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Patricia R. Kelly
California State University

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Round Robin Reading: Considering Alternative Instructional Practices That Make More Sense

Patricia R. Kelly

As a teacher educator in reading, I am interested in how well classroom practices which preservice students observe during fieldwork coincide with what they learn in my courses. Through discussions with my students, as well as my own classroom observations, it appears that there is not always a fit between current theory and the actual classroom practice. For example, round robin reading, the practice of one student at a time reading a portion of text aloud while other students listen, became the center of a class discussion recently.

In discussions about effective oral reading strategies, I had pointed out that professional opinion did not support the use of round robin reading. However, several of my students indicated that they frequently observed it during their visits to classrooms. My students and I decided to carry out a study about round robin reading. We designed a survey for students to use during their fieldwork observations in which they recorded occasions where round robin reading was being used, and, when possible, asked teachers about their reasons for using this practice.

I believed that this provided an opportunity for my students to engage in classroom research which would enable them to study a real situation, collect data, and draw their own conclusions, thus promoting inquiry and reflection. According to Wells (1989), "If teachers are to create classroom communities in which students learn through active, collaborative inquiry, they must have similar learning opportunities themselves" (p. vii). The implementation of a teacher researcher model during fieldwork furnished the means by which my students could construct their own learning and "be involved in active inquiry — asking questions, looking for answers, figuring out what's best for children, constantly examining the teaching/learning process" (Farnan and Fearn, 1992, p. 51).

This article examines the results of this study, and provides some effective researched-based alternatives to round robin reading.

Background

Round robin reading has been one of the most enduring practices seen in elementary classrooms. According to Millward (1977), round robin reading has been used for more than two hundred years. Over the last four decades, investigators have found that it is a popular instructional practice, even though it is pedagogically obsolete. For example, in the fifties, Spache (1955) wrote,

We see classroom teachers persist in methods which are antagonistic to the broad aims of instruction... The oral reading in turn in which listeners try to follow the leader — is probably the best type of practice in trying to read badly that has yet been devised. (p. 25-26)

Others have found round robin reading to be both firmly entrenched and of little benefit. Artley (1972) surveyed over 800 teachers. He reported that almost half of them justified round robin reading by saying it provided all children with an opportunity to practice word recognition skills. Millward (1977, p. 289) described round robin reading as "a non-objective, non-educational and non-positive approach to the process of educating students."

Round robin reading has been found to reach beyond reading instruction into the content areas as well (Hill, 1983a; Millward, 1977). Hill (1983b, 1983c) reported that 96% of the teachers he surveyed indicated that they used round robin reading as a major instructional strategy; students he surveyed substantiated the use of round robin reading in science and social studies classes. Johns (1982) advocated abolishing the practice of round robin reading in reading instruction and content area lessons:

[O]nly one student at a time is actively participating; moreover, participation of this sort is a questionable educational practice. Because many students are put 'on the spot,' they may become frustrated or upset. Favorable reading attitudes are unlikely to be fostered in such situations. (p. 202)

Additional problems with round robin reading have been described by others including that it is competitive and unfair to less capable readers, and it does not foster oral interpretation, communication, or comprehension (Artley, 1972; Briggs, 1978; Hoffman, 1981; Millward, 1977). Lynch (1988) reported that reading comprehension declined during round robin reading as compared either to listening to a fluent reading of the text or silent reading.

Durkin's (1993) description of instructional reading practices included an examination of round robin reading. Based on classroom observation research, she concluded that round robin reading consumes a considerable amount of time in primary grade classrooms and, when used in reading instruction with older students, they are usually the poorest readers. A second conclusion was that it is commonly used in social studies in middle- and upper-grade classrooms as a way to cover the content of textbooks. In her discussion, Durkin (1993) voiced several concerns about the use of round robin reading including that it was likely to foster purposeless subvocalization, and that the kind of halting, listlike reading of text often heard in round robin reading may "obscure rather than elucidate meaning" (p. 53). One of Durkin's (1993) most serious concerns about round robin reading was

the misconception it fosters about the nature of reading. That is, by assigning importance to naming words correctly and with expression, round robin reading plays down the need for making semantic connections... (p. 53).

It appears that round robin reading, as an instructional practice, has been questioned for many years. It is reasonable to assume, then, that today's teachers, most of whom were educated during this time frame, were most likely not taught to use round robin reading as an instructional practice during their teacher preparation coursework.

In conflict are the historical denunciation of round robin reading and its apparent enduring presence in classrooms. Two questions emerged that guided my students' research: 1) How popular is round robin reading as an instructional practice in classrooms of the nineties? and 2) If round robin reading is commonly used, why has it persisted?

Preservice students become classroom researchers

Seventy-two students enrolled in my reading methods courses participated in this study which took place in two large Southwestern counties that included urban, suburban, and rural schools. Although specific data regarding the types of reading programs used in each classroom were not gathered, literature based basal reading series, such as those published by Houghton Mifflin, Macmillan, and Harcourt Brace Jovanovich were used in all of the classrooms in which students observed.

Each student engaged in approximately 20 hours of field experience in elementary classrooms for eight weeks, where they observed, taught two lessons, and worked with small groups or individual children. Most of their school observation time took place during reading/language arts instruction, however, some content area lessons were also observed during this fieldwork. Students completed surveys about the use of the round robin reading in the classrooms where they did their fieldwork. On the survey, round robin reading was defined as "unrehearsed oral reading of stories or content area texts in which one student at a time is called on to read aloud whether or not they volunteered to do so." This definition was based on the most common definitions used in the literature.

The first question on the survey asked whether or not round robin reading had been observed. Overall, 68% of my students indicated that they had observed round robin reading during their fieldwork, while 32% said they had not. The grade-level breakdown of results (see Table 1) shows that round robin reading was slightly more popular in primary than intermediate classrooms, but differences between the grades were not large.

Table 1
*Elementary Classrooms in Which
Round Robin Reading was Observed*

| <u>PRIMARY</u> | | | | | |
|---------------------|--------------|--------------|-------------|--------|----------|
| | First Grade | Second Grade | Third Grade | Totals | Percents |
| Total Classrooms | 14 | 9 | 14 | 37 | |
| Round Robin | 10 | 6 | 11 | 27 | 73% |
| No Round Robin | 4 | 3 | 3 | 10 | 27% |
| <u>INTERMEDIATE</u> | | | | | |
| | Fourth Grade | Fifth Grade | Sixth Grade | Totals | Percents |
| Total Classrooms | 11 | 14 | 10 | 35 | |
| Round Robin | 4 | 10 | 8 | 22 | 63% |
| No Round Robin | 7 | 4 | 2 | 13 | 37% |
| <u>COMBINED</u> | | | | | |
| | | | | Totals | Percents |
| Total Classrooms | | | | 72 | |
| Round Robin | | | | 49 | 68% |
| No Round Robin | | | | 23 | 32% |

Furthermore, of those who had observed round robin reading, many indicated that it was seen in content area classes as well as during reading instruction, but there were grade level differences (See Table 2). A higher percentage of primary teachers used round robin reading only during reading instruction. Here, as in the research reported by Durkin (1993), proportionally more intermediate teachers used round robin reading in both reading and content areas. Social studies was most often cited as the content area where round robin reading was used, followed by science.

According to student observations, a couple of new twists had been added to the practice of round robin reading. In some classrooms, teachers had popsicle sticks on which students' names were written. To assure student attention, or random

selection, teachers chose readers by drawing sticks. The other new version of round robin reading was called "popcorn." Here, students read as much or as little as they wished, then said "popcorn" and called on another student to continue reading the passage.

Table 2
*Types of Lessons in Which
 Round Robin Reading was Observed*

| Reading Situations | Reading Lessons Only | <u>PRIMARY</u> | |
|---------------------|----------------------|--------------------------------|---------------------------|
| | | Reading & Content Area Lessons | Content Area Lessons Only |
| Observations of RRR | 13 | 13 | 1 |
| | | <u>INTERMEDIATE</u> | |
| Observations of RRR | 4 | 15 | 3 |

Regardless of what method for student selection was used, round robin reading was found to be alive and well by two-thirds of my students. The question is why? To answer, my students interviewed classroom teachers regarding their purposes for using round robin reading. Among the reasons given by the teachers interviewed in this study, the most popular were: 1) to involve students in the reading; 2) to insure that each student follows along; 3) to develop oral fluency; 4) to cover the material; and 5) to evaluate students' reading. (However, my students did not observe these teachers recording any information as their students read aloud). Other reasons less frequently cited by these teachers included: boosting the egos of the good readers, exposing ESL students to English, providing a model other than the teacher, helping build self-confidence (the teacher, who made this comment, limited each

student to reading just two sentences), and developing comprehension.

While the majority of teachers observed in this study used round robin reading, approximately one-third did not, and some indicated that they never used it because it was not a beneficial practice or that it was unfair to less able students.

One explanation about why round robin reading is employed so frequently in classrooms despite decades of evidence against the practice might be that teachers tend to teach the way they were taught, rather than the way they were taught to teach. Recently, Searls (1991) addressed this matter:

Research shows that teachers tend to teach the way they were taught. Through 12 years of school and 4 years of college our students learn about teaching by observing those who teach them the content of their courses. It's little wonder that our reading methods courses don't 'take,' even when we are modeling the best behaviors and strategies for our preservice teachers. There is too much old learning to be unlearned before the new learning can be assimilated. (p. 1)

It is apparent that teacher behaviors are the result of several factors, including their experiences as students from kindergarten through college. Hoffman's (1987) interviews with teachers indicated that they had learned the practice of using round robin reading from their own experiences as students, from observing other teachers, and from their experiences working with their own students in basal instruction. Durkin (1993, p. 55) suggested that the use of round robin reading "might be the result of not knowing what else to do."

Value of a teacher researcher model

Through participating in research and being careful observers in the classroom, my students became acutely aware of what really goes on among children during round robin reading, as well as teacher behaviors. They commented on how few children were actually paying attention during round robin reading, and how embarrassing this practice was for many children. They noticed that teachers often immediately supplied unknown words and corrected children's errors, providing little time for readers to figure out new words or to self-correct miscues. They also noticed how difficult it was to listen to non-fluent readers reading a passage they had not rehearsed. They admitted that even they had had difficulty comprehending what was being read under these circumstances. Many of my students concluded in their written reflections following their fieldwork experiences that they would not use round robin reading when they became teachers because they now saw its many disadvantages. Given this, one of the greatest advantages of my students' participation in this research may be that perhaps they will not slip back into the teaching-as-they-were-taught mode. Conceivably, the teacher researcher model has interfered with years of "on the job training." Only time will tell.

In order to prevent my students from falling into Durkin's (1993) category of teachers who simply do not know what else to do, I introduce them to several alternatives so that they will have a variety of ways to immerse their own students in reading. Additionally, I go beyond mere discussions of the alternatives and engage my students actively in whatever technique I introduce, because I want them to have personal experience with each instructional technique. The remaining section describes effective alternatives to round robin reading that can be implemented in classrooms, depending on the purpose for the reading.

Alternatives to round robin reading

There are several viable alternatives to round robin reading; however, *the alternative selected should depend on the purpose* for which round robin reading was being used. Depending on the teacher's objectives, as well as the grade level and the needs of students, the following activities offer effective ways to engage students in reading.

Objective 1: To involve students in reading. If round robin reading was used for management purposes, such as to ensure that students follow along, or to involve all students in reading, there are several effective ways to motivate student interest. Teachers can select highly appealing reading materials, ones they and their students love, to help foster students' interest. There are many sources of excellent children's literature, including a monthly column entitled "Children's Books" in *The Reading Teacher* which focuses on a different genre each month and discusses a wide variety of new books, as well as old favorites. Another source is *Children's Choices* published annually by The International Reading Association. This source discusses books chosen by children as their favorites.

Objective 2: To build confidence and develop schema. Preparing beginning or struggling readers to read a new story is important in fostering interest and confidence, as well as developing schema for the text. Clay (1991b) describes activities that teachers can use before reading takes place which enable emerging readers to read a new book independently and fluently. The richness of the introduction and activities used will depend on the book and the students' previous experiences with similar texts. The teacher might do any of the following: 1) share the illustrations, inviting children's responses and linking the text with other books they have read or heard; 2)

encourage students to share their own experiences which may be related to the new text; 3) give an overview of the plot or story structure without giving away the ending; 4) develop deeper understanding of a theme or topic which might be confusing to the students; 5) use any novel words or language which appear in the book in her interactions with students in a deliberate way so that the words/language are modeled for students before they are encountered in print (Clay, 1991b). These book introduction activities draw on students' prior knowledge and supply new information in order to prepare students for reading an unfamiliar story, thus building schemata, confidence, and the ability to make meaningful predictions about unknown words.

Objective 3: To foster comprehension. In addition to building schemata as noted above, providing reading materials at appropriate reading levels for each child is crucial if a teacher's objective is to foster comprehension. It is difficult for students to remain interested in or to understand materials that are too difficult for them to read. Selecting stories at the appropriate reading level, with some, but not too many, unfamiliar words, concepts, and language structures, provides students with enough familiar and predictable text to draw upon as they read (Clay, 1991a). Many "little books," such as those published by the Wright Group, Rigby, and others, are now available for beginning readers, while trade books at varying levels are available for primary and intermediate readers. Introducing these books using ideas from the previous section will enhance students' abilities to engage with the literature.

Content area learning also requires that teachers prepare students for the reading and provide appropriate materials because there are so many new concepts and text structures in content materials. Teachers can prepare students for content reading by engaging them in prereading activities to develop

background knowledge, including the ideas mentioned above, as well as brainstorming activities such as K-W-L (Ogle, 1986). K-W-L is an activity in which teachers or students record what students know about a topic, as well as what students want to know, prior to students' reading of texts. This builds schemata and helps students set a purpose for reading. Following the reading, students or teacher record what they learned.

Because the materials used in content areas greatly affect comprehension, teachers need to supply books at various reading levels, focusing on the specific topics or themes being examined, so that all students can find books they are able to easily read. Children can then share what they have learned with others in the class through discussions or brainstorming activities which are recorded on charts. In this way each child contributes at his or her own level and feels successful doing so.

The Directed Reading-Thinking Activity (Stauffer, 1975) is an instructional method that is far more likely than round robin reading to promote comprehension. DR-TA is a method of guiding students' reading by having them first predict what each page or two is about, then read to verify their predictions, and finally prove their interpretations of what the author has said.

Comprehension is also fostered through listening to a fluent reading of the text. One way to accomplish this is to have the teacher read materials to the class or tape record the readings for students' listening. Tape recordings are especially effective for use with beginning and struggling intermediate age readers because they can have several opportunities to listen to and read along with the text.

Objective 4: To assess reading. If the objective for oral reading was assessment, this can be done through individual

sessions with each child during which the teacher takes a running record (Clay, 1993a) or writes anecdotal notes about miscues, self-corrections, fluency, and the like as the child reads aloud. In this way, less able readers are not embarrassed or ridiculed by more proficient readers in the class, and the teacher has a written record about the child's reading behaviors. This one-on-one time also gives the teacher an opportunity to ask children about strategies they used when reading. For example, a teacher might ask the child how they figured out certain words. This helps the teacher gain insights about strategies children are using to problem solve unknown words. If teachers feel they do not have enough time for individual sessions with each student, they may have students read into a tape recorder for later analysis.

Objective 5: To develop fluent reading. Developing fluent reading has been the goal of many teachers who use round robin reading. Various experts have examined and defined reading fluency. Rasinski (1989) used the term "the smooth and natural oral production of written text" when discussing reading fluency (p. 690). DeFord (1991) characterized fluent reading in terms of reading at a "smooth pace, using linguistically correct phrases" while Zutell and Rasinski (1991, p. 212) suggested that there are three ingredients in fluent oral reading:

- (a) the reading appears fairly effortless or automatic,*
- (b) readers group or "chunk" words into meaningful phrases and clauses, and*
- (c) readers use pitch, stress, and intonation appropriately to convey the meanings and feelings they believe the author intended. (p. 212)*

Additionally, Nathan and Stanovich (1991, p. 176) described the role of fluency in comprehension: "The ability to recognize words rapidly and accurately is emphasized in

current reading theory because it is the key to good reading comprehension."

Several principles can guide a teacher's approach to developing fluent reading. Among these principles are providing frequent opportunities for rereading familiar passages, modeling fluent reading, providing direct instruction and feedback, demonstrating phrasing, furnishing easy materials that lend themselves to fluent reading, and allowing children to both read what they have composed and to have choices about what they read (Clay, 1993b; Rasinski, 1989). The following activities encompass many of the aforementioned principles.

One of the most effective ways to develop fluent oral reading is through the rereading of easy, familiar materials, particularly texts with rhythm-like songs and repetitive patterns (Clay, 1993b). Many books currently being published for use with emergent readers are excellent sources of repetitive, easy texts. Older struggling readers also benefit by rereading easy materials. An enjoyable approach here, which eliminates the embarrassment of reading "baby" books, is having students select easy books and practice reading them aloud in preparation for reading to younger students. Such peer reading can help to develop fluent reading, along with enthusiasm and confidence.

A second effective way to engage students actively and develop fluent reading is through Readers' Theater. In using Readers' Theater, teachers supply students with a story, poem, or passage that has been scripted with several different parts for students to read as if they were performing a play. These parts are not memorized, but read by individuals assigned to their respective parts. It is easy to divide a whole classroom into small groups, using different scripts for each group. The

teacher rotates around to the groups, listening to their rehearsals and offering help as needed. After several opportunities to rehearse (this may take only one or several days), each group performs its script for the rest of the class, or for other classes in the school. I have found that students enjoy being audio- or video-taped while they are reading so that they can watch or listen to themselves afterwards.

Another fluency building activity, which I have found particularly enjoyable for students in grades 2-4, is paired repeated reading (Koskinen and Blum, 1987). In this activity, pairs of students select different 50-75 word passages which they first read silently, and then read to their partners three times consecutively. After the third reading, the partners switch roles, and the listener becomes the reader, and the reader the listener. Readers then evaluate how well they think they did, and listeners can also give feedback about their partner's reading.

Other formats which provide opportunities for repeated readings have also been found to be effective in developing fluency. Choral reading helps to develop fluent reading because of the support given during reading. There is little pressure on individual readers since several readers are participating at the same time. Echo reading, in which the teacher reads one or more sentences and the group or an individual repeats what has been read, is also supportive and valuable in developing fluent reading. With this technique students hear the correct words and intonation before they attempt reading. Both fluent reading and confidence building result from this practice (May, 1994).

Final note

It is apparent that although round robin reading is still being used in classrooms today, it need not be. There are better

ways to manage, involve, or assess students, and to foster fluent oral reading and comprehension. Perhaps through teacher education in which classroom research and reflection are components, the second half of the 1990s will bring about the unlearning of antiquated practices such as round robin reading, and increase the use of more effective alternatives.

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Patricia R. Kelly is a faculty member in the School of Education at California State University, in San Bernardino California.