**Reading without Comprehending**

By Amber Miller

***Background Information***

Over the course of the past month I have been given the opportunity to work with two incredible little children. One of those incredible little children is a little girl named Britney and she is a nine year old little girl who just completed her third grade year in affluent suburban district outside of Lansing Michigan. She is a biracial student with a loving heart, and has two other siblings, both of which are boys. She comes from a low/middle achieving family and her family is totally supportive of her struggles in school and what they can do to help her succeed in the future. She’s the kind of girl, who always has a smile on her face, from ear to ear, who never has anything bad to say about anyone, and the kind of girl who writes stories to share her memories and experiences with the world. Though she can read beautifully at grade level, and write developing stories, she, like many students struggles with reading comprehension. On her reading comprehension tests where she had to answer ten multiple choice questions about a weekly story, while also having to write a formal paragraph addressing the weekly stories theme and supporting details, out of twenty one tests she averaged 24/38 points, which is about a 63%. Just this year we developed a pre IEP for her because she was struggling with aspects of reading and math, however, she did not qualify for services in reading because she scored at grade level in all aspects of reading (including vocabulary and comprehension), and therefore only received remediation for math. In collaboration with my building staff we found that there were two reasons why we felt she struggled with her reading comprehension, and those were because she had limited background knowledge and small funds of knowledge that she came to school with, and she did not take the time to go back through her reading to find the corresponding answers to the questions that were being asked of her (Standard III). Therefore, she was not connecting with the text.

The second little boy that I had the pleasure of working with was a little boy named Jordan. Jordan is an eight year old child, who also just completed his third grade year in a suburban school district in Chesterfield Michigan, a school district located northeast of Detroit. He loves sports and finds every opportunity to hang out with his friends and engage in soccer and basketball, which he always challenges me in. Jordan is reading above grade level at a 4.3 level, and when asked to read out loud he reads beautifully, and with expression as he is always looking for opportunities to make props for skits and plays and put on his pirate voice. He is an African American boy with no reported disabilities or exceptionalities, and does not receive support services. He was born and raised in the same Chesterfield community, yet he comes from an upper middle class family where his parents have had the opportunity to travel around the world and bring him with them. He has a repertoire of background knowledge, comes to school with knowledge of the world that is very high, and is known to finish his work early so that he can dive into a book of his choosing (Standard III). Though he loves books and can read above grade level he also has problems with reading comprehension, especially in a text that is given to him, instead of him choosing it. What I noticed about Jordan through physical observation was that when he had to read books that were given to him, that were of no interest to him, he couldn’t connect with them nor seem to remember what was going on. He, like Britney, was not connecting with the text. But he was not giving himself a chance to connect with the text either. According to his third grade teacher and parents he was not motivated, and did not utilize useful strategies to remember content materials because he hurried through his work.

When talking with both Jordan and Britney I found that Jordan was much more into subjects of science and social studies, but Britney liked language arts the best. Jordan loved social studies and science because it was much more hands on and when asked how he liked reading he would say, “It’s okay.” Yet Britney felt the direct opposite. She loved to write stories, and she didn’t feel smart at all when it came to those other subject areas because she felt like the boys were much smarter than she was. I asked her to draw a picture about how she felt when doing science and she used dark colors to draw a picture of a little girl, with a conversation bubble stating, “I feel dumb in science because I don’t know as much as the boys.”

In taking into account both of these children’s struggles I felt like reading comprehension was the best area for me to focus on. As both of my students were reading at grade level, though at different levels, they were both struggling with remembering what they had been reading and making connections with it. Even though students can appear to read so fluently and with ease, there are occasions when students do not comprehend that which they are reading. I believe that comprehension is a building block for literacy and developing a passion for reading. Gay Ivey says, “Teaching comprehension strategies to others makes students more cognizant of their strategies and more deliberate in their reading” (Ivey, 240). The ability to read with a purpose, make connections with that text, and formulate useful strategies to aid in remembering a text provides students with the framework to become much more competent and informed readers (Standard VI). Therefore, it is essential for students to be able to achieve these standards.

When students know how to make predictions and summarize they are better able to understand what a text is saying and go beyond superficial surface level questions and thinking. Knowing the useful strategies behind how to remember important details helps students to become better test takers, and to think about a text more critically, which my third graders will learn as they continue to grow throughout their elementary years. Simultaneously when students are able to make connections with a text they build their funds of knowledge, so they can have a bigger collection of information to pull from as they encounter more diverse texts.

***Implementing the Lesson***

In implementing my lessons to both Britney and Jordan I used differing settings to teach to both of them. For Britney I picked her up from her house and took her to the local East Lansing Barnes and Nobles. I knew that Britney loved hot chocolate so we stopped at the Starbuck coffee shop and bought some things to make her more comfortable. Then we sat in the children’s section near the picture books. I wanted to provide her with a child friendly environment, one that was quiet, because she did better on assignments where there were fewer distractions, but also a setting where she felt comfortable and had been numerous times before (Standard IV). I told her that I would be giving her a lesson on how to better comprehend. As her classroom teacher for a whole year we developed a very personal relationship and she knew she could talk to me about anything. She also knew she struggled with comprehension so us working together was a way for her to become better at it. I knew that it was important for her to know the purpose as well as to set a goal for what we were doing, as Dr. Troia indicates that “Setting goals enhances attention, motivating, and effort, and facilitates strategic behavior through the evaluation of goal attainment” (Troia, 2). Before school was out I made her promise me two things; that she would never give up no matter how tough things got, and that she would always ask for help when she needed it. So I made sure to tell her that those promises were still valid and I was going to give her some useful strategies to help her better comprehend what she was reading so that she could become a better test taker in the future.

For Jordan finding a relaxing environment was a lot easier to do. Jordan was one of my cousins so I arranged to work with him through contact with his parents. We set up a workstation in his basement in Chesterfield Michigan where we both sat on the coach, had a table to work on, and a lot of floor space for him to work as he started to work on his own. It was an environment that he also felt comfortable in, could walk right upstairs and talk to his family, and he was engaging in a lesson with a family member so his level of comfort was really high. I knew he was a good reader so I expressed to him all the good things I had heard about him, so that his confidence would be boosted, and I told him that I really wanted to see the thoughts in his head as he was reading a book. Ever since I’ve known him he’s been a boy that’s very prideful and because I didn’t want to make him feel bad because he was having a hard time comprehending I told him that I needed some help with my coursework and I needed for him to do his best work. This provided him also with a goal and purpose for attempting my lesson, and left him eagerly awaiting the challenge.

***Pre-Assessments***

Knowing that my students struggled with reading comprehension I wanted to take inventory of what reading and study strategies they were aware of. For both of my students I used the *Textbook Reading/Study Strategies Inventory (TRSSI)* and implemented the first two pages of the questionnaire, leaving out the third page as I thought the first two pages were more applicable to my area of study and the last page focused much more on study strategies and reading strategies that were geared toward upper elementary aged students. The questionnaire listed a total of 39 strategies, 27 of which I used to find out more information about what my students knew to be helpful and what strategies they were actually using. Each question had a scale from 1-5 to score under two categories (familiarity and actual use). By looking at the scale one could see whether students were familiar with the strategy and if whether they were familiar with the strategy affected how often they used it or did not use it.

Through pre-assessment I found that for Jordan he was moderately to highly familiar (score of 3 +) with 20/27 of the strategies listed, however, he only used these strategies moderately to highly (score of 3 +) in 6/20 strategies that he was familiar with. Therefore, he was using these strategies regularly at a rate of 30%, which was extremely low (Artifact 4). This told me that though he knew information about these strategies and were exposed to them he was not using them. Now as I looked at Britney’s assessment I found that she was moderately to highly familiar (score of 3+) with 11/27 of the strategies listed, however she only used these strategies moderately to highly (score of 3+) in 7/11 of the strategies that she was familiar with. Therefore she was using these strategies regularly at a rate of 64%, which also was low, yet not as low as Jordan’s use (Artifact 1). This told me that though she didn’t have a huge repertoire of strategies she was more likely to use the ones she did know about, when given the chance. So though Britney was using fewer strategies than Jordan she was using the strategies she was aware of more regularly than Jordan, who had a bigger bank of reading comprehension strategies to choose from. I knew that if I exposed Britney to a strategy she was more likely to use it more often and store it in her memory bank (Standard VI). I just needed to show her how to use them appropriately and give her experiences to actually play around with the strategies. For Jordan I had to find a way to motivate him to become engaged in the text. Though my expectations would be the same for both Jordan and Britney, I would use different processes by which to reach those expectations. For Britney I wanted to give her more strategies to use and for Jordan I wanted to motivate him to use the strategies he already had more consistently.

***Lesson Content and Assessments***

The lesson I implemented to both of these students concentrated on an expectation of connecting personal knowledge, experiences, and an understanding of the world through oral and written response through modeling (See Think Aloud Lesson-Artifact 9). It also concentrated on gradually releasing responsibility to students so they could learn to use these reading comprehension strategies on their own. According to the *Self Regulated Strategy Development Model,* “The teacher models how to use the target strategy and then provides students with as much support as they need as they progress toward independent use of the strategy” (Troia & Graham, 81). Though this is used generally in writing it can also be applied to reading, and in integrating the research into my lesson it helped for me to concentrate on making predictions, making connections, and thinking aloud for my students, whereby they would learn to self-monitor and regulate their own thinking while reading. I first explained to them that when I read a book there were several things that popped up in my head, and sometimes those things needed to come out so I could make sense of them. I then modeled for my students how to make a prediction by looking at the cover of the book *For the Love of Autumn* and how to use a graphic organizer to track my predictions. Next, I read a portion of the text, completed a think aloud where I connected my own personal information with the book and then recorded my connections on my graphic organizer again. I then took my students through the same process, and then read another portion of the text, and had my students practice making predictions and connections with the text, while recording their thoughts on the graphic organizer. Then my students repeated that same process to give them more experience with the strategy. My students were then assigned to read a book titled *More Than Anything Else*. It was an easy grade level text where the students didn’t have to concentrate so much on the words, but rather on the explicit and implicit connections and predictions they could make. Gay Ivey says, “If students are dealing with difficult to read texts most of the time, high level comprehension as well as comprehension instruction may be lost on them as they get tangled up in reading the words” (Ivey, 236). With this text I didn’t want for my students to focus on the words, but rather I wanted the focus to be on the connections and predictions they could make and form from the text. From that text I assigned my students the task of reading the book individually by themselves to continue practicing the strategy for comprehension that I had previously modeled for them. Their task was to read the entire book and complete the same predictions and connections chart they completed in the previous text, while writing down at least three think alouds. A few days later they would be post-assessed on what they could remember from the text. The fullness of this lesson concentrated on two Michigan Grade Level Content Expectations; students should be able to connect personal knowledge, experiences, and understanding of the world to themes and perspectives in text through oral and written responses (1st expectation), and students should be able to self-monitor comprehension when reading or listening to texts by automatically applying strategies used by mature readers to increase comprehension including; predicting, constructing mental images, visually representing ideas in text, questioning, rereading or listening again if uncertain about meaning, inferring, and summarizing (2nd expectation).

As a measure of assessing my students I used informal assessments in the form of physical observations and think alouds, as well as more formal assessments where I looked at the completion of my graphic organizers, written think-alouds, and summarizations. I choose to use graphic organizers because of their unspoken hidden value, which by many people are rarely taken advantage of (Standard V). “Their value is to make concepts more concrete, depict relationships, serve as an aid to memory, and use a context to enhance learning,” (Ehren, 313) and it also helped for me to track my students thoughts on paper. I used think alouds because of the value they placed on making connections and using those connections to make predictions. Because my students both struggled with comprehension but were wonderful readers, I didn’t want to just throw away their valuable thinking, but rather I wanted to take advantage of it. In the case of Britney I knew she struggled because of her small amount of background knowledge she brought to the table, but at the same time I knew she could connect with a text without always having background knowledge. Ehren says that, “Readers interact with new material, trying to match what they read to what they already know in order to construct meaning. For this endeavor to be fruitful, readers must have sufficient information in their knowledge base to relate to a wide variety of reading materials” (Ehren, 311). I knew that she didn’t have the background knowledge, but if she could make real-life connections with the text, then she would slowly develop that background knowledge and her own knowledge base would increase as she was connecting.

***Implementation of Lessons and Results***

Teaching the lesson to Britney I first started out by telling her about think alouds, making predictions, and connections and I told her that I was going to model for her how to make a prediction. I showed her the front cover of the book *For the Love of Autumn* and told her that I predicted that the kitten on the front page would be found in a dumpster by a little girl, and that little girl would adopt it. Then I wrote down my prediction on my graphic organizer reinforcing to her that the chart would help for me to keep track of my predictions and my connections Artifact 2). After that, I read a couple pages of the story to my student and spoke aloud a think aloud where I connected the kitten in the story with the two hamsters that roamed my house when I was a child. I used that same scenario to predict that the kitten would also get lost and roam the house, while continuing to reinforce the notion that with every prediction and connection I made I needed to actually write it down. As I continued to read I made another prediction where I connected my own life to the story. I was a student teacher and Britney was fully aware of this so she could also connect with it, and in doing so she found out a little about my loneliness that she didn’t know before. Then I wrote down that connection so she could also use it. I asked her the question, “after seeing me think aloud and predict what do you notice about my predictions and think alouds that could help you?” She said, “You talk about your life and that makes me feel close to you, so I should also talk about my life,” as she grabbed my arm and intertwined it with hers. So I told her that after watching me do it I was going to see if she could also copy my modeling and do it herself, so that whomever she was sharing her thoughts with, whether it be me or someone else she would be able to give of herself. Then I read a few pages for her and stopped so that she could complete a think aloud and a prediction. After reading page 6 she indicated “The cat got hurt and was bleeding. Last week I fell on the sidewalk and started bleeding. It hurted.” She then recorded her think aloud as I continued to read on, where she predicted that “The cat will get sick cause she all over the place.” After having her experiment with making these predictions and think alouds she wrote them down and I gave her the opportunity to read another text. It was a less complicated text and the reason I chose the text was give her the opportunity to concentrate not so much on pronouncing the words and knowing them, but rather connecting with it and understanding the meaning behind the words. Before starting the story she predicted “Somebody made the boy cry and hurt his feelings so he write down what happen in the journal.” Then went on to talk about how the boy couldn’t read, her own experiences with reading, and how she thought his mom was going to teach him how to read, but later found out that his mom couldn’t read well either (Artifact 3). At the conclusion of the lesson when I asked her “how does making connections with the text help you better understand it,” she said, “Just like when you helped me fill in the chart to learn about you, and I filled in the chart to teach you about me, we also learned about the boy in this story.”

Though Britney had a small amount of information to call upon, she made many connections with the text. All of which hinted at her own personal stories, or the stories of someone else. Some of her responses included, “In the story there is a papa. I call my grandfather papa an my grandma granny,” and “I remember when I learned to read. I was a baby and my mom teach me,” and “I learn the alaphabet by singing the letters.” All of these responses were personal to her and she could relate to them, so she used that knowledge, because her worldly knowledge was so minimal.

Then I taught the same lesson to Jordan. Teaching the lesson to Jordan I first started out by telling him that I needed help with my homework and I thought he would be the best person to help me. Keeping in mind that he wasn’t motivated to do his own work and use his own comprehension strategies I had to provide him with a bigger goal to motivate him. Plus it was his way of proving to me that he was smart, so he welcomed the opportunity. To top it off another way I motivated him was by telling him that I would play him in a game of basketball once he completed my lesson. First, I showed him the front cover of the book *For the Love of Autumn* and told him that I predicted that the kitten on the front page would be found in a dumpster by a little girl, and that little girl would adopt it (Artifact 5). Then I wrote down my prediction on my graphic organizer showing him that the chart would help for me to keep track of my predictions and my connections with the text. After that, I read a couple pages of the story to him and spoke aloud a think aloud where I connected the kitten in the story with the two hamsters that roamed my house when I was a child. I used that same scenario as I did with Britney, to predict that the kitten would also get lost and roam the house, while continuing to reinforce the notion that with every prediction and connection I made I needed to actually write it down. As I continued to read I made another prediction where I connected my own life to the story. I was a student teacher and I had talked to Jordan about my student teaching this past year, where we connected because he was using the *Everyday Mathematics* curriculum just like we were. Then I wrote down that connection so he could also use it. I then asked him the question, “after seeing me think aloud and predict what do you notice about my predictions and think alouds that could help you?” He said, “It sounds like you talkin. You show me your memories and predict what is going to happen.” Then I told him that after watching me do it I was going to see if he could also copy my modeling and do it himself, so that he would see a think aloud as a natural thing that just flowed out of my mouth and his mouth, like a conversation. I read a few more pages for him and stopped so that he could complete a think aloud and a prediction. After reading page 6 he indicated “When school is over that cat and the girl gonna go on summer vacation somewhere, but that cat might get hurt cause he in to everything.” I then had to remind him to record his think aloud because he had forgotten to do so. As I continued to read on, he commented, “She can’t find her cat when you can’t find a cat it means someone taken it. Then you see them lost signs on the street.” Again, I had to remind him to write down his predictions on the graphic organizer.

After having him experiment with making these predictions and think alouds I then gave him the opportunity to read the same text I gave Britney to read, *More Than Anything Else*. Before starting the story he predicted “I think the boy ran away and all he has is his book.” Then went on to talk about why the boy’s stomach was growling, wondered why the people didn’t have any shoes on but were working and walking on the salt, and identified that the characters in the story had to be slaves (Artifact 6). At the conclusion of the lesson when I asked him “how does making connections with the text help you better understand it,” he said, “It helps me focus on a lot of different things all at once.” Looking at all of that information I found that Jordan had a bigger source of knowledge to call upon when he made connections with the text. His connections consisted of information he learned through schooling and travel. When he was asked to think aloud one of his responses was, “Usually your stomiche growls when you ain’t ate,” as he took into account health related information he had learned. Then he also went on to say, “It says that people are free, that mean they weren’t free before, so they had to be in slavery,” therefore he took into account African American history he had learned through schooling and conversations he held with his family. Another example is when he predicted what would happen next in the book as he said, “the boy in the story is that man who was a slave but grew up and wrote a book,” relating the Booker in the story to the Booker T. Washington in history, an abolitionist and world renounced scholar who founded Tuskegee University. Those experiences became his experiences and were based upon worldly information.

Overall, in looking at the post comments from each of my students in regards to how making connections with the text help us to better understand it, Britney indicated that “Just like when you helped me fill in the chart to learn about you, and I filled in the chart to teach you about me, we also learned about the boy in this story.” This information she provided to me along with the information she wrote into her charts and think alouds provided her with a new way of looking at books and how she could connect with them. It signaled to her that it was okay to think aloud and that by thinking aloud, making predictions, and checking those predictions it helped for everyone to better understand the story, and remember it later. According to Britney’s pre-assessments she was a child who is more likely to remember to use her strategies when working, as opposed to not using them at all. I just hope that these strategies fall within the 63 percentage of strategies she uses, as opposed to the 37 percentage of strategies she doesn’t use regularly. In looking at the post comments from Jordan he indicated, “When I asked him “how does making connections with the text help you better understand it,” he said, “It helps me focus on a lot of different things all at once.” This information he provided to me along with the information he wrote into the charts and think alouds provided him with a strategy that he didn’t use before. Though he didn’t use it before, he now understood t as something that was helpful in helping him understand the text.

When I gave both of my students the post assessment two days later, the information they provided me was quite interesting. Both students had to summarize the text *More Than Anything Else,* and provide me with as much information as they could remember from the book. It was important to incorporate this aspect as it would let me know whether or not my lesson had actually been successful in helping my students better remember. Britney’s full response was, “There was a boy in the story and he couldn’t read. His mom didn’t know how to read either but he found someone to help teach him how to read and he became free” (Artifact 7). Though, it wasn’t much of a summary in terms of length Britney remembered the gist of the story, which was that the boy couldn’t read, nor could his mom, but eventually he learned how to read. Those three major details were all pieces of information that she talked about in her think alouds and predictions, so the strategies I designed helped her remember. In essence, Britney walked away from this lesson with the knowledge that think alouds and predictions can help her to recall the important events in a story.

As Jordan took the post assessment and summarized what he remembered from the text Jordan’s full response was, “Booker was a slave and he became free. He taught himself how to read by using the alphabet. I don’t remember no more” (Artifact 8). Jordan’s response was broken. He was right that at one point Booker was a slave, and that he learned to read using the alphabet. But the only relevant detail, in terms of the most important details from the story, that he remembered, was that the alphabet helped Booker learn how to read. Everything else he remembered was but fragments from the actual story, and not all of it was factual. Therefore, though I sought to teach Booker a strategy that would be beneficial for him to use long term, the strategy did not aid in helping him remember. He essentially walked away from my lesson in the same capacity in which he walked to it, with the knowledge of a strategy, but without any intention of using it.

***Changes after the Implementation of Reading Comprehension Strategies***

If I were to re-teach this lesson there are many things that I would do differently. When I taught Jordan the lesson my sole purpose was to motivate him to actually use the strategies he had already acquired so that he could better comprehend a text. However, I don’t think I motivated him to do that. His disjointed summaries provided me with vague unimportant events that happened in the text. Even when he wrote he didn’t remember anything else, he quickly rushed through the assessment, completing it in less than five minutes, which signaled to me that he was doing the same thing that he had been doing prior to the lesson. He was finishing his work quickly in order to tackle activities that really interested him. If I were to redo this lesson I would incorporate partner work, where he was assigned to work with another student functioning at a higher rate of comprehension. Research shows that when students cooperatively work together their reading competence improves” (Fuchs, 34). The two of them would work together to teach each other strategies of comprehension, and would be extrinsically motivated by receiving points to be exchanged for materials of value later on in the semester if they could use those strategies successfully (Standard I). That would motivate him to complete his work in the fullness, and his partner would challenge him to get things done the correct way, as opposed to the quick way.

Another way I would modify the lesson would be to pick a new post assessment for the students. The summary was good and it provided me with the knowledge I needed to see in order to assess whether or not my students were improving in comprehension with the strategies I had given them. Yet, my assessment did not specifically tell me which strategy helped aid them in remembering. If I could design a new post assessment I would have allowed for both my focus students to choose a book of their liking and would have had them read this book for about twenty minutes (Standard II). “Having selected a book, the student may be expected to read more deeply than a student who was assigned a book, and the student may use cognitive strategies more fruitfully to gain meaning from the text” (Guthrie, 409). Then I would have given them a list of strategies (think aloud, predictions, checked predictions, made connections) and had them check of which ones they used when they were reading and comprehending. That way I would have been able to assess what strategies they were using, as well as why they were using those strategies. It’s important that reading comprehension strategies become a part of who my children are, so that they are implementing these strategies consciously and unconsciously, and they see them as useful.

***Concluding Thoughts***

Reading comprehension is a topic that many students struggle with. Students must know what is expected of them, know the strategies, and be given opportunities to use those strategies in the everyday texts they encounter, whether by requirement or choice. Through teacher/student modeling and a gradual release of responsibility all students can learn to achieve whatever they put their mind to achieving.

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