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What Is Reading? What Is Reading Comprehension?

On a bright fall morning on the campus of Kent State University in Ohio, student clinicians in the university’s Reading and Writing Center are gearing up to assess and diagnose the reading of several children referred to the center because of reading difficulties experienced in school and at home. One of the diagnostic teams is assigned Marcus, a bright-eyed third grader, who is more than pleased to have the undivided attention of the three adults who have been assigned to work with him. After meeting Marcus and asking him to share with them his interests in and attitudes about reading, the clinicians have Marcus read orally some passages from an informal reading inventory.

Marcus is eager to do so. However, before beginning to read the first passage, he asks the clinicians an interesting question: “Should I read the stories as fast as I can?” The clinicians are momentarily taken aback but recover quickly to remind him to read in his best voice in order to understand what he reads. They remind him that they will be asking him to retell what he has read after reading each passage.

Despite the reminder, Marcus reads the first passage quickly and with remarkable accuracy—only one word-recognition error. However, he pays little attention to punctuation and demonstrates very little expression in his oral reading. Moreover, when he is asked to retell what he has just read, he struggles to provide even a few accurate memories of the passage. Still, he ends this first reading with a smile on his face; clearly he feels that he has impressed the clinicians with his reading.

Natalia, another third grader from a different school in the same town, arrives at the Reading and Writing Center a few minutes later with her parents. Although she is a bit more reticent than Marcus, she also eases

into the morning of reading with another set of clinicians assigned to assess and diagnose her reading. Natalia is asked to read orally some graded passages from an informal reading inventory. Natalia asks no questions before beginning to read. Her reading is slow and labored, and she makes several errors in recognizing words; but she perseveres and makes it to the end of the first passage.

When asked to retell what she has read, Natalia's demeanor changes from an intense reader focused on making it through the text to a child who is able to quickly provide a detailed recollection of nearly every event from the passage she has just read. Moreover, in her retelling, she notes how she has had some of the same experiences in her own life that were described in the reading. She even noted how she felt during those experiences.

The clinical teams continued to work with Marcus and Natalia throughout the morning and were able to identify their strengths and difficulties in order to provide parents and teachers with recommendations for helping the children overcome those difficulties. Both children left the reading center that morning tired, but with smiles on their faces.

You're the Expert

Both Marcus and Natalia struggle with reading, yet they each manifest different behaviors while reading and retelling what they have read. How do you think Marcus views reading? How would he define reading? What do you think Natalia thinks about reading? Who is the better reader? Why do you think so?

At Your Fingertips

Reading is a multidimensional process that involves the eyes, the ears, the mouth, and most importantly, the brain. What counts for you as reading? Consider the following tasks:

1. How would you describe or define *reading* to a child or person who doesn't know how to read? What are the most essential elements of reading?
2. Find two children and ask them how they would describe or define *reading* to someone who doesn't read.

Consider your response and the responses of the children. What are the essential elements of reading? Do the responses vary at all? What do these responses tell you about how reading is viewed by people?

To most reading specialists, the one essential element involved in reading is making meaning. In other words, turning those written squiggles on a page into meaningful thoughts, not just those expressed by the author, but also those that are triggered in the reader as he or she reads. These thoughts may even go beyond the content expressed in the text itself. Reading is the creation of meaning from the printed page. Although it may involve the sounding out of words, accessing the meaning of words, reading the text with appropriate fluency, and providing expression, these are all sideshows to the main event—making meaning.

Reading and Reading Comprehension

At its heart, *reading* refers to the ability to comprehend or make meaning from written text. A dictionary definition of the word *read* states that it is the ability to examine and comprehend the meaning of written words. Comprehension, then, is at the heart of any conventional definition of reading.

Comprehension and reading comprehension, however, are concepts that, to a certain degree, defy specific definition. What does it mean to *comprehend*? Some might say comprehension is the act of

understanding. That brings up the question: what is understanding? The dictionary says that *comprehension* is the ability to know or grasp ideas with the mind. Indeed, the term *comprehend* is derived from the Latin *prehendere* which means “to grasp.” Again, however, these words that are used to define the term *comprehension* are as vague as the term *comprehension* itself. How does one know when an idea is fully grasped? How does one demonstrate full comprehension or knowledge of ideas? Does a mere retelling of what one reads, as is done in some tests of reading comprehension, demonstrate adequate comprehension? The notion of *grasping* suggests that there is an action required of the reader in order to grasp the meaning of the text. Reading comprehension is not a passive activity in which meaning “magically” appears once the reader reads the words in the text.

Reading and literacy scholars have created their own definitions of reading comprehension that contain a bit more precision. Reading comprehension is the construction of the meaning of a written communication through a reciprocal, holistic interchange of ideas between the interpreter and the message (Harris and Hodges 1995, 39). The presumption is that meaning resides in the intentional problem-solving and thinking processes of the interpreter. The content of meaning is influenced by that person’s prior knowledge and experience.

This definition also suggests that reading comprehension requires an action on the part of the reader. That action involves the use of the existing knowledge that the reader has on the topic of the text as well as the text itself in order to create meaning. The problem in reading comprehension is making meaning from the text. The problem is solved by the intentional action of the reader, which includes the purpose for reading as well as the ability to draw upon prior knowledge that is relevant to the text. The question now becomes, what types of actions do readers engage in that allow them to solve the problem of making meaning from the text?