Triple R Teaching

Does Shared Reading have a place in a structured literacy classroom? Does it align with the science of reading?

When I talk about Shared Reading, I'm talking about capital "Shared Reading," which had its origins in whole language and balanced literacy. I'm not talking about lowercase "shared reading," which to some people is just reading aloud to our students. Let's talk about capital "Shared Reading," which is when you share an enlarged text with your students, and you read it together.

Before we get into whether or not Shared Reading aligns with the science of reading, we should just come right out and say that Shared Reading originated with Don Holdaway, who was a fierce advocate of whole language. Whole language is this idea that we can teach reading by surrounding kids with good literature, and they're going to just pick it up and we don't need a lot of explicit instruction.

Holdaway believed that Shared Reading of predictable text would lead children to easily recognize whole sentences and provide cues for reading individual words. He found it preferable to what he called "word by word processing" because it sounded like fluent language. He believed that explicit teaching of phonics out of context served no useful purpose, and that what he called "the Shared Reading experience" was much more effective than direct instruction.

We know from research that children benefit from explicit direct instruction in learning to read, and that is systematic instruction in phonemic awareness and phonics. So right away we know that Holdaway had some things wrong.

Interestingly, he saw Shared Reading as a way to replicate the experience of a parent reading with a child on their lap. That's a great goal trying to replicate that in the classroom, but we do not want to have this false understanding that sharing a text with students is going to teach them to read.

Capital "Shared Reading" holds a very important place in the balanced literacy model.

According to Fountas and Pinnell, Shared Reading is a bridge with the potential to "move children from one place on their reading journey to the next." And if you're not sure what that means, I'm right there with you.

Here's the thing. There's a lot wrong with the capital "Shared Reading" method. You've heard teachers say, "Hang on a second, let's not throw away everything from balanced literacy. Let's not throw the baby out with the bathwater." But in the case of capital "Shared Reading," we probably just need a fresh tub.

Shared Reading should not be used as a bridge between read aloud and independent reading. It should not be used to teach children to lift words from the page.

However, we CAN use Shared Reading to teach concepts of print and support letter learning through print referencing. So print referencing is when you point out things; it's using cues to direct children's attention to features of written language. Research shows that print referencing is effective.

We can teach concepts of print, which is an awareness of how print works. We can use those large texts as we read aloud and point to the words to show our students that print holds meaning, that we read from left to right, from top to bottom on the page. Concepts of print are easy and fun to teach, and it's easy to point out those features when you have an enlarged text to share with your class.

That enlarged text also makes it easy to draw attention to letters and letter sounds that you've taught.

You can also use Shared Reading to build oral language.

Think of it this way, Shared Reading is a way of giving your students access to beautiful vocabulary, advanced language structures, and best of all, knowledge.

You can do this with read alouds, but students can't follow along because the text is just there for you to see. Shared Reading lets your students see the words and read as many of them as they can.

So here are some principles I think you should follow when using Shared Reading in a structured literacy classroom.

Number one, choose an engaging text that will challenge your students, but is still within their reach.

When I think of traditional Shared Reading lessons, it's usually a very predictable text. Like in the book I Went Walking, "I went walking. What did you see?" There's repetition there. That's fine if the goal of your lesson is to teach concepts of print, that every word we say matches a word on the page. You certainly can do that.

However, if you're using the text to build oral language, you want to find something that's a little more challenging.

Now I'm not saying that you expect your students to be able to read the text with you, especially if they're still learning to decode. It's within their reach if it's something they can understand, and if there may be a few words here and there they can chime in on, maybe there's a refrain, maybe it's a poem about something.

So after you've chosen an interesting text that will challenge your students, introduce it, and then read it aloud, always tracking the print as you read.

You can use this shared reading text to call attention to previously taught sound-spellings or high frequency words that you've already taught your students.

You can draw attention to vocabulary. Take a word out of the poem or the passage or the book and teach it to your students.

You can also build knowledge. For example, if I'm reading a poem about the narwhal, I could say, "In the first stanza, I read about five different narwhal predators. Follow along as I reread that stanza. When I'm done, you'll turn to your partner and see if the two of you can list all five predators."

This is why you want to choose a challenging text, something that's going to teach them something, not something full of information they already know.

Next, you can read the text again, inviting your students to join in as they're able.

Then if your students are ready, which may not be true in kindergarten or first grade, you could provide copies of the text for them to read in pairs throughout the week, and then you could revisit the text on later days.

If this sounds intriguing to you, and you're wondering where to find shared reading texts like poems that you could enlarge and pass out a copy to everybody, you should definitely check out my membership, Reach All Readers Plus, because we have, at last

ones every month. They're of different levels, many of them are nonfiction, and they'll definitely give your students a chance to broaden their knowledge and increase concepts of print, as well as teach new vocabulary.

You can learn more about our membership at reachallreaders.com/join, and to get the show notes for today's episode, you can go to reachallreaders.com/episode137.