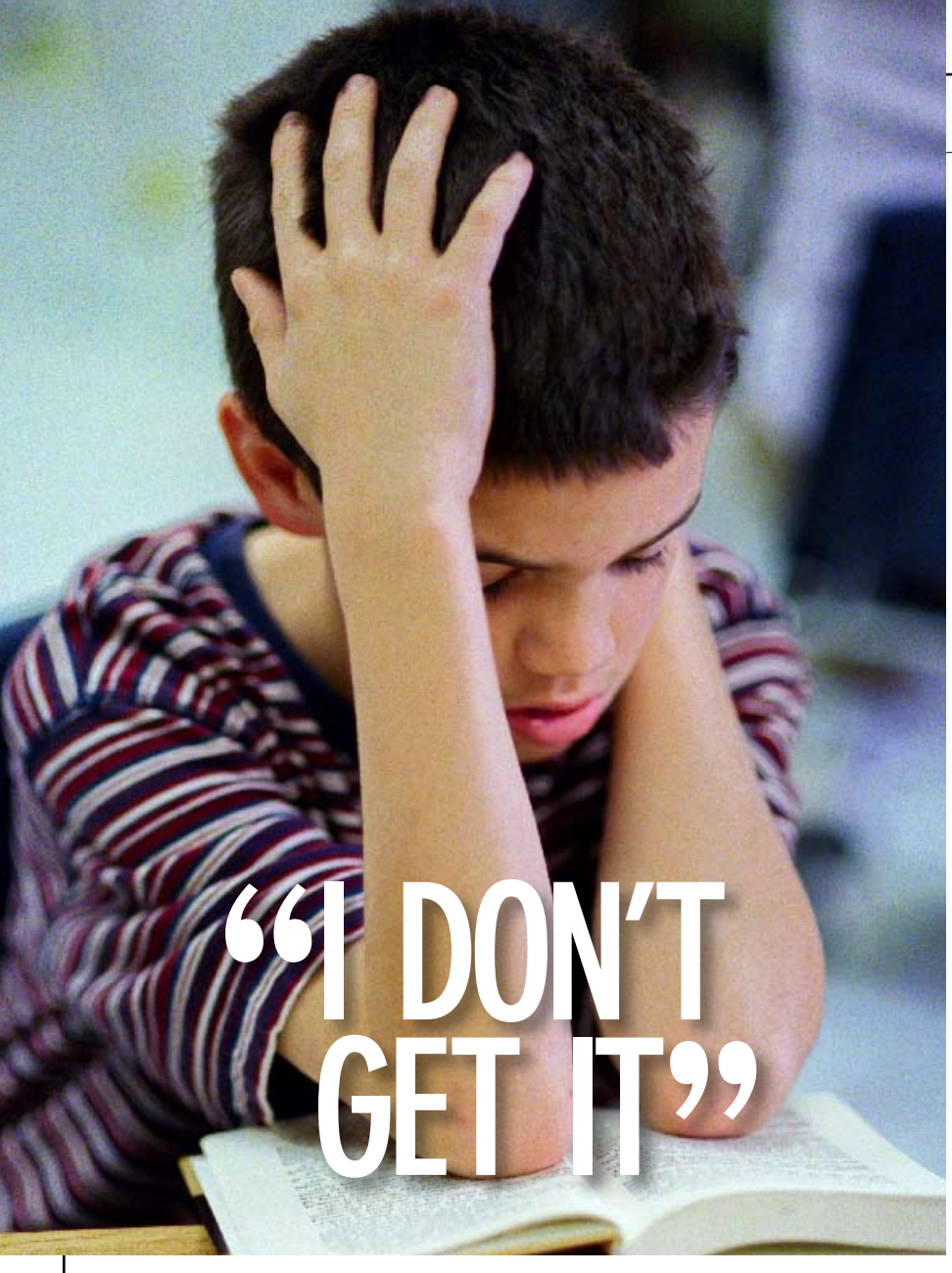

"I DON'T GET IT"

Literacy expert Marjorie Y. Lipson answers teachers' tough questions about teaching reading comprehension.

A few years ago, I taught Michael, a sixth grader who was still struggling with reading. I so wanted to help this child, but it was often difficult to understand what stood in the way of his fluency. Meanwhile, his classmates were diving into *Harry Potter* and nonfiction tomes on race cars and soccer. What could I do to get Michael up to speed?

One afternoon, as Michael prepared for another session with his tutor, I asked, "What's the hardest part about reading for you?" Michael paused, then answered, "The long words." Aha. I then asked if he had trouble saying the long words or knowing what they meant. Michael said his problem was only with saying the words. That seemed unlikely, but I questioned further: "So, if you can say or read the words, you usually know what they mean?" As I predicted, Michael answered no. Finally, I asked him whether he thought not knowing the meanings of the words was a problem. To my dismay, he again said no. It is easy for intermediate students to get the wrong ideas about the purpose of reading. We pay so much attention to decoding and fluency in the early years (understandably so) that children sometimes come to believe that flawless and rapid word recognition is the point. As texts get more demanding or unfamiliar, some of the "good readers" in our classes begin to struggle, because they are not sufficiently engaged in constructing meaning. And just like Michael, they may not even know they should be. Lack of both engagement and intentional effort is a deadly combination, which makes it impossible for many students to be independent during reading.

Thankfully, teaching comprehension is one of the most rewarding aspects of working with students in the intermediate grades. These students are capable of wonderful insights, terrific humor, and deep grief. They are also hungry for interesting information. We can help them get the most out of their reading by teaching them how to comprehend—how to manage a poem versus a novel or a textbook, for example. Here are answers to teachers' toughest questions about how to approach comprehension with their students.

Q How do I teach comprehension when I don't fully understand how comprehension works? I'm an experienced reader, but I'm not sure what I do when I read.

All readers comprehend text by recognizing words and thinking about them as they read. But this does not ensure that we know word meanings, and even when we do know the meaning of each word, it may not be enough to ensure comprehension. For example, when I read the law texts my husband writes, I can know the meaning of each word but still have little confidence that I will understand the whole. Prior knowledge is key because good readers comprehend by connecting known and new information. Readers are more interested when they can connect their reading with their own lives and interests. When new text information is challenging, it is even more important that they make these

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connections. Comprehending is not passive. Rather, it requires interaction with the text and active construction of meaning. Comprehension involves intentionally using specific, purposeful strategies to understand text.

Q Comprehension seems like a very complex topic, and I don't see how any one teacher could cover it all. What specific strategies can I teach in order to break it down?

Teaching comprehension is complex and requires a flexible and adaptive approach. There are seven basic strategies capable readers use to comprehend what they read (see the box on this page). Good readers use the strategies flexibly and are able to call them into action as needed. As teachers, we need to provide instruction in using these strategies so that our students will be able to use them when reading independently. Introduce the core strategies early in the year in order to provide a basis for the many conversations you will have about reading all year. Consider displaying a poster that lists the strategies good readers use, with clear age-appropriate descriptions of the steps in each strategy. Regularly model how to use the strategies during read-alouds. Remember, though, the seven individual strategies are actually not as important as teaching students that they need to take a strategic approach to reading.

What Good Readers Do

Share these seven comprehension strategies with your readers.

Make Connections: Create a bridge from the new to the known, connecting the text to yourself, what you know about the world, and what you have read in other texts.

Question: Ask questions as you read to enhance understanding, find answers, solve problems, find specific information, and so on.

Make Inferences: Connect ideas or fill in information to make sense of unstated ideas.

Visualize: Generate mental images to stimulate thinking and heighten engagement.

Summarize: Synthesize and organize key information to identify main points and major themes, distinguish important from unimportant information, and enhance meaning.

Monitor/Regulate: Pay attention to meaning, clarify or correct comprehension difficulties, or promote a problem-solving stance during reading.

Evaluate Make judgements about the text to form ideas and opinions, or determine the author's purpose.

Q My kids have an especially hard time summarizing. How can I help them learn how?

It's often a good idea to use short pieces of text from newspapers or magazines to introduce difficult skills and strategies. To have students practice summarizing what they've read, read a newspaper article together and then use a graphic organizer to highlight key facts from the piece. Include a space for students to write the main idea of the article, along with spaces for "details to include" in a summary and "details not to include." An organizer can help students to see what's important.

Q My students need help with comprehension when we do read-alouds. Where should I begin? How do I know which specific skill I should be focusing on at a given time?

Different texts demand different strategies, so don't be concerned if you are not focusing on teaching one comprehension skill at a time. By using a variety of strategies, you are teaching your students to be responsive to the text. That said, it is sometimes important to examine individual strategies closely through explanation, modeling, and

guided practice, and read-alouds are a natural setting for this exploration. With practice, it becomes easier to identify texts that provide good opportunities for instruction. For example, Gary Soto's *Chato's Kitchen* is a great text for talking about making inferences and visualizing. *Raising Dragons* by Jerdine Nolan is perfect for beginning to look at summarizing. When you have a book in hand, start by taking a reflective stance. Ask yourself: What is the most important thing about this book or chapter? What strategies do I need in order to comprehend the text? What strategies might my student readers need?

Q *Is it okay to use picture books to teach comprehension even with older kids?*

Absolutely. Picture books are especially useful for introducing strategies because they can be read in one or two sittings and everyone can participate in the discussions. Later, students can be asked to apply (or do guided practice) with individual chapters and longer or more challenging texts.

Q *My literacy block is jam-packed. How can I include comprehension with all the other skills I have to cover?*

Comprehension instruction is compatible with other approaches to instruction, such as readers' workshops and guided reading. For instance, you can give students direct strategy instruction during a mini-lesson prior to readers' workshops. Similarly, modeling of the strategy can occur during read-alouds or guided reading, while guided practice may occur during individual conferences or small groups—either guided-reading or flexible groups. You can also remind students to use a recently learned strategy during silent reading or as they read during another time of day.

Q *My kids need help with comprehension, but I'm not sure how to structure a lesson.*

No matter which strategy you're teaching, effective instruction always involves these steps: *explaining*, *modeling*, and *encouraging*. First, you explain—providing information about how and why to use the strategy. Next, you show students what the strategy looks like in action via think-alouds. At the same time, you provide guided practice, as they attempt the new strategies. Lastly, you need to remind and encourage them to keep practicing the strategies every time they read in a new situation or setting. In the end, the effort you put into teaching strategies will truly pay off for your students. ☐

Marjorie Y. Lipson codirects the reading clinic at the University of Vermont. This article was adapted from her newest book, *Teaching Reading Beyond the Primary Grades*. To order, call 1-800-SCHOLASTIC.