

VPost-Pandemic Realities: Examining Teacher Content Knowledge and Pedagogical Knowledge

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In this paper, I describe why teacher knowledge is essential in accomplishing the weighty task of helping children to become skilled readers. I begin by describing in general terms post-pandemic realities for teachers and highlight research related to the importance of learning to read during those formative early school years. Next, I spotlight one first-grade teacher's reading instruction, noting how her decisions are student-centered and sharpen learner awareness of critical decoding skills. I follow this with a discussion about learning to read, again emphasizing how teachers draw upon their content knowledge and pedagogical practice when instructing early readers. Finally, I suggest that teachers are instructional coaches whose expertise can impact student learning.

For many schools, fall 2021 was the first semester of full-on, in-person teaching after the Covid-19 pandemic knocked districts and teachers off their feet. Especially teachers. When Covid struck, teachers' classroom realities were upended. They now faced additional challenges (DeWitt, 2020) and according to researcher-psychologist Tim Pressley (2021), classroom educators were "showing high levels of stress with new instructional requirements and the anxieties due to the current state of education and the pandemic" (Pressley, 2021, p. 3). Working in an unfamiliar space where school mandates changed with each Center for Disease Control update left some teachers feeling inadequate and even depressed (Lee, 2020; Pressley, 2021). Many admitted they did not feel prepared for pandemic teaching. After all, what *was* pandemic teaching? The aspects of teaching that fueled their zeal—connecting with students and seeing the

light of discovery in their students' eyes—were altered. Yet, while schools looked different, teachers sought to work within these shifting realities.

Literacy levels, the ability to read with understanding and write clearly, can determine personal and societal success. Without literacy, it is “impossible to acquire other necessary skills, such as using mathematics” or to become an informed citizen (Walters, 2022, n.p.). Observers have noted that the pandemic widened educational inequality (Haelermens, 2022). Some families had access to more resources and were better equipped than other families to deal with the inconveniences and restrictions of an international health crisis (Haelermens, 2022; Walters, 2022). Many teachers, students, and parents found that online teaching was a poor replacement for the interactive nature of traditional classrooms (Gupta, Aggarwal, & Sable; 2021). Students and teachers accustomed to the personal connections that resulted from face-to-face instruction had to make dramatic accommodations to what had been familiar school patterns. Especially in elementary classrooms where teachers spend several hours a day with their homeroom students and develop classroom routines alongside relational bonds, the known became the unknown. Without much warning, the rise in Covid fatalities further altered the nature of learning; online instruction emerged as the primary delivery method for schools across the nation.

The Research Project

Over the last several months, my work as a field supervisor has positioned me to witness the ways teachers meet students' individual learning needs, especially in the aftermath of the pandemic lockdown. Informal conversations confirmed my observations that teacher content knowledge informed instructional effectiveness, especially during those critical K-2 grades where the foundation for literacy learning is first learned. My findings provided anecdotal data about teacher thoughts, beliefs, and actions. While helpful, I sought evidence from the authentic

milieu of a busy first-grade classroom where hundreds of small decisions direct a teacher's actions throughout the school day. Competent instruction guides "children's motivation to read and write by showing them" that reading is a worthwhile, engaging, and rewarding endeavor (Moats, 2020, p. xxii). What follows is description of an early reading lesson, conducted by a teacher whose practice reflects explicit, systematic, diagnostic, and responsive teaching.

After presenting my research plan to Ms. Turner's (pseudonym), I proposed possible ways this study might unfold. Ms. Turner eagerly agreed to four classroom visits during a two-week period to take place during her morning literacy block. She explained that teachers' work is often unobserved and underappreciated. With her informed consent, we agreed that she would review my post-observation notes for accuracy. In addition, Ms. Turner requested that I mask her identifying information and only share that she is a grade-level team leader with five years of experience at her elementary school in Park County, Montana.

I want the reader to know that what follows is a mere snapshot of what literacy instruction encompasses. While the scope of this research was intentionally scaled to a single practitioner's praxis, it offers the reader a valuable perspective. Furthermore, this paper describes a single interaction selected from many that I observed and is incomplete in telling the story of how children learn to master a complex, dynamic, and cognitively demanding task. Numerous requisite skills determine a learner's facility with reading, including word recognition and interpretation of connected text—words, phrases, and sentences. Nevertheless, the lesson presented below is one compelling piece of evidence that supports the importance of teacher content and pedagogical knowledge, critical for those charged with teaching young children to read.

Ms. Turner's dedicated 75-minute language arts block included a symphony of learning opportunities: whole class instruction; teacher-led, small-group skill instruction; and independent self-selected reading where students located books from bins labeled by subject and interest area. To determine which books to read during independent reading time, students employed the five-finger rule. While reading a page at random from a selected text, they would hold up one finger for each unknown word on a page. Accordingly, without teacher intervention, students were able to gauge a book's readability level: easy, just right, or not yet. If they held up five or more fingers on a single page, the book was probably a difficult read, and they understood from Ms. Turner's guidance that they were "not yet" ready to read it. If students held up 2-4 fingers, it might be in their "just right" zone. And lastly, if they held only one finger or even no fingers, the book was probably an easy reading selection.

Dehaene (2009) observed that "learning to read is not as natural or biologically 'wired in' as are speaking and listening and, thus, must be taught directly to most children over several years through formal education (p. 17). The National Early Literacy Panel (2008) noted that when students "are taught well and, consequently, begin to read in kindergarten or first grade, they are likely to reap benefits throughout their schooling." Snow, Griffin, and Burns (2005) further explained that once skills are introduced, they must be practiced. Independent reading helps anchor the nascent understandings of language processing. "Without well-developed reading skills, children cannot participate fully in classroom learning. They are at much greater risk for school failure and lifelong problems with employment, social adjustment, and personal autonomy" (Moats, 2020, p. 7). As a result, these individuals become school-time readers rather than those who use literacy in all aspects of their lives. A National Adult Literacy Survey (2003) reported that 14% of American adults were unable to perform functional reading tasks, such as

reading medicine labels and train or bus schedules. Another 29% with slightly improved skills had acquired basic literacy levels but did not read and write well enough to perform the language requirements of a typical job (Sweet, 2004; U.S. Dept. of Education, 2018). Educators and researchers know that exposure to books and motivation to read matter right alongside focused instruction in how spoken and written language work. The latter are the tools users need to decipher symbols and generate words. Teachers serve as the conduit to make the abstractions of language understandable and to spur motivation.

Literacy educators assert that those who read successfully from the start are more apt to enjoy reading (Heilman, 2006; Savage, 2011). If reading is a pleasant endeavor, children will be inclined to pick up a book. In turn, more reading experiences develop word knowledge and language patterns and expand learners' understanding of human interactions within a global context. On the other hand, those who experience frustration in learning to read have diminished vocabulary growth and other compromised language skills (Stanley, Petscher, & Catts, 2018). Avoiding that which is painful can be a default practice for those who find reading to be hard work.

A Snapshot of a First-grade Reading Lesson

Even though masks are no longer mandated, two of Ms. Turner's 18 students were wearing theirs. After taking attendance and collecting lunch money, Ms. Turner reviewed the morning agenda, printed in D'Nealian manuscript on the whiteboard. The literacy block began with a read aloud, Marcus Pfister's (1992) *The Rainbow Fish*. A heart-warming story about sharing and how that action can bring happiness to others is told with the help of large colorful illustrations that evoke reader empathy for the little fish. After inviting students to share what Rainbow Fish learned, Ms. Turner held up a large index card with *fish* printed in block letters

and asked for students to attend to the medial phoneme. Together, they identified it as a short-i vowel. Pointing to the whiteboard, she directed students to be on hunt for other short-i words throughout their reading block. Ms. Turner wondered aloud if her class of word detectives might be able to find 20 words before recess. Their heads nodding, students were ready to take on the challenge and within ten minutes of transitioning from the read aloud to small-group work, some had written their found short-I words on the whiteboard: *wish, chick, inch, pickles, and trick.*

In a few minutes, Ms. Turner would be working with small groups of students on targeted skills. She explained that nearly half of her first graders were at or above grade level while the rest struggled with various alphabetic understandings. This day's teaching concentrated on short vowels, consonant-vowel-consonant patterns, and closed syllable words. For Ms. Turner, preparing students for reading success was knitted to her belief in helping them understand how English works, how letters are assembled within words, and what those letter configurations mean—that is, comprehension.

Teacher Observation Informs Instruction

Now seated at a circular corner table, an animated Ms. Turner worked with a small group on early phonics letter-sound correspondences. Four first graders listened as their teacher explained they would be practicing how to blend letters together to make words and sentences. Students played a game of Go Fish, drawing a sentence strip from tray in the middle of the table. Knowing that colored paper can enliven ordinary skill work, Ms. Turner had prepared the sentence strips on bright green, yellow, and pink paper. At first, she invited the group to read in unison the simple sentences with decodable text: consonant-vowel-consonant (c-v-c) letter patterns. Unable to smoothly match the letters and sounds together, one child struggled to keep up with his peers. Matt (pseudonym) restlessly squirmed in his chair, unaware of his teacher's

watchful gaze. The boy was obviously feeling frustrated. When the activity shifted to individual reading, Matt faltered with his five-word sentence. Ms. Turner paused a moment to determine the direction of her lesson; this was the ultimate “teachable moment” that teachers talk about.

From observing teachers in similar situations, I know that one of three actions will likely occur. One option is that the teacher will remind the reader to sound out the words. Another possibility is that the teacher will read the sentence and have the student repeat it. Yet a third occurrence might be that the teacher will demonstrate how to blend the discrete sounds and point to the letters to show the sound-symbol association.

In one of our many conversations, Ms. Turned shared that she makes instructional decisions based on her understanding of what children can do and what they need to learn. With Matt, she knows that omitting the necessary practice of blending separate letters into a unit of meaning, a word, could further stymie his literacy development. Since this most basic of phonics skills is not secure, Matt needs to see, hear, and experience the step-by-step blending process so that future blending of letters becomes an effortless exercise. Ms. Turner also knows that decoding print is a difficult skill for some early readers and that this singular lesson might be key in ameliorating Matt’s understanding of the alphabetic principle, a skill, she suspects, was a Covid causality.

Clearly, the first option of telling the reader to “sound it out” is not viable because minus direct instruction and guidance, Matt will probably grow more frustrated. Telling students to practice what they do not know accomplishes nothing other than to heighten frustration. Without understanding those foundational letter-sound relationships in c-v-c words, it is unrealistic to expect this young reader to sound out the words to read the sentences. The second option, echo reading, where the teacher reads the sentence and invites the student to repeat, while still better,

is insufficient. Although the teacher would be providing some support by lessening the cognitive load of decoding all the words, since Matt does not know the simple letter-sound relationships, he would merely be parroting what the teacher said. Importantly, there would be no transfer of learning to when he reads independently. However, with the third option, Ms. Turner can model how to sound out words and guide Matt's practice with this foundational word attack skill. Such scaffolded instruction capitalizes on the importance of watching, mimicking, and doing. By showing Matt how blending works and moving her finger under each letter within the word, Ms. Turner can assist her developing reader to see how letters and sounds work together. With practice, it is likely that Matt will begin to read simple words and sentences on his own.

I do it. We do it. You do it. This say-and-show approach characterizes effective teaching (Hunter, 2004; Killian, 2021). In contrast, the vague admonition to "just sound it out" is ineffectual (Savage, 2011). During the pandemic, online instruction could not replicate the in-class experience of such a focused skill-driven lesson, and unfortunately, students like Matt were left lagging behind their peers who had already acquired the skill of blending. In this scenario, Ms. Turner's attentive observation and knowledge of individual learners' skill sets are key in making instructional decisions.

After the lesson, I inquired about Matt, and Ms. Turner shared that he was the youngest of four children. Two years earlier she had taught his older sister and knew the family from this prior association. Matt's family, she explained, experienced difficulties during the pandemic, including unstable home wifi access, extended hospitalization for a beloved grandparent, and exhausted parents trying to juggle virtual work meetings while monitoring their children's academics. The family was not prepared to help a kindergartener with remote lessons, and as a result, Matt's attendance in synchronous morning Zoom sessions was irregular. In addition, the

local public library was closed, and so books were scarce in Matt's home. Nevertheless, like families across the nation, as weeks became months of lockdown reality, Matt's family did the best with their circumstances and gradually adjusted, turning the kitchen and a bedroom into a virtual pandemic classroom. Families and teachers both made accommodations as they navigated Covid realities and responded to in-the-moment circumstances.

Discussion

In the opening scenario, the first-grade teacher had many options. Most early literacy teachers know that simply telling students to "sound it out" or "use phonics" would not be helpful. Dehaene (2006) reported that reading requires an understanding of print conventions and language abstractions. Moreover, most children learn to read through formal education that involves direct instruction in language (Moats, 1997). Moats (2020) opined that until students are proficient readers and competent spellers, lessons should include activities designed to sharpen awareness of individual speech sounds" with a gradual release of teacher responsibility (p. 256). In learning to read, children are immersed in phonological language processing skills where they fine-tune their ability to discriminate and manipulate sounds (Heilman, 2006). Yopp and Yopp (2000) suggested that phonological awareness activities focus on rhyme, syllable units, onset and rime, and phonemes. "Developmentally appropriate activities should be engaging, interactive and social, and should stimulate curiosity and experimentation with language" (Yopp & Yopp, 2000, p. 132.) When followed by opportunities to practice, linguistic stimulation and focused instruction anchor language learning.

Once this foundational knowledge is in place, youngsters are introduced to the alphabetic principle, or letter-sound correspondences (Yopp & Yopp, 2000) They also learn that letters combine to make words, and words are assembled into sentences (Henry, 2010). However,

letters are not all created equally. Teachers systematically present alphabetic concepts with simple, reliable sequences taught before more complex ones.

Consonants, more regular and predictable than vowels, are introduced first. Early on, students learn that initial consonants relate to one sound: *b bat*, *l lap*, *v vest* and *d dog*. Then consonant focus moves to final sounds in a word, such as *g hug*, *n barn*, *t fist* *p top*. Being able to discriminate and isolate those first and final sounds is a requisite, entry-level phonological skill (Yopp & Yopp, 2000).

Learning to read requires an understanding of consonants and vowels. Like consonants, vowels are taught in ordered manner. Children learn that the five full-time vowels—A, E, I, O, and U—each make short and long sounds. Typically, readers blend short vowels with consonants, after which long vowel sounds are studied and placed with consonants. Finally, two-vowel patterns are introduced (Henry, 2010; Heilmann 2006). However, these are only a few of the many phonics concepts first-grade teachers cover. Although alphabetic features are introduced individually and often in a specific sequence, they are not practiced in isolation. When a phonics element is applied within the context of reading words and sentences, the learning is contextualized and more meaningful for the young reader (Henry, 2010). Review and meaningful use help ensure that tentative understandings become established skills.

In Matt's case, repeated exposure to letter-by-letter blending in closed-syllable words was a necessary step for his eventual success in reading c-v-c short-vowel words. While some of his peers grasped blending easily, Matt needed additional practice with several words that exhibited a common pattern. Knowing this, Ms. Turner grouped words together based on medial vowel sounds: *bit*, *big*, *bid*; *pit*, *sit*, *dip*, *wig*, *tip*, etc. Consequently, after several opportunities to practice, Matt was able to decode short-vowel words and read these words in simple sentences.

Skilled reading teachers know that powerful instruction transitions tentative readers to the next level. A teacher with depth of literacy knowledge will be able to draw from a cache of teaching tools, selecting the one that fits a particular learner in a given context (Kilpatrick, 2015). Ms. Turner knew that Matt would need ample opportunities to practice blending before he would be able to confidently read sentences independently. Teachers like Ms. Turner embrace the long view, recognizing the complex array of skills that adept readers have acquired is built systematically, over time, and with much encouragement and support. Archer and Hughes (2011) confirmed that explicit instruction can greatly ameliorate reading problems. Most developing readers need direct guidance because English, with its complex linguistic layers, is more readily grasped if explained and practiced. But, this formal instruction must build on what readers already know about language.

Children and adult readers “bring a considerable amount of understanding and information to the tasks of constructing meaning in decoding” printed text (Savage, 2011, p. 19). They approach the reading task with an intuitive understanding of how English works, relying on their knowledge of oral language and its structures. As well, they have seen environmental print in abundance from signs and logos to bumper stickers and billboards. Early childhood play also has strong associations with language and can include rhyming verses, jump rope jingles, and songs (Yopp & Yopp, 2000). Oral activities such as stories and poetry “demand attention strictly to the oral language itself (Yopp & Yopp, 2000, p. 187). These natural avenues to learning and exploring language complement the more formal school process of learning to read. Instruction ought to be delivered intentionally and in the right dosage. Heilman (2006) advised that the “optimum amount of phonics instruction for each child is the absolute minimum the child needs to become an independent reader” (p. iii.). Excessive phonics instruction can usurp valuable

instructional time and has the deleterious effect of negatively impacting children's interest in reading (Alexander, 2020; Hammond, 2011). "The 'science of reading' controversy...is reading in the digital age" and cautions against the tendency to treat complex issues in an overly simplistic fashion (Alexander, 2020, p. 89).

Deciphering the code is a complex endeavor that demands cognitive processing of numerous language concepts (Coates, 2020) because those language concepts have irregularities. Early readers learn to attach a sound to a given letter, but once learned, they are then introduced to varying patterns (Johnston, 2000). The following examples illustrate letter variability. In each, the single consonant symbol produces a different sound, depending on the word: *s* as in *bus* or *busy*, *c* as in *cat* or *cent*, *g* as in *game* or *gentle*, *q* as in *quick* or *unique*, and *x* as in *xylophone*, *ax*, or *exalt*. Expert teaching can offer an explanation behind these apparent inconsistencies. Fundamentally, English is an alphabetic and positional language. In learning to read, attending to letter placement matters (Moats, 2022). Students learn that within the syllable unit, the letters that follow a particular letter, *c*, for example, can change the pronunciation of the word. Thus, children learn to read *cent*, *cider*, or *cyclone* because they recognize the vowel markers of *e*, *i*, and *y*. In contrast, when *c* is followed by other vowels, *a*, *o*, and *u*, /k/ results as in *cat*, *cougar*, or *cup*. Understanding this soft- and hard-*c* generalization aids not only in decoding words but also in spelling them. Someone who knows the two sounds of *c* would not likely pronounce *cider* with the same initial sound in *kid*. These sorts of judgments about words result when children attend to the individual letters of words, their sequencing, and their phonological translations (Kilpatrick, 2015).

Because practitioners understand that reading words and books is the goal, multiple phonics principles occur simultaneously with real-world reading. Accordingly, teachers seek out

decodable text that limits the introduction of multiple phonics patterns in words (Rightmyer, McIntyre, & Petrosko, 2006). They may, for example, have a story with a majority of consonant-vowel-consonant words. Once students have mastered this closed-syllable pattern, they have within their reading repertoire many familiar words, which empowers them as readers. But, children do not only read one-syllable words. In fact, the ubiquity of polysyllabic words in material intended for early readers points to the necessity of handling a variety of word types. Accordingly, knowledge of syllabication patterns and expectancies is yet another crucial part of word recognition (Heilman, 2006; Moats, 2020). Skilled readers are adept at breaking apart an unfamiliar word into chunks. For example, they recognize compound words as two smaller words and divide derived words into their morphemic components. With this morphemic foundation established (Kirk & Gillon, 2009), developing readers can more easily add to their growing understanding of language, and thus, over time and with guided instruction, grow into confident readers.

Teachers are Classroom Coaches

Learning to read is probably one of the most life-changing skills that determines an individual's future. It is during those critical primary-grade years where children learn the basics, necessary if they are to become consumers of print. Educators want students to be skilled and confident readers. To reach this goal, teachers themselves need to be savvy about literacy and English linguistic features.

Teacher content knowledge and pedagogical decision making can greatly impact emerging readers much like an athletic coach's approach can hone a player's skill development. An astute coach can provide more support and guidance to players compared to one who is new to the game or has less than a full understanding of all the nuanced aspects of the sport. A coach

designs drills and offers strategy to advance an athlete's performance; likewise, teachers impart tricks, tips, and strategies for word learning and reading instruction. Those "in the know" tend to get results.

Conclusion

Talk to any teacher, and it is likely that individual will extol the benefits of being a professional educator. The Covid pandemic introduced untold challenges, yet professional educators like Ms. Turner in the opening vignette rallied, embraced change, and persevered despite daunting circumstances. Their motivation? Students. Former President William J. Clinton observed that "literacy is not a luxury; it is a right and a responsibility" (Muglish, 2014, p. 1). The noble profession of teaching prepares this and future generations of school children to become readers. Literacy endures because of teachers who know their craft well and deftly deliver instruction.

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