

Reading is Not a Guessing Game

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As a speech pathologist and reading specialist, I have spent many years in the public school system in Boston. Many of the schools followed an inclusionary model so I spent a lot of time in the classrooms. I have also attended my share of workshops and professional development sessions sponsored by different schools where the main focus was directed toward teaching strategies rather than on skills. I have spent many years researching and shouting from the roof tops that strategies will not work without skills. I know that this may sound like a “no brainer” because I would have thought that it was just logical that you need a solid foundation from which to build upon. I have found over the years as a reading specialist that reading is not just one skill but it is actually a process made up of many skills. Each of these skills is built upon the one before forming a solid foundation to allow the student to become a fluent and competent reader.

Many times I will turn to sports to explain my thoughts on teaching reading even though I am not a very good athlete. I use sports due to the fact that I wanted to use a subject, which many of my students can relate to and understand. One example I use quite often is one that relates to a football quarterback. The quarterback could have a great strategy or play but the play is doomed to fail if the quarterback does not throw the ball accurately or the receiver is unable to run the play as well as to catch the ball. The play is based upon the skills of both the quarterback as well as the receiver. One has to accurately throw the ball and the other has to be able to catch the ball. The successful execution of the play is solely based upon the skills of the players. In the same light, students need to possess a set of skills in order for

a student to be taught to be a successful reader. As I have stated to many teachers over the years, reading is not a skill but a process that requires a set of skills to execute well.

In the years that I have been teaching middle school, I have seen many programs to teach students how to comprehend text but the problem was that many of their students were unable to read well or read fluently. The problem is that by the time a student gets to middle school, it is assumed that they can read and I have not found many schools at this grade level that offer programs to teach the student how to learn. I would think that schools would have already learned that research has taught us for years that students need to break the code of letters and sounds before they will be able to master the concept of comprehension. As stated by (Braunger, Lewis, 2006), "The research of the last two decades emphasizes that phonemic awareness plays a critical role in the development of the ability to decode and to read for meaning."

I can't count the number of students that I have worked with in the middle school who could not sound out a multisyllabic word that was unfamiliar to them. Many were able to read by sight but not anywhere close to grade level. In order for them to be able to read by sight only, on the middle school level, they would have had to memorize thousands of words. What is more humorous is the fact that many of my students who are being taught the strategies of comprehension are unable to sound out and spell the word comprehension. On top of that many of my students had no idea the meaning of comprehension even though they are supposedly being taught the concept in their classroom. Over two decades ago Laberge and Samuels (1974) showed that lack of decoding fluency resulted in poor comprehension.

In order for the reader to be able to be successful in reading comprehension, s/he needs a certain level of fluency and word automaticity. As noted by (Braunger, Lewis, 2006), automaticity in word recognition is important because it frees up the reader's attention to the meaning of what is being read. Many of the students spend most of their brain's cognitive time trying to figure out how to decode the words which leaves them little cognitive support to derive meaning from the text. I am sure it must be both frustrating for the student as well as for the teacher to have a student struggle through a whole paragraph and then not able to explain or to demonstrate understanding as what they had just read.

In my own research I have spent most of my time thinking about the brain, which led me to discover the importance of voice in relation to processing and decoding information. When authors write their text they are adding their voice to their words, which provides underlying meaning, and mental imagery to the words being written.

In talking about voice, you then need to talk about the skills related to finding the voice in the text. This goes back to learning the skills necessary to be able to read the words as well as to be able to comprehend and infer meaning. The author has presented the reader with his thoughts and ideas and it is up to the reader to be able to decipher the information hidden within the text. The reader needs to use the proper prosody, intonation and rate in order to be able to ascertain the meaning the author had in mind for the reader to understand. As noted by Kinniburgh and Newman, "When readers embed appropriate volume, tone emphasis, phrasing and other elements in oral expression, they are giving evidence of actively interpreting or constructing meaning from the passage." As noted by (Buehl, 1999), "An entire layer of meaning is missed when students understand that reading is an act of communication with another person."

A student needs to be able to visualize the text being presented by the author. Many times I have read with students and asked them what they are visualizing, and often they are picturing items that are totally different than the author had intended for the reader to see. As noted by Jacobson in the website The WiLearns, "Children learning to read or struggling reader, may not always apply the strategy of visualizing as they read. Instead, they may only "see" the words on the page; thus a whole critical layer of meaning is lost as they merely grapple with words." I constantly say to my students, "What does the author want you to picture". I want them to understand that the author is writing the text for the reader who needs to be able to interpret and comprehend put the words on the page. Reading is not a guessing game but a process made up of a set of skills, which enables the reader to decipher and decode the author's voice from the words written on the page.