

HARRY POTTER AND THE RELUCTANT READER: STRATEGIES FOR ENCOURAGING READING FLUENCY

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ABSTRACT

It is a truism that learners in the foundation phase learn to read while those in the intermediate phase read to learn. However, this paper examines research indicating that a high percentage of learners never manage the transition from reasonably accurate to fluent reading, and suggests possible strategies for addressing this problem area within a South African context. These strategies include setting aside more time for reading aloud to children in the intermediate phase; addressing the shortage of novels in indigenous languages suitable for older children in South Africa; and countering adult prejudice against popular fiction such as JK Rowling's *Harry Potter* books and Stephenie Meyer's *Twilight* series. It will be suggested that works such as these, which are relatively long but fast-paced and generically unchallenging, can be very helpful in developing reading fluency: and that widespread adult resistance to them may actually be preventing young readers from accessing the very texts best suited to encouraging them to bridge this crucial divide.

KEYWORDS

reading, fluency, reading obstacles, children's books in indigenous languages, reading aloud

In his introduction to his luminous and engaging memoir, *The Child that Books Built*, Francis Spufford compares his early reading experiences to entering an airlock that 'sealed to the outside so that it could open to the inside' (2002:1). He suggests that what is to follow is more about books than himself, but is, nevertheless, his inward autobiography:

... for the words we take into ourselves help to shape us. They help form the questions we think are worth asking; they shift around the boundaries of the sayable inside us, and the related borders of what's acceptable; their potent images, calling on more in us than the responses we will ourselves to have, dart new bridges into being between our conscious and unconscious minds, between what we know we know and the knowledge we cannot examine by thinking. They build and stretch and build again the chambers of our imagination (2002:21–22).

Clearly, the complete creative immersion in a fictional world that Spufford so vividly recalls involves far more than the mechanical decoding process whereby the literate can inspect and interpret the signs used by their culture to represent words or discourse. The one experience is certainly dependent on the other: had Spufford never learned the curious act of double translation whereby the reading brain translates graphemes into phonemes and then phonemes into morphemes, he could never have arrived at what he refers to as “the intensity of a solitary encounter with wild knowledge” (2002:62). Yet there is nothing inevitable about the progression he details.

In *Proust and the Squid: The Story and Science of the Reading Brain*, Maryanne Wolf refers to what she describes as ‘the nearly invisible issue in American education ... the fate of young elementary students who read accurately (the basic goal in most reading research) but not fluently in grades 3 and 4’ (2007:135). These students, who seem to make up just over 40 per cent of American children, are left Wolf argues to slip into ‘a netherworld of the semi-literate’ (2007:136).

The figures for South Africa are even more disturbing. Our general literacy results are among the worst in Africa. In 2006, South African grade four and five learners participated in the Progress in International Reading Literacy Study (PIRLS). The country achieved the lowest score of all forty-five participating education systems (Howie, Venter, Van Staden, Zimmerman, Long, Scherman & Archer 2008:19). The majority of learners, more than fifty per cent of the English and Afrikaans speakers and over eighty per cent of the African language speakers, did not even reach the lowest international benchmark indicating that they lacked even the most basic reading skills and strategies (Howie et al 2008:29). More alarming were clear indications that even those learners who do manage to acquire the basic decoding skills required of nine-year-olds fail to build on these as their formal education progresses. The recently released report on the pilot national benchmark tests commissioned to assess the entry-level literacy and mathematics proficiency of students enrolling at South African universities tellingly reveals that only a quarter of the students accepted for university study, on the basis of good results in their final school examinations, can be considered “fully quantitatively literate” and fewer than half have sufficient literacy skills to allow them to complete a degree without extensive and ongoing support (South Africa 2009).

In 1983, Allington described the acquisition of fluency as the single most neglected reading skill (556). Similarly, Lyon and Moats in summarising the state of intervention

research call for attention to be refocused on fluency claiming that improvements in decoding and word-reading accuracy seem far easier to achieve than improvements in fluency and automaticity and that this may indicate that there is still ‘much we have to learn about the development of componential reading skills and how such skills mediate reading rate and reading comprehension’ (1997:579).

A suggestive indicator of the problems inherent in any attempt to encourage the acquisition of reading fluency is the fact that, as Wolf and Katzir-Cohen have demonstrated, there is, as yet, ‘no consensual definition of either what is meant by fluency and what its relation might be to the sub-set of time-related terms most frequently related to it (e.g. automaticity, speed of processing, reading rate/speed, and word recognition rate/proficiency)’ (2001:213). Yet even in the absence of an agreed formal definition, all fluent readers instinctively recognise the transition Spufford describes as occurring while he read *The Hobbit* when:

... the writing had softened and lost the outlines of the printed alphabet and become a transparent liquid, first viscous and sluggish, like a jelly of meaning, then ever thinner and more mobile, flowing faster and faster, until it reached me at the speed of thinking and I could not entirely distinguish the suggestions it was making from my own thoughts. I had undergone the acceleration into the written word that you also experience as a change in the medium. In fact, writing had ceased to be a thing – an object in the world – and become a medium, a substance you look through (2002:65).

While it is readily apparent that such a moment of metamorphic revelation cannot be acquired without a sound basis in perceptual, phonological, orthographic and morphological processes at both the level of the individual word and the connected text, it is also clear that ultimately its achievement is a solitary rather than a co-operative experience. Hearing a story is a social act but reading one is, as James Carroll observes ‘an act of interiority, pure and simple’ (in Wolf 2007:212). Until a new reader strikes out on his or her own and takes up a reasonably substantial book with the desire to read it unaided, the true fluency so essential for further education is unlikely to be achieved.

One of the reasons for this failure may be that learning to read fluently needs sustained effort. What Wolf refers to as the decoding reader, the individual in a state of semi-fluency, needs to add at least 3 000 words to what he or she can decode before such a person can hope to achieve fluency and, for this task, the 37 common letter patterns which form the core of most methods for teaching reading in English will no longer be adequate (2007:127).

Furthermore, according to Laurie Cutting (2005), readers on the brink of achieving fluency also need to acquire and strengthen crucial nonlinguistic skills such as working memory and comprehension strategies such as inference and analogy. Only sustained practice in an environment free from the distraction of school bells, bored classmates and adult intervention will allow the decoding reader to experience Spufford’s ‘acceleration into the written word’.

The crucial question then that anyone interested in the promotion of reading fluency needs to ask is why any child should willingly embark on such an arduous journey. The answer, I would argue, is astonishingly simple. As with most other human activities, he or she will only begin such an obviously demanding process if the perceived rewards are considered to outweigh the readily apparent difficulties and drawbacks. This is particularly true for children and adolescents since Blakemore and Choudhury (2006) among others have conclusively shown that adult decision-making, in which short-term gratification is weighed against long-term consequences, is the result of key changes to the pre-frontal cortex and that such changes are generally completed only after the age of twenty. Those children who learn to read fluently therefore do so almost entirely because they firmly believe that reading the book they hold in their hands at any given moment is likely to be an intensely pleasurable experience.

The task of the supportive adult, whether parent, teacher or librarian, is thus to constantly foreground the pleasure that reading indubitably offers. I have vivid memories of tugging at my mother's sleeve in a vain attempt to win her attention from the novel currently claiming it. While I strongly resented the books for displacing me, however temporarily, from my central position in her consciousness, I was also enormously intrigued by the way in which the novels absorbed her and longed quite desperately to find the hidden path to this secret adult indulgence for myself. Sadly, mothers like mine are in short supply in contemporary South Africa where it is estimated that only some two to five percent of the population is able or willing to buy books for the home (Jenkins 1993:3) and where fewer than fifty per cent of the South African PIRLS learners reported having access to more than ten books at home, compared to approximately seventy eight per cent internationally (Howie et al 2008:31).

In an environment where homes lack books, it becomes essential that teachers and librarians make a conscious effort to present themselves as readers both by enthusiastically discussing their own current reading with the developing readers around them and by allowing such readers to observe them reading themselves. Interestingly the PIRLS study showed that South African teachers read less often in their spare time compared to those in the highest achieving countries (Howie et al 2008:57). This is particularly worrying given the fact that substantial numbers of learners also have parents who are only marginally literate suggesting that the role of the South African teacher or librarian in promoting reading is an absolutely vital one. The temptation to catch up on administrative work while a class is engaged in silent reading is difficult for hard-pressed educators to resist, but the teacher who takes out a book and reads with such a group is modelling behaviour vital to the long-term prospects of those in his or her care.

As Frank Smith puts it, 'to understand reading children must become members of a group of written language users, they must join the *literacy club*' (1978:134). By this Smith means that children surrounded by adults who habitually read and write come to expect that they themselves will eventually use written language in the same way. Similarly the adults about them tend to assume that the children will be like them. Of

course, as Smith also acknowledges, expectation cannot in itself guarantee success, but it does certainly enable it. Equally, the expectation that a certain type of learning such as the achievement of reading fluency will *not* take place almost inevitably becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy.

Once a developing reader has been persuaded by adult example of the pleasures of reading, it becomes vital to ensure that he or she has access to texts likely to enforce rather than undermine this expectation. The years between nine and twelve are crucial ones for developing fluency but they are also years in which the child's body, mind and interests develop at frightening speed. The inevitable result of this is that a gap opens up between what young readers are *able* to read and what they *want* to read. Books are no longer the only means by which children can gratify their desire for story. If the books available to decoding readers are too limited in their subject matter or concerns, those whose reading ability has been outstripped by their development in other areas are likely to turn instead to the less-demanding mediums of television, computer games and videos.

For this reason, it is vital that the practice of reading aloud usually begun by parents and continued by foundation phase teachers should not be allowed to lapse in the intermediate phase. Although fluency will probably always elude the learner who avoids sustained solitary reading, decades of research have also shown that 'the amount of time a child spends listening to parents and other loved ones read is a good predictor of the level of reading attained years later' (Wolf 2007:82). Yet while parents, teachers and librarians recognise the importance of this and often go to great lengths to build reading aloud time into busy lives and working routines, they often assume that the importance of reading aloud wanes as soon as the child is able to decode a simple picture book. However, the halting process whereby many children half decipher and half memorise loved books in the early stages of learning to read is no indicator of an established competence sufficient to allow them to access all the books they want to read unaided. Negotiating shared meaning under the guidance of a trusted adult offers both supportive warmth and the steady reinforcement of the idea that books are not merely collections of dry facts or the banal record of the doings of Dick and Jane in a slightly outdated world of apron-wearing mothers and playful mongrels.

Penelope Fitzgerald has suggested that 'twice in your life you know you are approved of by everyone – when you learn to walk and when you learn to read' (in Wolf 2007:115). If the immediate consequence of acquiring this skill is the loss of treasured time spent listening to a valued adult reading aloud, many children are likely to feel that they have been punished rather than rewarded for their achievement. Furthermore, by reading aloud and discussing books slightly more demanding than those the decoding reader might attempt on his or her own, the concerned adult affirms the power of books and reading to challenge assumptions and demonstrates more sophisticated reading skills like inferencing, paraphrasing and assimilating which are almost certainly beyond the capacity of the novice decoder.

Sometimes parents, teachers and librarians voice the fear that if they continue to read aloud to older children they will somehow encourage laziness and a reluctance in children to read for themselves. Such fears are groundless as Frank Smith observed as early as 1978:

Children allow other adults or children to read for them for just as long and as much as they are unable to read for themselves. As they develop confidence in reading so they will take over from a person reading for them. Their impatience soon shows when they are forced to listen to something they can read for themselves (133).

Furthermore, reading aloud can also be used to encourage solitary reading more directly. By reading the opening chapters of an exciting narrative aloud, the concerned adult can stimulate the learner's appetite for the rest of the story. Once a cliffhanger moment has been reached, the adult reader can then suggest that the decoding reader continue on his or her own. Feeling that they are not required to read more than a chapter or two at a time may reassure anxious novices who often lack the confidence to begin reading a substantial book entirely unaided.

The fact that the average nine-year-old can still benefit from adult support while developing fluency skills raises the crucial issue of precisely what texts are best suited to encouraging the development of fluency. Clearly, readability should be a priority for all books aimed at decoding readers. Sadly, however, even a cursory examination of many South African textbooks shows that this is rarely the case. Recently, Theuns Horne, an independent literacy consultant, released the results of a survey he had conducted of grade four textbooks currently used in South African schools (Rademeyer 2009:4). Disturbingly he found that most of these made no concessions to their target readership so that almost all of the books currently prescribed for ten-year-olds use vocabulary and syntax appropriate for those with a reading age of seventeen or eighteen (2009:4). Children baffled and frustrated by such texts are likely to lose confidence and become what Wolf and Katzir-Cohen call "disenfranchised from their own language" (2001:232).

Apart from the textbooks provided in schools, children in what one might call a state of liminal literacy need access to books likely to encourage the solitary reading which it has already been suggested is crucial to the development of fluency. Sadly, such books are not always readily available. Instead, as Frank Smith observes, there is a tendency among adults to see reading and learning to read as two different activities. Such a view becomes particularly dangerous when dealing with 'older students having difficulty reading, who may be restricted to activities that do not make sense to them in order that they can 'acquire basic skills'' (1978:125). Such an approach ignores the self-evident truth that, as with learning to swim or ride a bicycle, beyond the most elementary levels of preparatory instruction, the basic skills of reading can only be accessed by the experience of reading itself. As Smith also says, 'What encourages children to read and thus to learn to read is not some "extrinsic reward" like praise or high marks or a special treat but being able to read' (1978:125).

Smith is not alone in his views. In 1997, Patience Thomson retired as headmistress of Fairly House School, an Edinburgh school for children with specific learning disabilities such as dyslexia. Many of her pupils were slow or reluctant readers and she had come to feel that there was a serious lack of suitable reading material for the less able or struggling reader, quality books with engaging stories and characters that were age appropriate for the children involved. The result was Barrington Stoke, a children's publisher based in Edinburgh which publishes fiction and non-fiction adapted to a reading age of eight but aimed at reluctant, underconfident or dyslexic readers from nine to eleven and from twelve to sixteen. The publisher commissions work from established writers such as Michael Morpurgo, Malorie Blackman and Terry Deary and has been so successful that it has spawned imitators in other countries and hopes soon to branch out into adult fiction for the estimated 11 million adults in the United Kingdom who have a reading age of thirteen or below (Eve 2008).

Barrington Stoke was established to cater for the reading needs of reluctant English-speakers but the principles underlying their books mean that they are also appropriate for those whose reading skills in English have been slowed by their lack of proficiency in the target language. Given the multilingual nature of South African society, it seems surprising that there have been as yet few real attempts to apply the Barrington Stoke experience to the local context. New Africa Education's *Siyagruva* series aimed at teenagers certainly builds on this model but there is little local literature aimed at struggling readers between the ages of nine and twelve.

A further problem, as many teachers can confirm, is that far too few children's books are currently published in any indigenous language other than Afrikaans. Moreover, even a cursory examination of the catalogues put out by South African publishers clearly indicates that the vast majority of such books are aimed at children under the age of nine. Thus children who speak African languages at home and who often battle socioeconomic odds to attain basic reading skills usually find that, at precisely the age when they need to acquire reading fluency, there are very few books available to them in their own language. Unfortunately, the English books to which they may have access are often either too 'babyish' in their content or too linguistically complex to be tempting. The result is that many such children then effectively fail to begin reading for pleasure and thus also fail to achieve most of the key fluency skills so crucial to their educational development.

If the gap between what children *want* to read and what they are *able* to read is neither recognised nor addressed, there is a very real danger that substantial numbers of learners will simply choose not to read resulting in what some researchers are already calling aliteracy. MacDonald, in the final report of the HSRC-commissioned Threshold project, records that of the South African grade five pupils she had worked with probably 98 per cent chose not to read at all (1990:66). The very fact that this percentage is so depressingly high forces one to consider whether there may not be further stumbling blocks obstructing the achievement of fluent reading in South African schools. Certainly

conversations with teachers soon reveal that there is often not only a gap between what children *want* to read and what they are *able* to read but also between what children *want* to read and what adults think they *should* be reading.

In this context, a recent study of eleven rural primary school libraries by Mnkeni and Nassimbeni (2008) is most revealing. When the children were asked what would make them use the library more, the overwhelming response was more story books. ‘I love the story books. I go to the library every day at break time to get some more to read,’ is just one of the responses they record (2008:15). When the educators were asked what they needed to encourage learners to use the library more their responses covered fourteen areas including shelves, computers, educational toys, burglarproofing and reference sources, but not one of them mentioned story books (2008:15).

Why should well-meaning educators so entirely disregard the fiction the learners so eagerly prioritise? In trying to account for this, three possible explanatory factors emerge: our capitalist economy, a strong residual Puritan ethos in our culture, and an education system that has a clear bias in favour of the scientific and the rational. Despite the fact that South Africa is governed by an alliance between the ANC, a historically left-leaning liberation party, and the South African Communist Party, its economy is being managed in accordance with International Monetary Fund guidelines and this combined with a strong social reaction to years of economic deprivation may have helped to stimulate an overtly materialistic climate in which children are encouraged to dream of financial success rather than of imaginative growth. Perhaps even more troubling for those who believe in the uses of the imagination is the fact that contemporary South African society continues, despite the country’s famously liberal constitution, to ascribe at least publicly to a deeply conservative and almost puritanical value system. Early settlers in South Africa were often religious refugees and the fundamentalism that is so deeply imbued in many of South Africa’s Protestant churches is reinforced by constitutionally protected tribal structures that often validate conformity and authoritarianism. The result is a culture deeply mistrustful of the free-ranging spirit. Unfortunately for fiction, it is viewed with suspicion not only by religious conservatives but also by those espousing the values of scientific rationality. In their eagerness to foster social development and encourage the growth of science and technology, those in charge of South African educational policy tend to believe that “because science and technology are integral to modern developing economies, such economies will automatically develop if only sufficient emphasis is placed on mathematics and science in the education system” (Wright 2007:106). Of course, as Wright also indicates, such an attitude is inherently ironic since science and technology only really flourish in democratic, relatively stable and wealthy societies and such societies are almost always the products of systems that value and encourage the humanities (2007:106–170).

For all the reasons listed above, reading fiction is often encouraged in the foundation phase, in which children are perceived to be learning to read, but not in later phases in which it is believed that children should now be reading to learn. The result is that the

very books most popular with older children and therefore most likely to encourage them to read for pleasure are often dismissed by educators and, in some extreme cases, even banned from school premises.

The most obvious examples of such prejudice are JK Rowling's *Harry Potter* series (1997–2007) and Stephenie Meyer's *Twilight* books (2005–2008). Earlier this year I spoke to an English teacher at one of Gauteng's leading girls' schools and she complained that the grade eights and nines in her care didn't read at all. When I asked if she had tried introducing them to the *Twilight* books, she pulled a face and said, 'Oh, they're all walking round with those under their arms but it doesn't really count as reading, does it?' Ironically, the very popular literature most likely to encourage decoding readers to embark on substantial solitary reading is also the least likely to be found on the shelves of school libraries. Both Rowling and Meyer write fast-paced and generically unchallenging novels which also incorporate fantastic elements and thus they tend to fall foul of the prevailing canonic norms which usually privilege fiction that is complex, reflective and strongly rooted in realist conventions.

Yet the very qualities that may be considered to deny literary merit to popular fiction such as that by Rowling and Meyer are also those most likely to encourage readers to make the transition to fluent reading. Although the novels are surprisingly long and the vocabulary used by each author is rich and varied, the storyline moves quickly, the characters are appealing and the works end happily. By relegating these novels and others like them to the vagaries of what is effectively a playground black market, concerned adults lose a vital opportunity to promote reading fluency. Too often, children who have read the *Twilight* books may fail to maintain a reading momentum because disapproving adults discount this experience and therefore cannot build on it by encouraging the excited new reader to move on to more complex works with similar themes such as Shannon Hale's *The Goose Girl* (2003), Diana Wynne Jones's *Fire and Hemlock* (1985) or eventually even Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* ([1847] 1994).

As Ann Swinfen confidently demonstrates in her study, *In Defence of Fantasy*, it is also a mistake to equate fantasy with mere escapism since 'all serious fantasy is deeply rooted in human experience and is relevant to human living' (1984:231). Ironically too, the very fantastic elements so many adults deplore in many best-selling works for younger readers may also be ideally suited to the exploration of issues that the developing reader may not yet be strong enough to confront directly. Good fantasy, by creating a world seemingly distant from the primary one, creates a space in which the reader can confront his or her deepest fears and beliefs at a safe remove. As Farah Mendelsohn suggests, the fantastic journey is 'where information is discovered, interpreted, and disseminated, safe from the awkward questions the outside world might provoke' (2008:7–8). Like all teenagers, Harry Potter must learn to reassess his idealised picture of his parents, discover his own strengths and weaknesses, break free of his mentors and establish intimate relationships with his peers. His magical powers must be controlled just as his readers must learn to manage their demanding bodies, questioning minds and

frighteningly powerful tongues. In this sense Harry's transition from Privet Drive to the magical environment of Hogwarts simply echoes the inevitable process of growing up, including the transcendent experience of attaining reading fluency. Just as Harry Potter's discovery of his magical powers frees him from the dull constraints of the Muggle world, so may the experience of delighted submersion in the written world open doorways to knowledge and experience undreamed of by those not yet fully literate.

Thus, at the beginning of *Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone*, Harry desperately wants to board the Hogwarts express from platform nine and three-quarters, but when he arrives at King's Cross he finds that there is only a blank wall between platforms nine and ten. Fortunately, a supportive adult, Molly Weasley, is there to advise him.

All you have to do is walk straight at the barrier between platforms nine and ten. Don't stop and don't be scared you'll crash into it, that's very important. Best do it at a bit of a run if you're nervous. Go on, go now... (Rowling 1997:70).

Like Harry, novice readers often doubt themselves and those of us with more experience of the magical worlds of literacy should use whatever means we can to encourage learners to hurtle at the seemingly insuperable barrier to fluency with such confidence that they will soon, like Harry, emerge blinking but triumphant on that mythical platform of mastery from which all intellectual adventures start.

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