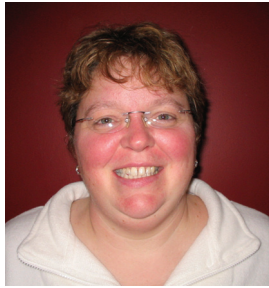


How can I help improve my student's literacy?

Biography



Shannon Mabee is currently in her third year of teaching. She has taught all three years at Courtland Public School in the Junior/Intermediate Mixed Exceptionalities class.

Abstract

This project is the description of working with a particular student in a Junior-level Mixed Exceptionalities class. Various plans were implemented in an attempt to improve the reading ability of the student. Although the timelines were short and some negative behaviours impacted his progress, the research enabled some new steps to be devised for future consideration.

Creating a Question

“Okay, so now that I understand what an Action Research Project is....It's encouraging to realize that some of the “stuff” that I chose to use in the classroom falls in line with what the Board believes, as outlined in the Guiding Principles. I'm already using a lot of Cunningham in the classroom. I'm supposed to have a question nailed down by February 15th. Hmmmm.....I think I'm going to do some work with Steven. I'm very interested to see how the behaviour decreases as his ability to read/comprehend increases. I also need to figure out why the word wall keeps stalling out. Even though they are only to learn ten new words each month, it's still not happening. Why? I can't do spelling with Steven with ten new words each week because he does not know them in just one week! One colleague says to give fewer words at a time. Another colleague says that a student cannot identify the word to spell it if he/she cannot read it first. It all seems to come back to phonemic awareness. So, my next question is...how do I teach Steven phonemic awareness and not make him feel like he is six years old? (Journal entry from January 28, 2005)

My Question

How can I help improve my student's literacy?

The Project

There are a number of factors which impact on a child's learning. Even in a self-contained classroom, where one would expect an optimal environment for children with learning differences to thrive, it is not always the case. The child with whom I worked with regard to improving his literacy skills received a great deal of one-to-one attention from me. Because he has been identified as having a learning disability and as having behavioural issues, there have been a great many challenges facing us over the past five months.

This child, we'll call him Steven, has a behaviour contract. He craves attention from anyone and everyone and he'll obtain this attention by any means possible. He is aggressive and disruptive almost the entire time he is in the classroom. When he knows an answer, he'll shout out, “This is SO easy”

followed by shouting out the answer. When he does not know the answer, he will often shout out, “This is SO stupid!” or “This sucks!”. He will often disrespect his classmates by laughing at them when they give an incorrect response. He continuously tries to obtain control of the classroom. He will interrupt and answer for the teacher. He will question his classmates or shout out at his classmates for doing something that he does not think is appropriate. This child behaves this way all day long. Why? Because this child is desperate to control what little he feels that he can. He has no control over where he lives or how little money his family has. He has no control over the lack of support at home for him. He has no control over his mother’s inability to follow through on anything that she needs to do in order to assist this child in his learning. What he can control, however, is how his classmates view him. He wants them to think that he’s cool. He’ll do whatever he has to in order to appear cool and not appear stupid! And, if he can constantly disrupt the class and monopolize the teacher’s time dealing with behavioural issues, he is not going to have to struggle and become frustrated and possibly not look cool when he is expected to learn something—especially when he is expected to read.

What is surprising, however, is that Steven enjoys reading. He is eager to read, one to one with the teacher. He wants to improve and takes full advantage of the fact that he has the teacher’s undivided attention and that she is helping him to read. Because Steven is a bright child, the teacher spent time conversing with him about different strategies that may or may not be effective. The challenge, frequently, when working with bright students who are twelve years old and who are reading at a grade one reading level is to make the reading interesting and not “babyish”. However, because maturity was on our side (Steven’s not mine) we were able to converse about how some of the skills he needed to practise were ones that were often learned in Kindergarten. I assured him that because he is a bright boy and because he is twelve, he would probably learn these skills much more quickly than a child in Kindergarten would. And, he did. I also spoke to Steven about how I came to this decision.

We had been doing work with Patricia Cunningham’s Four-Block programme. We had been working on the Month-by-Month Phonics for Upper Grades. The subtitle of this programme is *A Second Chance for Struggling Readers and Students Learning English*. High-frequency words are the focal point of the programme. We would follow the programme as it is set out in the book by Cunningham. I realized quickly that there was no way that Steven was learning to spell these words. It was taking him weeks and weeks and weeks, working on the same words. He was becoming increasingly frustrated. He was being reminded to “sound the words out”. Therein lies the problem.....Steven’s phonemic awareness was extremely limited. Without a great deal of cueing, he could not sound out words!

So, we put the high-frequency words on a back burner and we began with the word families. I quickly realized that this was too “advanced” in the sense that even though Steven could rhyme off all of the members of the “-at” family, he could not generalize. He could not see “-at” in “Atlantic” when asked to identify the ocean during social studies class. That is when he and I decided that he needs to be able to identify the sounds that the letters make. Steven was very bothered by the fact that he could not do this. I told him that there is a very effective way of him learning his letter sounds and remember them. It was called Jolly Phonics. Again, he and I discussed the fact that this is a programme that is usually done in Kindergarten. Steven’s response to me was that it did not matter to him, provided it was going to help him read better!

“Okay, I’ve tried the word wall thing again with Steven. It just doesn’t seem to work! He can sometimes spell the words in isolation but not consistently! There isn’t a lot of progress! It doesn’t help that he misses so much school! Whenever he’s presented with an unfamiliar word, no matter how much I remind him to remember what he knows, look for the smaller words in the word; he begins trying to sound out the word! I need to help him develop his phonemic awareness...but how?!?!? Jolly Phonics?!?! Then, the same old issue comes to light....how do I teach a junior/intermediate aged kid to read better and not give them “baby” things to read?” (Journal, February 15, 2005.)

We began the Jolly Phonics programme. Absenteeism was a big problem with Steven. No matter how much I tried to impress upon him that he needed to be here every day, no matter how much I presented him with incentives to improve his attendance, it did not seem to improve. Once he does come back to school, it feels as though we need to begin again, at the very beginning. We are not just reviewing that “S” says “Sssss”, we are learning all of the generalizing strategies that he has already learned, again.

After having been absent for a few days, Steven has come back to school. There has been some intervention with an attendance counselor. Steven is resentful as he likes being the one in control and he does NOT want to be at school. He decides that he is going to be extremely loud and disruptive in class. Because of this behaviour, he is given his Social Studies title page and asked to sit at the back of the room and work quietly. He is argumentative and oppositional but, he does finally comply. While sitting at the back of the classroom, he begins to throw pieces of eraser at his classmates. He continues to be loud and disruptive. We are all doing a very good job of ignoring the behaviour. He then proceeds to begin throwing pencils and markers. The more we ignore Steven’s behaviour, the more it escalates! He is eventually asked to leave the classroom. He has only managed to do a minimal amount of work. He would not comply with the educational assistant’s requests to do his work. He is upset with his teacher because she cannot provide him with the one-to-one attention that he is requesting. Steven’s behaviour eventually escalates to the point where he is suspended. After not having been there for several days, he is then suspended so that he will not be there for several more. It is an incredible challenge to reduce the gaps in a child’s learning when he is absent for an exorbitant amount of time.

When Steven returned back to school, he was given his work that he had done from the last time he was at school. He took one look at his folder and said, “Who did this to my folder? Who scribbled all over my social studies folder?” He also asked if he could start his title page for his Prince Edward Island over again. He did not believe, at first, that that was his work. It took some convincing before Steven would believe me that that was his work! He was in such a state while he was in class that he does not even remember doing that work!

Steven wants to read novels. He chooses novels that he is not going to be able to read. He quickly becomes frustrated with these novels, as they do not have picture cues for him to use. He is incredibly adept with using picture cues however; he is no longer interested in reading picture books. He agrees to read short novels from the “Sparklers” series.

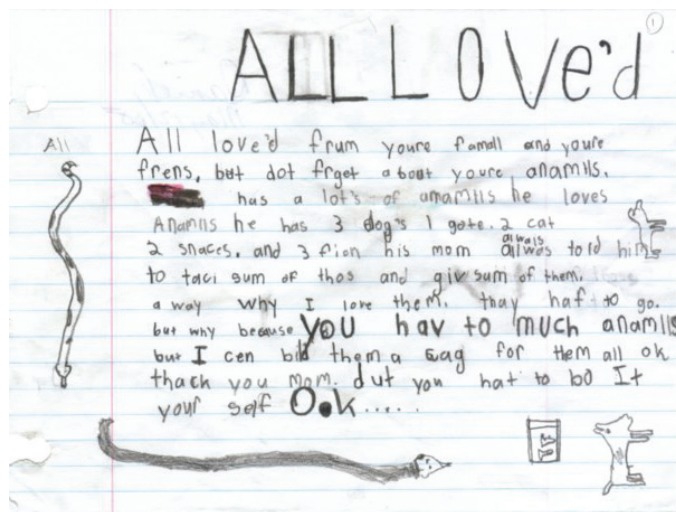
"I often see him reading these books. This is a new development. It's one that I'm going to encourage as Steven does not read with anywhere near enough fluency to comprehend what he has read." (Journal, February 16, 2005)

These are high interest, low vocabulary books. They often have a picture table of contents. Steven enjoys reading these books and feels a sense of accomplishment when he has read one independently. Because his fluency is weak, he often has difficulty with the comprehension questions that follow the chapters. To rectify this, the text and the questions are read to him orally as he follows along. Immediately after the information is read to him, he is able to accurately answer almost every comprehension question. Steven does not like the way that he sounds when he reads. During a discussion that he and I have, I suggest that he uses repetition as a strategy. I suggest that he read the same sentence(s) over and over again until he is reading with the desired fluency.

"Well, I haven't had a lot of time to do much of anything besides report cards and IEP's. Plus, it's been like a revolving door around here. Unfortunately, this moving in and out of students is extremely difficult for the students in my class. Steven has become more unsettled. When he's unsettled, there's often an escalation in behaviour. With an escalation in behaviour, there is often a suspension. So, when do I get to work with this child?" (Journal, March 4, 2005.)

The book, "Classrooms that Work" is extremely informative and I think that I would use it a great deal in a regular classroom. It does not seem very applicable for a Junior/Intermediate Mixed Exceptionalities classroom. There are not enough walls for thirteen individual word walls. There are not enough adults in the classroom to give each student the one-to-one attention that they need in order to see what would be considered a significant amount of progress!

Out of the blue, for no apparent reason, Steven decides that rather than working on his independent novel study, he'd rather write a story. This was completely unsolicited and most unexpected. When asked why he had written this story, he said that he did not know. Perhaps it is because students had been talking about their pets. Steven says that he has all of these pets however; that is not the case. At first glance, Steven's writing does not appear to have improved at all. After studying it with a trained/familiar eye, I see that he is attempting to write with a great deal of expression. Although he does not use the proper punctuation or spelling, for Steven, it is a well-written piece of work. Again, the fact that he wrote this of his own accord is also extremely meaningful.



Conclusion

There were many factors that inhibited this Action Research Project. I feel that it was not very successful because of these inhibitors. The first time we met as a group, it was the end of January. Four months is an extremely short period of time for an Action Research Project; compounded with the fact that I was working with an identified student who has severe behavioural issues and attendance problems, progress appears to be minimal, at best. After having spent time this summer attuning this child via his work, I have come to realize that what I thought were difficulties in attention may actually be difficulties with short-term memory. A longer time frame would have afforded more time for experimentation and potentially a greater opportunity for improvement in my student's ability. If I were his teacher this year, I would be addressing short-term memory issues, primarily and attention issues secondarily. Because of Steven's frequent absences from school, it was almost impossible to tell if his behaviour would have decreased as his reading improved.