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W. John Harker
University of Victoria

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CHILDREN'S LITERATURE AND BACK TO THE BASICS

Dr. W. John Harker

FACULTY OF EDUCATION, UNIVERSITY OF VICTORIA

The comprehension of literature places different demands upon children than the comprehension of non-imaginative prose. This is because, in order to comprehend literature, children must enter and understand the highly imaginative worlds of literary creation. Although these worlds are charged with delight for the child, they are at the same time essentially unreal – they are the imaginative productions of their creators.

Despite these different demands, the current so-called “back to basics” movement – entrenched as it has become in a growing number of competency-based reading programs – asserts that it doesn't matter what is being read; as long as children are taught to apply a highly structured sequence of individual skills, comprehension will result.

Many teachers intuitively resist the skills approach, however. They feel that teaching skills alone does not account for how children learn to read, especially when reading involves literature. But teachers need more than intuition as a basis for their resistance; they need a well-documented rationale. The purpose of this paper is to provide one. Through an exploration of how children think and learn to comprehend literature, it will be shown that many practices which teachers now use successfully, but which are at variance with the skills approach, are in fact consistent with how children learn to read literature. It is this consistency which accounts for the success of these practices in the classroom, which explains their intuitive and often long-standing appeal to experienced teachers, and which provides the reason why they should continue to be used in the face of the encroachment of “the basics” on the teaching of literature.

Children's Thinking

A fundamental question in any discussion of reading comprehension is how is knowledge attained? Put another way, if comprehension involves children in a process of gaining information from the printed page, how is this information acquired and organized in the mind?

While definitive answers to these questions are still to be determined, a coherent theory of human cognition and the development of children's thinking has been provided by Jerome Bruner and his colleagues. Bruner maintains that the individual learns about the world through a process of cognitive model building. He theorizes that the individual constructs in his mind a representation of the world founded on his experience which serves as the basis for interpreting his environment. Fundamental to this process is categorization. Bruner defines a category as “a range of discriminably

different events that are treated ‘as if equivalent’ (1956, p. 213). For example, the category “dog”, by which we describe and cognitively represent all four-footed creatures which characteristically bark and wag their tails, may be made up of dalmatians, poodles, cocker spaniels, and so on. However, all dogs, irrespective of shape, size, or color, are categorized as equivalent. In this way, categorization involves “an act of invention” (Bruner, et al., 1956, p. 2) by which equivalence is imposed upon observably non-equivalent phenomena. All dogs do not look alike despite the fact that no one would argue that Fido (a great dane) and Spot (a cocker spaniel) are both dogs. For this reason, another way of describing a category is to call it “a rule of grouping” (Bruner, et al., 1956, p. 45).

Categorization demands the active response of the learner to his environment. The individual selects certain characteristics of the phenomena he encounters as “defining attributes” (Bruner et al., 1956, p. 22) which allow him to assign these phenomena to existing categories or to establish new categories. Reality is never approached in an empty headed manner; the individual brings to each new encounter with the world a set of expectations about what he will find there. Four-footed creatures that bark and wag their tails are likely to be dogs. Moreover, once categorized as dogs, a number of other predictions can be made as well—such as these four-footed creatures can be trained to fetch one’s slippers or they are not to be trusted around cats. Thus the complexity of the environment is reduced. Each new event need not be interpreted *ab oia*: the individual’s cognitive model tells him what to expect.

Developing the efficiency of this cognitive response to the environment is the key to children’s learning. Through increasing life experience, children are able to reduce the complexity of their environment by developing more inclusive categorizations which permit more accurate prediction. In this way, the world becomes more known and knowable; the information load created by the constant bombardment of external sensory stimuli becomes controlled and ordered. Bruner describes this process of cognitive development in children as one of “finding techniques for being simple with respect to information” (1963, p. 141).

Children’s Reading

The influence of cognitive psychology on current explanations of the reading process has been both direct and profound. Smith (1978), for example, describes reading as a process in which the reader makes predictions about the meaning about to unfold as he reads, and comprehension as the reader’s confirmation of these predictions. Similarly, Goodman describes reading as a “psycholinguistic guessing game” in which the reader “seeks to reconstruct a message encoded by the writer. He concentrates his total prior experience and learning on the task, drawing on his experiences and the concepts he has attained as well as the language competence he has achieved” (1969, p. 15).

The common characteristic of these explanations is the importance placed on the child’s store of knowledge of the world—his model of

reality—which he brings to the reading act as opposed to the information he finds on the page or the particular reading skills he may possess. The child does not begin reading as an empty vessel waiting to be filled by the information on the page. Rather, he comes to reading with a model of reality based on how he has categorized his life experience. It is on the basis of the expectations generated by his model of reality that the child actively seeks to make sense of the information before him. Comprehension results when the child finds consistency between the model of reality he expects to find represented on the page and the reality he in fact encounters there.

Children's Literature

But what is the model of reality which the child encounters in literature? Hardly the one he has derived from his experience in the real world. Suddenly, that benign, four-footed, barking, tail wagging, slipper fetching, cat-chasing dog can be transformed into a symbol of ultimate malevolence, a Rowsby Woof, diabolical enemy to a struggling colony of socially ordered, highly articulate rabbits who inhabit *Watership Down*. The world of literature is essentially unreal. The metaphors of reality are upset. Despite its apparent or professed reality, the world of literature is a world of imagination and fancy created in the mind of the writer. It is a world which T. S. Eliot has described as providing “the illusion of a view of life” (1953, p. 53). The manner in which this illusion is created has been described by Tolkien as a process of “sub creation,” where the writer “makes a Secondary World which your mind can enter. Inside it, what he relates is ‘true’: it accords with the laws of that world” (1969, p. 114). Similarly, C. S. Lewis characterizes the process of literary creation as one of seeing imaginary pictures, some of which “have a common flavour, almost a common smell which groups them together” (1969, p. 218). When children's literature is considered in this way, the child's comprehension task becomes one of understanding alternate models of reality created in the minds of writers and represented in their work.

The initial effect of the child's encounter with alternate models of reality is surprise—surprise resulting from defeated expectation (Berlyn, 1960; Charlesworth, 1969). What follows surprise is either confusion and frustration, or discovery and delight. Bruner has postulated that “the triumph of effective surprise is that it takes one beyond common ways of experiencing the world” (1973, p. 212). In order to comprehend literature, in order to go beyond common ways of experiencing the world, the child must restructure, at least momentarily, his model of reality in order to accommodate the new reality he encounters in literature. If he fails to do this, comprehension will not occur and the child's surprise will not serve as a catalyst for the discovery of new, imaginative worlds through literature.

Teaching Children's Literature

How can the teacher develop children's comprehension of literature?

It should be clear by now that children's comprehension will not be developed by teaching a dreary collection of specific reading skills which

have little or nothing to do with reading or literary appreciation, but which have become the unfortunate accompaniment of the back to the basics movement and competency-based reading programs. Not only does the skills approach fail to encourage the process through which children learn to comprehend, but also by virtue of its sterility and lack of interest, it stifles children's receptivity to the imaginative worlds represented in literature.

At the beginning of this discussion, it was argued that many teachers have long been using basic approaches to teaching children's literature which, though at variance with the current emphasis on teaching skills, have proven successful. The reason why these approaches have proven successful is that — even though they have often been derived intuitively and by trial-by-error — they activate the process through which children learn to comprehend and enjoy literature. The remainder of this paper will review some of these basic approaches.

Developing Linguistic Awareness

Too often literature is taught as a process of translating literary expression into conventional expression. The "as if" process of categorization is put into reverse. Children learn that their reading task is to transform the imaginative experiences they encounter in literature back to the language in which these experiences would be represented in the conventional world.

This approach is wrong and has been recognized so by perceptive teachers. For children to grow and develop through their discovery of literature and the imaginative experiences literature provides, they must be immersed in the reading of literature and not in some arbitrarily prescribed program of artificial reading skills. The teacher's role is to encourage the child to engage actively in the process of reading literature so that the child may learn to form bridges between his existing model of reality and the imaginative and fanciful models of reality represented in literature.

Clear support for teaching based on this approach is provided by Bruner's notion of language development and its role in cognition. Bruner (1973) has argued cogently that the child uses language to order experience and through this to discover reality; language is a tool through which reality is manipulated and ultimately understood. When the reality to be understood is an imaginative one of literary creation, the linguistic awareness (Mattingly, 1972) the child requires for understanding is of a very special kind, and it is only by the teacher's providing repeated encounters with the language of literature and the reality which this language represents, that the child will come to understand and enjoy literature.

Oral Language Activities

A first step toward developing this linguistic awareness can be listening and oral language activities. For example, through the simple act of reading aloud to children, the teacher can provide direct exposure to literary language and a growing familiarity with the diverse and fanciful realities which this language represents. At other times, this exposure can be furthered by choral reading. This is particularly appropriate with

poetry. Through listening to the language of literature and through participating in this language orally, the child will gain a growing sense of its style and rhythm, and a greater understanding of the meaning literary language conveys through its combination of sound and sense.

Freedom of Choice

But listening and oral language activities can only serve as first steps toward children's own active participation in reading. This raises the question of what should they read? Children should be encouraged to read the literature they enjoy. Too often we teach what we enjoy ourselves rather than recognizing what is enjoyable for the child. The child still possesses that sense of wonder which we as adults have largely lost, and this explains the often inscrutable (to us) delight which children demonstrate in literature we sometimes find bizarre, obscure, or silly. But, by recognizing the need for children to read literature which they like, we are not encouraging the development in children's minds of some kind of literary slum. Rather, we are recognizing that if children's literature is to serve as the basis for the development of more refined literary taste, it must in the first instance be enjoyable.

Widening Horizons

One way to develop children's literary taste is to encourage discussion of the literature they read both among themselves and with their teacher. Discussion should not focus on dismal comparisons between the events of literary creation and "what really could happen," since what really could happen doesn't matter in literature. Rather, children should be encouraged to explore and extend the full range of the interpretive possibilities literature provides by developing more imaginative expectations and making more creative predictions. In this way, the language of literature becomes the medium through which the worlds represented in literature become part of the child's model of imaginative reality, and through which extensions of these worlds can be made.

Conclusion

If one common conclusion emerges from current concepts of the reading process and successful teaching practices, it is that children learn to read by reading. It is only in this way that reading becomes joyful—that children want to read and continue to want to read. The more experience they have with constructing meaning from the interaction of their own experience with the experience they find represented on the printed page—no matter how fanciful—the greater will be their understanding and enjoyment. This is particularly true of literature. Poetry must be read as poetry and not as some deviant form of prose that must be translated to be understood, and imaginative prose must be accepted at face value as representing worlds which, though detached from reality by virtue of being imaginary, are still perhaps possible, at least for one joyful moment. In these ways children's delight in the fanciful and imaginary can be nurtured,

and their sense of wonder enriched and developed. Over one hundred years ago, in a utilitarian society preoccupied like our own with the teaching of facts and skills, Charles Dickens in *Hard Times* recognized the need for this sense of wonder. In the words of Mr. Sleary, "People muht be amuthed. They can't be alwayth a learning, nor yet they can't be alwayth a working, they an't made for it."

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