Co-Regulation as the Foundation to Helping Young Children Learn to Read

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Process of Learning to Read

Reading is a complex skill that requires mastery of a number of processes in order to be successful. Adams' (1990; 2004) seminal works on reading acquisition explain that successful readers use orthographic, contextual, and phonological cues to recognize words and form a coherent and meaningful understanding of what is read using a process that is systematic, mostly subconscious, and mainly based on pattern recognition. These processes typically become internalized over time, but they can be taught and practiced until they become automatic and effortless. Phonological awareness is the primary mechanism that enables early reading (Stanovich, 1986), enabling young children to first understand the distinctions between spoken words and then to isolate, blend, and segment various phonemes to create words or to break them apart. Next is the development of the alphabetic principle (Ferreiro & Teberosky, 1982), or the understanding that words are composed of sounds that can be represented by letters, which is the basis of phonics. Prior to the development of the alphabetic principle, children experienced printed words in a manner similar to pictures where they might memorize a few keywords based on visual properties but be unable to understand the graphophonic properties (Stahl & Yaden; 2004). In addition to phonological awareness (and phonemic awareness), the National Early Literacy Panel (2008) identifies three additional pillars for early reading programs: phonics, fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension. These pillars align with the work of Adams (1990; 2004), Stanovich (1986), as well as Ferreiro and Teberosky (1982) to describe a well rounded, effective early literacy program.

Why is Reading so Difficult for Some Children

Stanovich (1986) first described the Matthew Effects in reading, or how developmental differences in children's acquisition of reading skills lead strong readers to flourish and poor readers to lag further and further behind their peers. In addition to academic challenges, poor readers report increased feelings of anger, sadness, social isolation, and other negative emotional states (Morgan, Farkas, & Wu, 2012), affecting their self-concept and motivation to read.

Research on reading development points to the supportive role that quality early literacy experiences play in the development of many literacy skills including phonological awareness, receptive and expressive vocabulary, knowledge of language

structures, concepts about the world, and knowledge about how print and books work (McDowell, Lonigan, & Goldstein, 2007; Niklas & Schneider, 2013). Supportive environments are rich in reciprocal oral language exchanges with fluent speaking models such as parents and caregivers, in the availability of age-appropriate print, in opportunities to read with caregivers, and in opportunities to engage meaningfully with print and sound through games, rhymes, environmental print, etc. These experiences model fluent language use and open up access to new vocabulary, concepts, and language structures that are incorporated into children's repertoire of skills before they begin formal reading instruction. Yet, differences in uncontrollable factors such as: socioeconomic status (Ferreiro & Teberosky, 1982) leading to differences in the availability of resources for literacy experiences or differences in parental reading level (Phillips, Norris, Hayward, & Lovell, 2013, 2017) can have significant effects on children's performance in early reading that are unrelated to the child's cognitive ability. For example, if a family cannot afford many books or does not have access to a library card, children may not have as many experiences with having fluent reading modeled or with print itself. If parents are not proficient readers, they may not feel as comfortable making opportunities to read with children. Any of these may delay the development of the alphabetic principle, which is a foundational concept that makes reading possible (Ferreiro & Teberosky, 1982) and other early reading skills.

Supportive literacy experiences in the preschool years are one factor that can help children develop literacy skills more easily, but reading development varies between individual children. Quality reading experiences in school by teachers who understand the developmental nature of reading, and are able to assess and build on children's areas of need in appropriate ways, help build on these early literacy experiences. Unfortunately, this can be a difficult skill set for teachers to develop, particularly because many teachers lack adequate understanding of phonological awareness and how it supports early reading (Cheesman, McGuire, Shankweiler, & Coyne, 2009; Fielding-Barnsley, 2010).

The Connection Between Anxiety and Learning to Read--Exploring Two Causal Models

The first model to consider when examining the relationship between anxiety and learning to read is to look at how those with existing anxiety and stress approach and cope with the task of learning to read. The research literature indicates that anxiety can negatively impact problem-solving, self-regulation, and completion of new or difficult tasks requiring information processing (Everson, Smodlaka, & Tobias, 1994; Hill, 1984). Interestingly, Grills-Taquechel, Fletcher, Vaughn, and Stuebing (2012) note that very little research has been conducted on anxiety and academic functioning, specifically for young children with reading challenges. They state:

> Reading difficulty is a particularly salient marker for achievement in young children because it is a primary focus of early education and a principal predictor of current and later achievement. Given the high prevalence of reading and anxiety difficulties in youth, along with the potential long-term implications of these difficulties, it is important to better understand the relationship between reading achievement and anxiety. Such research is also important because it may lend to the development of more complex interventions for children with these comorbid [conditions]
> (p. 35).

A research study by Ialongo et al. (1994) looked at the association between anxiety and reading achievement in 684 students who were evaluated in the fall and spring in Grade One. Results revealed that children identified as highly anxious in the fall were over seven times more likely to be in the lowest quartile for reading achievement in the spring.

The alternative model to consider that might account for the anxiety-reading achievement association suggests that children with severe learning challenges may be more likely to develop anxiety. Some children may develop the symptoms associated with anxiety in response to repeated failure experiences with learning to read in the classroom setting (Grills-Taquechel, Fletcher, Vaughn, & Stuebing, 2012). The skill of reading typically develops in the majority of children between the ages of 4-7. For some, the excitement of learning to read is regarded as an enticing challenge, filled with opportunities to learn new information about the world around them. For others, reading is a cognitive stressor and is often approached with anxious thoughts (i.e., What if I never learn to read? Why can't I get this?) that serve as a distraction during the reading process and which often leads to visceral reactions (sweaty palms, shaking legs). When children develop an awareness that they are struggling with reading they may experience heightened levels of anxiety which disrupt the child's ability to focus and could lead to a stress cycle where the anxiety and learning difficulties continue to impact one another.

Shanker Self-Reg™ as a framework to support students through the reading process: Revisiting co-regulation

When considering the relationship between anxiety and learning to read, it is important to return to the seminal study by Yerkes and Dodson (1908) who demonstrated how anxiety in small to moderate amounts can actually play a motivating role, whereas excessive amounts can result in impairment. For classroom educators,

particularly those who have the privilege of guiding children through the reading process in Kindergarten and Grade 1, becoming emotionally attuned to student feelings about reading is paramount. For students who are experiencing cognitive overload as a result of engaging in the process of learning to read, we suggest the following:

- Focus on your own interpersonal neurobiology when supporting the child which entails paying attention to your own affect and non-verbal signals. These signals include: eye contact, facial expressions, tone of voice, timing, gestures, intensity, and posture (Siegel, 2017).
- Have the child select literature topics of interest.
- Follow the child's lead in a literacy inquiry.
- Identify and reduce stressors in the other 4 domains (biological, emotional, social, and prosocial) which could be exacerbating or contributing to the stress load the child is experiencing in the cognitive domain (i.e., reading).
- Provide an environment of safety and trust so that the child can engage in shared reading experiences with you.
- Provide ample opportunities for reading to happen spontaneously and incidentally throughout the day (reading words that the child has drawn in the snow during outdoor play, reading words in a toy catalogue that the child has picked up).
- Becoming stress detectives and following the 5 step model of Shanker Self-Reg™ in order to support a child in returning to calm.

The children's book, *Thank you, Mr. Falker*, by Patricia Polacco (click here for the read-aloud version https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=abN2aP_Dzd0&vl=en) is a beautiful autobiographical story about Trisha, a young girl who is struggling to read and the incredible journey she takes with a compassionate and understanding teacher who provides her with much needed gentle encouragement. The story captures the essence of co-regulation and how the dedication and empathy of one teacher, coupled with the determination and courage of a struggling reader, come together and result in a shared and caring relationship which catapults young Trisha into a confident and literate teenager. The early years are a time of rapid change and learning to read is a highlight of this stage of development. Co-regulation is the foundation for helping our struggling readers meet the cognitive demands brought on by learning to make sense of the links between phonemic and phonological awareness and print and, we argue, is also at the heart of exemplary teaching pedagogy.

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