On Reading Maturity

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The ultimate goal of reading instruction is to help children develop a level of reading maturity that serves them well in the upper grades and continues through adulthood. At a minimum, readers should function at the *proficiency level,* which is defined by the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) as "competency over challenging subject matter, including subject-matter knowledge, application of such knowledge to real world situations, and analytical skills appropriate to the subject matter" (https://bit.ly/3zrnhmc). In 2019, NAEP test results revealed that 63% of 12th grade students did not reach this proficiency level in reading.

It's worth remembering that Applebee, Langer, and Mullis (1989), with reference to the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), noted that 61% of 17-year-olds failed to "demonstrate the ability to find, understand, summarize, and explain relatively complicated information, including material about topics they study in school, suggests that most students leaving secondary school do not have the comprehension skills often needed in the worlds of higher education, business, or government."

Although the tests in 1989 and 2019 were different, they assessed very similar aspects of reading performance and can be considered reasonably comparable measures. So the fact that students 30 years apart scored very much the same is certainly discouraging, as is the realization that so many of the students in both cohorts did did so poorly that it was doubtful they would become high-functioning adult readers. The prevailing opinion during that stretch of time has been that phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, and vocabulary should come first and that comprehension instruction should be delayed until these so-called basics are in place. However, this reflects a misunderstanding of the reading process and a mistaken notions about effective instruction.

Initial instruction should help young readers focus on meaning from the very beginning so that they associate reading with meaning, not simply with pronouncing letters or words. They are most likely to do this if their teachers make meaning the priority that it is for mature readers. If teachers know the characteristics of mature readers, they can cultivate and nurture those emerging characteristics in their young students.

The list below of mature reading behaviors is as useful today as it was when it was originally developed (Hammond, 1993). The twelve behaviors are not all in play at the same time among mature readers, of course. Different ones are more or less salient depending on the text and the reader's purpose. But all are important hallmarks of mature reading. Let's review the behaviors first and then see how they can be cultivated in beginning readers

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12 Behaviors of Reading Maturity

1. **Retell and summarize text**
   Retelling involves relating the key events in a narrative; summarizing involves enumerating the key points in an informational text. These are separate but basic behaviors. Both involve putting the information in the reader's own words, not simply reciting the text verbatim.

2. **Infer meaning from text**
   Inferencing involves using text information to go beyond what the text states explicitly to judge what the author is implying. Readers can do this by connecting various text details or by connecting text information with relevant prior knowledge.

3. **Take a metacognitive stance**
   Metacognitive readers monitor what they're doing while they're reading. For example, they're aware of their purpose for reading and adjust their rate to their purpose. They're aware of their attention level and bring themselves back when their attention wanders. When they don't understand something, they reread to see what they may have missed or they may paraphrase the author's words to see if that helps to clarify meanings.

4. **Detect and describe the author's point of view**
   To detect an author's point of view, readers must become less egocentric and more sensitive to the context within which the writer is communicating. This means being able to identify the perspective of the writer (e.g., political, religious, historical, cultural, social) so as to gain a fuller understanding of the way the writer is approaching the topic.

5. **Read with the sense of a skeptic**
   Skeptical readers raise questions about both the content and the author. They take a critical, not cynical, stance. For example, when reading fictional narratives, they think about how believable the characters' actions are and how likely the sequence of events appears to be within the created fictional world. When reading informational texts, they think about the author's veracity and consistency, the quality of cited sources, and whether the conclusions follow from the evidence presented. Critical readers also give thought to what authors may have neglected to mention or perhaps have misrepresented or distorted.

6. **Identify and respond to the theme or perspective of the author**
   Themes are associated with fictional narratives and relate to the aesthetics of the writing in that the writer artfully uses characters, plot, and setting to illuminate the theme(s) of the narrative. The comparable feature of informational text is the author's perspective on the topic that influences the details the author chooses to include, the ordering of the information, and the overall intent of the work. Noting a text's theme or perspective, readers also consider what it means to them and extend their thinking to the issues that are invoked (e.g., social, political, cultural, psychological).

7. **Respond intertextually**
   This aspect of reading involves noting similarities and differences across different works by the same author and across similar works by different authors, including comparisons of texts between and within genres or between and within historical eras.

8. **Read with the sense of an author**
   Reading like a writer involves appreciating how an author has constructed a story or organized an informational account. Such author-oriented responses may be to the content, the language, the tone, or other aspects of the work and may result in the reader conducting an ongoing mental conversation with the writer.

9. **Read with a dispassionate, open mind**
   This aspect of reading involves suspending judgment about the text so as to better understand what is being presented. This is especially relevant when reading persuasive writing, statements of opinion, and the like. The behavior involves avoiding immediate agreement or disagreement with the author so as to focus on what the author is actually saying and to raise questions about the presentation.

10. **Read with a moral or ethical perspective**
    This involves making judgments about a text within a moral or ethical framework. When the text is fiction, readers are able to judge characters' motives or actions, the sequence of events, or the way the story ends. When the text is informational, readers are able to judge the author's choices of information to present and and how to present it.

11. **Engage in thoughtful, civil dialogue about text**
    Thoughtful dialogue with other readers involves discussions of what a text means, what issues it raises, how different readers respond to it, and how the different responses contribute to each reader's understanding. Civil dialogue involves respecting others' points of view and helping to ensure that respect is maintained throughout the dialogue.

12. **Read broadly and deeply**
    Reading broadly means reading a wide range of texts over time: narratives, informational texts, essays, commentary, memoirs, letters, speeches, legends, poetry, drama, and so on. Reading deeply involves concentrating on a topic, author, or genre for a time so as to explore and reflect upon its multiple aspects.

Cultivating the 12 Behaviors in Beginning Readers

All twelve behaviors have their seeds in the way children are guided to focus on meaning from their earliest days as readers. Here are ways to cultivate and nurture the seeds in beginning readers.

1. **Retelling and summarize text**
   • When children have read a predictable book, ask:
   See if you can tell the story in your own words from the beginning. What happened first, next, and so on?
   • When children have read an illustrated informational text, ask:
   What were the most important things you learned from reading?

2. **Infer meaning from text**
   • While children are reading a story, pause at a turning point and ask:
   What do you think will happen next? Why do you think so? The predictions and the reasoning call for inferences to be made from what is known about the characters and what has happened so far.
   • While children are reading informational text, ask:

3. **Take a metacognitive stance**
   • Inviting children to make predictions periodically as they read a story or inviting them to form hypotheses about a topic before they read an information text are also good ways of cultivating a metacognitive stance. After discussing their ideas, ask them what they will be reading to find out so that they will articulate their purpose for reading.
   • If children become confused while reading, have them reread and paraphrase the text language to see if they can clarify.
   • Have children talk with each other about what they do when the text doesn't make sense.

4. **Detect and describe the author's point of view**
   • Have children read (or read to them) two versions of a story told from different perspectives. For example, have them read (listen to) a classic version of The Three Little Pigs and *The True Story of the Three Little Pigs* by Scieszka (1989).
   • When reading a story with or two children, ask them to consider who is telling the story and how it might be a different story if it were told from a different point of view.

5. **Read with the sense of a skeptic**
   • After reading a narrative to or with children, ask them how they would have responded if the story events had happened to them. For example,

6. **Identify and respond to the theme or perspective of the author**
   • After reading a story with a clear theme to or with children, ask: *What is this story really all about?*

7. **Respond intertextually**
   • After reading a story to or with children, ask questions like these, without trying to guide them to any particular response:
   Does this story make you think of any other story? What are your thoughts?
   Is this story like any other story you know of? How are they alike? How are they different?
   Does this character remind you of any other character? In what ways?
   • After reading an informational text to or with children, ask questions like these, without trying to guide them to any particular response:

8. **Read with the sense of an author**
   • After reading a story to or with children, ask questions like these:
   What do you especially like about the way this author tells this story?
   Authors choose the words they use carefully. What are some of the words that you especially like in this book?

• When reading a picture book to or with children, ask questions like these:
Which illustration in this book do you like the best? Why do you like it?

9. **Read with a dispassionate, open mind**
   • After reading an informational text to or with children, ask questions like these:
   What questions do you have about what you have learned from this text?
   What else would you like to know about this subject?

10. **Read with a moral or ethical perspective**
    • After reading a story to or with children that includes a moral dilemma,
    What do you think about the ending of the story? Do you think it was a good ending or do you think a different ending would have been better?
    With reference to an action that has a moral or ethical aspect, ask:
    What do you think about how ____ acted in the story?

    In asking such questions, try not to steer children to any particular response but simply invite them to consider alternatives.

11. **Engage in thoughtful, civil dialogue about text**
    • When discussing a text with children, avoid repeating or rephrasing what they say in response to your questions. Repeating and rephrasing suggest that the children's responses are not valid on their own. These responses also discourage children from listening to one another because there appears to be no expectation that they do so.
    • When discussing a text with children, encourage them to listen to and respond directly to one another rather than always responding to you.

12. **Read broadly and deeply**
    • Include a wide variety of texts in the classroom library: wordless picture books, illustrated stories and informational texts, collections of rhymes and chants, children's magazines and newspapers, along with catalogues, menus, and other texts that are commonly found in the community outside of the school.

References

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