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ABSTRACT

This paper reviews the literature on the teacher's role in mediating learning for students with learning disabilities in whole language instructional programs, with specific emphasis on teaching students the parts of language and generalizing this knowledge to various contexts. Principles identified in the review include the following: the dynamic nature of the relationship between teacher and child; the importance of facilitating the child's ownership of his/her own learning; mediated instruction which is "functionally contingent"; a continuum of teacher intervention ranging from less to more teacher control, depending on the student; the necessity to teach skills (such as the parts of language) within a contextual basis; the teaching of generalization through the real use of knowledge in exploration of meaningful problems; use of a learning experience approach which helps students discover the patterns of language, including the parts of language, and how to use them effectively; and recognition that learning optimally moves from the whole, to the parts, to the whole. The paper concludes that, in a whole language curriculum, mediation of learning is provided in a way that allows the student to retain ownership of learning, while providing necessary assistance to facilitate growth. (Contains 27 references.) (DB)

Mediating Learning for Students with Learning Disabilities

In a Whole Language Curriculum

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Running Head: MEDIATING LEARNING FOR STUDENTS WITH LEARNING DISABILITIES IN A WHOLE LANGUAGE CURRICULUM

Abstract

There has been considerable debate regarding the effectiveness of the whole language approach to learning for students with learning disabilities. Central to the debate is the nature of the facilitation required for learners who are considered to be learning disabled. Two areas considered to be problematic for these learners are difficulty with learning and using the parts of language and generalizing this knowledge to various contexts. In this paper the authors examine the teacher's role in mediating learning for these students with specific attention given to the parts of language and generalization.

During the last decade there has been an emphasis on an active, child-centred approach to learning in the language arts curriculum. The whole language approach is founded on the principles of this child-centred focus (Goodman, 1989; Newman, 1985; Weaver, 1990). While whole language has been widely adopted, there has been some debate over whether or not instruction based on whole language principles is appropriate for students with diverse needs (Edelsky, 1990; McKenna, Robinson & Miller, 1990; Poplin, 1988a, 1988b). An issue which has created considerable debate centres on how the teacher can best facilitate learning. Some maintain that direct instruction should be the primary instructional method (Kimball & Heron, 1988; Licht & Torgesen, 1989). Direct instruction involves the child working through a hierarchy of skills on a schedule controlled by the teacher. Some special educators have questioned the appropriateness of direct instruction when working with students considered to be learning disabled (Heshusius, 1989; Iano, 1986; Poplin, 1988a, 1988b). They believe that when the teacher controls what and when learning is to occur there are often crippling effects for learners.

When the teacher and child are conceptualized in a dynamic relationship, in which learning is facilitated rather than controlled, the description is complicated. Understanding this role is crucial to the success of whole language for students with learning disabilities. The teacher must facilitate the learner's ability to gain control over learning and yet not strip away student ownership (O'Brien, 1987). "Mediation" of learning is a term that best depicts the role of the teacher. Critical to the effectiveness of mediation is the nature of how it evolves, because as identified by Newman (1991), learning how to lead (teach) without taking control and ownership

away from students is difficult.

In a whole language context, the teacher needs to play an active role to ensure that the learners' understanding and use of language strategies is left to chance. This is particularly important for meeting the needs of students with learning disabilities. Reid and Stone (1991) maintain that the type of guidance that is required to facilitate learning and monitoring should be "functionally contingent" on the student's need to know. This sensitivity to timing is critical to mediation. To be most effective, it is important that instructional information is volunteered by the teacher in response to what students are actually doing; and questions are asked or suggestions are made to those particular individuals when they are likely to prove immediately helpful (Newman, 1991). When mediation which nudges development is absent, students can be left to struggle. This point was demonstrated by Lindsay (1990) who conducted an observational study which focussed on students with learning disabilities and those being considered for referral and/or grade retention. Lindsay's research suggest that the teacher needs to play a vital, yet delicate role in evaluating, monitoring and facilitating the growth of learners. While students who are considered learning disabled need to experience independence and control, they also need a teacher who is not on the periphery of their learning. She noted that when given the option of either generating a story or copying the one generated by the teacher and the class, the at-risk students invariably copied. Thus, she concluded, they spent a good deal of time each day performing a task with little meaning and little potential for cognitive development. In addition, Lindsay noted the behaviours of children during silent reading time in which they self-selected books. Two of the three targeted low-achieving students consistently picked books that were too difficult for them, and had little success reading them. These behaviours indicate that the

children had difficulty when left on their own with no guidance or mediation provided. It is important that the teacher work in a collaborative manner with the students to help them engage in fruitful activities (Shannon, P. 1989; Staab, 1990).

The learner's characteristics and the nature of the learning need to be focal points in the mediation. Therefore flexibility in the teacher's approach relative to the characteristics and the task are essential. For example, reading many of the books in the early elementary curriculum is greatly facilitated if children have a rhyming strategy within their repertoire of knowledge. Consider the case of grade two children with a learning disability, who have difficulty manipulating sound patterns in such a way that allows them to identify rhyming patterns or produce rhyming words. In this case it would be essential for the teacher to provide explicit explanations and create learning events that focus on rhyme and the manipulation of language. This mediation would likely be conversational in nature where the teacher might ask questions which would encourage the learner to focus on the relevant details.

O'Brien (1987) suggests that teacher intervention needs to occur along a continuum from less to more teacher control, depending on the characteristics of the student. She explains that the need for the direct or more explicit instruction is particularly important for students who are learning disabled. Delpit (1988) suggested that some of the attempts at creating a whole language curriculum have disadvantaged some students through a lack of making the curriculum explicit. As she has pointed out, this is a problem, particularly for the students who do not internalize the patterns and conventions of the language represented in the classroom, which she refers to as the standard English. In order to make certain aspects of the curriculum more explicit, O'Brien (1987) suggests the need for teachers to develop "enabling strategies" that

encourage the students to extend and clarify their understandings. These enabling strategies can vary from something as direct as a mini-lesson focussing on a particular aspect of language for students who require more explicit explanation, to something as indirect as changing the material to encourage the use of various strategies. For the teacher interested in meeting the needs of students considered to be learning disabled, "enabling strategies" is an important construct. When the role of the teacher as mediator is conceptualized in this way it enables the teacher to give specific attention which helps learners become more strategic and flexible in their language use.

Many children who are characterized as learning disabled have difficulty manipulating and using parts of language in a variety of contexts. In an attempt to facilitate learning, there has been a move to simplify material into discrete sequential steps. In doing so, the necessary semantic information has been stripped from the activity (Gavelek & Palincsar, 1988; Poplin, 1988a). The more disconnected and abstract the material the more difficult it is to store and retrieve information. Brown (1978) has cautioned against the teaching of isolated skills without a contextual basis.

> The learning of isolated material for a purpose neither understood nor appreciated is not an easy task for the skilled and far less so for the novice...The aim should be to " recontextualize" (Anderson, 1977) early school experiences, to breathe meaning into school activities in order to alleviate the transition difficulties of the disadvantaged child. (p.95)

Material presented in an isolated fashion is only effective if the student has sufficient background information in which to link the material to what is previously known. When the contextual links in the information are unclear, the student will have more difficulty in

remembering the material. It has been documented that poor readers frequently enter the intermediate grades with a basic sight vocabulary, yet without having developed an understanding of sound-symbol relationships (Gaskins, Gaskins, & Gaskins, 1991; Zivian & Samuels, 1986). Even when the skills are acquired, students with learning disabilities often fail to use them in context. Concepts which are presented in a manner which is disconnected and abstract makes generalization problematic.

Difficulties with generalization have been a concern which has surfaced in all the models of instruction used with students who exhibit learning disabilities. Their ability to demonstrate their understanding of a concept or skill in one context and failure to transfer what they have learned to a different context has puzzled many researchers and practitioners. This difficulty in transferring newly acquired skills spontaneously across setting and tasks has been well documented (Borkowski, Carr & Pressley, 1987; Keogh & Hall, 1983). Generalization rests on an understanding of the function served by a given skill (Stone & Wertsch, 1984) which emphasizes the importance of teaching strategies in a meaningful context for these students. Even though students may be able to verbally explain the steps of a skill, it does not necessarily mean that they will use that skill effectively. Palincsar, David, Winn and Stevens (1991) suggest that there is a relationship between "inert knowledge" and difficulties with generalization. "Inert knowledge" refers to the knowledge that students can recall on request but fail to use spontaneously within or across tasks. The work of Palincsar et al. (1991) suggests that the difficulties of transference are due to a lack of instructional environments which encourage the real use of knowledge. They suggest that a major goal of instruction needs to be the "creation of shared environments in which students and teachers explore meaningful problems that provide

occasions for real use of knowledge" (p. 44). These shared environments create opportunities for dialogues which can provide feedback and enrichment of strategy usage for the student.

Foundational to whole language is the belief that there is a delicate relationship between wholes and parts of language (Newman, 1985; Poplin, 1988b). This is the root of the criticism voiced by proponents of whole language about the teaching the parts of language in isolation and the subsequent development of "inert knowledge". For many, understanding this relationship has been problematic and all too frequently has resulted in one of two behaviours. Many have rejected the notion of a whole language curriculum for students with learning disabilities because they feel that working within the framework does not allow them to attend to skills or parts of language. Still others, working within a whole language perspective have a phobia about anything that resembled "teaching phonics". However, after some reflection, some theorists have integrated the whole-part relationship, and the door has been left open for dealing with skills and parts of language (Freppon & Dahl, 1991: Poplin, 1988b). Understanding this component of the whole language curriculum is important in meeting the needs of the learning disabled. Researchers continue to suggest that not all students become readers by merely immersing them in reading and writing. This applies particularly to poor readers (Gaskins, Gaskins, & Gaskins, 1991). These students need learning experiences which help them discover the patterns of our language and how to use them effectively in their literacy learning. It is important to note that in a whole language curriculum the focus on the parts of language is attended to differently than in a curriculum established from reductionist principles. The most significant difference being that in a whole language curriculum a child is taught a skill or part of language when she or he needs it, not when the teacher wants it (Edelsky, 1990). Further, the

process of learning to read and write is not approached as a hierarchy of skills to be mastered.

Drawing on the previous work of Whitehead (1929), Poplin (1988b) suggested that learning optimally moves from the whole, to the parts, to the whole. She maintained that first there needs to be an initial phase of romance in which a curiosity and craving for new information is developed. This is followed by a second stage of precision which is driven by the need to gain control over the form or details. It is within this context, after the student has become emotionally attached to the reading and writing, that elementary units such as letter recognition, grapho-phonemic relationships and control over grammatical structures might be addressed. Real purposes are created for the student to want to gain control over the elementary unit. This is typified in the case of young readers who have become convinced that they can read, yet want to be more exact in reading by attending carefully to the print. After the love for constructing the meaning is satisfied, readers start to slow down and allocate extra time and energy into gaining control over the processes of word identification. No longer are the readers content to read by constructing a message based on the recalled meaning of the story. The readers become more concerned with precision. In this case, there is a need established to move from the meaningful whole of the story to gaining control over the parts of word recognition. It would be on occasions such as these that the focus on parts would be meaningful for the learner. The recent work of Winsor and Pearson (1992) suggests that when teachers encourage students to use invented spelling (approximations) in writing, a medium is created in which phonemic awareness and phonetic knowledge develop. When students engage in the process of using invented spelling, they have to segment the speech stream of spoken words in order to focus on the phoneme. This information then becomes a base of knowledge about the relationships

between sounds and letters that can have substantial transfer value in reading. Further, if the child is not given the opportunity to become attached to the process of reading and writing there would be little drive or purpose to gaining control over the parts. Poplin (1988b) outlined that the next stage in the process is the movement back to the whole through generalization.

Conclusions

Mediating learning is essential to the growth and literacy development of all learners. When the mediation is carefully crafted, students considered to be learning disabled are provided with teaching that is targeted at their needs and interests and offered at a time when it will be fruitful. O'Brien's (1987) construct of "enabling strategies" helps create a framework for understanding that the overall goal of mediation is to enable individual development. As a consequence the instruction needs to be personalized in a way that facilitates generalization and further learning. In a whole language curriculum assistance is provided in a way that does not substantially take the ownership away from the student. However, it does provide the necessary assistance to facilitate growth in the learning process. It is this interactional support provided by the teacher that gently moves the child forward in her or his development.

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