



What matters?

A PRIMER FOR TEACHING READING

Edited by Diane Stephens

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Center for the Study of Reading, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign



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what matters?



Chapters by

Joan Gillette

Rebecca Huntsman

Noel K. Jones

Donna B. Lindquist

Diane Stephens

Jennifer Story

Janine Toomes

For the teachers and the children

contents

preface

*"jigarees here, jigarees there,
jigarees jump everywhere . . ."*

Five of us—four teachers finishing a master's degree in reading education and I, their professor—were watching a videotape (Wright Group 1987) of a shared reading lesson (Holdaway 1979). We didn't know the teacher on the videotape, a Mrs. O'Brian, but we all wished we did. She was quite impressive. We'd recently been talking about response as a teaching strategy and we were watching Mrs. O'Brian closely, trying to write down everything she did that made her seem effective at teaching through response. We had to pause the machine in order to keep up.

Earlier that week, I'd shown the same videotape to my undergraduate class of college juniors taking their first reading course. They too saw Mrs. O'Brian introduce and carry out a shared reading lesson. I asked them to take notes during the tape and told them that we would discuss afterwards the strategies that Mrs. O'Brian used to help her "first-year" children in New Zealand learn to read. Brenda opened the discussion by commenting, "I don't understand how she gets them to stand up, act out a part of a book, and then sit back down again so quietly." Bob continued, "Yeah, she has done a really good job controlling them." Sandy added, "I wonder how long it took her to teach the children the rules for how to behave?"

I expected there to be a difference of course. In terms of what they know about reading, teaching, and learning, undergraduates just beginning education courses are worlds apart from experienced teachers finishing a master's degree in reading. But I found myself wondering how to help the undergraduates appreciate the things on the tape that the graduate students and I thought really mattered. Mrs. O'Brian used response to teach and she was a master of that art, but the undergraduates hadn't heard her teaching through conversation. How could I help them see the artfulness of the teacher? How could I help them focus on what the teacher was helping the children learn about language and books? After all, in what looked like and sounded like conversation, the teacher had managed to communicate that:

- A book has a beginning, middle, and end.
- The text itself has a front and a back.
- Print is read from left to right and top to bottom.
- Size of print and punctuation give clues to intonation.
- Books tell a story.

- Pictures are useful in making predictions.
- Predictions are helpful whether or not they're accurate.
- Reading is fun and exciting, a treat to look forward to.
- Reading is a social process.
- You learn new things from reading.
- Children already know a lot.
- Students in the class could read and were good readers.
- Good readers made predictions and connections.

And that was just a partial list!

I brought my concerns to the graduate seminar and found the teachers had similar concerns. As graduate assistants, they supervised student teachers and wanted to know how to help pre-service teachers develop a framework for examining what they were doing and seeing. As parents of young children, they wondered how to share their new insights and understanding with their children's teachers.

We all wanted to share our understandings about reading, but had no simple means of doing so. How to share? What to share? We couldn't hand people a pile of the books and articles we'd read over the last two years and expect them to scurry over to some quiet corner and begin to read. After all, we'd read at least twelve of the same books, probably a hundred of the same articles, and had shared with each other numerous other books and articles. Even if anyone responded enthusiastically to our pile of recommended readings, it wouldn't answer the immediate need. We wanted *this semester's* student teachers to understand the importance of asking real questions instead of reading preformed questions out of the teachers' manual. We wanted classroom teachers to help the children feel good about themselves as readers and encourage them to take risks as readers *this year*. We wanted undergraduates *currently enrolled* in methods classes to be really "seeing" during their field experiences and just not "recording" information about the cuteness of bulletin boards or the neatness of lesson plans. Where should we begin? How best to share what we knew?

We began to think about writing a short paper for interested pre- and in-service teachers. At first we thought we should write something on response. Then we took a step back and realized that in order for teachers to use response effectively as a method, they would first have to reflect upon what the students in their classroom already knew and where they needed to be going as readers and writers. But that wasn't a beginning either, because in order to reflect on their students, teachers would need

to know (1) what kinds of things children generally know about language and (2) what strategies successful readers use.

We decided to begin there—Jan Toomes offered to write about what children know about language, and Donna Lindquist agreed to discuss reading as strategic. To provide a context for their understandings, they both decided to tell stories about readers they knew. By doing so, teachers could relate theory and research to real learners and understand how to make sense of the observations they were making in and out of their classrooms. Then Jan Toomes, Joan Gillette, and I would talk specifically about observing learners. It seemed important to share the kinds of questions we had developed to frame our observations. Becky Huntsman took on the challenge of explaining how response could build on these understandings and observations.

Once we had identified these pieces and begun to write, we became aware that just as there were ideas that led up to response, so too were there ideas that seem to follow from it. Response does not exist in isolation; it works as method only in an environment that facilitates communication. We decided to ask Noel Jones, a member of the faculty at the University of North Carolina at Wilmington, to talk about planning for literate environments and Jennifer Story, a local fifth- and sixth-grade language arts teacher who had received her master's degree the year before, to write about her decision making within the literate classroom environment she'd created.

In the process of writing this book, we've learned a lot. Sometimes our experiences allowed us to move past knowledge into understanding. We knew before we began, for example, that writing and reading were complementary processes. We'd read Smith (1985) and knew that it was important to "read like a writer" and "write like a reader"; for some of us, however, this was the first opportunity we'd really ever had to write. We learned that writing is a lot different when you care. As Jan wrote in her journal, "Writing when you really have something to say is HARD!"

Sometimes our experiences generated new insights. As writers, we had to find words for things we didn't know we knew, and for things we knew but had never shared. We saw that in the very process of thinking, of searching, we learned, we "outgrew our former selves" (Harste 1984). We began to understand that perhaps the best way to help others was to suggest they take some time to share what they know. We became advocates for reflective practice—for teachers to think about their beliefs and examine them critically, in light of what others believe.

That's how we hope you'll use this text—as a beginning point, the

opening argument in a dialectic. What do you think about what we've said? Do you agree with what we think? Disagree? Why or why not? Do you think we've interpreted the literature correctly? Incorrectly? What would you do differently? Were the examples we've chosen effective? Useful? Was the text organized in a reasonable manner? How could it have been improved? Were there books and articles we should have cited but did not? Some we should have left out?

We hope you'll reflect on what we've written. We'd love to hear from you. Maybe the next edition could have contributions from teachers all over the country. Or perhaps you'd rather join forces with teachers you know and write your own volume.

We're convinced that teachers can make and are making a difference. We believe that education will improve as teachers begin to share with others what they know. Won't you help? We hope to hear your voice soon.

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what matters?

IT MATTERS THAT TEACHERS UNDERSTAND HOW
LANGUAGE IS LEARNED

one

OBSERVING LEARNERS

What They Know About Language

Janine Toomes

Three-year-old Maggie carefully drew a large stick figure on the chalkboard. Underneath she wrote two long strings of random letters.

"Now," she said to me in an authoritative voice, "What does this say?" She waited patiently as I surveyed what she had written.

"Does it say *mom*?" I asked, basing my reply on what I took to be the figure's long curly hair.

"No!" she emphatically replied, running a pointer underneath the two lines of letters. "It says *grandmother* and *grandfather*."

Michael, also three years old, settled himself in a chair with one of his favorite books, *Mrs. Wishy-Washy* (Cowley & Melser 1980). Opening the book to the first page he briefly studied the picture and began to read aloud.

TEXT

MICHAEL

"Oh, lovely mud," said the cow, and she jumped in it.

The cow jumped in the mud.

"Oh, lovely mud," said the pig, and he rolled in it.

The pig jumped in the mud and rolled over.

"Oh, lovely mud," said the duck, and she paddled in it.

The duck jumped in the mud.

Along came Mrs. Wishy-Washy. "Just look at you!" she screamed.

And Mrs. Wishy-Washy screamed at them. "Again! You jumped in the mud."

Neither Maggie nor Michael have had contact with formal schooling, yet their actions and responses indicate that they already know a great deal about what it means to be literate. They are what Smith (1985, 124) calls "junior members of the literacy club." No one expects them, at age three, to be able to read and write like experienced members of the club; but no one doubts they will do so in time.

A keen observer of young children will realize that Maggie and Michael are not unique with respect to their knowledge about language and its use. They are the rule rather than the exception. Indeed, extensive research (Clark 1984; Clay 1975, 1979a/b; Doake 1985; Ferreiro & Teberosky 1982; Harste, Woodward & Burke 1984; Holdaway 1979; Voss 1988; Wells 1986) has documented the phenomenal growth children achieve naturally during the preschool years. Using Maggie and Michael as our informants, let us look back at their language stories and examine what they, and children like them, know about literacy.

What Children Know About Language

CHILDREN ARE ACCOMPLISHED ORAL-LANGUAGE USERS AND COMPREHENDERS

Children like Maggie and Michael were not *taught* to speak and use oral language. They *learned* over time, achieving their competence by being immersed in a community of oral-language users who encouraged them to participate as best as they could from the beginning, all the while supporting their experimentations and approximations (Cambourne 1984; Cambourne & Turbill 1987).

As children learn to talk, they not only learn the language, they also learn about language in general. They acquire a basic understanding of its rules, structures, and terminology (Goodman 1977). Finally, children learn through language. They use language as a tool to learn new information and to acquire the basic concepts necessary for understanding things, events, thoughts, and feelings. They talk to share, to seek help, to acquire the things they want, and to communicate their understandings. In particular, they talk about the literacy events in which they participate (Wells 1986). In this manner, oral and written language become interconnected, mutually reinforcing and supporting each other (Harste, Woodward, & Burke 1984).

Maggie and Michael provide clear examples. Both children used oral language to test and confirm their knowledge about written language. They did this naturally and freely, but in different ways. Maggie used oral language to request participation from me. She wanted to test her hypothesis that, yes, written language does carry meaningful messages that can be read and understood by others. Michael used oral language imaginatively as he created his personal version of *Mrs. Wishy-Washy*. His rendition of the story was evidence of the profound effects of repeated experience with literature. Oral language provided a medium for showing that he had internalized a sense of story, sound, and rhythm.

CHILDREN UNDERSTAND THE PURPOSES OF PRINT AND EXPECT IT TO BE MEANINGFUL

Maggie and Michael both showed signs of understanding that print serves a purpose and communicates meaning. Clay (1977) states that one way young children often test this process is by producing signs we cannot