Connecting the Dots Between Interactive Writing and Decodable Texts:

Literacy Solutions/Lasting Impact

By Leah Mermelstein

   Picture this scenario: It's January in a Kindergarten classroom. As part of the literacy block, students are learning the spellings for /j/, /w/ and /z/ through some highly interactive word building activities. After they finish word building, the teachers and the students share the pen to compose a sentence together using some of the code knowledge they have been learning. The lesson ends with the class reading a short decodable passage, practicing some sound/letter correspondences they had learned in weeks prior. The children were fully engaged throughout the lesson, learning new code knowledge, practicing old code knowledge as well as consolidating their blending and segmenting skills.

   Later in the day, the teacher pulls a small group of students for some additional practice writing and reading, deliberately having them practice some sound symbol correspondences they have not yet mastered. The teacher's goal is to ensure that all students gets the practice they need to decode and encode easily and automatically.

   When phonics instruction is done with this sort of preciseness, the impact is palpable and leaves plenty of time for other types of reading and writing experiences, imaginative play and knowledge building across the curriculum.

   Next, I am going to highlight the two high impact, high leverage instructional practices that you saw in action in the above scenario, **Interactive Writing and Decodable texts** and discuss how connecting the dots between these two can help students succeed. Finally, I will share

why this type of deliberate practice is essential in getting all of our children to be decode and encode with automaticity.

Interactive Writing:

Interactive writing is a type of instructional session where teachers and students share a pen to write a message. In my book, *"We-Do Writing": Maximizing Practice to Develop Independent Writers*, I talk about an approach to Interactive Writing that connects to ongoing phonics instruction. Teachers and students still share the pen, but the teacher deliberately comes up with the sentence or sentences that they'll write. She creates a sentence that includes code knowledge that has recently been taught. If the children for instance had recently learned /k/, /l/ /r/ and /u/, the teacher might have the students help her write the sentence. *Pat had a kit and a rug in the sun*.

How is this different from dictation you might wonder? Both practices are helpful, but they serve different purposes. During Interactive Writing, there is one message that is being composed (often on a class chart or smart board). Teachers tend to call different students up to the front to share the pen and help her to compose parts of the message. Teachers instruct the entire time, making sure that they provide support that enables everyone to be successful. During dictation, students tend to write the sentence or sentences independently (Although some teachers offer individualized feedback while students are working.)   Teachers then look at the writing to think about next steps.

Decodable Texts

Decodable texts (sometimes referred to as accountable texts) are defined as texts that children can decode based upon what they have already learned during their phonics

instruction. For example, if the class had been working on the /f/ /p/, /d/, j /e/, /g/, during phonics instruction, the teacher could give students decodable texts that included this newly learned code. Teachers would then coach/instruct students while reading, helping them to apply what they have learned into this connected text.

Leveraging the Connection Between Decodable Texts and Interactive Writing

Both Interactive Writing and decodable texts give students practice with what they are learning during phonics instruction. In Interactive Writing, students must retrieve the code information to get print onto the page, whereas in reading decodable texts they have to recognize the code in order to be able to lift it off the page.

When you pair these two practices, students get deliberate practice on the same code knowledge but in different ways (retrieval and recognition) This will make it easier for them to reach automaticity with both encoding and decoding.

Some teachers do both practices in one day; while other teachers have students read decodable texts one day and then the next day conduct a connected Interactive Writing session.

What About Choice Reading and Writing Experiences?

There are absolutely times reasons and times to for students to be reading and writing in topics/genres of their choice; however, I would suggest that all primary teachers include times in their week for both Interactive Writing and decodable text reading. Understanding the Cognitive Load Theory can help you understand why this is essential.

Cognitive Load Theory (CLT) -coined in 1988 by John Sweller, suggests that our working memory is only able to hold a small amount of information at any one time and that instructional methods should avoid overloading it in order to maximize learning.

When something is new and a teacher wants their students to be skilled at it, they need to avoid overloading their working memory. To give a personal example of this: My entire life, I have been terrified of parallel parking. The thought of trying to park in Hoboken, New Jersey (where I live) with the tight spaces, the honking, and the crowds was petrifying. I compensated for my lack of skill by looking for parking lots everywhere I went even if it meant walking miles to my destination.

I finally learned how to parallel park when my sister lessened my cognitive load. She taught me how to parallel park in quiet Amherst, MA (The parking spaces were big and the town was quiet.). After that controlled practice I ventured into Hoboken.   I can now park like a pro, with little or no conscious thinking while doing it. Being in the role of student trying to learn something that was hard was humbling and emphasized how vital it is for teachers to understand Sweller's work in Cognitive Load Theory.

Weaving Interactive Writing and decodable texts into your phonics instruction is one way to translate research into classroom application. I hope this summer offers you the time and space to think about how to do this next year in efficient and effective ways.

<u>References</u>

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About Leah:
Leah Mermelstein is an expert and author on the teaching of writing, reading, and language development. She is a sought-after keynote speaker at national conferences, admired for her close study of students' writing and reading development. As an educational strategist, she works closely with school districts, teachers, and students, helping them develop and deliver quality and cohesive literacy instruction. She holds a Master's Degree in Cultural Diversity and Curriculum Reform and aspires to ground all of her work in creating equitable access to children and families.

More recently she has obtained her supervisory license, completed the Science of Reading Academy and has trained in Sounds-Write, an expertly structured synthetic phonics program.

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