



The ABCs of Reading Comprehension Through the Lens of My Babies' Reading Journeys

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Introduction

This ABC book sets out to explore the various components of developing reading comprehension for diverse learners. I use photos of my children, George and Janie, reading, writing, and being read to as a visual framework. I am a passionate reader and have always tried to impart a deep love of reading to my children. Both my children love being read to and refuse to go to sleep without a read-aloud. I apply the strategies that I learn in this course to my children's literacy development, so I thought that utilizing their reading journey as an extended metaphor would be meaningful. Through this book, I want to explore how reading comprehension can be supported and developed by teachers in classrooms, for all learners. I want to connect reading comprehension to all of the underlying ideas, skills, and instructional strategies.



Assisted Reading

Students transition to reading independently through reading along with other voices as a scaffold to support them in moving toward fluency (Young, Paige, & Rasinski, 2022). There are multiple ways to accomplish assisted reading, some of which are described elsewhere in this document, including choral reading, duet reading, paired reading, and echo reading.



Background Knowledge

Activating background knowledge through text previews, short videos, and targeted review can be an effective approach for supporting comprehension. Asking students what they know about the topic is imprecise and ineffective, and can lead to incorrect information being shared (Vaughn, 2023). Students whose critical thinking skills are not yet strong or who are literal thinkers, like many autistic students, may form incorrect associations through Know-Wonder-Learn activities that ask students to brainstorm everything they know about a topic. Overall, background knowledge is associated with higher reading comprehension (Vaughn, 2023).

Choral Reading

Choral reading is when the entire class reads passages together, in sync. It is a form of assisted reading where the voices of students form a scaffold for students who struggle with fluency, and it can improve their fluency and support the development of their comprehension. It is a good morale-building class activity. Many diverse learners may struggle with fluency, though their decoding is strong, and choral reading can support fluency and comprehension.





Distributed Practice

When teaching vocabulary, give students many exposures to a new word to develop familiarity and to cement the new word into their long-term memory. Many small opportunities to interact with a word are better than just one long, intense instructional period. Flanigan and Hayes (2022) recommend teaching a word in multiple ways *at least* ten to twelve times throughout a week. These might include explicitly defining a word in student-friendly language, reading words contextually, connecting words to students' experience, sharing that experience with peers, discussion about usage and variations, morphology explorations, games, and finding an example of the word in their daily life as homework.

Echo Reading

Echo reading is where you read passages to the student while they follow along silently. Then, have the student read the same section aloud to you. This helps them to hear how it should sound, and to have a framework on which to model their own reading. This supports fluency and comprehension development.





Fluency

Fluency is the ability to read text accurately, quickly, and with appropriate expression (Wanzek et al, 2019). Increasing fluency also improves automaticity and boosts reading comprehension. Teachers should work to model what good fluency looks like through read-alouds and through interrogating what makes for fluent-sounding reading. This will give students a goal to aim for and also will encourage them to self-check their own fluency, especially when they've spent time thinking about what makes fluent reading. We want to support learners to become self-aware, self-monitoring readers.

Goal Setting

Setting goals in relation to fluency, comprehension, and reading overall is an excellent way to help students decide where they want to go, plan how they want to accomplish their goals, and work on a continuum. It helps students become self-aware and self-reflect about the kind of reader they want to become and why. In my experience, working with students to set goals at the beginning of the year, and periodically returning to those goals throughout the year, helps remind them why they are doing the work and keeps them focused and driven. It is hard to get somewhere when you don't know where you are going.





Hope

Many students who struggle with reading comprehension, especially students who are older, experience frustration and hopelessness. They can shut down easily when faced with reading passages, because their experience has not been positive in the past. Ensuring that students can achieve some kind of success and enjoyment is paramount. It is very important that teachers keep this in mind, and ensure that students experience compelling stories as read-alouds, as audiobooks, or through assisted reading opportunities. This is especially important for older students.

Interest-based Reading

Students need to have choice over their reading materials as far as is possible. They should be able to select, or be supported in finding, materials that are related to their interests. If students are forced to read texts that are levelled or never self-selected, it is more likely that they will shut down and be less willing to read. We need to create opportunities for students to make connections to texts, and to read materials that they want to read. When students are interested in the material, can understand or make connections to it, and have autonomy over what they read, they are more likely to want to read. Wide reading supports comprehension development. Let's set our students up for success by allowing them to read what they are interested in, whenever possible.





Journalling

Journalling is an important tool for students to develop comprehension. Reading and writing are inextricably linked. Writing about texts, incorporating vocabulary, and using text structures allows students to synthesize, reflect on, and make their own connections to what they read. Journalling is an excellent routine that supports students in extending their comprehension and supports them in developing metacognitive, reflective habits. I begin my English 9 classes with ten minutes of journalling according to a prompt I put on the board, and this year especially I saw enormous growth in the students' writing abilities and general stamina for reading.

Knowledge

General knowledge and generally linguistic comprehension is critical for reading comprehension. Students benefit from having a broad oral knowledge base when they are interpreting and understanding the words they read. When students can learn about and be exposed to different ideas, subjects, topics, and viewpoints, they will be able to more easily interpret and understand words. We thus want to work to continue to develop content understandings alongside literacy instruction in order to extend comprehension. Furthermore, when students have a deep subject matter knowledge, they can more easily comprehend texts about that subject. This means that their reading abilities can be uneven, increasing when they are more interested. This suggests that it is even more important to allow students choice in reading material.





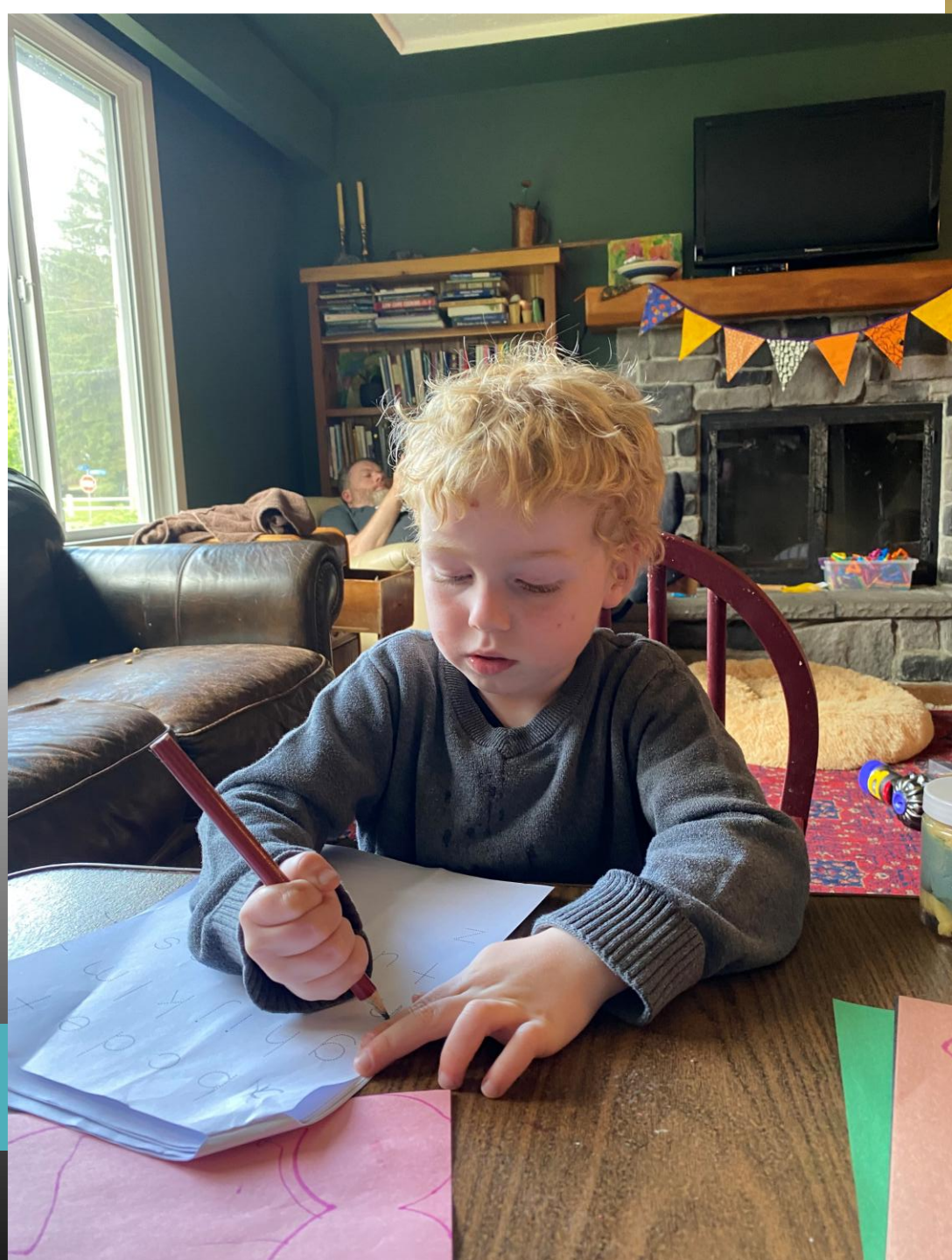
Language Rich

Students learn new vocabulary contextually. Incorporating new vocabulary into instruction and discussion is important to exposing students to new words, and can be an important scaffold to comprehending those words in text. Language-rich classrooms and schools support students in developing their reading comprehension. We want to cultivate classrooms where students interrogate and play with words, considering their morphology and etymology and evaluating and experimenting with their different meanings. We want to create spaces where students are excited about and interested in words. We want to create language-rich spaces where students are excited about learning new words and reading. Creating language-rich spaces will support students in thinking about themselves as readers, and thinking about themselves as capable word detectives who can figure out new words.

Morphology

Learning to break down words into their morphology – the small components that make up each word – supports students in better comprehension. They can learn, for example, that ‘un’ means not, and apply that across the board. Strategic teaching of morphology supports students in interpreting words that they have not before encountered, and helps them to be word interpreters. Morphology can be an excellent strategy that encourages readers to be engaged, critical readers.



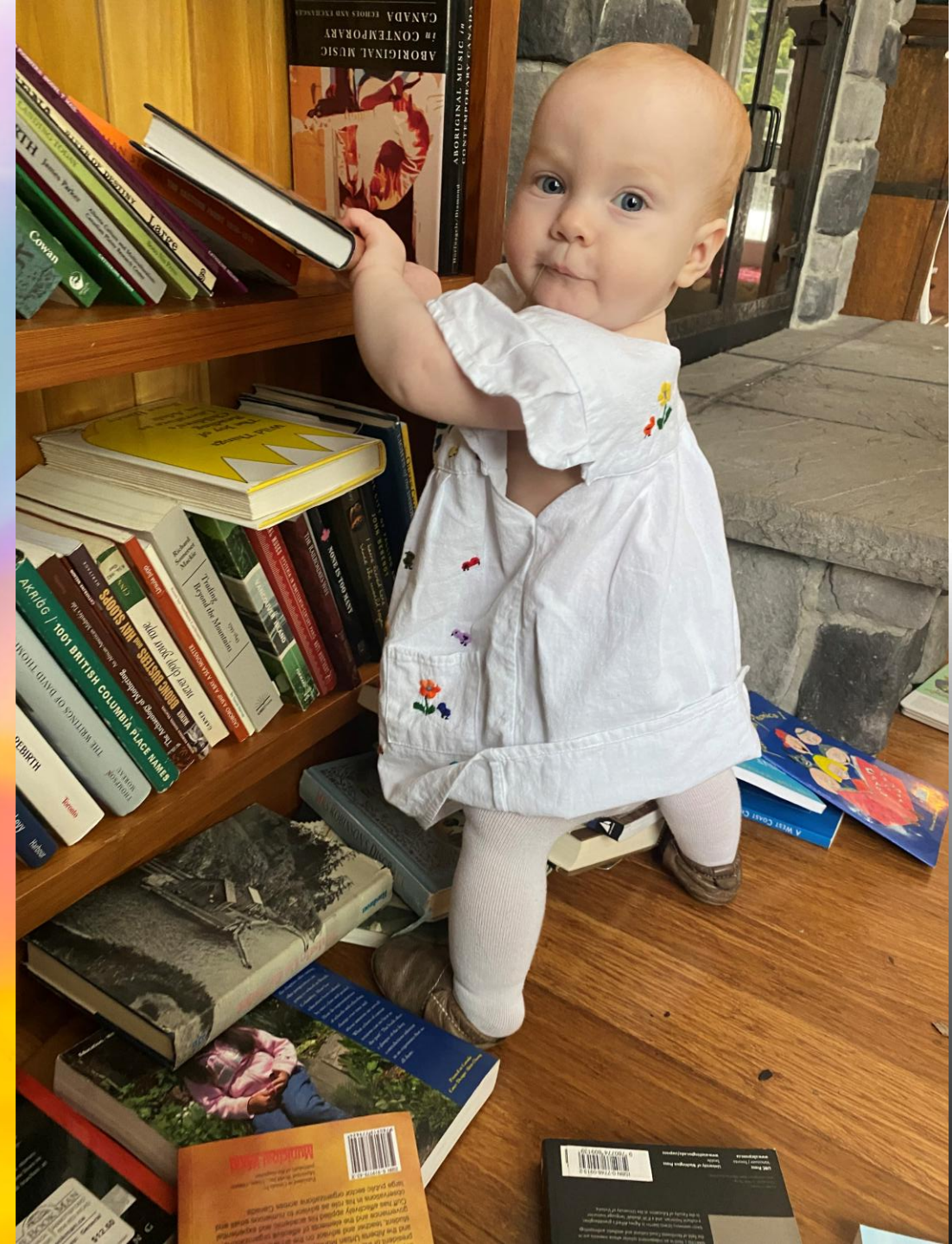


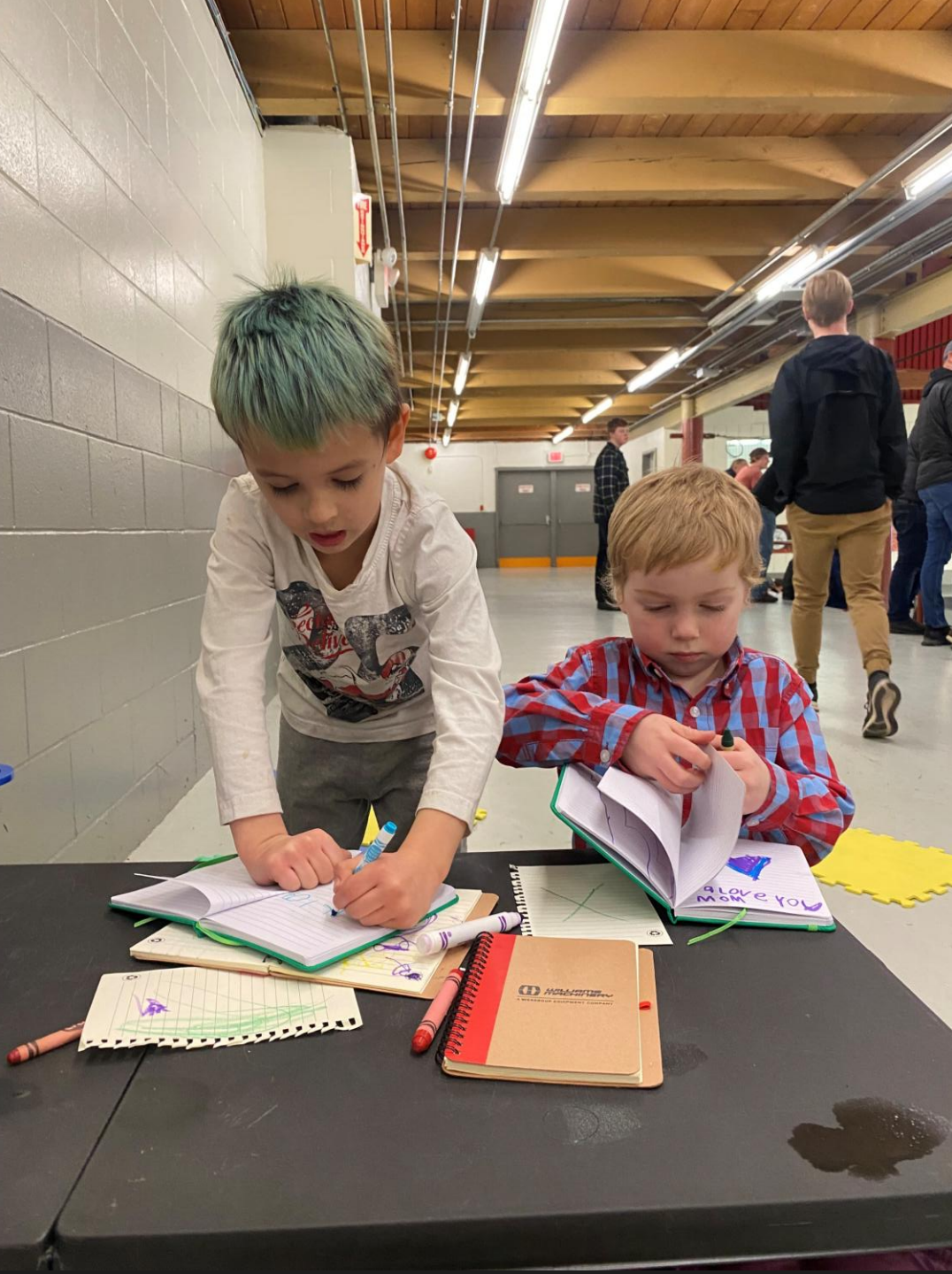
Narrative

Students need to develop a systematic understanding of text structures such as narrative to be able to process and comprehend what they are reading. They need to be able to have a structural framework that they use to interpret what is happening as they read. Teachers can explicitly teach these structures, then review them as students explore them in context. This helps students be able to understand what they are reading. Students can also be taught to be aware of their own narratives, especially as readers. What is their story as a reader? What limiting ideas do they have about themselves as readers? Can we help them to situate their reading narrative as a continuum, where they are curious learners who can approach new words as problems to be solved and they can demonstrate persistence when they make mistakes? The idea of narrative is an important structure for students to learn and for students to apply to their own journeys.

Orthographic Mapping

Students need a firm foundation in orthographic mapping, where they connect the phonemes or sounds of a word to its graphemes or spelling in order to have good reading comprehension. Orthographic mapping allows for fluency and comprehension to develop, and is a necessary basis for good reading. Orthographic mapping allows readers to focus on understanding the meaning of the words that they read, bringing them toward comprehension. When students cannot do this automatically and effortlessly, reading becomes laborious and a struggle. It is thus important that teachers assess where this process is breaking down, and support students in developing the skills and subskills that they need in order to achieve orthographic mapping and thereby good reading comprehension.





Phrase-Cue Text

Students who struggle to read fluently benefit from cueing phrases, pauses, and emphasis points in text. The teacher can use markings that work for them or colour code the text to make it easier for the student to read smoothly and with prosody. Students who practice and develop fluency support the development of their automaticity in reading, and synthesize text structures and phrasing. Phrase cuing text is a fairly simple intervention that we can quickly do to improve the fluency of students who struggle with comprehension. I often do a simplistic version of this for my husband when he gives speeches. He also does it for himself, breaking out lines where he wants to ensure that he pauses and writing phonetic phrasing of names and places. We underline words that he wants to emphasise or give special prominence to. It has helped improve his speeches immensely, to the point that many people compliment him.

Questioning

Questioning what you are reading is critical to developing reading comprehension. Sharon Vaughn (2023) notes that students who struggle with reading comprehension can often get into a kind of autopilot mode where they are not processing what they are reading. Getting them to ask questions as they read (who, what, when, where, why) supports them in slowing down and comprehending the text. We can also teach students to monitor their comprehension by asking themselves regularly about what they are reading. Questioning the text through notetaking or mental checks for understanding can support the student in developing strategies that will continue to bolster their comprehension.





Repeated Reading

Repeated reading, where students read aloud a passage several times, is well corroborated by research as being effective for developing fluency. Adapt passages to students' interests and passions, and have them reread them at least three or four times (likely more!), giving immediate corrective feedback. Have students spend time working with words that they make errors with, then repeat the reading again. Do not focus on time. If you need a step-by-step model, follow the Fluency Development Lesson (Young, Paige, & Rasinski, 2022). Try to avoid timing students or encouraging them to read sections faster, as this is inauthentic (Young, Paige, & Rasinski, 2022). In working with struggling readers, I have personally witnessed repeated readings having great impact. This year, a student on my caseload jumped three grade levels in one year from repeated reading interventions. When I called his mom to tell her, she cried. Repeated reading is a simple but incredibly effective intervention for fluency, and can also lead to increased reading comprehension.

Student-friendly Definitions

Define new vocabulary words with student-friendly definitions. This means that new words are defined using controlled, simple, easy-to-understand language. Longman's Dictionary of Contemporary English is a good resource and is freely available online. It is worthwhile to use it with students and also to direct them to use it themselves when they encounter unfamiliar words. Using student-friendly language makes vocabulary more accessible and supports students in learning new words. I have seen teenagers shut down when words they ask about are defined with other new, hard, big words.



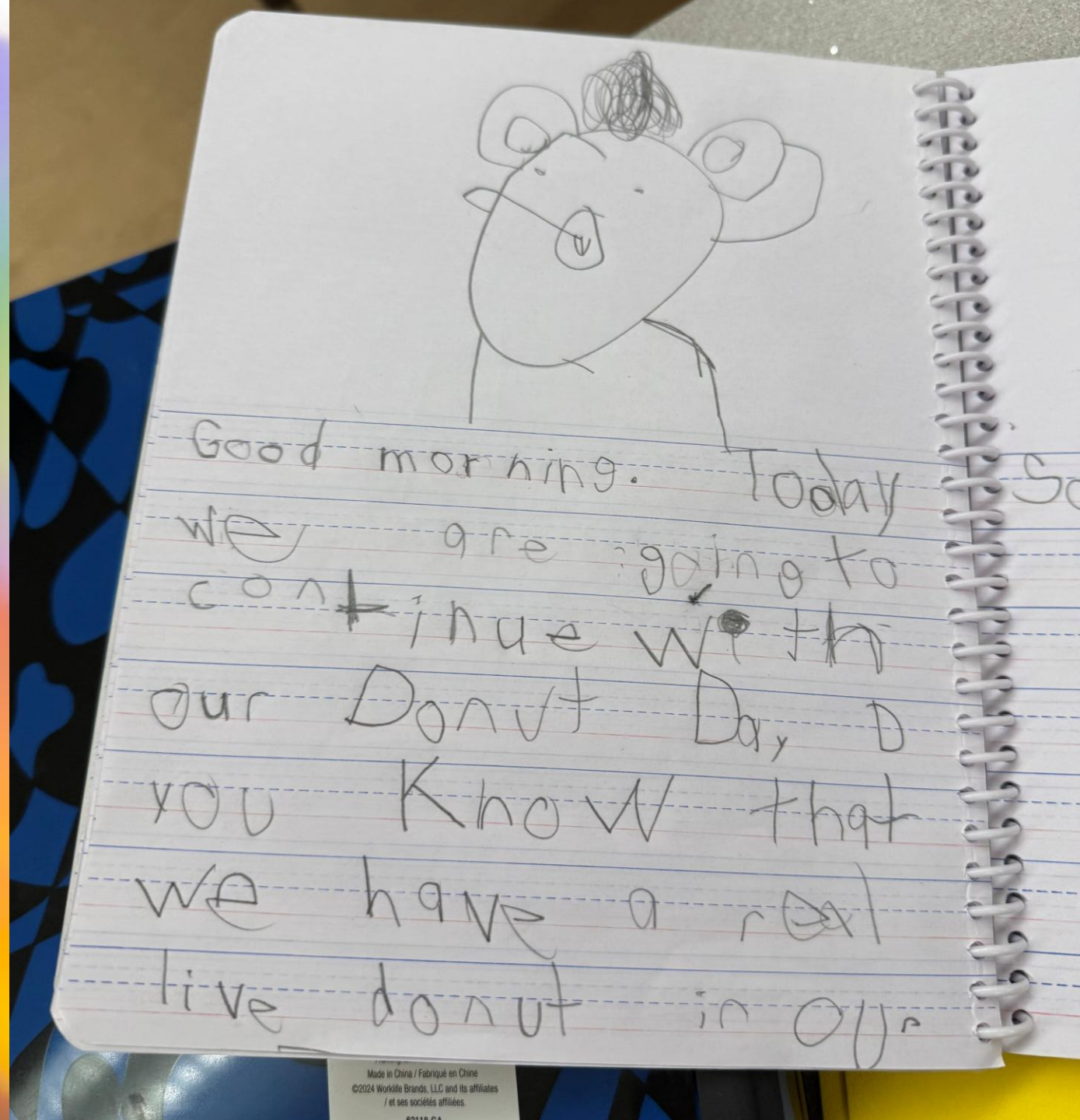


Targeted Instruction

Skilled reading teachers will assess the skills that students are lacking in order to achieve good reading comprehension and address those specific skills and subskills through targeted instruction. Assessments need to be robust enough to give information about the students' fluency, decoding skills, phonological grasp, and comprehension. By addressing the specific skills that need to be taught through targeted instruction, the student can develop those foundational skills and go on to become a strong reader. Assessment is key. We do not have enough time to reteach every single literacy skill in intervention and general classes. Being able to hone in and support the student in developing the skills that they specifically lack allows the interventions to maximize instructional time and impact.

Understanding

Understanding is the ultimate goal in reading instruction. We want students to be able to understand what they read, when they encounter text throughout their lives. We want the world to be as open to them as is possible, so that they can experience the breadth and depth of it. We want to ensure that their lives are not limited by poor reading skills or by limited comprehension. We are working to bring students to a place where they can understand the world around them and can participate in it fully.



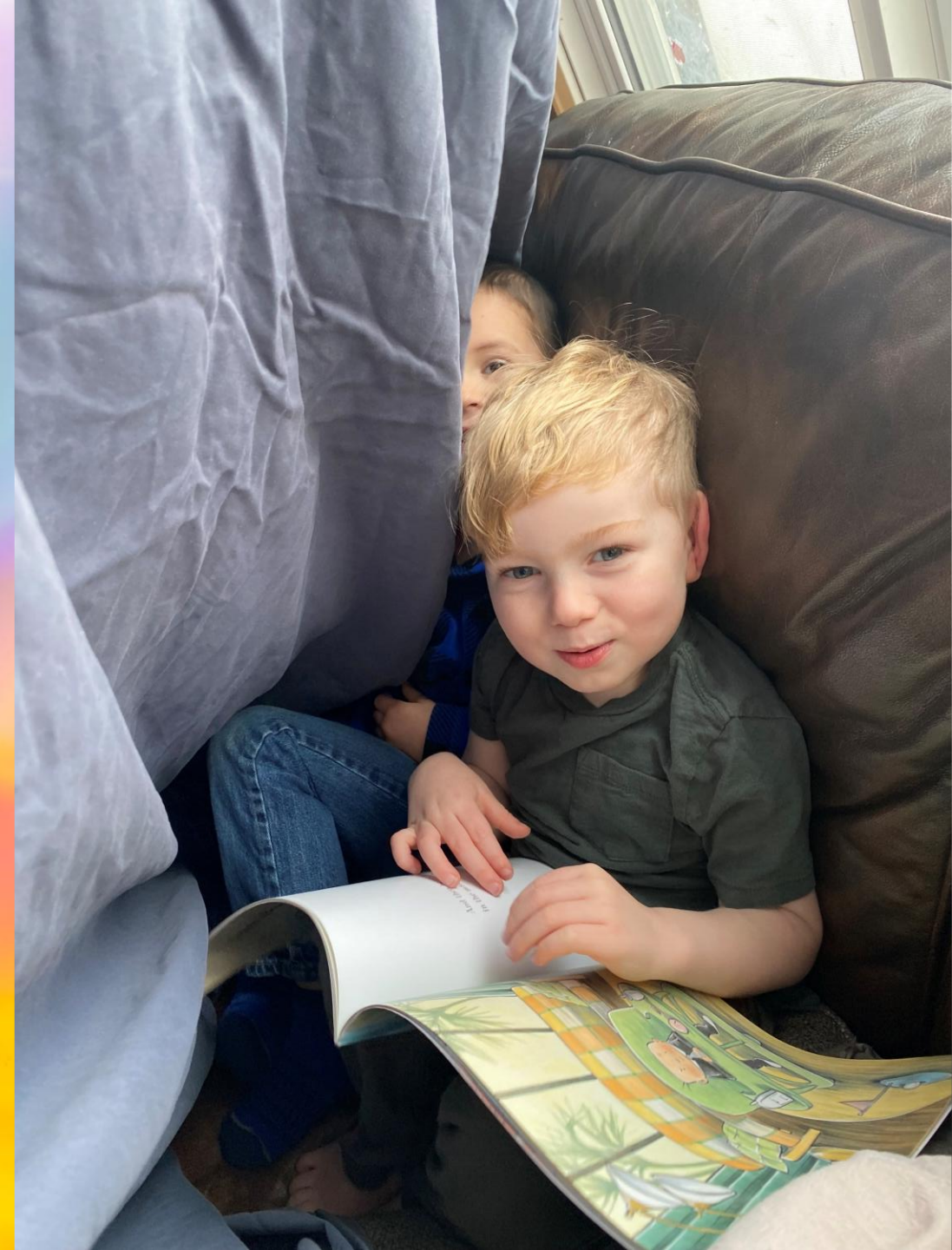


Vocabulary

Vocabulary is best taught contextually. Students do not learn in a void, so we need to ensure that we connect vocabulary instruction with broader texts, students' existing understandings, and activities where they construct new knowledge using the new vocabulary. Vocabulary is closely connected to comprehension. Increasing vocabulary improves comprehension overall (Coyne & Loftus-Rattan, 2022). Teaching vocabulary strategically and contextually can support students in developing their overall literacy. A powerful way to make new vocabulary “stick” is to assign students to find examples of new words on their own, as homework, as part of small-group or partner discussion, or as a written assignment (Flanigan & Hayes, 2022). Integrating new words into daily journal time (ex: ‘Tell me about a time you experienced *ecstasy*’) after defining the word explicitly and contextually will help the students better conceptualize the word and connect it into their own schemas.

Word Consciousness

We want to teach students to be what Sharon Vaughn (2023) terms 'word conscious.' Teach students to interrogate new words, figuring out their morphology, their etymology, and their contextual meaning. We want to get students excited about encountering new words. We need to cultivate word-conscious environments where we discuss, identify, and contextualise words. We want to create word detectives who feel confident in their abilities to figure out new words, and who go forward into reading with confidence and excitement.





X-ray Assessments

In order to ensure that our teaching is nimble, targeted, and strategic, we must ensure that our assessments specifically tell us what skills are students need support with. General assessments like DIBELS can give us a broad perspective about students' fluency, comprehension, and decoding. We can also employ a variety of diagnostic assessments to specifically pinpoint skills and subskills that students need support with. Sharon Vaughn (2023) recommends using retell to assess comprehension.

You!

Reading instruction is complex and multifaceted. Reading comprehension is the ultimate outcome of reading instruction, and is inextricably linked to all other components of reading. As much as it all feels like a lot, the skill and passion of the teacher is the most central component of successful reading instruction. Your enthusiasm for reading, for teaching strategies, for targeted instruction of skills, and for the students' confidence and developing ability matters.





Zeal

Our zeal for vocabulary, for language, and for reading is an important model for our students. We need to ensure that we demonstrate our passion about literacy in our teaching. When we are excited about reading, we invite our students to also be excited. Our example as language-rich teachers can cultivate a love for language in our students.



Conclusion

Through this ABC book, we have explored the various concepts and strategies relating to the development of reading comprehension. As Sharon Vaughn (2023) notes, we cannot teach comprehension. Comprehension is instead the culmination of all other interventions relating to reading, and is the ultimate goal. We need to ensure that students have a strong foundation in phonics, decoding, morphology, and fluency so that they can achieve good reading comprehension. This became exceptionally clear to me in the course of writing this ABC book. So many different skills and instructional approaches can support and develop comprehension, and we must balance all of these in our teaching. All of the skills associated with reading support and scaffold reading comprehension. George and Janie are both at different stages of their learning-to-read journeys. George has strong decoding skills but is working on developing his fluency and comprehension. We practice repeated reading and I model fluency through our evening read-alouds. I have learned about many other strategies that I will add into his reading practice, and that I will do from the beginning with Janie. I am excited to have learned how to teach my children (and my students!) to be passionate, confident, capable readers.

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