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Introduction

I had a number of motivations in writing what I wrote, in the way I wrote it, in the Kick Arse Poetry Books (yes, there is another one coming out soon). Some of it was just seat-of-the-pants stuff: finding out by trial and error what seemed to appeal to, and work with my own son who had poor reading skills, a strong disinclination to read, ADHD, and a myriad of learning and behavioural difficulties. I had the gut feeling that they were interrelated in some way. If the words swim about on the page and make you feel sea-sick, then that clearly is a strong disinclination to read. We started to make some progress once we found a way of keeping the letters still, thanks to Ronald D Davis and Eldon M Braun's book *The Gift of Dyslexia* (there is a revised and expanded version, Perigee Books, 2010). The consequence of all the woozy reading was a poor vocabulary and comprehension, and a disinclination to read (partly because he'd learned that it made him feel ill, so in effect the act of reading had been associated with a punishment, and partly because he was now a poor reader, and who wants to look like a dick?). Reading material he was given at school was either too hard, uninteresting, or the sort of thing you would normally give a much younger child (insulting). He couldn't really tell you what he would like to read, because his experience of reading was so limited. Furthermore a book that was anything other than 'slim' was a terrifying prospect - in his mind, it was mission impossible: it would take an infinity of time to read. The pages might have all been blank for all he knew, because you could rarely persuade him to peek inside. Sometimes you could trick him into it, by reading aloud a chapter or two, and then he might be persuaded to join in the reading, if the content appealed. But those chapters had better be short, or you wouldn't hold his attention.

We found that poetry had some advantages over prose: generally short (always a plus) so it didn't require sustained effort; the rhythm seemed to keep him going, whereas in prose he would get stuck on any new words; and like the lyrics of a song it tended to be memorable on account of the rhythm and/or rhyme. Clearly he would be more likely to read it if the subject matter was of interest, so the early poems were about events, pets, people, or places that were familiar, or which discussed subjects such as bullying, or being not good at stuff. I wanted to champion the underdog somewhat. I wanted to unstigmatise the stigmas and elevate ordinariness to extraordinariness.

It soon became evident that the poems had a wider readership, and appealed to good readers and poor readers alike, and young and old alike. It also became evident that there were plenty of adolescents who were poor readers, and who were reading-averse. This caused me some alarm, I have to say. No matter what your interest, your likelihood of succeeding is greatly impaired by poor reading skills. Furthermore, the only way to become good at anything is to practice it a lot - whether it's skating, playing the guitar, or reading. So, having been moved to write more poems for a larger readership, the book had to be something that the average adolescent might be tempted to pick up - hence the small size, and the picture of an elephant's arse on the cover. I wanted my readers to laugh because it's good for the soul, and because humour fosters learning.

I deliberately avoided having pictures in the book, despite the fact that I have the skills to do the illustrations myself. Also despite the fact that teens would be drawn to the illustrations. The reading-averse would prefer all pictures and few words, like a comic book. Of course they do. My son will readily admit to that - it's easier. It saves all that mental effort of having to turn text into meaning. However, he also gets (now that he's older) that the meaning, emotion, and learning that derive from text (and by text I am referring to something a little more complex than the microwave instructions for the noodles) depend on what the reader brings to the interaction, as much as what the author brings. Just as different people have different experiences when looking at a painting, or listening to music, different people have different experiences when reading.

Its not just a matter of the literal understanding of the words - the author has woven them in a way so as to communicate their thoughts and feelings, and the reader then marries that up with their own understanding of the world. It is a communication which involves both parties. If you provide an illustration, you have saved the reader all this cognitive bother: text = picture. But the art of reading is precisely that cognitive bother, without which one greatly diminishes either the learning or emotional connection one might have derived from the text.

I have included some excerpts, from literature which I found interesting and pertinent in this regard:

Vexed Texts - How Children's Picture Books Promote Illiteracy. Pamela Protheroe, The Book Guild Ltd 1992

“It is not the actual content of texts that children need to learn it is how to create context, and they learn this best by making mistakes and not having ‘meaning’ handed to them on a platter”

“It is simple minded to sit the second language learner down with a series of picture books in order to teach vocabulary. Instead of working the new items in with other known items, the learner simply looks at the picture for meaning which is an entirely different process - a non-linguistic process - a process that links the symbol with a referent not a concept. This is equally detrimental for first language learners who are just beginning to read, and especially detrimental for children whose language experience has been limited. These children need to build up their semantic fields for lexical items, which necessitates building up the conceptual as well as the lexical fields together”

“The fact that metaphors can be seen as basic to language seems to me to highlight the need for an individual's creative activity in understanding text, and I believe pictures prevent this creativity and deny the metaphorical nature of language”

“From a linguistic point of view there is no logical connection between pictures and language, but pictures are being used to a great extent in education to subserve the cause of language teaching, and yet there is no evidence that pictures are of any use in the teaching of language. In fact, there is every reason to believe that they interfere in a serious and damaging way. Quite simply, children learn the wrong things from using picture books”

T Rasinki, S Homan, M Biggs. **“Teaching reading fluency to struggling readers - methods materials and evidence.”** *Reading and Writing Quarterly* 2009 25: 2-3 192-204

“Reading fluency has been identified as a key component in reading and learning to read. Moreover, a large number of students who experience difficulty in reading manifest difficulties in reading fluency. The keys to the development of reading fluency include modelling fluent reading for students and providing students repeated reading practice of written passages..... Rather than have students involve themselves in a mechanistic form of repeated readings for which the main goal is reading fast, we feel that a more authentic approach to repeated readings and fluency development is called for, especially for readers who struggle. This more authentic approach involves the use of materials that are meant to be read orally and performed for an audience. With such materials readers do not practice reading a text to improve their reading speed; rather they practice a text to recreate the voice of the author so that an audience listening to the performance of the text read aloud will more fully appreciate the meaning that is embedded in the voice of the reader. Not only does such an approach to fluency instruction work, as the fieldbased research we have summarized in this article demonstrates, the use of materials such as poetry, song, scripts and the like will help students develop a love of and appreciation for the written language that is not always present in other forms of written discourse”

E Moje, M Overby, N Tysvaer et al. **“The complex world of adolescent literacy: myths, motivations, and mysteries.”** *Harv Educ Rev* 2008 78(1) 107-154

“The findings presented here provide a glimpse of what young people value in texts: They like to read books about people like them, and not only in terms of race, ethnicity, age, class, or gender...They also like to identify with characters who are resilient through struggles, people who are working through relationships, people trying to figure out who they are.”

“The Effects Of Training In Timing And Rhythm On Reading Achievement”

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Philip J. Lazarus, Florida International University, USA 343 - 350.

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“Although the automaticity theory accounts for the accurate and effortless decoding that fluent readers demonstrate, it does not account for the role that prosody plays in reading. According to linguists, prosodic aspects of language include rhythm and expression (Kuhn & Stahl, 2003). Prosody comprises a series of features including timing or duration, pitch or intonation, stress or loudness, all of which contribute to reading text (Allington, 1983; Dowhower, 1991; Schreiber, 1987, 1991). Prosody may also provide a link between fluency and comprehension. It is speculated (Chafe, 1988) that to read a sentence, one must assign syntactic roles to the words. Appropriate intonation, phrasing and stress are all indicators of fluent readers. Both timing and rhythm play an important role in the reading process. Students experiencing deficits in timing/rhythmicity are often poor readers. In fact, many students with these deficits have a learning disability in reading. Perhaps significantly improving a student’s skill in timing/rhythmicity, may have the effect of reducing the impact of reading disabilities of handicapped readers and improving the reading fluency and broad reading skills of typical readers”

Usha Goswami, **“A temporal sampling framework for developmental dyslexia”**

Trends in Cognitive Sciences January 2011, Vol. 15, No. 1

“Traditional educational practices, such as learning metrical poetry and singing nursery rhymes, might also entrain the Theta and Delta oscillatory networks that are (by hypothesis) impaired in dyslexia”

Melissa Lee McCartney Matthews **“A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Hippocampus: The Effects of Humor on Student Achievement and Memory Retention”**

A Dissertation Presented in Partial Fulfilment of the Requirements for the Degree Doctor of Education. Approved April 2011 by the Graduate Supervisory Committee: Arnold Danzig, Chair ARIZONA STATE UNIVERSITY. May 2011

“However, students in this study corroborate research on humor in education in several ways. They reported in response to interview questions that humor helped them learn because it reduced stress. As much as humor in the lesson calmed the students, it also livened the discussions and helped keep the students’ attention throughout the class. In previous research on humor, laughter is said to trigger the reward, or pleasure centres of the brain. The humor group had statistically significantly higher scores than the non-humor group three weeks

after the lesson was taught. Therefore, it can be concluded that humor does aid in memory retention. During the interview, the students made analogies that humor was like memory hooks to hang the concepts on and acronyms or mnemonic devices that help trigger memories. At the same time students enjoyed the experience of learning. Therefore, it can be concluded that humor helps students remember information”

Jesús M^a Alvarado, Aníbal Puente, Virginia Jiménez, and Lorena Arrebillaga
“Evaluating Reading and Metacognitive Deficits in Children and Adolescents with Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder” *The Spanish Journal of Psychology*
2011, Vol. 14 No. 1, 62-73

“The main result of this research was the confirmation of a close relationship between ADHD and the components of comprehension and metacognition that form part of RD [reading disabilities]. On another note, the repeated finding that there is strong comorbidity between the two disorders (August & Garfinkel, 1990; Semrud-Clikeman et al., 1992; Willcutt, Pennington, Olson, Chhabildas, & Hulslander, 2005) makes it necessary to investigate the nature of this relationship that, according to recent studies, denotes an influential genetic component (Miranda, Grau, Rosel, & Meliá, 2009; Pennington et al., 2009; Willcutt, Pennington, Olson, & DeFries, 2007), calling into question the thesis that the two disorders have different cognitive and behavioral profiles, a notion that is defended by developmental psychologists (Bonafina, Newcon, McKay, Koda, & Halperin, 2000; Felton, & Wood, 1989). According to Pennington, Groisser, and Welsh (1993), the phonological processing of children with RD is affected, while their executive functions remain intact. The reverse is the case for children with ADHD: the phonological component of reading remains intact while the executive functions are altered.

One of the greatest disadvantages for students with ADHD is the impulsivity and disinhibitory behavior it entails. In other words, ADHD implies a slowed development of the ability to inhibit behavior. The executive functions related to inhibitory capacity affected by ADHD are: prolongation and memory of work, self-regulation of affect/motivation/excitement, internalization of language, analysis, and synthesis. All of the above result in the child having greater difficulty organizing his or her behavior over time, predicting and controlling behavior, and optimizing the long-term consequences of it. Though the executive functions have a neuropsychological tie to the prefrontal lobes of the brain, slowed development in the executive functions may be overcome by using metacognitive strategies, enabling one to internalize language, and to develop self-control and self-motivation. To this point, there has been scarcely any research on how to treat and manage a hyperactive child from the perspective of metacognition, or on its application as a strategy to treat the RD that usually accompanies ADHD and tends to be responsible for these students’ academic failure. This represents an emerging field of research with tremendous potential, as this study’s results suggest.”

“Evidence-Based Strategies for Reading Instruction of Older Students with Learning Disabilities” Greg Roberts, *The University of Texas at Austin*; Joseph K. Torgesen *Florida State University*; Alison Boardman *The University of Colorado at Boulder*; Nancy Scammacca. *Learning Disabilities Research & Practice*, 2008 23(2), 63–69

“Capable readers have large, oftentimes sophisticated vocabularies, nurtured by reading a great deal across a wide variety of genres. Older students identified as having LD [learning disabilities], on the other hand, generally avoid reading as an independent activity, thus limiting their exposure to new vocabulary (Cunningham&Stanovich, 1998). Further, the school-related textbooks that they are required to read often fail to provide legitimate opportunities for vocabulary learning (Hirsch, 2003). Textbooks are generally too difficult for struggling readers and require a level of content-specific prior knowledge not typical of this group (Hirsch, 2003). These students, adolescents who choose not to read independently and who struggle to access content-related texts, perform at lower levels than their more skilled peers in vocabulary knowledge and use and, as they get older, fall further and further behind (Stanovich, 1986). While the ability to decode words fluently and to understand the meaning of individual words is important, the point of the whole enterprise is to understand the meaning of written text. Reading well is a demanding task requiring coordination of a diverse set of skills. Good readers monitor their understanding by linking new information with prior learning and, when comprehension breaks down, by deploying appropriate repair strategies, like adjusting their reading rate or strategically rereading passages. Struggling readers, even those with adequate word-level skills and acceptable fluency, often fail to use these types of strategies, either because they do not monitor their comprehension or because they lack the necessary tools to identify and repair misunderstandings when they occur.

.....Reading comprehension is an active, effortful process, particularly when it comes to complex text. Motivation and engagement make reading enjoyable, increase strategy use during reading, and support comprehension (Guthrie & Wigfield, 2000). Struggling readers often lack this motivation ... In other words, comprehension of complex text involves the conscious application of effortful strategies for processing text; students who are not engaged, or who are not interested in extracting meaning from text, are much less likely to put in the effort to comprehend and, as a result, miss opportunities to become proficient in comprehending complex text”

Eric Taylor, **“Commentary: Reading and attention problems –how are they connected? Reflections on reading McGrath et al. (2011)”** *Journal of Child Psychology and Psychiatry* 52:5 (2011), pp 558–

“It is therefore necessary to return to the possibility that some of the risks for each disorder are the same, or at least correlated. At the level of genetics, it does seem that there are loci on the chromosome that are common to both RD [reading disabilities] and ADHD. It is, therefore, logical to explore the idea of commonalities at the level of neuropsychological process. The preceding article by McGrath et al. (2011) does this, and applies the multiple deficit model in an effective way, to argue (inter alia) that a change in processing speed occurs in both RD and ADHD, and suggests more fundamentally that it can account for the association. This will spur more research on the genetics and consequences of processing speed, and on the ways in which general and specific risk factors may work together. There is, however, a long way to go before practical applications are clear.... Poor performance on psychological tests is not constant in ADHD: every supposed deficit, including those in the hallowed tests of ‘function’ characterises only a minority of diagnosed children. For many children, it is better to think of changes in style, learning and motivation (such as delay aversion and accelerated delay-of-reward gradients).

The practical implication of this is to avoid treating all children with ADHD and RD in the same way: they will best be helped by individual analyses of strengths and weaknesses. Indeed, RD itself is only partially accounted for by considering constitutional abnormalities of information processing. A lack of experience and stimulation at home, and inadequate instruction at school, may also influence the acquisition of reading skills; the relation between these and brain changes is a matter of controversy; intervention can work”.