

Our brave new world: metacognition for tiny tots

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Kindergarten used to be such a snap. You'd draw and sing and count, then break for recess. You'd have milk and cookies and a nap, hear a story, maybe recite your ABCs, have more recess, then go home. Nothing to it! But what did we know then? Now, they know that kindergarten is deadly serious stuff. Recess time has been slashed, and every kindergartener's schedule is crammed with activities designed to raise her Grade 3 test scores. A new "reading strategy" is spreading through Ontario's classrooms like a virus. It's not enough any more just to teach the little tykes to read. Now they must also be taught to be aware of their metacognitive processes.

"We've been told that we simply cannot read books for the sake of reading books," says one exasperated teacher. "It's incorrect to read a book straight through. Instead, the teacher is supposed to stop after every page and ask, 'What do you think is going to happen next? How do you infer that?'"

Metacognition is what you do when you're thinking about your thinking. (I think.) And teaching comprehension strategies is a good thing to do - with older students. But it may not too useful for kids who are still struggling to decipher "the cat sat on the mat."

"We have to teach the terms 'schema' and 'inference,' even to kindergarten children," says the beleaguered teacher. To ensure compliance, children are randomly removed from class by visiting experts and quizzed on their ability to use words such as "schema" and "inference."

For many years, this teacher has been using a lively phonics program to teach reading. Most of her kids wind up reading well above grade level. But her approach is no longer acceptable, and the internationally recognized phonics program that she uses has been heavily discouraged.

"All over the school, children are saying 'I infer this' and 'I used this schema,'" says the teacher, who says it's worth her job to speak up publicly. Like many other teachers, she has spent thousands of dollars of her own money over the years to buy much-needed teaching materials for her kids - even as the province throws millions on the latest pedagogical fads.

Ontario's Ministry of Education never met a fad it didn't like. The ministry is dominated by progressive educators who regard it as a crime to teach children how to read the traditional way, through scripted phonics programs. This particular fad began around a decade ago in the United States, and is being spread throughout the province by squads of facilitators and literacy coaches who work under the direction of The Literacy and Numeracy Secretariat (a title worthy of the defunct USSR).

"They have a very simplistic view that teaching 'higher-level thinking' - even to children with severe cognitive disability - will lead to all kinds of wonderful breakthroughs," says one skeptical observer,

who's an expert on trends in reading instruction. As for whether this approach produces better readers, she says: "I have seen no empirically valid evidence that says it does."

In fact, there are several successful, scientifically proven methods for teaching reading. All are phonics based, and none are mandated in Ontario, where education experts would never subject our kids to such brutality. The roving reading police don't even bother to test children on their ability to decipher words, or their reading speed. What matters is whether they demonstrate "higher-level thinking."

So who's really hurt by this fashionable gobbledygook? Most likely not your kids. They'll probably learn to read just fine, anyway. The kids who get hurt are the ones at the bottom of the heap - the slow learners and the disadvantaged children who don't come equipped with educated, middle-class parents.

"At the last staff meeting I went to, we were asked for examples of what we've done that resulted in better outcomes for our students," this teacher related. "I was thinking of measurable improvement, so I said, 'If they're stumbling over the "or" blend, then you help them with that.' And the literacy specialist kind of rolled her eyes and said, 'Well, that wouldn't do much for metacognition, would it?' "