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Humans move along the literacy continuum from birth. In some homes literacy is valued and emphasized. Children observe reading and writing in the home for pleasure and as entertainment. They are read to at an early age (from infancy) consistently, and are involved in conversations about the stories and the language found in the text. The children are involved at first in one-way conversations about text, and then as their language develops they become more involved in question and answers which occur naturally between parents and children while reading. This shared book reading and the ensuing discussion between parents and children is a critical step to literacy.

> Shared book reading is not only an opportunity to gain knowledge about the conventions of print, it is also an opportunity for extended talk, often decontextualized talk, that is stimulated by the material being read. Divergent styles of interaction are associated with different longer term effects, with the best outcomes across a variety of measures being associated with an interactive, dyadic, or collaborative approach in which the child's *verbal participation is encouraged*" (Backman, 1993).

Language development is greatly affected as well, by the environment in which a child finds himself. Emergent literacy focuses on those readers who are "just blooming", or at the novice edge of the novice to expert continuum. In general these individuals are young, preschool and kindergarten students who are emerging as readers and writers. As teachers, it becomes quickly apparent that all children are not equipped similarly when entering school. Children from literate homes have over

1,000 hours of informal reading, writing and conversational encounters before coming to school. (Cunningham, 1995). This includes time spent talking about books (print) and the ideas and experiences they represent. Estimates are that children from literate homes experience almost an hour each day of informal reading and writing encounters such as the following: being read to, trying to read a favorite book, watching someone write a note, trying to write, manipulating magnetic letters, and talking with someone about environmental print such as grocery labels and signs. From these varied but connected experiences, these children know what reading and writing are really for and that you use words and letters in order to create meaning. Books fertilize the writing/reading/ speaking/thinking process. If children make the important connections between print and their own lives, then they are truly readers. The Michigan Definition of Reading states that "Reading is the process of constructing meaning through the dynamic interaction between the reader's existing knowledge, the meaning suggested by the writer's language, and the context of the reading situation."

That is to say that simply knowing all of the words on the page will not suffice if one is truly reading. Rather, reading occurs behind the eyes, and we read with our brain. (Smith, 1997) Reading is an active process whereby the words on the page are given meaning by the individual reader. This meaning varies from individual to individual and is dependent upon the existing knowledge, or prior knowledge of the reader. That schema helps the reader sort, classify, and reclassify new information. By confirming or rejecting predictions and putting individual meaning to that new information, the reader has interacted with the text, not simply absorbed facts as a tabula rasa.

## The Reading Process

According to the Michigan Definition of Reading, the cues of reading are syntax (word order), semantics (meaning), and phonics (letter-sound relationships). Given that, miscues are certainly common, even for the best readers. All of these cues

must work together to create meaning. Miscues occur when our prediction, based on prior knowledge of letters, words, word order, and subject matter, are surprised. Miscues are tied into prediction. When our predictions are incorrect, we have miscued. Repeated exposure to words, text, styles of writing and writing themselves allows students to hypothesize, predict, validate, or reject more effectively, simply by experience.

This seems straightforward enough. Invite a student to read a text, combine it with what they already know and come up with a new meaning. But what about those students who are reluctant readers? What about students with special needs who hold reading at arm's length and refuse to crack a book? What makes children view themselves as non-readers?

Quite often these children arrive at school with lack of experiential background. Language ability is a strong predictor of reading achievement and early readers are characterized by superior language ability. This is not necessarily because of greater intelligence, but because of more experience and more practice in the business of literacy. These children maintain their advantage over their peers well into the elementary school grades. (Huba, 1989). These students have a deficit in meaningful oral language experiences. In homes where literacy is not a large part of the environment, children will have more difficulty in school, since their "hours" of literacy experiences are far less than those who have been read to regularly. Reading to children offers the opportunity of decontextualized talk, which is important in the development of ideas which are not a part of the present context or situation. This ability to talk about things in the past or present is developed over time through conversations about print with parents and other significant adults. The literacy experiences a child has in the home prior to entering school directly affect his success with formal reading and writing instruction.

When a text deals with the unfamiliar it is more difficult or impossible to comprehend. It has been found that "the major reasons for lack of reading comprehension among remedial readers at the secondary level are poor motivation, lack of experience and egocentricity." (Collins, 1996) Once a child has experienced failure over time, they will find themselves in a catch-22 situation. They don't understand what they read because they lack experience and language skills so they don't read, don't comprehend and then the downward spiral begins. These students do not participate in class, balk at reading for pleasure and are in a continual state of confusion. Unfortunately, at this point, no learning is taking place. Instead, the child becomes an expert at masking his deficiencies but makes no progress in improving his reading ability. " Learning depends on prediction and comprehension. It takes place continually except in conditions of confusion, when no comprehension is possible." (Smith, 1997). There are seemingly two tracks to literacy. One is for the child with plenty of early literacy experiences. The other track is for the child who enters school with significantly fewer hours of literacy experience. This child will struggle.

## Reading Remediation

In order to "help" these struggling students, schools typically pull them out of their regular classrooms and place in remedial reading programs. By definition, remedial should mean corrective. So why is it that schools take struggling students out of the general classroom, further limit their oral language experiences and focus upon skill and drill exercises supplemented with lists of isolated vocabulary lists? This phonics/sight word instruction reduces reading to the point whereby all of the meaning is gone. "Paradoxically, children who don't learn to read easily are often expected to learn in the most difficult way possible. They may be assigned to remedial reading programs that are neither remedial nor reading." (Smith, 1997) In a recent study designed to examine the reading instruction and grouping practices provided for students with learning disabilities by special education teachers in resource room settings (Vaughn, Moody, & Schumm, 1998) most teachers relied heavily upon basal readers and phonics/ vocabulary worksheets. During reading instruction,

"most of the teachers either told students the word they did not know or asked them to read the sentence again and figure it out. They were not observed teaching phonics in context. When phonics was taught, it was taught out of context and largely through worksheets." There is virtually no oral language component to this type of instruction. Rather, students are further isolated, and even more of the meaning is removed. "Observations revealed that the students…spent the majority of their time copying words, sentences, and other material from the board." (Moody, 2000). Not surprisingly, the results of this study revealed that these students made little or no growth in their reading ability. So what then, are the options for these students?

All children have unique needs, interests and abilities regardless of whether or not they are classified as "special needs." There exists a wide range of reading abilities in every classroom. "Seldom are two children ready to be taught reading from the same material at the same time." (Swartz, Hendricks, 2000). One option is to teach to the middle ability level of the classroom. That is, to direct instruction and classroom materials to the students who are "average." The problem with this approach is obvious. "If teachers teach to the middle level of a class's ability, using only grade-level materials, students who read above grade level are not being challenged and become frustrated. Students reading below grade level find the material daunting, also become frustrated, and have little motivation to learn." (George, 2000). In this case, inclusion is not inclusive and the less capable students tend to shut down, do not participate in class discussions and fall farther and farther behind. At the other end of the spectrum are the students who are ready to move on and find this middle of the road classroom instruction boring. This situation does not make for a productive classroom environment but instead, lends itself to frustration and failure for both the students and instructor.

**Benefit of Literature Circles**

The ultimate goal is to have students reading and engaging in meaningful dialogue about what they read. "Struggling middle school readers need real purposes for reading, not surprising given that motivation is highest when students engage in tasks for their own intrinsic reasons." (Ivey, 1999). The second step is to have them discuss what they have read. It is through this dialogue that true comprehension occurs. The work of Vygotsky supports this view. According to Vygotsky, "the internal development processes that are necessary for learning are able to develop only when children are interacting with people in their environment and in cooperation with their peers." (Eeds, Wells, 1991). This deep level of understanding results from interaction with others, not skill and drill performed in seclusion. So what can be done to motivate students to read? Students need to be interested in what they are reading, have time to read, and have an opportunity to talk about what they have read with others.

It is important to have available interesting books and other reading materials that "hook" reluctant readers. This is true at any level. Regardless of a student's ability, "getting the right books into middle school students' hands will make a world of difference in their inclination to read." (Ivey, 1999). Whether a student is a special needs student, reluctant reader, or not, the same factors influence the book selection process. (Swartz, Hendricks, 2000). Children are more likely to read if they are interested in what they are reading. Students with special needs have the same reading interests as typically developing children. Providing choice in reading materials increases the likelihood of engagement in the text. If a student has an interest in the book and has some choice in the selection process, typically they will have relevant prior knowledge. "The best predictor of what and how someone will learn is what they already know." (Poplin, 1988). Their personal investment in the selection process will allow them to link the text to their own experiences. It follows then that their comprehension will increase, they will read more, and these successes will build upon themselves.

Students need to have consistent, predictable amounts of time set aside for reading. There is

strong evidence to support the fact that "sustained silent-reading programs boost students' fluency as readers." (Atwell, 1998). The only way to become a better reader is to read. Many reluctant readers live in homes where reading is not supported, or the atmosphere is not conducive to sustained periods of reading. For this reason, it becomes critical to set aside class time to guarantee that these students will have time for the sole purpose of engagement in meaningful text.

The next piece to this puzzle lies in supporting students in their efforts to make their own meaning from the text, engage in discussion with peers, and reassess their own ideas. "Learning often proceeds from whole to part to whole." (Poplin, 1988). The small group discussions of a literature circle make it more likely that all students will be able to participate. It is much less threatening to share ideas in a small group than it is in a large group setting. When students collaborate in small groups with their friends they are more comfortable taking risks and participating in discussions.

Literature circles are an ideal environment for all students, even those students who view themselves as non-readers. When students are given the freedom to align themselves with a peer group of friends, negotiate the book they will read within certain parameters, (biography, Newbery Award, Fantasy, etc.), have books available from which to choose, set their own reading pace, have time in class to read, have time to discuss what they have read and finally, present their book to the class through a collaborative effort—the positive outcome is far beyond what can be achieved with a single student completing phonics worksheets in isolation.

The social interaction evidenced in literature circle groups provides opportunities for negotiated meaning among students. There are more opportunities to participate and develop the oral language component of literacy. The negotiated meaning requires each student to activate prior knowledge, their own constructed meaning based upon that knowledge and then during and after group discussion to reconstruct an even deeper meaning. The recounting of personal stories, inquiry and

critical thinking skills as a group supports the group and makes it a much stronger support in literacy development. These discussions will develop oral language ability, interpersonal skills, and the ability to assimilate views other than one's own in text interpretation. This higher level of constructed meaning is the ideal for learning. Each student can move along the continuum at his own pace since each student is supported within his Zone of Proximal Development (Vygotsky, 1978).

**Conclusion**

The universal concept is that students want to read authentic text, they want to talk about books with group member that they choose, they want to choose their own books to read and they want lots of time to read in class. The research related to self-selection of reading materials supports the notion that the books students find most interesting are those they have selected for their own reasons and purposes. Students who participated in literature circles for at least a year, formerly reluctant readers, become confident, engaged and knowledgeable readers who truly viewed themselves as readers. They were not reading simply to complete a task, but because they were enthused about their reading. Students who are part of a literature circle are more likely to be engaged in what they are reading, constructing new meaning based upon their own schema, interacting socially discussing what they have read and negotiating new meanings. Literature circles complement the Michigan Definition of Reading, engage more students than a traditional reading classroom, and most important , are more inclusive than the traditional methods of reading remediation.

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