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READINESS FOR READING COMPREHENSION

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Over the last four years several students in my graduate courses in the teaching of reading have informally questioned kindergarten teachers about their reading readiness programs. The results have been remarkably consistent. Almost all of the kindergarten teachers surveyed did have some kind of readiness program. Generally they reported that these programs were designed to teach letter names, consonant sounds and fine motor skills. Occasionally listening skills, following directions, and interest in reading were mentioned. Only rarely, however, did kindergarten teachers report that building comprehension was part of their readiness program.

My reaction to the omission of comprehension training is reminiscent of the man in the steak sauce commercial: "After all, what is reading?" Reading is not knowing the names of the letters or huffing and puffing to sound out words or staying on the lines when you write. Reading is understanding what the author is trying to tell you. It is absorbing and reacting to the author's ideas. Identifying the words is only a means for getting to the ideas. When a program designed to enhance readiness for reading does not include a strong comprehension component, that program becomes at best a decoding or word identification readiness program. It is not a reading readiness program.

Fortunately, an effective comprehension component may be included in any kindergarten curriculum in a relatively simple manner. The series of lessons described below does not require expensive kits or a great deal of teacher preparation. What these lessons do require is teacher/child interaction, with careful attention given to how the child arrived at an answer, and for that reason these lessons work best with groups of six to ten children. The activities are built around the concept of parallel lessons (Cunningham, 1975) and are a non-threatening but very effective way of guiding children toward the comprehension aspects of reading. In Cunningham's model for parallel lessons, the processes of comprehension are taught at the listening level (which is easier than reading for most children) and then transferred to the reading task. At the listening level, the teacher reads the passage while modeling the thinking processes necessary for understanding while the children listen. At the reading level, the children are then encouraged to utilize these same thinking strategies while reading the materials themselves. Moore and Readence (1980) have extended Cunningham's suggestion for parallel

lessons to include pictures and oral reading as well as listening and silent reading. With each mode the teacher first models the processes, then helps the children recognize and later generate good responses.

For the purposes of a kindergarten program, only the picture-based and listening methods will be discussed here. The comprehension lessons which follow are designed both to enhance teachers' awareness of the processes that lead to comprehension and to provide a framework within which they may develop their own lessons for comprehension awareness.

Picture-based Lessons

Beginning with pictures, the teacher goes through three strategies designed to move the children gradually to independent application of the thinking processes required to interpret a picture. The teacher should focus only on one specific aspect of comprehension during each set of lessons, such as identifying the main idea or determining a sequence. The example I will use in the following descriptions is inferring the characters' feelings or personality traits.

The first strategy is teacher modeling. Holding up a picture, the teacher models for the children, for example, ways in which they can figure out how a particular character in the picture feels. This modeling should always include two components: 1) exploring why a right answer is right and a wrong answer is wrong, and, 2) showing the children that they always have two sources of information—what's on the page (whether it's a picture, or, later, words) and what's in their heads (i.e., what they already know about the world). By emphasizing how one can tell when an answer is reasonable and when it is not and what kinds of information are fair to use in making these decisions, the teacher is modeling the thinking processes necessary for arriving at answers reasonably. Too often comprehension instruction deals only with what the right answer is (Durkin, 1978-79), but doesn't show the children how to get the right answer. Actually, what the right answer is is not of primary importance in comprehension instruction. What is important is knowing the processes and strategies for figuring out the right answer when you are on your own. Furthermore, by pointing out to the children what it is that is right about a particular answer and contrasting that with what is wrong about another response, the teacher focuses the children's attention on the pertinent features of each answer. Without such a discussion, the children may decide that an entirely irrelevant feature is the important aspect.

Showing the children what kinds of information are fair to use is also crucial. Children need to understand from the beginning that the book doesn't always give the answer and that they are supposed to use what they know about the world when they listen or (later) read. Sometimes, of course, that means different children will arrive at different answers because of variation in their experiential backgrounds. Exploration of differing answers will help children understand that there will not always be just one right answer; indeed, sometimes several different answers

may be justifiable, as long as each can be supported by some kind of evidence.

In the sample modeling script below, these two emphases are coded as EX⁺ (exploring reasonable answers), EX⁻ (exploring wrong answers), TXT (using information from the text) and HD (using information from your head).

Teacher (holding up a picture of a children's birthday party and pointing to the "birthday child"):
 I can tell how this boy feels right now. He feels happy and excited. How can I tell that? For one thing, I can just look at him (TXT). He is smiling and clapping his hands. When we're happy we smile (EX⁺, HD). Have you ever done that? When? (HD) I don't think I would say that this boy is being silly (EX⁻). If he were being silly, his mother would probably be looking annoyed or even angry (HD) and she's not doing that. (TXT) What does your mother do when you're being silly (HD)?

After the children have watched the teacher model thinking about two or three pictures, they will start to interrupt to share their own reasoning. Terrific. Now's the time to move quickly to the second strategy, recognition of a reasonable answer. In this step the teacher shows the children a new picture and asks: "Does this person feel angry, happy, or sick?" This is essentially a multiple-choice exercise in which the children have to do some of the work (i.e., recognize reasonable answer among several wrong answers) but not all of it. The most important part of the recognition step, however, is not recognizing a reasonable answer but understanding how one determines that it is reasonable. Therefore the teacher should always ask:

How do you know that's a good answer? What do you see that makes you think that's a good answer? (EX⁺, TXT)
 Is that how you would feel? Why? (EX⁺, HD) What do you see that lets you know the person doesn't feel sick? (EX⁻, TXT) Why wouldn't you feel sick if this happened to you? (EX⁻, HD)

After the children have become adept at selecting a reasonable answer when given a choice and supporting their decision with confidence, the teacher should move to the third strategy—student generation of a reasonable answer. In this step, the children have to come up with an answer all by themselves; they have to produce it, not just recognize it. As with the first two strategies, the primary emphasis should be on process (how to get a reasonable answer), not product (what the right answer is). After asking, "How does this person feel?" the teacher should have the children tell why they decided on that answer and rejected other possibilities, following the questioning format described earlier.

The teacher will most likely spend several short (10-15 minutes) lessons just working with pictures in order to insure that the children really do understand the thinking processes involved. When they can deal with pictures with ease, it is time to move to a slightly more abstract level, listening.

Listening Lessons

At the listening level the teacher uses the same three strategies that were used with pictures: teacher modeling, student recognition of a reasonable answer, and student generation of a reasonable answer. Although the listening level is more abstract than the picture level, it has one very important advantage over pictures. It is more like reading than looking at a picture because information is not received all at once but is received by the listener over time. As with reading, a tentative conclusion reached early may need to be altered later as additional information is processed. At the listening level, therefore, the teacher should break the listening into segments and these breaks should come as new information becomes available. Somehow many children think that it is wrong to change your mind when reading. They need to learn from the very beginning that reading is a gathering and sifting through information, and as one gathers more information and gets more clues, an earlier, very reasonable hypothesis may need to be modified or even discarded entirely. At the listening level teachers can emphasize the hypothesis-testing nature of comprehension by pausing when new information becomes available and asking the children to re-evaluate their answers.

The teacher modeling step during a listening activity might follow a sequence something like this:

Teacher reads a paragraph or so) Hmmm...
 I think Andy must be feeling sad. He has lost the money he was going to use to buy an ice cream cone (EX+, TXT). I'd certainly feel sad about that, especially if I didn't get to buy ice cream very often (EX+, HD). I sure wouldn't feel happy about it (EX-) because I like ice cream a lot (HD). How would you feel if you'd lost the money? Why? (Children give responses and justify them.) Let's read some more and find out if Andy really is feeling sad. (Teacher reads aloud and stops when additional information has been presented in the story about Andy's feelings.)
 I may have to change my mind now. At first I thought Andy was sad because he lost his money. But now it just said that when he got back home from the store he yelled at his sister and he kicked his bike (TXT). Now I think he's more mad than sad. I know when I'm feeling sad I just get quiet and want to be by myself (EX-, HD). That's certainly not how Andy acted (EX-, TXT)! But I still don't know why he's mad. Let's go on and see if there are any more clues about how he is feeling and why.

Note that whereas sad was a reasonable (EX+) answer early in the story, as more clues to Andy's feelings are given, sad becomes an example of a wrong answer (EX-). Teachers should carefully build into their listening lessons opportunities for themselves to make reasonable guesses that will later be proven wrong. In this way the children will feel more comfortable both about making guesses in the first place and intelligently changing their guesses as needed.

As at the picture level, during the listening lessons the teacher should move gradually from dependence on the teacher to student independence, from teacher modeling through recognition of reasonable answers to student generation of answers. If the teacher carefully follows the questioning strategies outlined here for picture-based and listening lessons, pre-readers should begin to develop many of the thinking processes that they will later need for successful reading comprehension. They will begin to understand how to figure out a right answer and how to combine what they already know with why they learn from the page. They will be ready for reading comprehension.

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