



WHAT AARON TAUGHT ME ABOUT FLUENCY

How a kid who had never been to school transformed my teaching. **By Max Brand**

It was the first day of school, well into the afternoon, when my principal, Tom, dropped by. “I’ve got a new student for you and this story is a little different,” he said wryly. “Aaron is twelve and he’s never been to school. Not at all. Not even home schooling.”

I have to admit I was a little daunted. I quickly learned the rest of the story. Aaron had spent his days helping to

take care of younger kids and had no formal literacy experience. No doubt I looked apprehensive because Tom added, “I know this is going to be a challenge, Max, but you’re the right teacher for him.”

On my way home that night, I wasn’t so convinced. How was I going to assimilate Aaron into our classroom with my (mostly) on-grade-level students? How could I



a teacher's story

build his fluency when fifth grade would be his first experience with school?

The next day Aaron arrived. Tall, gawky, and tow-headed, he towered a full head above his peers. We chatted in a friendly fashion while we toured the classroom, but when we stopped to read the morning message, Aaron froze. I quietly explained that the morning message was composed as a greeting, followed by an expository text. "The greeting is usually about the weather," I said, "and I try to use scientific vocabulary so we can learn it. Then there are a few sentences explaining the day's morning work."

Aaron's face brightened a little. "I know a lot about weather," he said proudly.

A group assignment to read a children's magazine article about Ken Burns' documentaries gave me a quick sense of Aaron's literacy level. Anticipating he could not read the text, I offered to read the article aloud to Aaron and his seatmates. They jumped at this opportunity. Aaron listened intently, commenting

about the ideas in the text.

After reading, discussing, and thinking about Ken Burns' passion for documentary filmmaking, Tim, Alex, and Robbie began to quickly jot a summary of this article. Aaron joined the activity by copying a one-sentence response that I had written on a sticky note. His writing was shaky; he had trouble forming letters, did not use spaces between words, and reversed the numbers in the date. I walked on eggshells that first day, worrying about how to include Aaron without calling attention to his limited literacy knowledge.

Aaron quickly taught me how: read aloud, read aloud, read aloud. And not only reading aloud, but rereading texts and bringing the words to life. Poetry became Aaron's favorite genre, and he copied poems to read to his dad. His big breakthrough was giving his proud father a self-composed poem as a gift.

Over the year, Aaron would challenge my knowledge about teaching. Now, when I think about fluency instruction, I

return to the lessons he taught me. Here are 10 strategies that worked for us.

1 DEMONSTRATE WHAT FLUENCY SOUNDS AND FEELS LIKE. I use classroom conversations and reading aloud to demonstrate what fluent language sounds like. I ask students to monitor my oral language, asking them, "While I'm talking/reading, listen to the flow of my ideas and I how I articulate each word." Aaron and his classmates developed the habit of noticing, then correcting me when what I said did not meet their expectations. Aaron prodded me to write my oral directions on a chart, which he read and reread.

2 READ ALOUD TO YOUR STUDENTS AT LEAST THREE TIMES A DAY FROM A VARIETY OF READING MATERIALS. I read fluently from nonfiction or informational books, poetry, the newspaper, and more. I ask my students, "Listen to me read aloud. What do you notice about my voice? How does my voice make the words and ideas come alive?" Aaron positioned himself next to me while I read aloud, learning to train his eyes along lines of text. I copied key ideas on a chart during read aloud, rereading them to emphasize fluent reading of information. Aaron read these copied texts during independent reading, using my model to guide his voice.

3 CRAFT WELCOMING MORNING MESSAGES FOR STUDENTS. The morning message sets the tone for the school day. Aaron relied on the structure of this text to guide his fluent reading. He and I often read the message together in meaningful units. I would prompt students, "Read the ideas in this message. How do you know where to pause, stop, or think?" We also examined punctuation, grammar, and vocabulary while reading, rereading, and discussing the morning message.

4 HAVE STUDENTS READ SHORT TEXTS. Newspaper articles and poems are great examples. I prompt students to read for ideas: "During your

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first reading of _____, what are the big ideas the author gets you to think about? During your second reading, highlight important ideas that help you understand the text.” Aaron would memorize highlighted sections during my read alouds, then fluently read them back.

5 HAVE YOUR STUDENTS REREAD FOR A VARIETY OF PURPOSES.

Rereading deepens understanding and prepares kids to participate in responsive or reflective conversations. Students reread when their understanding breaks down, or when they need to defend a position during a discussion. I also ask them to read and reread their writing out loud for sense and punctuation. Encourage rereading by asking students to show you where in the text they are confused, make connections, have questions, or disagree.

6 KEEP YOUR LESSONS BRIEF AND FOCUSED.

My lessons need to be short, explicit, and connected to students’ learning needs. To support Aaron’s decoding skills, I used cloze procedures in five-minute lessons to explicitly teach fluency, getting him to use his background knowledge to read for ideas.

7 HAVE STUDENTS READ INDEPENDENTLY AT LENGTH AND FOR A VARIETY OF PURPOSES.

In my classroom I have a range of independent reading materials at a variety of reading levels. During content studies I put together text sets: books of different length and reading levels that focus on concepts under investigation. Aaron read the easy books, then used his knowledge of words and ideas from these books to read the more challenging books fluently.

8 USE ENLARGED TEXT FOR SHARED READING.

Help students understand that proficient readers slow down and speed up while reading. During shared reading, stopping once or twice and demonstrating decoding skills while reading for meaning were critical in helping Aaron develop fluent word solving

strategies. Enlarging texts by using an overhead projector, big books, or charts helps all students see the text and lets them participate in the lesson.

9 WHEN INTRODUCING A NEW TEXT, DISCUSS THE FEATURES THAT WILL ACTIVATE PRIOR

KNOWLEDGE.

I begin a lesson by asking the students, “Let’s read the title together. Meanwhile, look at the cover and think about what the text might be about.” Students begin to chatter, bringing up ideas and vocabulary that may be included in the text. Aaron was curious about maps, pictures, and diagrams. Talking about these features and gaining insight through them helped to support his burgeoning reading skills.

10 HAVE STUDENTS WRITE THROUGHOUT THE DAY.

Reading and writing are reciprocal language processes. I ask my students to write as a tool for learning

throughout the school day. Students learn and use high frequency words while writing. They learn to craft their ideas into sentences, paragraphs, and short and long texts. This helps them learn the importance of punctuation as a tool that helps the reader understand the text. Aaron began the year as a novice writer, but a great storyteller. Capitalizing on his ability to recount events and recall information helped Aaron learn that he had ideas that should be recorded, read, and thought about. Aaron built his writing a word at a time.

Working with Aaron taught me the importance of crafting systematic fluency lessons. Aaron spent his day reading and writing for a variety of purposes, including self-selecting texts. He left fifth grade reading at a fluent second-grade level and with the stamina to write for 20 to 30 minutes—enormous progress for a student with no education. He had a future. □

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