

# Southwest Regional IRA Conference - Ellin Keene

## Topic I - What does it mean to comprehend?

- If teachers know the theoretical basis for the decisions they make, they will make the right decisions.
- Teachers want to understand the complexities of human literacy acquisition and cognitive development.
- Need to invest in the theoretical knowledge, so teachers can make the best decisions for their kids no matter what programs come or go.
- We're asking our kids questions and asking them to retell. No matter how glorified the form is, it is not teaching comprehension - it is teaching assessment. Most of the activities we give our kids are some form of retell.
- We are spending the vast majority of our time assessing comprehension, not teaching it.
- If all we ask our kids to do is answer questions and retell, that is all they will do.
- We shouldn't bother with comprehension instruction if all we're going to do is ask our students to answer questions and retell.
- Asking questions and retell is not worthy of our students' intellectual development.
- Comprehension assessment needs to be about their thinking about the book, not the retell. Five days from now, they're not going to remember what they retold.
- Being able to "do" the comprehension strategies, does not necessarily mean they understand.
- We should be asking, "How does your thinking help you understand this particular text and any text you might read in the future?"
- The vast majority of our assessment is based on a particular text, at a particular time.

- We need to help our students identify what it is we do when we are faced with a really difficult text.
- Comprehension is generating questions that help someone else understand the text differently. Asking questions in order to focus one's attention on an aspect of the text.
- Making a connection is not enough - it is the outcome of the connection - to feel deeply what a character feels, to experience empathy.
- It is not the comprehension strategies - it is the outcome.
- We need to be asking our students to do this great thinking every day.
- What can we do to push kids to this level every time? To make it habitual?
- What if we said . . .
  - I know you don't know anymore, but what if you did?
  - Take you time to think. This is hard. It's supposed to be hard. That's how we come to deeper understanding.
  - Look at her. That is the face of a thinker! This is a kid who doesn't mind taking her time to think, even with all of us waiting.
  - What else? Go deeper.
- We need to be focusing on a few concepts, in great depth, in a wide variety of texts, over a long period of time.
- Look at our kids when they are doing something great and ask ourselves - what is it he/she is doing? Once we've identified that, we can teach it to our kids.
- Our kids need to know that they have the intellectual capacity to struggle to understand.
- Our kids need to struggle intellectually. We jump in and rescue too quickly.
- Ask our kids - In what ways did reading this piece change who you are - your thoughts, your knowledge, your opinions?
- We long for our understanding to be as beautiful in our knowledge as it is in our heart.

Topic II - What Matters Most in Literacy Instruction? What is essential? How do we balance all we're supposed to teach?

- These are important questions because if we want to go deep, we need to know what is essential.
- We are spending a great amount of time on skills and strategies that are not backed by the research.
- As literacy leaders, we must know what is essential.
- If we're not going to use the basal or follow the scope and sequence - we've got to know what matters most.
- Do we know what skills and strategies matter the most?
- Rumelhart Research - The Cornerstone Project that Ellin was director of used his research because it was so encompassing, so broad. It was done over a period of 30 years and looked across all disciplines. It looked across languages and ages.

### Findings

- 6 Cueing systems
  - 3 Surface structure systems - have to do with identifying words and reading fluently
  - 3 deep structure systems - have to do with understanding and probing meaning as well as interacting with meaning
- 6 is manageable. We can teach 6 deeply.
- Kids who think well, test well.
- These six systems are the scope, but there is no sequence. There is no research to back up any specific sequence. Sequencing of skills is for adult convenience.
- Theory of Simultaneity - all 6 systems develop in human beings simultaneously and are used simultaneously.
- She went over the six systems briefly. See handout.

- Kids need conceptual understanding of new words.
- Kids need to be reading in slightly challenging text - this doesn't work if they are always reading in leveled texts.
- During her time working with Cornerstone, they noticed over and over again that when a teacher did multiple readings of a challenging text, then put that text in a child's hand, they would read it, not only on a deep understanding level, but at a surface level, too.
- We use all six systems to read/understand a text.
- There is a relationship between the comprehension strategies and the deep structure system.
- When we teach the comprehension strategies, the deep structure systems improve.
- We can improve human understanding. This goes in the face of the idea that some kids can and some kids can't.
- There is no fixed intelligence quotient. We can help our kids to grow their intellect.
- Understanding is a malleable entity, not fixed.
- We need to tell our kids about these six systems and teach them to use them.
- We must be asking ourselves - Can we help our kids understand that they have the capacity to think at high intellectual levels?