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## Meaningful Reading: Instruction for Children Experiencing Reading Difficulty

Carol A. Kirk\*

\*University of Wisconsin-La Crosse

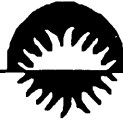
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# Meaningful Reading: Instruction for Children Experiencing Reading Difficulty

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## **Abstract**

Traditional instruction in reading is grounded in a bottom-up model which asserts that learning occurs from part to whole. Thomas C. O'Brien (1989) suggests that this model was fueled by the industrial revolution in America. Educators developed an assembly line mentality, which assumed that readers are built like cars —part by part. If all the parts which go into a car are assembled correctly and in the prescribed order, then the final product should run well.



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Seth, age eight, sits before the computer typing his new story. He invents words when he is not sure of the correct spelling and smiles with satisfaction. His tutor sits at a nearby table observing the process Seth goes through as he creates. She also notes spelling patterns Seth needs to learn.

Kellie and her tutor have just returned from an autumn walk around the campus. Kellie did not know the word *autumn*. She lacked a great many experiences with life and language which one might expect a nine year old to have had. Now she sits surrounded by beautiful leaves and books about autumn. She and her tutor will press the leaves to use as illustrations in the autumn book Kellie is preparing to write.

Mark, age twelve, pastel chalk in hand, ponders how to portray God in a group story he has helped write. Cory, age nine, shy and withdrawn, brings the letter he has written to Reggie Jackson for me to read. He has read a book about Jackson, and he is preparing to write an original baseball story.

Seth, Kellie, Mark and Cory are four of the children who have received instruction at the reading center of a state

university. Their learning experiences differ significantly from what one would have observed in a remedial reading setting just a few years ago because the paradigm which guides instruction in reading is shifting. The purpose of this paper is to present a holistic approach to the instruction of children with reading difficulties. After a brief overview of the traditional paradigm which has been predominant in reading education in recent years and some of the problems associated with it, I will present the holistic model which now guides instruction in the reading center, illustrating the model with entries from a tutor's diary.

### **Shifting paradigms in reading instruction**

Traditional instruction in reading is grounded in a bottom-up model which asserts that learning occurs from part to whole. Thomas C. O'Brien (1989) suggests that this model was fueled by the industrial revolution in America. Educators developed an assembly line mentality, which assumed that readers are built like cars — part by part. If all the parts which go into a car are assembled correctly and in the prescribed order, then the final product should run well. Likewise, reading was broken down into its smallest constituent parts, phonemes. The familiar phonics approach begins with letter names and letter-sound correspondences, and progresses to the reading of stories with carefully controlled vocabularies and limited plots. Children complete numerous worksheets, practicing isolated skills in an orderly scope and sequence by filling in circles, drawing lines or writing answers requiring only a few words. "Comprehension is viewed as a product that results from a student's ability to call words and offer expected answers to questions and assignments" (Glazer, Searfoss and Gentile, 1988, p. 5). The curriculum is dictated largely by the text. The assumption is that if all the parts — sound, sight words, sentence structures — are assembled in the appropriate manner, the end product will be a good

reader. The role of the teacher, in this approach, is to teach basal material, disseminate information, oversee drills and test to see that skills are mastered.

In the bottom-up approach, meaning is viewed as linear and hierarchical with emphasis on what the reader extracts from the printed page. The assumption is that "readers understand text by analyzing the print as they move through successive levels of analysis" (Lipson and Wixson, 1991, p. 7). Yet in real reading situations, people use different strategies when they read for understanding. They sample print, picking up only as much information as they need in order to comprehend (Smith, 1985).

Many children who have received bottom-up instruction have learned to read, though whether they learned because of, or in spite of, this skill-driven approach is not altogether clear. Sadly, significant numbers of children have not learned to read or have learned very slowly. These children fall further and further behind their peers and are eventually labeled remedial or learning disabled. Some have never understood the purpose of reading. When asked why people read, they reply, "to get the words right." Some of these children are very good at getting the words right. They can read fluently and with good expression, but cannot retell or answer questions about what they have read. Others have never deciphered the decoding system with its myriad rules and exceptions. To them, reading is nonsense. The traditional program of remediation involves extensive teaching of isolated subskills and reteaching, over and over, of those skills not mastered through what some termed drill and kill. The assumption is that eventually, if skills are practiced enough, they will be mastered. In spite of repeated drill, many children have not grown appreciably toward becoming literate individuals.

For these children, the joy of reading, and the self-confidence that comes with success, have been killed.

Fortunately, recent research emerging in the fields of psycholinguistics and cognitive psychology has provided a new paradigm of language learning and given educators insight into the processes involved in reading.

New initiatives in reading instruction are focused on a top-down model which views reading as a transactive process whereby readers actively construct meaning by interacting with print (Rosenblatt, 1978). In this holistic philosophy, sometimes called whole language, ideas are more important than printed words (Glazer, et al., 1988). Language is viewed as integrated, not fragmented. Once children have developed an oral language base, language processes — reading, writing, speaking and listening — develop simultaneously as children use language in authentic contexts. The readers' prior knowledge and experience enable them to make sense of print. Meaning resides in the reader. Using language cues to search their memories and predict outcomes (Glazer, et al., 1988), readers sample the text as needed to confirm predictions and generate new hypotheses (Goodman, 1968). Since meaning is contextual, isolated drill and practice is viewed as counterproductive. Instead, instruction begins with whole units such as stories and poems and moves to specifics.

In this child-centered approach, attention is also paid to the affective dimension of learning. Learning is natural. Children are always learning when they are in a meaningful environment (Smith, 1985). "Students will learn what is personally meaningful to them" (Rhodes and Dudley-Marling, 1988, p. xii).

When a child is struggling as a reader, it is not assumed that the problem lies within. Reading professionals look beyond neurological and perceptual deficits to the environment in which the child is expected to learn. According to Lipson and Wixson (1991, p. 18), "Factors such as interest, the amount of time and effort required, willingness to take risks, or perceived competence can influence children's decisions whether to use their skills or not." Therefore, attention must be given to the physical, intellectual and social-emotional aspects of the environment. Language learning takes on a sense of purposefulness for children in an environment where reading and writing are personally meaningful and are shared in authentic and meaningful ways (Lipson and Wixson, 1991, p. 344-45). Children are not asked to sit in separated desks, be quiet and do their own work. Rather, a whole language classroom is characterized by the hum of learning (Calkins, 1986).

Within the context of this literate environment, teachers observe what children are trying to do and then give them the support they need in order to be successful. They provide blocks of time for reading and writing, allow children to make choices based on their interests, guide learning and encourage children to share.

### **A holistic model for remedial instruction**

At The Reading Center, it is assumed that all children can learn to read. Tutors determine what each child can do and build on that foundation through developmentally appropriate experiences. Children are immersed in reading, writing and oral language every time they come.

The physical environment is inviting. When they first enter, children find areas decorated in themes which build on their interest. Teenage mutant ninja turtles border the edges of one area; basketball players leap toward hoops in another.

There are places to share books children have read, to publish original writing, and to display books which might interest the children. Computers are also available. As tutoring gets underway, the children often add decorations to the areas. This is their space, and we want them to be comfortable.

Attention is also given to the social-emotional environment. Early in the tutoring experience, the children participate in shared reading/writing experiences. As tutoring continues, children become comfortable enough to share their work with others. In place of basal readers, our shelves are filled with literature for children and adolescents. In place of workbooks and comprehension skill kits, there are spiral notebooks, paper, pens, pencils and markers. Children also visit the education library regularly, where they are encouraged to check out children's and adolescent literature to read at home.

One of the tutors' first tasks is to get to know the children and create a positive intellectual environment. The children are affirmed as valuable and interesting individuals who bring a wealth of knowledge and life experience with them. They experience success the first day and every ensuing day. Failure is not a word we use. Children are encouraged to read and write for real reasons, to take risks with reading and writing, and to discover personal reasons for reading and writing.

The children's needs drive instruction which is built on strengths. Information has been collected through on-campus assessment, parent interviews, and information supplied by schools and outside agencies. In addition, tutors gather information that is still needed to inform their decisions about instruction. As a multi-dimensional picture of the child takes form, tutors plan authentic instruction for the children which



takes into account their individual development and provides experiences that reflect the literate world. Assessment continues as an integral part of instruction.

All learning including the learning of skills occurs in a meaningful context. Visitors to the Reading Center find children engaged in a wide variety of activities. Some children dictate language experience stories to their tutors, who record them. The children read their dictated stories aloud to their tutors several times until they are familiar with all the words. They may then choose words they particularly want to learn to read. These words are added to personal word banks which become resources for skill development and references for children as they write. The tutors can also select words that exhibit spelling patterns or phonic generalizations which the children need to learn. Words can also be selected which include frequently confused letters, as well. These are but a few possibilities.

The best way to learn to read is to read (Smith, 1985). Children in the program read a wide variety of tradebooks. Daily, tutors and children read together. Children are encouraged to choose books of appropriate difficulty on topics of personal interest, and they are taught how to make good choices.

Children also read predictable books. Rhodes and Dudley-Marling (1988, p. 87) point out that "reading materials that support the prediction of certain features of text are especially valuable for readers who aren't fluent or don't use effective reading strategies." Children use their background experience and their knowledge of language to read predictable books successfully. Many such stories have been printed in Big Books which can be read and modeled to groups of children. They can also be used for strategy and skill learning in much the same way as language experience stories.

Wordless books are another excellent resource. Children create original stories which are consistent with the picture sequence. These stories, like language experience stories, may be dictated to the tutors or written by the children. Expository text also has an important place in reading instruction. Older children often experience difficulty in school because they lack reading and writing strategies required for comprehension of textbooks and the metacognitive awareness which would allow them to use strategies effectively. Their textbooks become the resources used to improve content area learning. They learn to preview text, to organize information by identifying the text patterns, and to activate and connect prior knowledge to text. They learn "fix-it" strategies which help them comprehend content-specific vocabulary, and they learn to reflect on what they have read and organize it in some framework to make it easier to remember. Expository and narrative writing are used to support learning. At the same time, the tutor can help children develop the fluency, vocabulary, and word analysis skills they need in order to become mature readers. Children also read informational books of personal interest and learn to do new things, such as build aerodynamic paper airplanes and polish stones in a rock tumbler.

Fluency develops as children engage in frequent extended periods of reading. Assisted reading strategies such as neurological impress reading, repeated reading and echoic reading are also employed in authentic contexts to improve fluency.

Writing and reading are connected as integrated language processes, as can be seen in several of the above activities. Since writers become better readers and readers become better writers (Smith, p. 1983), and since children who are experiencing difficulty with reading usually have related

difficulty with writing, they are encouraged to write a great deal. Children often write personal responses to the literature they read. Sometimes, a piece of literature becomes an invitation to write an original piece (Calkins, 1986). In addition, most children also write, illustrate and publish their own original stories which they then read and share with their peers. With the young authors' permission, these books are displayed in a hall showcase for others to read and enjoy. Another popular activity is letter writing. For example, children often write to their sports heroes and anxiously await replies. Children also engage in personal journal writing, written conversation, and dialogue journals.

When the children write, the focus is on meaning. Personal writing is not corrected, but children edit writing which will be shared with an audience after they have their ideas down as they want them. The purpose of this approach is to remove the roadblocks of spelling, punctuation and other conventions of print which have previously been emphasized over meaning, creating more concern about correctness than ideas. The tutor's role is to identify reading and writing strategies which will help the children move forward, provide models of how the strategies help them construct meaning, support children's efforts to use the strategies in context and gradually remove their support (Pearson and Gallagher, 1983). Children must be able to use the strategies independently before they can be said to have learned them.

### **A model of the tutoring process**

Keith was eight years old when he first came to the Reading Center. He is a very bright child, but has had numerous health problems, including ear infections, for several years. Keith missed school frequently, and there were resulting gaps in his reading and writing background. He comes from an educated, active family, and his parents read to him

frequently. Reading at the primer level, Keith had fallen behind his peers by the end of first grade. There was talk of a special education referral. Keith was beginning to think there was something wrong with him.

Keith attended tutoring sessions for two semesters. Four goals were established for his tutoring: 1) develop expanded word knowledge and interactive use of the cueing systems; 2) continue to develop reading and writing processes; 3) create a positive attitude toward writing; and 4) increase reading and writing fluency. The following excerpts from his summer tutor's journal illustrate how she worked with Keith.

*June 22 — we managed to get through the story "Michael Jordan." I introduced the Humming Alien strategy to Keith. It seemed difficult for him to hum the word and continue reading. He seemed insistent on getting the word. At times I think he read ahead silently and used meaning to get cues, but usually he seemed to rely on graphophonic cues.*

*We only had a few minutes to work on Keith's letter to Michael Jordan. He wanted to ask for a team photograph but got "hung up" on spelling please and send correctly; thus, he didn't get even one sentence written in our short time today.*

This excerpt is an example of ongoing diagnosis. The emphasis on correct spelling and pronunciation in the instructional environment is interfering with reading and writing for meaning. The Humming Alien strategy helps children use the larger context as a word recognition and comprehension aid.

*June 23 — we started today talking about likenesses and differences in words. I pointed out how one letter can change an entire word. We went on to talk about*

*the importance of word meaning. I gave examples of sentences where I have to know the correct meaning to understand the sentence. For example, the word sit has different meanings.*

*We read the book The Popcorn Dragon. Keith seems to be using the Humming Alien strategy better today. He seems so proud when he figures out those unknown words.*

*We put some finishing touches on Jordan's letter. Keith seems anxious to mail it. Hopefully, we can get it finished tomorrow. Keith was pretty good at picking out words he might need help on. I think I'll start a word bank with him tomorrow. I'll have to remember to ask him to bring his from the last tutoring session.*

*On this day, a strategy lesson was designed to help Keith attend to the distinctive features that make words different. Keith is quickly picking up on the cueing strategy. The book he read relates to his interest in dragons. He is experiencing success and seems motivated to write. He is also developing metacognitive awareness of his own needs.*

*June 30 — we read another Eric Carle book, The Hungry Caterpillar, today. I asked Keith if I should read the book to him or if he wanted to read. I was pleased that he decided we would take turns reading every other page. It would have been "less risky" for Keith to just have me read.*

*He read very successfully. After the reading we used flannel board pieces to do a retelling of the story. Keith loved the flannel story. I've never seen him so excited. I was worried that he might think the activity was too babyish. Keith seemed so confident as he told the story and manipulated the pieces. When Keith was done, I suggested we could use the Eric Carle books and patterns to think of ideas to do some writing. Keith seemed to freeze. I know he has the ability to write very creative stories, but he sure resists writing. I could*

*tell he didn't like the idea of writing a story. I assured him I would help.*

Keith is willing to take risks with reading, and he is being rewarded with success. He has shown his tutor that visuals and manipulatives help him retell a story, and he is exhibiting the confidence that builds self-concept. Eric Carle's predictable books are an invitation to write, but Keith still resists writing.

*July 1 — we started out today by deciding on a word for Keith's word bank. He decided on the word slam-dunkers, a word we used in the letter to Michael Jordan. For our first reading activity, I asked Keith to choose a favorite Eric Carle story he wanted to read again. He picked The Mixed Up Chameleon and The Birthday Present. It was too hard to pick just one! After reading, we did some brainstorming to come up with an idea for writing. I suggested we follow a pattern similar to Eric Carle. Keith got more tense at the idea of writing. To make it easier, I said I would do the writing. He has so many creative ideas, I want him to realize that the first writing doesn't have to be perfect. I modeled in my writing by crossing out words as ideas changed. I also underlined some words that needed a spelling check. I expressed not worrying about spelling now — we want to get our ideas down.*

*Keith decided on a story called "The Secret Scavenger Hunt" using the pattern found in Carle's The Birthday Present. The ideas were really flowing when it was time to stop. Keith took the book and rough draft home with him.*

The word bank is successful because many of the words in it are important to Keith, not because they appear on a frequency list or are deemed important by the tutor. Rereading predictable books helps him become more fluent as the stories

and patterns become familiar. When she allows Keith to choose which books to reread, she is giving him ownership of his learning. She offers to take dictation in order to relieve the pressure of writing and allow ideas to flow. Keith's earlier journal entries show that his fine motor skills are still developing and that writing is a slow and laborious process for him. She makes the best of the situation by modeling some concepts about the writing process that she thinks Keith needs to learn.

*July 7 — Keith's word for his word bank today was read. His sentence was "I can read!" We talked about doing some word sorts using the words in his bank. I showed Keith some various sorts that could be done (for example, words with "qu"). After our discussion Keith said "I could sort them according to alphabetical order." Keith seems to understand the value of the word bank. He was surprised that he remembered so many words that he had put in his word bank during the spring tutoring session.*

*We worked on Keith's story "The Secret Scavenger" that he had dictated to me on Thursday. I had put the story in book form after I typed the text on the computer. Keith read it without a single miscue! He seems excited about his book.*

Word sorts give Keith an opportunity to develop categorizing skills and practice the words in his word bank. He is already familiar with words from his own writing and reading; thus, he can practice them with an understanding of their meaning and function in the language. Keith's almost perfect reading of his dictated story is motivating as he gains confidence in his ability to read and write well.

Keith's tutor and I concluded that he does not have a learning disability. He needed some intensive help to catch

up in school, and he needed to learn to view reading and writing as meaningful.

Keith is a good model because his tutor's diary so clearly illustrates the holistic process applied in working with children who are experiencing significant difficulty with reading. We have observed similar progress with children who have very serious reading difficulties, many of whom have been identified as having learning disabilities. Holistic strategies are used with all of the children, though specific strategies vary based on individual needs. Some children learn more slowly than others, but the children make significant progress over time.

A teacher from a local elementary school recently told me, "We love what you are doing at the Reading Center! We just can't believe how much these children can do after they've been in your program." The children are excited, too. For example, Keith's mother reports that he voluntarily reads and writes at home, and recently he spent his monthly lunch money at the book fair. Cory's mother remarked on his emergence from withdrawal as his reading improved. He recently helped a local hospital develop a menu for diabetic children. These children view themselves as readers, writers, and learners.

## **Conclusion**

As classroom teachers move from isolated, skill-based instruction toward holistic, literature-based instruction, teachers of children with special needs may wonder how new understandings about language learning apply to their teaching. Instruction in which reading is viewed as a process of constructing meaning within a context that emphasizes the child's personal connection to text can benefit a variety of children with special needs.



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*Carol A. Kirk is a faculty member in the College of Education, at the University of Wisconsin-La Crosse, in La Crosse Wisconsin.*