



Exploring children's difficulties with language and literacy

Poor comprehenders

Narr:

Paula Clarke is a Post Doctoral Researcher at the University of York, in the Centre for Reading and Language. Her research focuses on children who have poor comprehension.

Paula:

The term poor comprehender is used to describe an individual who is able to read fluently and accurately, so decoding aspects of reading are intact, but when you ask them about what they've been reading, ask them a question about a piece of text, they find it very hard to reflect on that and give you an answer that is full and that's in context, and often you may get a "don't know" response, so their level of understanding is weak compared to their decoding skills.

A quite useful way to think of it is almost the opposite pattern to what you see in dyslexia so a dyslexic reader may have difficulties with decoding aspects of reading but their comprehension may be relatively intact and in some cases very good. In poor comprehenders you see the opposite pattern so decoding is often very good, but their comprehension skills are weaker, so it's like a mirror pattern to dyslexia.

Well I think on the surface these children appear to be doing pretty well with their reading and if they were reading a book in class they would appear to be reading very fluently and very accurately, and so may actually be in quite a strong position with regard to their peers in terms of their reading skill, but in a classroom situation it's quite difficult to be able to work one-to-one on a regular basis to be able to work with the children to explore their understanding of the text, and often it would require some questioning, and so being able to spend time with the children, talk through different aspects of the text to really get to their understanding of what the story's about, so that type of activity is usually done best in a one-to-one or a small group setting, and so in a classroom they might get missed.

Well in terms of prevalence it's estimated that about 10% of children in the primary school age sort of classrooms may show a poor comprehender profile so it's becoming more and more recognised and, in fact, if you think about the demands of a primary school curriculum many, many aspects of the curriculum require quite high level comprehension skills to be able to process information effectively, so somebody with a poor comprehender profile might find it difficult not only in literacy but also in subjects such as history, geography, any subjects where you have to really focus on key information, summarisation, predicting and deeper level understanding.

When we think about reading comprehension it's an incredibly complex skill so there's lots of different processes and things that need to be, that are involved in reading comprehension, so the research literature has uncovered a number of different areas where poor comprehenders have difficulties, and so by definition they have difficulties when they're understanding text, but then if we look at their wider skills we see that they also have difficulties in oral language tasks, so things like vocabulary tasks, expression, narrative, inferencing, and beyond that other issues with other cognitive skills, so it's been proposed that they may also have difficulties with things like memory skills and being able to suppress and dampen down irrelevant information. It's also possible that they have difficulty monitoring their own comprehension and actually knowing when their comprehension has broken down, so the ability to sort of stop and think and reflect on what they've learnt and where they're at with a piece of text, they might find it very hard to do that.