



Lisa Burman

Consulting in Pedagogical Change

Imagine...

Create...

Believe...



Can we slow down?

Life seems to fly by faster and faster each year! Is it just because I'm getting older or is it more to do with how busy our lives are these days? Maybe a little of both...

I DO know that schools, kindergartens and children's centres are all incredibly busy places to be in 2013. Every site I work with in my consulting tells me how busy they are. Teachers are feeling over-loaded by the demands of working with children living increasingly complex lives. In addition, in many countries such as Australia, educators are learning to use new curriculum documents and frameworks. I don't think we can under-estimate how much energy it takes to learn how to understand and implement a new curriculum. Change is emotionally draining, but it *is* necessary. If we don't continually change and grow we will no longer be relevant.

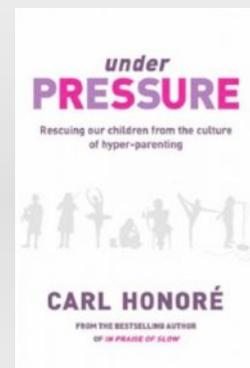
I worry that children are also feeling over-loaded because we end up rushing through learning rather than spending the time that true inquiry requires – sparking curiosity, provoking thinking, questioning and constructing theories to test and re-test.

Unfortunately, I do not have a magic wand to wave or a list of solutions to respond to the overload. I just wanted to acknowledge the hard work you are all engaged in so you know it is not unnoticed. I'm very much looking forward to hearing Carl Honore speak in Sydney next week. I think his notion of "Slow Living – Slow Learning" has much merit. Check out his writing on his website and in his books. Happy SLOW reading!

Slow Learning

Carl Honore

www.carlhonore.com



"Slow" in this context does not mean doing everything at a snail's pace. It means doing everything at the right speed. That implies quality over quantity; real and meaningful human connections; being present and in the moment. The Slow creed can be applied to everything we do: work, sports, medicine, food, sex, design...and, of course, child-rearing." Carl Honore

I'm More than a Reading Level

What messages are schools giving children about reading?

What image of themselves as readers do children develop through the pedagogical practices a school adopts?

These questions have been bouncing around in my thinking for some time now: bouncing and thumping quite noisily, actually. My fear is that too many children see a 'good reader' as someone who:

- Progresses through reading levels quickly
- Says the words correctly
- Reads quickly to 'get through' as many books as possible
- Never re-reads a book – that would hold you back from getting to the next level
- Is at a higher reading level than their friends

When did learning to read become a video game of getting to the next level?

I think I know *how* it became to be defined this way: an obsession with reading levels that has taken the joy out of learning to read for so many children (and their families and educators).

Recently, I heard a story of a young reader who, at the tender age of seven, has given up reading altogether because of an experience at school. In the early weeks of the year he was told he was 'at level 10' when the year before his teacher had proudly told him he is 'a level 16 reader'. He was devastated and now sees himself as a non-reader and as 'stupid' (his word). How degrading to be thought of as a level. This young reader is far more than a level and has the right to be treated with far more respect. We need to be very mindful of the messages we unconsciously give children about who they are as learners.

Yes, you can read between the lines and see I'm pretty fired up about this. I try, in my consulting work and in my writing, to promote and share an **image of children** as competent learners. Defining a child by a level is the opposite view – in this view the child is empty and incomplete.

This raises the question: What is our **image of reading**? The '*Video Game View*' of reading (progressing through levels) is a diminished view of a complex process that has the ability to move, entertain, inform and transform lives. I certainly want children to see reading from this rich perspective and not from the '*Video Game View*'. Learning to read is not easy for everyone, but every child has the capacity to learn. When we give the message that good readers progress through levels (and they do so quickly, remember) we risk children developing the habit of word-calling. They say the words accurately to get to the next level, not to think deeply and enjoy the text they are engaging with.

My view of a strong reader is someone who:

- Chooses to read and gains satisfaction from reading
- Enjoys reading a variety of texts (multi-modal as well as text types)
- Thinks about what the words say, as well as the pictures, diagrams, charts and other graphics so they can construct meaning (using different comprehension strategies to think)
- Has many strategies for working out words they don't know (not just sounding out or the 'turn and look' strategy waiting for the adult to tell them the word)

I'm More Than a Reading Level cont.

- Reads slowly when they need to think more closely about something
- Re-reads to monitor their understanding
- Chooses to re-read favourite texts or those that need more thinking to understand them
- Has favourite genres, authors, illustrators and can talk about them
- Knows him/herself as a reader and so can choose texts that are “just right” for him/her

Please do not misunderstand me: I am not ‘anti-Reading Levels’. I think Reading Levels are a very helpful tool *for teachers*. I just don’t think they are all that helpful for children. In fact, when we over-emphasise Reading Levels, I think they can be quite harmful. Reading Levels, in my opinion, are most helpful to teachers – to monitor learning progress and development. I could not effectively teach reading if I did not use Running Records and Miscue Analysis. This assessment gives me great diagnostic information to inform how I’m teaching reading and what a child’s next learning goal might be. Matching the Running Record information to a reading level can help me to monitor children’s growth and ensure every child is making progress.

I don’t believe it helps for children to be as focused on these levels as I see they are in many schools. I think it is far more helpful to teach them how to choose appropriate reading material – how to choose a “just right” or a “good fit” text and even a “browsing” text (one I might enjoy reading the pictures or that an adult could read to me). We teach children specific strategies for text selection, and can also help by grouping texts together in ways that will scaffold the process without taking away the child’s right to choose their own reading material.

These are skills for life, not just skills for the classroom. When did you last see a public library, bookshop or online store categorise books according to reading levels? It would be a shock, actually, to walk into such a public library. Maybe I’d discover that I’m not allowed to read some of the psychology texts I’ve been reading lately - because they’re ‘not at my level’. They are certainly challenging and I have to re-read quite often to make sure I understand, but they are fascinating all the same.

Let’s bring some balance back into the use of Reading Levels in our teaching and show children that reading is more than getting to the next level.

What view of reading does your school promote – consciously or unconsciously?

What messages are your children getting about reading?

