Supporting Readers

by Diane Stephens

We want our children to be life–long readers and learners, who read widely, think deeply, and take a critical stance.

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To understand how to support readers, let's start with the goals that we, the support team (caregivers, parents, teachers) have for our children: We want them to be life-long readers and learners who read widely, think deeply, and take a critical stance.

Why do we want this? Because it positions them to experience success in their lives, schools, and work places and it makes possible an informed citizenry, which is necessary to a functioning democracy.

What does the support team know to do to help children reach these goals? The team needs to know:

- a little about how children learn oral language. (Knowing this makes it easier to understand written language learning.)

- a little about how children learn written language. (Knowing this makes it easier to understand how children learn to read.)

- a little about the reading process. (Knowing this makes it easier to understand how to assess and support children as readers.)

- what five characteristics of a reader a child already possesses. (Knowing this makes it possible to understand each child's strengths and needs.)

- how to help every child develop all five characteristics of a reader. (Knowing this enables the support team to help children end up as life-long readers and learners who read widely, think deeply, and take a critical stance.)

So, let's begin ...

A little about how children learn oral language

Children learn to talk, and learn the conventions of oral language, because they are surrounded by talk and, because they want to participate, they make sounds that others consider meaningful. Think about babies who say something that sounds like /dah/ and the support team member responds, "Oh, you said 'Daddy'!" and likely shares this hallmark with others, "Today the baby said 'Daddy'." The support team member is teaching, most often without naming their response as such. They are teaching because they were: (a) exposing the child to language; (b) expecting the child to talk; (c) responding to the child's language; and (d) providing to the child the word they believed the child meant.

As the child's language grows, one word often stands for a complete sentence, eg.,"Up" stands for "Please pick me up." And later, children start trying to figure out the rules of language. They might say, for example, that they "gots two foots" as they are trying to figure out which verb is considered grammatically acceptable and how to form the plural of the word foot. Throughout all the periods of oral language acquisition, the support team teaches through response. In the above example, the support team member might say, "Yes, you have two feet," thus providing the grammatically correct words for the child's intended meaning.

Much of what we know about oral language development comes from the work of Brown (1970), Cambourne (1988), Halliday (1973), Lindfors (1980) and Piaget (1926). Cambourne named the conditions under which children learned language: immersion, demonstration, engagement, expectation, responsibility, employment, approximation, and response.

Instinctively, support team members *immerse* children in language, provide *demonstrations* by talking with them, *expect* the child to learn language (to talk, read, and write), provide a context in which the child can take *responsibility* about what they will learn, provide time for them use language authentically (*employment*), accept *approximations*, and *respond* as language users.

All of this research into language learning was revolutionary. Instead of thinking that young children learned language by parroting what they heard, support team members (and researchers) came to understand that children were actively learning language under the conditions they created. The net result is that, before they go to school, on average. children know about 10,000 words and most of the oral conventions of their culture. Great job, support team!

A little about how children learn written language

In the early 1980s, three researchers set out to explore what preschool children knew about written language. In their book (Harste, Woodward, and Burke, 1984), the researchers reported that children learned written language from the written language around them, from demonstrations. For example, when asked to write, four-year-olds from three different countries, wrote in ways consistent with their home language. Dawn, from the United States of America, wrote from wavy lines from left to write and top to bottom. Najeeba, from Saudi Arabia, wrote a series of "very intricate formations with lots of 'dots' over the script." When she gave it to the researcher, Najeeba commented, "Here, but you can't read it 'cause it's in Arabic and in Arabic we use a lot more dots than you do in English." Ofer, from Israel, printed, first from right to left,
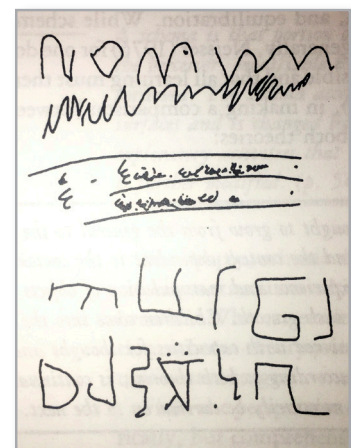
and then from left to right, "a series of rectangular and triangular shapes. His grandmother shared that what Ofer wrote, "looks like Hebrew, but it's not'." She added that she was concerned that he sometimes wrote backwards, which for her meant right to left.

Harste, Woodward and Burke also found that young children understood that print made sense, even though their understanding was not a direct match to what they saw. Shown a tube of Crest toothpaste, three-year-old children told the researcher that the word *Crest* was "brush," "toothbrush," and "toothpaste." Shown a picture of toothpaste without any words, another three-year-old said, "It's supposed to say 'brush teeth,' but you took the words off." Shown a picture of a milk carton, most of the three-year-olds reported that the package said "milk." Another three year-old reported, "Milk goes in there."

Very young children also understood that writing and drawing were different. For the most part, if a child's name began with a letter that had linear elements, like *T*, then the child's writing was linear and drawing was circular. The reverse was also true: if a child's name began with a circular letter like *C*, then their writing was circular and drawing was linear. Even with these differences, adults looking at children's papers could easily identify what was writing and what was drawing.

Finally, Harste, Woodward, and Burke found that children's understanding and use of written language became more conventional over time. While none of the three-year-olds said "Crest," almost all the six-year-olds did. The writing of three-year-olds did not contain letters; the six-year-olds wrote a list of words.

Other studies, before and since, confirm these patterns. (See review by Read & Treiman, 2013.) Gentry (2007), for example, described the stages as non-alphabetic writing, pre-alphabetic writing (letters are used but they do not represent sounds), partial alphabetic writing (HMT DPD for Humpty Dumpty), full alphabetic writing (TUTH FARE for tooth fairy), and consolidated alphabetic writing (BOTE for boat).

These researchers learned that, just as young children learn the conventions of oral language under Cambourne's conditions (described above), children also learn the conventions of written language under Cambourne's conditions. Children are *immersed* in written language, see many *demonstrations* of written language in use, are *expected* to learn to read and write, are in contexts in which they take *responsibility* for engaging as language users, have their *approximations* accepted, and are *responded* to as readers, writers, speakers, and listeners.

A little about the reading process

Imagine that you are reading a sentence on a piece of paper with a torn edge. What you can see is "Juan was walking down the sidewalk and tripped over a …" Automatically, before going to the next line, you think about what Juan might have tripped over. When I asked people about this, I get responses such as *crack*, *branch*, and *tricycle*. I don't get nouns like *elephant*, *bra*, or *diagram*. Nor do I get words like *hurry*, *dark*, or *even*. That's because, as readers, we know that language is meaningful and we know what it sounds like and so we want the sentence to make sense/be plausible and we want it to "sound right."

In the 1970s, two researchers on two different continents studied this meaning-making process: Ken Goodman (1969) from the US and Marie Clay (1979) from New Zealand. Dr. Goodman was a linguist and Dr. Clay was a psychologist so they came to this inquiry from very different perspectives. Each of them wrote about three cues in language that readers use to

make predictions. Dr. Goodman called the cues: semantics (meaning), syntax (grammar) and graphophonics (sound/symbol relationships). Dr. Clay had different names for the same cues: meaning, structure, and visual.

In the example I gave above, there was a rip in the page and so graphophonics/visual information was not available. Imagine, however, that the first letter was visible and it was a *b*. You would already have used your knowledge of the world (what one can trip over on a sidewalk) and your knowledge of grammar (what sounds right) and now you would use your knowledge of sound/symbol relationships to narrow your choices to things like *bike*, *branch*, *banana*. If the edge of the paper were merely folded back, a glance at the rest of the word would allow you to confirm your prediction. You would know, using all three cuing systems, what Juan tripped over … a bike.

And that's basically how reading works: We use our knowledge of the world (semantics/meaning) and our sense of what sounds right (syntax/structure) to predict what is going to make sense, and use our knowledge of sound/symbol relationships (graphophonics/visual) to confirm our predication. Both brain research and eye-movement research confirm this process (Nessel & Hammond, 2021).

A little about what characteristics of a reader an individual child already has

Working with groups of teachers over several years, Stephens et al. (2012) came up with a list of characteristics of children who were on the path to becoming life-long readers. Based on their experiences with children, the authors concluded that effective and efficient readers:

1. Understand that reading is a meaning-making process that requires thinking
2. Believe in their ability to make sense of text
3. Choose to read because they find it pleasurable
4. Self-monitor for meaning
5. Have a repertoire of skills and strategies to problem solve meaning.

The teachers referred to this as a What Matters list.

The support team, knowing their preschool child well, can assess whether their child has these characteristics. As they watch their three-, four-, or five-year-old child flipping through of a new or familiar book and telling a story based on the pictures, they will know their child expects books to make sense. The home support team knows their child feels confident as a reader when the child picks up books independently and reads through them. And they know their child finds reading pleasurable when the child chooses to spend time reading, asks to be read to, and wants to talk about stories. And they will notice if the child stops when something does not make sense, and what they do or do not do to make sense.

Once the children begin to match what is on the page with what is read, meaning-making, confidence, and pleasure are still very easy to assess. The support team knows about these because they do what Yetta Goodman (1985) calls Kidwatching. They pay attention to how the child engages with text. They notice if the child laughs at funny parts or is focused on saying words (What Matters #1). They notice if the child seems to feel confident as a reader or engages in activities designed to avoid reading (What Matters #2). And they notice if the child finds reading pleasurable enough to choose to do it (What Matters #3).

Knowing about self-monitoring (What Matters #4) and skills/strategies (What Matters #5) is a bit more complicated because usually the child is in school at the time they can do this speech-to-print matching and there is only one in-school support team member—the teacher—and 20+ children. This means that the teacher needs to plan time every week to sit next to every child and listen, briefly, while the child reads. This most often happens during independent reading. Teachers notice if a child stops or hesitates when something does not make sense. During this time, the teacher can also notice what strategies, if any, the child has to ensure that the text makes sense. Do they re-read? Read ahead? Substitute a synonym? Try to sound out an unfamiliar word? Skip the unfamiliar word (sometimes losing track of meaning)? Use what they known about sound/symbol relationships (aka phonics) to help them problem-solve for meaning?

How to help every child develop all five characteristics

Let's take these characteristics one at a time, although six simple actions—reading to a child, talking with them about books, giving them books to read, writing to them, talking to them about writing, and giving them time to write—help with several characteristics at once.

What Matters #1: How to help children understand that written language makes sense, that it involves thinking

Let's go back to how the support team helps children learn oral and written language. First and foremost, they immerse children in oral and written language. They talk to kids, read to kids, write notes to kids, teach them the names of the letters of the alphabet, point out street signs etc. Language, whether oral or written, is always meaningful. This immersion continues at home throughout elementary school and is a part of every classroom routine. In school, teachers read books to kids every day, talk with them about books, and provide time for them to read books they find interesting. Even kindergarten teachers provide time for kids to read and then to talk about books they have read—whether or not they are matching print to text or reading the pictures. In the early grades, teachers display the letters of the alphabet. Photographs of children and their printed name may go under each letter. Some teachers may also hang up objects or pictures of objects that children bring in from home. Teachers talk to children about the sounds that letters make. This happens most naturally when children have ample time to write. (For an example of kindergarten children starting to write their own books, see Bridges, B. 2019.)

What Matters #2: How to help children have a sense of agency, believe that they can make sense of print

All of us choose to do things for which we feel we will be successful. We avoid tasks if we feel that, even with hard work, we will not be successful. At school and at home, the support team makes sure that children can do what we ask. This is true for all tasks. We do not ask an infant to stay away from a fireplace—we put up a barrier so the child cannot access it. But we do expect a three-year-old to stay away. We match our expectations to what is possible for this child. In this way, children experience success (and don't get hurt physically or emotionally). In reading, when a three-year-old reads the pictures in a book and tells a story, the support team responds with statements like, "What a great job you did reading that story and telling me about it. You made it sound so exciting." When that same three year-old makes marks on a paper and tells you they wrote a story, the support team, says something like, "That's great that you wrote a story, please read it to me." In school, it becomes the responsibility of the teacher to ensure that they

celebrate what the child can do and only ask the child to do things for which the child will be successful. What teachers ask varies with each child and across time. What Child A can do easily in September, Child B might not be able to do easily until November. And what the teacher asks Child A to do in November will be easy then although it was not easy in September. Customizing instruction in this way ensures success and builds confidence. From the very start of the year, the teacher helps each and every child have a sense of agency and see themselves as capable readers and writers.

What Matters #3: How to help children choose to read because they find it pleasurable

There are thousands upon thousands of books that children come to love. Sometimes they fall in love with an author and sometimes with particular characters and sometimes with genres. The more that the support teams know about books, the more time they spend in the children's section of a library, the better they will be able to help children find the kinds of books with which they will fall in love. It is critically important that children already know most of the words in the books that they read (Allington, 2001). If children know 98-99% of the words in a book, they will be able to focus on meaning and they will be able to figure out the 1 or 2% they don't know and so build their vocabularies. This may seem counter-intuitive but take a look at the examples in the appendix. The passages contain 90%, 95%, and 98% of the words; the rest are empty blanks. Which passage was easier and more interesting to read? Which was more pleasurable? If we help kids find books they love and can easily read, then they will find reading pleasurable. If they find it pleasurable, they will read more. And there are volumes and volumes of research (Bridges, L., 2014; Cullinan, 2000; Taylor, Fyre; Maruyama, 1990) which show that the more kids read, the better they become as readers. Also keep in mind that what is "easy" for a child changes over time. In September, a teacher may not suggest a book for a child because the child will only know about 95% of the words. By November, by reading often, a child may know 98% of the words in that same book.

What Matters #4: How to help a child self-monitor for meaning

This is one of the easiest goals to achieve because when the first three What Matters are in place—when kids focus on meaning, have a sense of agency, and are choosing to read—they almost always stop when something does not make sense. In the rare event that does not happen, the support team member can simply say, "That part didn't make sense to me. Let's look at that again." This sends several messages: (1) Texts are supposed to make sense; (2) It helps to look again when it doesn't make sense; and (3) The teaching team member, not the child, is the one who is not understanding. The support team member only needs to make this comment a few times in order to help the child understand that, when something does not make sense, they need to take some action.

What Matters #5: How to help a child develop a repertoire of skills and strategies to problem-solve meaning

In a classroom, at least 364 days may separate the youngest child from the oldest. As every support team member realizes, there is a considerable difference between a five-year-old and a six-year-old, a six-year-old and a seven-year-old, etc. All support team members then need to customize what they ask and how they respond. In school, this means that the teacher needs to know what skills and strategies each child already has and to have a sense of what they are ready to learn next. These skills and strategies involve: looking at the picture, thinking about what

makes sense, making predictions, using knowledge of oral language to think about what would sound right, and using knowledge of written language to think about the information provided by the letters on the page. The teacher learns about each child's strengths and needs by spending time listening to the child read. Teachers help children by naming the skills and strategies they notice: "On this page, I noticed that you stopped before the word *gigantic*, looked at the picture of the dog, and said, 'very big.' That was a great use of looking at the pictures and, you are right, the dog is very big. The word the author used was *gigantic*, which means 'very big.'" Teachers also ask children to participate in whole class Strategy Sharing sessions in which children share with their peers what they learned that day about themselves as readers, e.g., "I did not know the word *gigantic* so I looked at the picture and said 'very big,' and now I know that gigantic means "very big." Other times, children may say things like, "I knew what the word meant but I hadn't seen it before so I tried sounding it out. I was able to figure out the word was *mentioned*."

So where does that leave us as support team members? There are really only a few things to remember:

- **It is important, at home and school, to create Cambourne's conditions:** immersion, demonstration, engagement, expectation, responsibility, employment, approximation, and response

- **Focus all language use—reading, writing, speaking, listening—on meaning.** It does not, for example, help to teach sounds in isolation. Imagine, example, not talking to a baby but instead saying, on one day, the sound /b/ and. on another day, only saying the sound /k/). Instead, help kids learn that language always makes sense by talking to them about real things, reading them books that make sense, providing them with time to read independently, talking to them about what they read, writing to and with them, and providing them with opportunities to write on their own.

- **Teach through authentic, conventional, helpful response.** With oral language, provide the conventional grammar naturally, without correction. In earlier example about "gots two feet," respond, "Yes, you have two feet." With written language, focus on the meaning. In the earlier example about a three-year-old writing a story with what look like circles, say, "Great. You wrote a story. Now read it to me." When a child in the classroom wants to write the word spider (Bridges, B., 2019), follow the lead of the teacher in the video (?), and say something like, "Where in this room could you find something that would help you write this word?," thereby helping to direct the child to an alphabet chart. In the classroom, create small, short-term small groups to help children with similar strengths and needs. Create whole group mini-lessons (see introduction, Bridges, B., 2019) or whole group strategy sharing times (O'Keefe, 2019) See also pages 224–235 in *Reading Revealed* (Stephens, Harste and Clyde, 2019) and the accompanying vignettes under Supplemental Material at scholastic.com/ReadingRevealedResources.

- **Keep language use—oral and written—joyful and within the range of possibility for the child.** By keeping the task joyful, children find talking, listening, reading, and writing pleasurable and so choose to stay engaged. By keeping tasks manageable, children build a sense of agency. Agentive kids who choose to engage with literacy grow as literate beings. They become life-long readers and learners who read widely, think deeply, and take a critical stance.
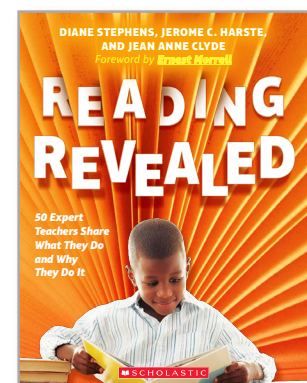
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*For Bridges, B. and O'Keefe: Use learners as password. Then see Additional Videos at top of page.