

Educational Leadership

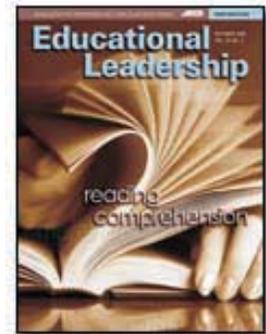
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Becoming an Engaged Reader

We need to engage students right from the start in reading, reflecting on, and talking about interesting texts.

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We recently read a series of letters to the editor¹ in which one writer told of a 1st grader who brings home simplistic books to decode each night during tearful homework sessions. Another letter described teachers being “forced to use a scripted reading program against their professional judgment.” Still another urged schools to “spend money on real books, not on basal readers and workbooks” and to stop spending “hours teaching phonics out of context, giving up developmentally appropriate activities in the process.”

These comments raise the question: In pursuit of narrow, short-term goals, are we giving up something important?

Instructional mandates have monetary, social, personal, and emotional costs, and we must weigh those potential costs against the benefits. If we spend a great deal of time on whole-class drills that are too easy for some students and too hard for others, how will we meet the needs of all students? If we teach students through stories that do not make sense to them, what are they learning about the act of reading? If students get an overload of isolated phonics instruction, what will they miss in terms of opportunities to behave as real readers and writers?

This is not an anti-phonics article. We offer our credentials: As authors and educators, we have advocated for and written about phonics instruction for years (Dahl, Scharer, Lawson, & Grogan, 2001; Fountas & Pinnell, 1999; Pinnell & Fountas, 1998). Basic knowledge of the building blocks of words is essential. But we also argue for a higher goal. We want to make two promises to every child: We will teach you to read, and we will help you become a *reader*—a literate person who experiences the power and joy of comprehending.

These two promises are inseparable. Learning to comprehend is an ongoing process, a thinking process that expands across time as the individual encounters different texts, in different ways, for different purposes. Students do not first learn to decode and then become readers; they must be engaged in reading, thinking about, and discussing interesting texts from the beginning. Some important insights about readers, teachers, texts, and emotions can help foster this kind of learning.

Readers

Reading is thinking cued by written language. We cannot think for students; we cannot even directly show them the complex operations they need to put in place. But we can teach in a way that gives students an idea of what effective readers do and supports them in using these strategies daily (see Fountas & Pinnell, 2005):

- Effective readers think *within the text*. They pick up the basic information to understand what the text is about. Both fiction and nonfiction reading require literal comprehension. In fiction, readers need to identify the characters and follow the story. In nonfiction, readers need to understand the topic, learn facts related to it, and remember and know where to locate important information.
- Effective readers think *beyond the text*. They draw on their own knowledge and experience to make sense of what they are reading. They make connections to their own lives. They imagine what the characters are feeling; they infer what the author is implying. They make predictions and then confirm or disprove them.
- Effective readers think *about the text*. They step back from the text to notice how it is crafted, to appreciate its language, to admire the writing, or to critique. They notice the organization of the text and use it to find information; they recognize underlying structures that the writer has used to convey information, such as compare/contrast. This kind of thinking not only contributes to rich understanding but also helps readers become better writers.

Reading is indeed a complex thinking process from the beginning.

Teachers

For two decades, we have studied classrooms in which teachers teach for comprehension. In an effective reading program, teachers coordinate a range of instructional approaches: independent reading, in which teachers confer with individual students; writing workshop, in which students' experience with the writing process promotes their understanding of text; word study, in which students look at letter-sound relationships and word structure; content-area study, in which students build background knowledge and concepts; shared and performance reading, in which students must think about the meaning of a text in order to decide on the appropriate expression; and more.

Here we describe two highly productive teaching contexts: interactive read-aloud and guided reading.

Interactive Read-Aloud and Literature Discussion

You can think of reading aloud as providing students with a massive infusion of comprehensible written language. In every way but decoding the words, listeners process texts that they hear read aloud (Fountas & Pinnell, 2005).

Usually taking place in whole-group settings, interactive read-aloud is an efficient way for students to expand their vocabulary and concepts and share and understand texts. Through

interactive read-aloud, teachers

- Create a community of readers.
- Teach students how to talk with one another about texts.
- Provide meaningful, enjoyable group experiences.
- Give students opportunities to process language and think about texts that are too difficult for most of them to read independently.
- Engage readers in thoughtful discussion.
- Model and provide group support for fluent, phrased reading.

Judy, a kindergarten teacher, had taught her students some routines surrounding interactive read-aloud. For example, she often paused and invited students to talk about their responses to the text, either in the whole group or in pairs. In the following example, which took place during a reading of *The Very Quiet Cricket*, by Eric Carle, notice how Judy helped students express theories about why a little cricket was silent. At this point in the story, the cricket had met several insects and each time had been unable to make a sound.

Teacher: "The little cricket wanted to answer, so he rubbed his wings together. But nothing happened. Not a sound!"

Kyla: What's wrong?

Teacher: I'm wondering, too.

John: Maybe he's just a baby and can't do it 'til he's grown.

Shada: Maybe he can do it later with his dad.

Teacher: Maybe he's too little?

Mike: Maybe he lost his voice.

Kyla: My mom lost her voice once.

Cara: Maybe it has to be nighttime.

Teacher: Let's see what's going to happen.

Later in the reading, when night fell and the cricket was still silent, Judy reminded students of Cara's theory that the cricket could talk only at night. Students hypothesized that one of the other reasons must be correct or that it needed to get even darker. Later, when Judy read "and this time . . ." and paused for the ellipsis, one enthusiastic listener blurted out, "It made a sound!" The phrase "and this time," along with the pause, signaled to the listeners that the resolution was coming. The students in this kindergarten classroom were already learning how language works, how books work, and how to think while reading.

Interactive read-aloud sessions can become the foundation for small-group literature discussion. Guided by the teacher, a group of four to six students discuss a text together. Students in the group are at various levels of reading proficiency, but all enjoy talking about

age-appropriate materials. Here is part of the discussion of a group of 2nd graders who had heard Vera Williams's *A Chair for My Mother* read aloud.

Charlie: I thought it was real scary when they were coming home and they saw their house burning.

Teacher: You thought that was a scary part of the story?

Janet: It's like in the book...we had a fire in our house and everything got black with smoke and it was scary, but we put it out.

Sarah: That's why they were saving so much money, because their stuff all burned.

Janet: But nobody got killed like happened on the TV last night. Nobody got killed in our fire either.

Andrew: They were putting money in the jar and then they had a fire.

Sarah: No, they were just *remembering* how bad the fire was and how they didn't have any furniture and stuff.

Andrew: Oh, they were saying why they wanted the chair?

Sarah: Yes, but they still didn't have a chair and her Mama didn't have any place to sit.

Teacher: I'm just thinking how they felt after all that, when they finally brought their chair home.

Fred: They rode on it in the truck!

In literature discussions like this one, the teacher's participation is important, but students also respond to one another. Articulating thinking daily through this kind of discussion not only extends students' understanding but also sets a clear expectation that reading is about meaning.

Guided Reading

During guided reading, teachers support students as they read a challenging text that they could probably not read well without support. Guided reading is small-group instruction for students who exhibit similar reading behaviors and who read at similar levels. The teacher selects a text and introduces it; then each student reads the text either softly or silently. The teacher observes, notes students' reading behaviors, and sometimes interacts briefly with individuals. After the reading, students discuss the meaning of the story, and the teacher helps students practice processing strategies and engages the students in phonics/word study work. Guided reading may also include extending the text through writing, drawing, discussion, drama, or another kind of analysis (Fountas & Pinnell, 1996).

In the following discussion, Daniel, the teacher, introduces 2nd grade students to a new book.

Teacher: Your new book is called *Henry and Mudge: The First Book*. It's very exciting because this is a chapter book. The author is Cynthia Rylant. What do you think it

might mean to say *The First Book*?

Janeen: Are there more books about them?

Teacher: That's right. This is the first book, but there are more books about Henry and Mudge, and you might like to read some of them later. [Daniel goes on to point out the characters and invite the students to talk a little about them, making connections to their own knowledge of pets. He also points out the table of contents and helps them notice that chapters are alternately titled *Henry* and *Mudge*.] So all through this book, you'll see chapters, and the title helps you think what the chapter will be about. You get to read the first three chapters today. You find out why Henry wants a dog, and you read about how he gets Mudge. Just look at page 11. On the left, you see Mudge.

Vera: He's a puppy. He's really little.

Teacher: Then on the right, you see some collars. Those are all the collars Mudge wore. What happened?

Vera: He grew really big!

Teacher: Listen while I read on page 11. "He grew out of seven collars in a row. And when he finally stopped growing...[Daniel turns the page] he weighed 180 pounds, he stood three feet tall, and he drooled."

Jorge: He's bigger than my dog.

Teacher: Yes, he's really big. Look back at page 11. Do you see the three little dots? That means that you pause and then keep going to the other page to finish the sentence. The author was helping us really notice how big Mudge got. OK, read the first three chapters, and if you have a little time when you finish, you can take out some paper and do a quick sketch of anything this story reminds you of.

In the interchange above, which took less than five minutes, Daniel provided information that would help students read with understanding. Notice that Daniel not only directed students' attention to details that they would need in order to read the text with literal understanding but also helped them notice the organization (thinking *about* the text) and connect the book to their own lives (thinking *beyond* the text).

Texts

Without interesting and engaging texts, reading instruction is joyless. We need texts that captivate students even at the beginning levels. At least three kinds of texts are important to provide a rich base for reading comprehension:

- *Books to read aloud*. Every classroom needs plenty of carefully selected, age-appropriate books to read aloud to students. There are wonderful picture books in every genre, including fantasy, informational text, biography, and poetry. You can read favorites again and again, enabling young students to internalize powerful language.

- *Leveled books.* Leveled books are categorized along a gradient of difficulty to help teachers organize their small-group instruction. They provide a ladder of support so that students can take on more difficult texts with teacher support and, in the process, expand their strategies for thinking within, beyond, and about texts (Pinnell & Fountas, 2001).
- *Classroom libraries.* Students should be able to choose from a rich variety of books that they can read independently. Students must experience massive quantities of comprehensible reading to build successful processing systems. Research has shown that the quantity of reading that students do really counts (see Anderson, Wilson, & Fielding, 1998). Students select books not primarily for their level but because the topic, the author, or the series interests them.

Emotions

One area is largely neglected in the current conversation about literacy instruction but is essential to creating successful readers: the role of emotion in memory and comprehension. Neuroscientists have proven that reading comprehension is a complex and individual constructive process. They have also found that beginning readers create networks in their brains to link what they see on the page to the language they speak. Emotions organize the neuronal networks required to think, retrieve previously learned information, understand, and remember (Ratey, 2001).

Parents and teachers know that there are individual differences in how children learn to read. Some children, when facing reading difficulty for the first time, quit immediately; other children enjoy the challenge of trying to figure out the problem and persist in their attempts. No matter how a child reacts to the learning situation, however, adults' responses affect the child's emotional, social, and cognitive development (Lyons, 2003a).

Michelle, a shy, withdrawn 1st grader, did not participate in classroom activities the first few weeks of school. When encouraged to react to a book read aloud, she became anxious and whispered, "I don't know." The concerned teacher called Michelle's mother to ask for advice. The mother said not to expect anything from "dumb Michelle." She complained that her daughter had had difficulty learning since she was born and would probably have to be held back.

If children repeatedly sense disapproval, they are likely to remember negative experiences and avoid putting themselves in those circumstances again. Michelle lacked the motivation and confidence to respond in class; she felt incapable of learning. Children who are experiencing difficulty learning to read commonly become frustrated. Continued emotional distress can create deficits in a child's intellectual abilities, crippling his or her capacity to learn (Levine, 2002). That is why we need to look for and support children's approximations or partially correct responses. Consider the following example.

David had been classified as learning disabled in kindergarten and 1st grade by two teams of professionals (Lyons, 2003b). He was the lowest-achieving child in his 1st grade class, with little interest in classroom activities and a short attention span. He was unable to write any

words and was reading below grade level. David was recommended for Reading Recovery, an individual tutoring program for 1st graders that builds on children's strengths. When David exited the Reading Recovery program 99 lessons later, he was reading at end-of-1st-grade level and was no longer labeled as LD, ADHD, or language delayed.

Carol, David's Reading Recovery teacher, noted that their relationship had contributed to his learning. Carol demonstrated a genuine interest in David and his learning, which helped change his attitude and increase his interest in reading. Carol also purposefully selected books and writing topics that built on David's strengths and interests, which further motivated him to engage as a reader and writer.

The brain's organization reflects its experience. If the child's experience is characterized by fear, anxiety, stress, and helplessness, then the chemical responses to these emotions become the most powerful architects of the brain (Damasio, 2003). Fortunately, emotionally positive learning experiences can change children's attitudes and provide motivation to learn.

A Higher Goal

Our challenge, then, is not only to ensure acquisition of basic skills but also to guarantee high levels of comprehension and a positive emotional response to reading. Educators have the resources and the knowledge to achieve this goal, but we will need to move beyond politics to do so. If we attend to readers, teaching, texts, and emotions and are willing to pursue complex solutions to this complex problem, all students can both learn to read and become readers.

Endnote

¹ Nancy Barth, Derek Boucher, and James Venable, in Backtalk, *Phi Delta Kappan*, May 2005, pp. 717-719.

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