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In 2001, I wrote an article that reviewed the Ministry of Education's (1990, 1991) guidelines on guided reading for beginning readers. I noted that guided reading was of particular importance in New Zealand classrooms because it provided opportunities for teachers to work with small groups of children and give explicit instruction about reading strategies. I argued, however, that the Ministry guidelines could result in ineffective teaching as they gave little attention to assisting children to develop word identification skills (see Blaiklock, 2001).

Most of the Ministry of Education recommendations were directed at encouraging teachers to talk about the meaning of the story. Understanding meaning is, of course, crucial when reading. However, the vocabulary and structure of most books for beginning readers are well within the language comprehension levels of children who are learning to read in their first language. These children do not usually require extensive discussion of the text in order to comprehend it. What they do require, however, are the skills to identify the printed form of words that are already part of their oral vocabulary.

The Ministry guidelines over-emphasised discussion of the meaning of a story at the expense of giving instruction on decoding. I concluded my review of these guidelines by noting:

teachers can discuss the meaning of a story as and when appropriate, but they need also to show beginning readers how to make use of grapho-phonetic information to identify words that are causing difficulty. Rather than only asking questions about the meaning of a story, teachers need also to ask questions that encourage children to focus on the spelling patterns and letter-sound relationships within words. (p. 42)

Since the publication of the earlier Ministry of Education guidelines (1990, 1991), research has continued to examine the effectiveness of different instructional approaches in reading. Major reviews of this research have emphasised that a fundamental part of any reading programme should be teaching children about grapho-phonetic knowledge (see Adams, 1990; National Reading Panel, 2000; Rayner, Foorman, Perfetti, Pesetsky, & Seidenberg, 2001; Snow, Burns, & Griffin, 1998).

With these research findings in mind, I was interested to see whether the Ministry of Education would show a change of approach in the publications it provides for New Zealand teachers. In 2002, the Ministry released a new book on the teaching of guided reading, “Guided Reading: Years 1-4”. The book is accompanied by videos showing guided reading lessons.

The book and videos do show some change in approach. There is occasional use of words such as “phonological knowledge” and “decoding”. But the change in emphasis is very small. The overall message of the new book and videos is that teachers should spend most of the guided reading lesson talking about the meaning of a story and give only a small amount of attention to word-level processes.

Near the start of “Guided Reading: Years 1-4” is a section titled “The theoretical basis for using guided reading”. The Ministry asserts that the guided reading approach

“is solidly grounded in theory and research” (p. 8). What follows, however, is a rather selective interpretation of a small number of references. There is no mention of the major reviews of reading research that have been published in recent years (e.g., Adams, 1990; National Reading Panel, 2000; Rayner et al., 2001; Snow et al., 1998). There is no mention of the emphasis that these reviews give to the importance of developing word identification skills in order that children may become independent readers. One of the references that is cited most frequently in the Ministry’s review of the research literature is “Reading instruction that works” by Michael Pressley (1998). The ministry makes no mention, however, of Pressley’s advocacy of phonics as a crucial component of teaching children to read, along with the use of rich and varied literature.

“Guided Reading: Years 1-4” provides some general information about classroom management and grouping. The book suggests that a teacher will usually have the class divided into 4 or 5 guided reading groups based on children’s reading levels. While the teacher takes a guided reading session for about 15 minutes with one group, the other children work on independent literacy activities. A rotational system enables the teacher to work with several groups over a one-hour literacy session. In an effort to avoid stigmatising children as being in particular groups, the Ministry advises that children should be organised into mixed groups for independent activities. This approach, however, is problematic for a teacher who wants to provide independent activities that focus on what is most appropriate to the reading levels of students. Children at different reading levels have different learning requirements. For example, children in the early stages of reading may benefit from activities that increase their familiarity with letter-sounds whereas children at higher levels may benefit from activities that focus on the use of orthographic knowledge for

more advanced decoding. Having students in mixed groups for independent activities makes it very difficult for a teacher to target particular skills and strategies and may therefore result in ineffective use of learning time.

When working with a group of children, the Ministry guidelines suggest that teachers spend time introducing the text that is to be read. An introduction may be useful to motivate children and to activate background knowledge. An introduction could also be used to alert children to letter-sound or orthographic patterns that may be encountered but the Ministry does not recommend this. The overwhelming emphasis of the Ministry's recommendations is to focus on meaning-level strategies rather than word-level strategies.

The Ministry does say to keep the introduction brief, usually "no more than a few minutes" (p.40). However, a few minutes is a significant part of a 15 minute lesson and may not be the best use of instructional time for beginning readers. Although the Ministry does not cite specific references to support its focus on meaning level factors in the pre-reading discussion, another publication on the teaching of reading in New Zealand, "How Children Learn to Read" by John Smith and Warwick Elley (1997) claims that there is good evidence to support this practice. Smith and Elley refer to a single case study to verify their claim. The study, by Wong and McNaughton (1980), examined the effects of prior discussion on the reading accuracy of a low progress 7-year-old reader. Wong and McNaughton found that prior discussion of vocabulary and meaning resulted in the child showing higher levels of accuracy than when prior discussion was not provided.

This study indicates that prior discussion can increase the reading accuracy of a low progress reader on a specific piece of text. It is incorrect, however to claim that the study provides evidence to support the use of prior discussion as an instructional

approach for helping children learn to read. Prior discussion of a story may increase accuracy for that particular story but does not provide children with the skills they need to become independent readers (as evidenced by the decline in reading accuracy that occurred in Wong and McNaughton's (1980) study when prior discussion was no longer provided). Indeed, the use of prior discussion to encourage children to identify words on the basis of semantic cues may actually have a negative effect on reading progress. Although semantic cues can be helpful when used in combination with grapho-phonetic information, an overemphasis on semantic cues promotes an inefficient strategy for reading. Research indicates that beginning readers show greater progress when they shift from dependence on contextual information to making more use of grapho-phonetic information (Nicholson, 1993; Tunmer & Chapman, 1998).

Following the pre-reading discussion, the Ministry suggests that teachers ask all the children in the group to read a section of the text at the same time. The Ministry guidelines emphasise the value of encouraging silent reading at an early stage. The Ministry notes: "students are likely to read out loud during the first one or two years of school. This makes it relatively easy for the teacher to monitor individual students and to provide support and feedback as required" (p. 43). However, the accompanying video of a model Year One lesson shows the teacher encouraging children on an emergent level book to "read it quietly in your heads" when they first read the story independently after going through the book with the teacher. Encouraging beginning readers to read silently will make it very difficult for a teacher to monitor a child's reading during the guided reading session. Consciously avoiding vocalising in the early stages may also interfere with a natural stage of learning to read and will reduce opportunities for children to develop expression in their reading

(see Kuhn & Stahl, 2003, for further discussion of oral reading strategies that encourage expressive and fluent reading).

If beginning readers ignore the advice to “read it quietly in your heads” and continue to read out loud, then a teacher will have some chance of hearing the children read. The Ministry suggests that children be seated in a semi-circle on the mat, allowing a teacher to “move unobtrusively alongside one or more students to hear them read in order to monitor their fluency or use of strategies” (p. 43). This is easier said than done. Teachers often prefer to sit in a chair during the guided reading session so that they can face the reading group and also keep an eye on the rest of the class. Even assuming that a teacher is comfortable getting on the mat with the children, it can be difficult to hear an individual child when a number of other children are reading at the same time.

The Ministry states: “round robin reading, where each child takes a turn at reading aloud, is never appropriate in a guided reading session. It prevents each student from processing the text and constructing meaning independently, distracts and bores other students, and obscures meaning.” Another disadvantage of round robin reading, not noted by the Ministry, is that it can cause anxiety and embarrassment for some children.

The Ministry is right to raise concerns about the value of round robin reading but they also need to explain that other oral reading activities can be an important part of learning to read (see Opitz & Rasinski, 1998; Rasinski & Hoffman, 2003). It would be unfortunate if teachers interpreted the Ministry’s comments as meaning that there was no place for oral reading in their classroom programmes. The Ministry also needs to acknowledge that having children read aloud in a group situation can be a quick way for teachers to check on reading accuracy and fluency. Embarrassment can

be avoided by asking for volunteers to read. In my own observations of many Year One to Three classrooms I have found that most children, including low progress readers, are keen to be selected to read to their group.

“Guided Reading: Years 1-4” goes into considerable detail about how to conduct a discussion with children as they read parts of the text. Nearly all of the Ministry’s recommendations are concerned with discussing aspects of the meaning of the story. For example, the Ministry states:

Generating purposeful stimulating discussion is the most challenging part of guided reading. But focused discussion of the text is central because one of the fundamental purposes of guided reading is to enhance each students understanding of what they are reading. ... Your aim is to use prompts and ask rich questions that get the students to respond to the text – to get beneath its surface, to explore the language and illustrations, and to think critically about what they have read. (p.45)

These suggestions may be applicable for more advanced readers but the Ministry appears to be forgetting that the best way to enhance the comprehension skills of children in the first years of school is to develop their word identification skills. If children are to comprehend a text, they first need to be able to read the words. The Ministry guidelines do include one comment that acknowledges the importance of decoding skills:

In the beginning years of instruction, the focus is on developing the student’s abilities to read with accuracy, fluency and comprehension. While the emphasis is on decoding, students should be encouraged from the outset to be conscious of the learning that they are gaining and to talk about this. (p.50)

Although the Ministry states that “the emphasis is on decoding”, they provide minimal guidance for teachers on how to develop children’s skills in this area. Indeed teachers who follow the Ministry’s guidelines will find that they have very little time for assisting children with word identification skills as nearly all of the guided reading session will be taken up with discussing the meaning of the story.

The predominance of discussion about meaning is clearly seen in the model Year One planning sheet that is included in “Guided Reading: Years 1-4”. The planning sheet lists the questions that a teacher could ask during two guided reading sessions. Of the 29 questions, only one requires children to think about the letters in a word. The remaining 28 questions are all to do with the meaning of the story.

The predominance of discussion about meaning is also apparent in the video produced by the Ministry to show guided reading in a Year One classroom. The teacher asks a total of 45 questions during the lesson on an emergent level book. Five questions guide children to look at individual words and 4 questions prompt children to focus on letter-sound patterns. All of the other questions focus on discussing the meaning of the story. During the 15-minute lesson, less than 2 ½ minutes is spent on questions and discussion about specific words or letter-sound patterns.

The overemphasis on discussion about meaning, and the minimal attention to word identification, indicates that the Ministry has misunderstood what is involved in learning to read. Children need to be able to comprehend what they read but in order to do this they must first identify the words. Most books for beginning readers use relatively simple vocabulary and text structure. The level of these books should be well within the language comprehension skills of children who are learning to read in their first language. These children should not require detailed discussion of



beginning level books in order to understand the text. What they do require, however, is skilful teaching that helps them to identify words that are in their listening vocabularies, but are unfamiliar in print (see Juel, Griffith & Gough, 1986; Pressley, 2002).

More detailed discussion of the meaning of text may be valuable for more advanced readers. Many children in Year Three and Year Four classes may be reading books that have vocabulary and text structures extending beyond the children's listening comprehension levels. These children can benefit from a focus on reading comprehension strategies (see Dymock & Nicholson, 1999) but may also benefit from teaching that further improves the level of their word identification skills.

Some discussion of the meaning of the story will often be appropriate with beginning readers. There is value in explaining unusual word meanings and in making links with children's experiences. But discussion about meaning should not be to the exclusion of helping children to develop the fast and efficient word identification skills that they will need if they are to become independent readers.

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