



Guessing is not a Reading Strategy

By Educator Barnes – November 27, 2021

A few weeks ago, my husband and I attended our twin sons' parent/teacher conference on Zoom. Our boys are in fifth grade and in the same class. The teacher shared how our sons were reading 6th and 7th grade level books. This did not come as a surprise to us. Our boys

have been reading books above grade level since kindergarten. Although I do acknowledge the importance of their teachers, I know I had a hand in their literacy success.

I hold certifications in five areas and have held jobs in all five. I have a 5-12 English/language arts license, a P-12 reading license, a P-12 English as a new language license, a P-12 library/media license, and a P-12 building administration license. In all the roles I have held due to my various licenses, I have been concerned about literacy development for all learners.

Because I am a parent who is also an educator with certifications that cover literacy, I used my expertise to ensure my sons would be proficient readers. I could not leave their literacy development solely to the schoolhouse. This is year 16 for me as an educator, so I knew better than to blindly trust the school system to teach my Black sons to read. I have seen too many students reach me when I was a middle school English teacher or when I was a high school English teacher who was reading way below grade level. Most of those students were Black of those Black students, most of them were boys.

As the preacher says during the sermon some Sundays, “Come closer.” I mean really close. What I didn’t do is teach my kids to guess using context clues or pictures. I wanted my sons to read with accuracy. I taught them to identify letters. Then I taught them the sound of the letter and the multiple sounds they make. Next, I taught them digraphs and blends. Then, I taught them how to chunk parts of words and blend those chunks together. Last, I gave them ample opportunities daily to practice.

Some of those opportunities included no pictures. I did not want my sons to guess at words but instead read them correctly. Pictures can help students guess and that guess might provide a word that is similar to the word the student could not read. That similar word they guessed might even allow them to understand what they are reading but they are not reading. They are guessing.

Not only have I been an English teacher, but I have also only been an elementary English as a New Language teacher and an elementary literacy coach. Through those roles, I was able to see that some teachers did not have the skills to teach reading effectively. When I was an elementary literacy coach, I was grateful that the principal had all teachers and academic coaches attend Orton-Gillingham training, known as OG in school buildings. The tool teachers learned improved their abilities to help students learn how to read.

What is disappointing is that two of the biggest names in literacy, Irene Fountas and Gay Su Pinnell have continued to dig their heels in about their reading approach even though cognitive scientists have disproven part of their reading approach. The worst part is many schools are buying what they are selling. I am not sure how much of the Fountas and Pinnell approach is used in my sons' school district, but I know my sons' school uses their reading assessment to find students' reading levels.

During the 2019-2020 school year, I saw Lucy Calkins materials in their school folders. Calkins also ignored what the research said when it came to reading, but eventually backpedaled and changed some of the products she sells to school.

Black boys should not have to have a teacher for a mom to learn how to read. They should be able to learn at school from teachers who used research-based practices. I could ignore this problem since my sons can read, but I won't. Students leaving school with limited literacy is not good for our society.

I tweeted at my sons' school district to voice my concern. No, I haven't heard back. Yes, they are well aware of who I am, and yes, I will ask more formally.

I don't want any more students taught to guess as a reading strategy.