

Reading Comprehension--Taking it to the Next Level

By Alexandra Berube

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Max and I did not spend time working together during his second grade year, because he was receiving services through school. At the end of his second grade year, I began working with him again, picking up where we had left off the previous summer. His mother's goals were for him to improve his reading comprehension in the following three areas: making inferences, comparing and contrasting, and deciphering main idea/details in text.

In my assessment of his reading comprehension at that point, I noticed that he didn't anticipate the next steps in a text based on the clues. For example, if a character is put into a situation and someone tells him not to move, *Max did not anticipate that the character would of course move, because that is standard literary practice. He didn't know how to anticipate these common literary themes that would help him make predictions in his reading. His predictions were usually completely unrelated to the story structure so far.

I started reading books with him that all had a theme: the character did something bad at first, then did something good, and everybody likes the character in the end. We read books such as *Walter the Farting Dog* and Leo Lionni's *Frederick*. I wanted him to learn of this story pattern, which is so common in literature (and movies). I also wanted him to be able to contrast and compare the way that the character interacted with the others in the book in the beginning (and how they treated the character in response), and how things changed at the end. This also related to cause and effect relationships, because the character acted a certain way and the effect was that the others related back to him in a certain way (first he was 'bad' and they didn't like him, then he was 'good' and they did like him). We also did many text-to-self and self-to-text relationships to help him connect to what he was reading.

We continued to practice reading stories with this literary theme so that he would improve in his ability to make predictions. Adults are used to so many classic story patterns that we can anticipate when a common literary theme is being used. But young students don't have this storage of knowledge, and I wanted him to get used to more and more of the literary themes he would encounter in his reading, so he would be able to make predictions and make connections between what he already knew and what he would read.

Talking about the structure of the stories also helped focus on the main point, because the main point is a larger perspective of the story, not the details in the story specifically. Many students focus on the individual details and can't back up farther to get the main point, but when talking about patterns between one story to another, it's easier to step back and see the larger story structures at hand. The more you do this, the more they also begin to understand the order of events and the idea of cause and effect

The more we did text-to-text relationships between the books we were reading with common story patterns (including many text-to-self relationships so he could relate personally to what was going on in the story), the more he was able to make predictions about the text, make inferences about what was going on, determine what the main point was, and figure out the cause and effect relationships.

This study of a specific literary theme helped Max realize that there are patterns in stories that he can recognize. All stories will not have this literary theme of 'character is unliked, does something good, is then liked by others,' but all will have a main point, all will have cause-and-effect relationships, and all stories have a beginning, middle, and end so that you can compare and contrast what happens from one part of the story to the next. You can also connect stories to other stories and to yourself. You can make predictions based on what you have seen characters do in other stories, or based on what you would do in that situation (text-to-self relationships). Just the knowledge that all this is going on helped Max know to look for these clues, and to be an active reader (not just ingesting details, but seeking out broader answers). This is the goal of every teacher in instructing reading comprehension.

*Name has been changed.

Note: Max has Agenesis of the Corpus Callosum.

About Alexandra Berube

Alexandra is the Managing Director of Boston Tutoring Services, a tutoring company that offers one-to-one in-home tutoring in Massachusetts. She is also a former Kindergarten teacher who also tutors students in grades K-8, in all subject areas, including test preparation.

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