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ANOTHER DECLARATION OF INDEPENDENCE

James A. Wright

EAST LANSING PUBLIC SCHOOLS

I suspect if we taught preschoolers to speak many would not learn nearly as well as they do in their own independent manner. The very young child learns to speak when he wants to, in the way he wants to, because he wants to. Above all else, he does not become anxious about what he can not understand or can not do. He does not worry about making mistakes. He does not worry about being wrong. He does not fear an extrinsic evaluation of his progress. He meets only success.

This healthy attitude changes abruptly for the young child when he enters school and becomes accustomed to the superimposed standards of progress. He is forced to relinquish his choice of what knowledge he is to accumulate, and he must exhibit each bit of learning in a prescribed fashion before he is exposed to the next. The technique of discovering for himself, which served him well in his "developmental speaking program" is denied him in his developmental reading program. His ears become filled with an endless drone of rules, reasons, and remonstrations.

An independent exploration of the unknown is replaced by an attitude of dependency when a youngster ventures forth on the road to reading via the basal reader approach. In fact, in many cases the teacher also abandons any notion of exploration and relies completely upon the basal reader guidebook. Too often the result is a distorted view of the reading act itself, on the part of both the teacher and the pupil.

The independent reading program attempts to regain the freedom the youngster experienced when he learned to speak. Analogous to surrounding a youngster with interesting talk and encouraging him to speak is the procedure wherein we surround the pupil with interesting reading material and encourage him to read, with an emphasis on the independence he once employed when learning to speak.

Further indictment of the basal reader approach is found in answers to the following questions:

1. Are members of a reading group sometimes taught what they obviously already know?
2. Do members of a reading group sometimes need modified instruction?

3. Do members of a reading group sometimes fail to find the lesson meaningful and challenging?
4. Do members of a reading group sometimes fail to exhibit independence?
5. Do members of a reading group sometimes fail to exhibit interest and satisfaction?
6. Is it detrimental for a youngster to force himself to follow along at a pace much slower than his own silent reading rate while a member of his group reads orally—and often haltingly?
7. Is the mental health of a child sometimes injured when he is placed in a group that can be labeled?
8. Do individuals proceed at a varying rate of progress in the process of learning?
9. Are different individuals entitled to different interests, motives and curiosities?
10. Does the way a teacher interacts with a child affect how he feels about himself and how he feels about learning?

Method

In brief, the method includes (1) planning the activities for the reading period (2) holding individual conferences (3) arranging group conferences about books and stories read (4) directing group instruction in particular skills (5) seeing that each child has made a worthwhile choice for a learning situation (6) providing opportunity for the pupils to share what has been read.

The pupil activities which teachers have found workable require that the children first understand the independence they must assume. The teacher and pupils plan together and decide the manner in which the reading program is to be sustained. Successful teachers have found the following activities appropriate once the independent approach has been initiated:

1. Selecting a book or story
2. Reading independently
3. Writing about what was read
4. Having an individual conference with the teacher
5. Reacting to the reading with an independent follow-up activity
6. Engaging in a group activity directed by the teacher

7. Engaging in a group activity not directed by the teacher
8. Recording progress
9. Sharing what has been read
10. Evaluating reading skills

The Individual Conference

The individual conference provides the best opportunity for concentrated instruction in word recognition and comprehension. It also furnishes an excellent occasion for nurturing a genuine appreciation for good literature. Consequently, those teachers who have used the independent approach feel the instruction is effective or ineffective according to the teacher's ability during this brief, intensive, personal contact. However, the one to one relationship between pupil and teacher is considered to have a "tremendous" potential for learning.

In general, the teacher's attitude should be one of guiding a student's ever increasing recognition of meaning clues. Both teacher and pupil should adopt a diagnostic posture. A record of the youngsters specific inability while analyzing unknown words and his particular inability while reorganizing the structure of the selected reading matter provides an indication of instructional needs of the individual.

The guidance offered to improve or diagnose a pupil's ability to analyze unknown words could take the following form, based on words from the selected text.

Make a list of words which you did not know and tell what clues helped you figure them out.

How is this word pronounced and what does it mean?

What is the root of this word?

Unlock the meaning of this word by telling me the meaning of its prefix, root, and/or suffix.

The word starts like *chicken* and ends like *train* so it must be what word?

The word starts like what other word?

The youngster progresses through assignments of gradually increasing difficulty, controlled by the length and readability of the selection, the type of questions posed, and the prescribed format of the anticipated responses. Meanwhile, teacher guidance should be commensurate with the student's instructional level, insuring a constant challenge but only an appropriate number of errors.

Questions are used to provoke thinking. A student answers the particular questions and verifies his answers by referring to that part

of his selected reading which confirms his ability to comprehend what he has read.

The following exercises serve as examples of one teacher's techniques used while implementing an independent reading program. The questions referred to in the third exercise of each assignment sheet appear at the end of this article, and are taken from a prominently displayed wall chart.

Each student was given a dittoed copy of the respective assignment and did the exercises independently.

Name

- I. Read "Sent by Mail." pp. 89-93.
- II. Vocabulary. Be sure you can pronounce these words and know their meanings. Write down the definitions and pronunciation of the starred words. Write a sentence for each of these words. Be sure you can also use the other words in sentences.

notion	brimming	Harlem
farewell	*miracle	groomed
*penetrated	*beckoned	*parcel
Manhattan	Meriden	colonies
*distinguish	*derived	bidding
*public	relatives	
- III. Answer these questions from the chart. Be sure you use complete sentences. 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 7, 8, 9, 10, 11, 13, 15, 16.
- IV. Prepare a part for oral reading.
- V. Sign up for a conference (group or individual).
- VI. Hand in ditto and work stapled together.
- VII. After your conference record the date of the conference on your file card.

Name

Independent Reading of Library Books

- I. State the purpose or reason for reading the book. This may be a question you want to answer.
- II. Vocabulary. Keep a list of the words you didn't know or found interesting. Write their definitions and try using them in sentences.

- III. Select some questions which pertain to the book and answer them. Do as many as you feel pertain to the book (minimum of 5). When you finish, keep this paper filed in your notebook.
 - IV. Practice a short part of the book you would like to read orally.
 - V. Sign up for an individual conference. Bring the book and your paper with vocabulary and questions to the conference.
 - VI. After the conference, record the title and author of your book and the conference date on your file card.
 - VII. Remember to keep your own record by putting your paper with the vocabulary and questions in your notebook. Include any special comments you'd like to make about the book.
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Wall Chart

HOW WELL DO YOU READ STORIES?

- 1. What is the main word of the title?
- 2. Change the title into a question.
- 3. Who is the main character?
- 4. Who are the other main characters?
- 5. What was each doing before trouble started?
- 6. What made the trouble start?
- 7. What was the trouble?
- 8. What made the trouble stop?
- 9. How did the story end?
- 10. What is the main character like?
- 11. Who was the bad character?
- 12. What did you like about the story?
- 13. What was funny?
- 14. What is the main idea of the story?
- 15. Make up a new title.
- 16. Make up subtitles.
- 17. Make sentences from your subtitles.
- 18. Could this story really happen?
- 19. What lesson does this story teach?
- 20. Retell the story but make it short.

Ultimately an independent examination of an author's style and credibility may be assigned the young reader. An enhancement of the appreciation of all forms of writing could be the anticipated, logical result. Uppermost in a teacher's mind should be the pupil's increased love of reading and the development of the cluster of critical thinking skills required of a maturing reader.