The Story Behind Smart Start Reading Lessons

The ECS diploma/early childhood education degree from the University of Calgary was an outstanding program. It emphasized the importance of fostering curiosity and using developmentally appropriate learning experiences. It abounded with practical approaches for teaching art, music, physical education, science, math and reading to students in early childhood.

We started school visits in the first year and were told to observe and take notes on classroom organization (see sidebar), daily routines, academic instruction and discipline measures. One thing I noticed from these classroom visits was that most primary teachers shared certain teaching strategies in common. (See sidebar.) Another thing I noticed was that in some classrooms children were reading fairly well, and in others they were not. Why was this?

The first year I taught grade one, I used a centers approach and guided reading lessons. It was fun, but not very successful. The gap between students reading levels grew wider as the year progressed. Some children zipped ahead leaving the rest far behind. I had a lot of questions and not a lot of answers. I was most interested in finding strategies that would work with the bottom end of the class. If it worked with these children, it would work with the rest. I also knew from my own schooling that the primary complaint with phonics instruction was lack of context and story. Such instruction is not only boring, but impedes comprehension skills. I needed a story structure that integrated phonics and sight words. That seemed an insurmountable task. I combed the teacher's store for months and finally found a teacher made

General Grade One Classroom Set-up

1. Carpet area to sit on for circle time.
2. Calendar
3. Word Wall with sight words
4. Alphabet letters on posters with pictures (D for drum)
5. Spelling Rules on charts
6. Pocket Chart for reading lessons.
7. Classroom Library with early readers
8. Flashcards for reviewing words in small groups
9. Listening station (cassette tapes with head phones for listening to stories)
10. Math Manipulatives (such as buttons)
11. Art easel, paint shirts, brushes, paint
12. Ghetto Blaster for music lessons
13. Scrap paper for writing and art
14. Games for free time

unit on colours. I liked the look of it right away. Grade one science started with a unit on mixing colours and colour words were introduced right away in grade one so that children could colour pictures. The unit had some simple sentences along with pictures to colour. I tried some of the worksheets with my class and soon had a list of questions.

1. How can I help children see the spaces between words?
2. How can I help children recognize the difference between sight words and decodable text?
3. What happens when there is text thrown in which can't be decoded with the child's current skill set and isn't a sight word?
4. How much text can a child handle before they are overwhelmed and can no longer comprehend?
5. How can I keep track of an entire classroom of children's decoding progress?
6. How can I be sure each child is comprehending the text he is reading? How do I keep track of it?
7. How can I introduce new phonics concepts and sight word without losing the old ones?
8. How can I get children to apply phonics rules in context?
9. How can I give children enough phonics practice without losing their interest?

In order to answer these questions, I began to experiment with simple sentences for them to decode.

How did I help children see the spaces between words and also read the words? This question was more easily answered in writing, because the students were directed to spell a word and leave a finger-sized space between it and the next. With beginning readers. it was trickier. I tried creating a few sentences which combined the sight words with the colour words, but the difficulty of not seeing each word separately remained for a number of children. I knew this, because when I asked the children to count the words, many could not.

One evening, I remembered a reading lesson at university that involved using rebus pictures (a symbol that looks like the word it represents). The next day, I tried drawing rebus pictures below each word in the sentence. This definitely helped the children notice the words individually. After a number of tries, I settled on having the children draw the rebus pictures to show they could identify each word.

Example:  **= see**

I also drew paint brushes beneath the colour words. Children were instructed to read a word, draw a rebus picture below it, and colour the paintbrush. The skill of recognizing individual words took about nine school days.

How did I help children recognize the difference between sight words and decodable text? I tried experimenting with different ways of marking a single sentence to see if I could find a strategy to help students differentiate between sight words and words that required blending. What finally worked was:

*underlining words which required decoding
*not underlining sight words
*adding the new sight word for the day in bold-face type
*using a controlled vocabulary

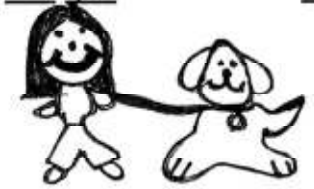
Letter: v	Sight word: this
Day 25	Valentine Letter

Name_____

4/4 comprehension

28/28 decoding

The vet got **this** brown dog.



The brown dog ran and ran.

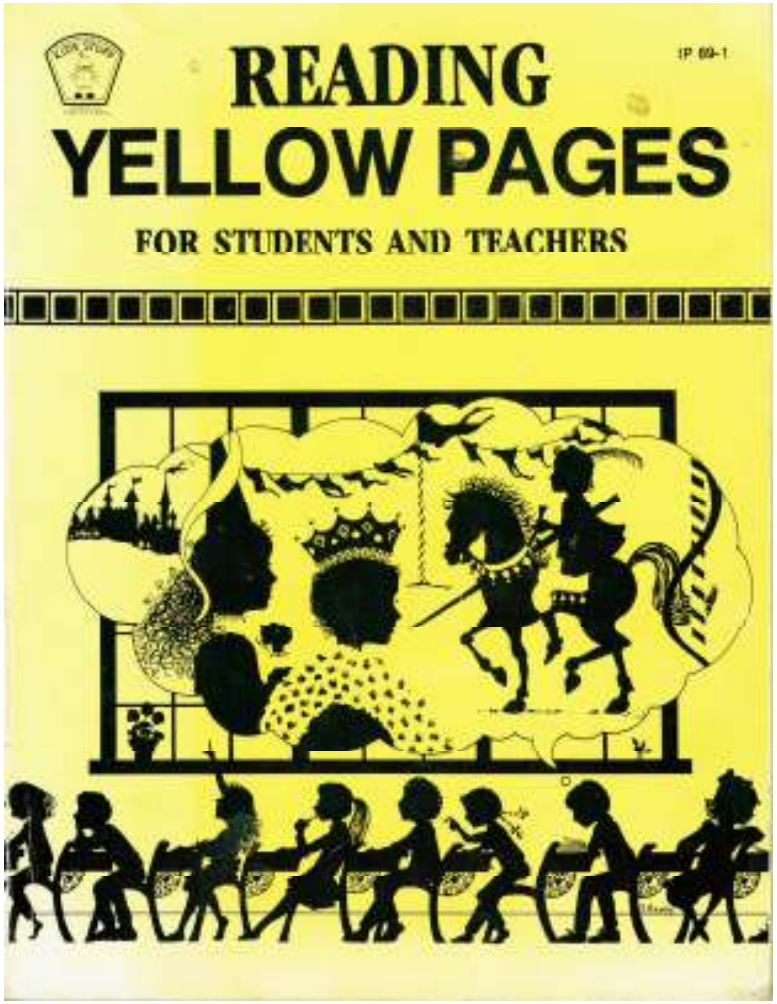
The vet ran with the brown dog.

The vet and dog ran to the green hill.

- **Student and Teacher Responsibilities**
- While students are working independently at their desks, the teacher moves from one child to the next listening to him/her read the story.
- The teacher circles any missed words and subtracts them from the word count at the top of the page.
- The teacher records the lesson number and the exact words missed by the child in her record book. This enables the teacher to assess any patterns of difficulty (sight word/phonics) in decoding.
- In this example, the child read the story perfectly and got 28/28 for decoding.
- Next, the teacher looks to see that the child's drawings match the text and records a comprehension mark for each picture. In this case the child's pictures matched the text for each sentence and was given 4/4 for comprehension.
- Once students finish all the independent work, they leave it on their desks and proceed to: free time, word packs or the classroom library depending on the time of year and their progress. Leaving work on their desks, indicates it is ready to be checked and keeps the children from following the teacher around the room.
- The teacher calls the children back to their desks to read, conference, or fix errors as soon as he/she is able.

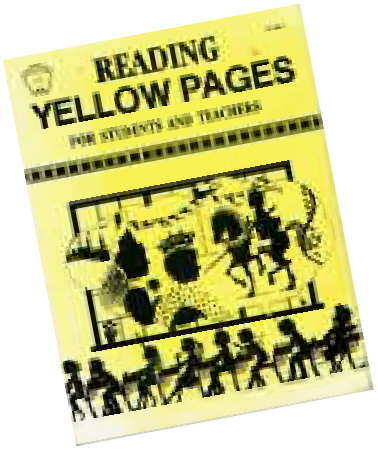
What happens when there is text thrown in which can't be decoded with the child's current skill set and it isn't a sight word? Generally confusion resulted when vocabulary which could not be decoded was added to sentences and so I ruled it out. Sometimes it was unavoidable. In such cases, I tried to find a picture and label it with the word. Example: "alligator" would be accompanied by the graphic of an alligator

How did I know what to include? I had purchased a book when I was teaching grade six called



The Yellow Pages for Reading and used it then for spelling dictation. However, without this book, I could not have written Smart Start in Language Arts. It contained word lists of short and long vowel words, y at the end of one and two syllable words, consonant blend words, words with digraphs, diphthongs, rhyming word families, compound words, contractions, synonyms and antonyms. Additionally I used a list of the Dolch sight words I got at university. These word lists became my curriculum skeleton. Each day's lesson usually included new letters or phonetic concepts and a new sight word. Gradually the lessons grew longer and the sentences turned into stories which were accompanied with short comprehension questions. I hoped to create enough lessons for the school year and persevered until I had written half of the stories by the end of my third year teaching grade one. I undertook finishing the rest of the stories on my maternity leave, hoping to make things easier for myself when I returned to my job and had to balance teaching with being a new Mom.

When writing the stories, I was limited to using a controlled vocabulary. Therefore, each new story had to incorporate a new sight word in bold-face type, as well as include only previously taught sight words, and use decodable text containing only the phonics letters/keys that had been taught up until that day's lesson.



Where did I get ideas for writing so many little stories? It is difficult now for anyone to realize what writing was like without the internet at one's fingertips. I couldn't write a story and then look for a graphic, because I didn't know if I would be able to find a graphic to accompany the story. I had two CD roms with graphics, but only Corel Draw was professionally licensed and could be used as graphics for my worksheets. The other was a Disney production filled with cartoon pictures for colouring. It was helpful for stories, but could not be used in the worksheets. Therefore, if I wrote a story from a Disney cartoon picture, I also had to make sure there was a graphic from Corel Draw which could accompany the story.

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I kept a constantly changing sight word dictionary on one side of the computer desk and photocopied sheets of word lists from The Yellow Pages for Reading on the other side of the desk. After using a word, I would stroke it off. I would figure out the phonetic concept, the new sight word and then search through the two cd roms looking for a graphic to base the story on.

Each graphic had to be opened up on the computer individually, because they could not be previewed and most of them did not work for basing a story on. This was a lengthy and laborious process. The Disney CD of colouring pictures was surprisingly helpful for ideas. Unfortunately, with the advent of the next computer, it had to be discarded, because it didn't work. The only graphic I have from it is this picture which one of our daughters coloured when she was very young.

Needless to say, with these limitations some of the stories sound silly. Although I had limited resources, the end of the journey was wonderful. The children learned to read and I had a great adventure writing Smart Start in Language Arts.

JoAnne Moore

NOTE:

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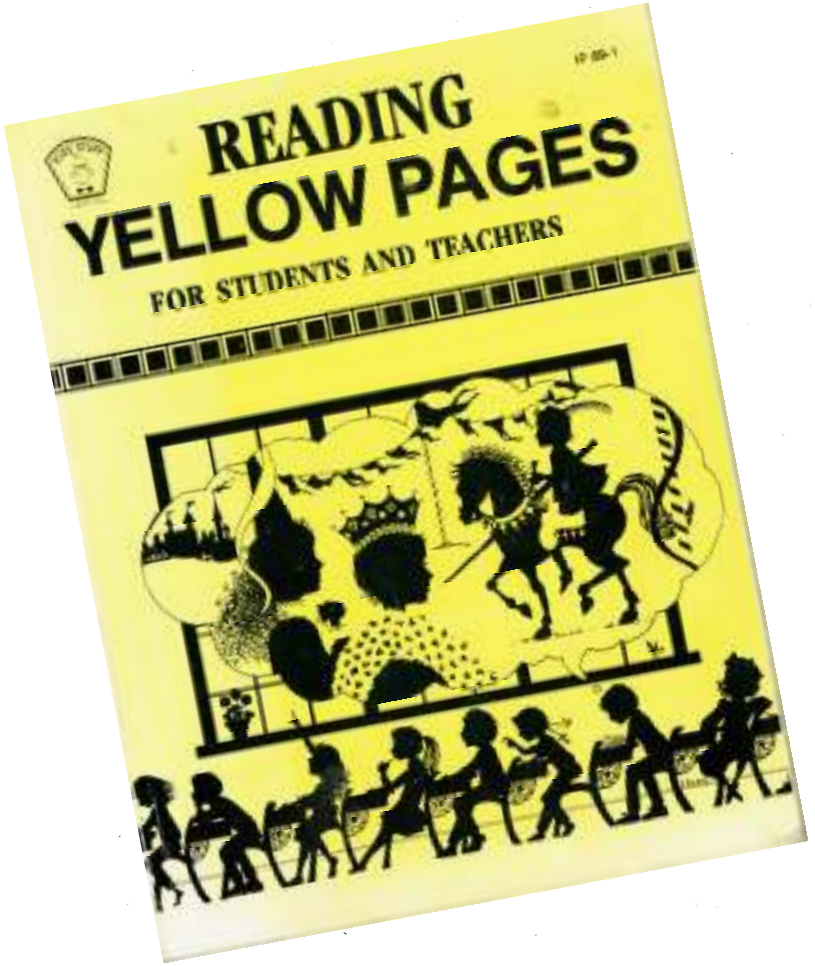

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