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The merits of reading schemes which focus on phonics

PAMELA SHARPE

Introduction

There is a controversy in Britain as to the effectiveness of Reading schemes for the systematic teaching of reading to young school children. The central concern is essentially whether reading schemes or real books, provide the most appropriate early reading experiences for young children.

Historically, learning to read was seen as requiring a special set of skills which encompassed sets of hierarchically ordered rules which had to be learnt through repetition and practice, and reading schemes were devised to provide such experiences. The behaviourist principles applied to such schemes prescribe phonics, identification of words out of context, coding, and graded reading lists.

More recently, the psycho-linguistic approach has stressed the provision of real books in order to develop children's communicative strategies within a socio-cultural emphasis. A focus on children, not just as readers, but as writers and authors of stories, anecdotes and messages emphasising and developing children's ideas and based on their needs and interests, rather than the prescribed needs and interests of adults. The current trend then, is to assist children to relate the new and unknown to the familiar by the provision of language experiences in different and varied contexts.

Before commenting further on this debate, the merits of the phonetic approach to the teaching of reading warrants some attention, given more recent evidence of its importance in the development of children's reading and writing.

Phonics

Reading schemes which stress learning about letter sounds, letter names, printed word vocabulary, and reading aloud single words from items of vocabulary, are usually termed phonetic reading schemes. Here children learn to identify items of related language in the text by matching written symbols with specific sounds, thus making symbol and sound connections.

Some very recent research in Britain has indicated that children who were encouraged in such practices in the early years and especially when matching rhymes to monosyllables, were the best readers and spellers when tested at 10 years of age. This research indicates the predictability of phonological awareness scores at 4 years of age for attainment on reading and spelling tests at 10 years of age. The children had a larger sight vocabulary, better strategies for coping with new and difficult words, and there was a strong relationship between accuracy and comprehension. (Stuart, 1993).

Critics of schemes based on phonics suggest however, that the method, with its identification of language resemblances, obstructs attempts by children to process for meaning, to make predictions and inferences, and to make meaningful connections, (Exton and O'Rourke, 1993) Exton and O'Rourke, in supporting the "Real" books approach, comment that such reading schemes assume a similarity between linguistic and reading complexity/simplicity, especially with their present tense emphasis. In this regard, they cite the Ladybird series as an example which they claim does not equate to the use of english in the everyday sense, even for those who read english as their second language.

In order to develop their notion of linguistic simplicity dominating such books, Exton and O'Rourke compare popular "Real" books with books from selected reading schemes. In order to identify the strengths of such books, they compare a selection with similar titles from some reading schemes. For example they compare the "Real" books "Dear Zoo", and "Is anyone there?", with the "Scheme" book "At the Zoo,". In doing so, they show how the former sensitise the reader to new words and language patterns, and left/right orientation with picture clues, rather than the proliferation of repetition

of simple sentences, so characteristic of "Scheme" books. They also point to the encouragement of narrative complexity, in the form of the provision of sequential clues to narrative structure which is evident in books such as: "On Friday something funny happened", "The hungry caterpillar", and "Six blind mice". The basis of such opinions, as expressed by Exton and O'Rourke, is that children learn written and spoken languages in much the same way.

Whether such a concentration on the provision of meaningful text for the beginning reader, is preferable to a stress on the need to analyse sound in single words, has recently been given further attention, (Bryant, 1994). Bryant's research has proposed that an awareness of sounds and symbols as well as a sensitivity to grammar and meaning are equally essential for reading and writing. (Bryant, 1994). The research is based on a longitudinal study involving the collection of children's scores from phonological tasks and tasks which assessed their competencies in applying semantic and syntactical rules. These were then compared with scores from tasks related to reading and writing over an 18 month period. Bryant concludes that, although each type of linguistic application has an independent and specific contribution to make to the processes involved in learning to read and write, both are essential for this complex process in its initial stages of acquisition. However, in terms of the reading and spelling of certain words with irregular grammatical structures, Bryant suggests that children will continually need to rely on the learning of some differences in the written and spoken parts of speech and language.

What though does such a debate contribute to our quest for appropriate activities and experiences for our children in Singapore?

Appropriate Practice

It has been shown that when adults are sensitive and supportive in their interactions with children in learning situations, attainment and achievement are more likely to result and be sustained (Wood et al., 1976). It may follow then, that in teaching children, the provision of any activity which involves close encounters and empathetic consideration, should result in positive and purposeful learning and

enjoyment. If such prescriptions are applied though, to teaching children to read, adults may benefit from some kind of guidance on how best to proceed. The following advice is suggested:

Following the prescriptions of Bryant, (Bryant, 1994), it may be that the provision of a phonics reading scheme and "Real" books in tandem, would be desirable. As such, this provision should result in both the acquisition of a sizable sight vocabulary, and, strategies for translating print to sound, thus enabling the identification of new and difficult words for reading and spelling, (Stuart, 1993). Furthermore, "Real" books should provide experiences for arousing curiosity, inviting the supply of words and sentences, language patterns, and an awareness of narrative complexity and sequencing, (Exton and O'Rourke, 1993). Additionally, when adults follow a prescribed or progressive plan or structure, such guidance should enable suitable reading experiences to be provided confidently and conscientiously, so that children enjoy reading for pleasure, as well as for the acquisition of knowledge and information.

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