially empowering ways.

**Literacy opportunities**

Our ways of understanding how children best comprehend play out in the classroom in very real ways. Far from operating on a purely theoretical level, theories of what it takes for children to comprehend yield specific activities, strategies, lessons, and assignments. Pérez (1998) put it succinctly: “The literacy opportunities, materials, and projects that teachers provide for students give powerful messages to children about the role, importance, and nature of reading, writing, and thinking in everyday life” (p. 303). Strategies for teaching and improving comprehension, like anything else in education, are organized and used within the social practice of schooling. They do not exist in isolation, as separate techniques or skills to learn, outside of a social and educational purpose. The literacy activities and lessons that we provide in the classroom encapsulate our views of comprehension—whether we see it as residing in the print and the student’s cognitive capabilities, or whether we see it as being more socially and culturally situated—and this has vast implications in terms of the value placed on diverse knowledges and experiences. Teachers interested in providing comprehension
instruction for educationally diverse classrooms, then, need to decide what kinds of literacy opportunities they wish to make available for their students.

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