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Books are for Reading

Fannie Schmitt
Florence State College

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Fannie Schmitt

FLORENCE STATE COLLEGE

Surely there has never been another time in which it was so important for people to be able to read—and to read—as it is today. Reading is, or should be, a part of nearly every experience of children, young people, and adults. Valuable though the other media of communication are, they are necessarily inadequate for full coverage: of reporting events, of expressions of opinion, of findings of investigations, of descriptions, of recounting of experiences. Only in books are we likely to find the inclusive, extended coverage necessary for adequate analysis, interpretation, and application. Never before have we been confronted with such need to know so much so quickly, to communicate so clearly and thoroughly, and to be able to interpret so accurately.

Reading must, therefore, become an integral part of every instructional experience which the school provides for its young people. For example, as the boys and girls in our public schools and the young men and women in our colleges learn the facts of well-documented historical accounts, they must learn also to read fiction, biography, drama, and poetry, for these serve to clothe the skeletal structure of history with the attitudes, the beliefs, and the ways of life of the people who created the history. Literature describes the ways in which these people thought and felt and had their being—how they brought about these events and movements, and how, in turn, they were affected by them and how they reacted to them. So learning how to read, and reading, the fiction, the biography, and the poetry becomes a necessary part of learning to read history, to understand how the present relates to the past, and to the future. The themes, the content, of imaginative literature include all that man has dreamed, hoped, thought, felt, loved, feared, created, and destroyed.

We have said so often that "every teacher must become a teacher of reading," that the concept is sometimes in danger of being lost in the trite words. Certainly it is true that reading—reading of pictures, of charts, of maps, of many types of graphic presentations, and reading of words and phrases and paragraphs must be an integral part of the teaching and the learning of all curriculum areas. And learning to read the graphic presentations of thought and the verbal symbols representing thought must be just that—learning to read the symbols

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in order to read the thoughts, to understand concepts, and to analyze and to interpret and apply them.

This we are not likely to find refuted. But acceptance of this point of view cannot amount to much unless it is applied and followed by careful, skillful, continuous attention to teaching young people the various types of printed material which is inherently a part of the various subject areas, and unless there is attention to teaching them to read in terms of the purposes of the authors whose work they read as well as in terms of their own purposes. Reading poetry is quite different from reading fiction, and requires different types of reading attitudes and skills. So it seems to me that we must teach, in each curriculum area, the types of reading attitudes and skills necessary in that area as a means toward the achievement of the accepted goals for teaching and learning in that area. The teaching and learning of reading must not be an end in itself. Reading is a very functional thing—unless I have reason for reading, a reason which I accept, there really is little value in my learning to read.

If one asks a prospective first-grader what he will learn when he goes to school, he almost certainly will reply that he will learn "how to read." When this youngster goes to school, we build him up so that he feels that when he is able to read, the world will be his. And indeed the world will be his, when he learns to read; but not when he learns only how to read. When a child has learned enough words and has caught the idea that words open windows to a wider world, what do we give him so that he can move into that wonderful world?

Well, sometimes, I'm afraid, we give him material which surely will not motivate him to want to continue to learn to read better—for it is neither interesting, provocative, nor stimulating. Recently, one of my capable, creative students brought me her frustrations on this score. She had become immersed, saturated, in fact, with many of the truly fine books for boys and girls, books by imaginative, skillful, literary artists such as Elizabeth Enright, Laura Ingalls Wilder, Carolyn Haywood, Robert Lawson, Elizabeth Speare, E. B. White, and many more. Now, in another curriculum area, she was examining a great many textbooks for elementary grades, including some readers. She called me one night, saying "Listen to this," and she read to me a story from a reader—a story without logical plot leads, without valid characterization, and certainly without evidence of creativity on the part of the writer. But the bibliography of titles listed in that text as suggestions for further reading by the children included some of the

finest books in the whole of children's literature. Here were titles by Eleanor Estes, Miriam Mason, and others just as excellent.

Now, reading is a process of thinking; there is no reading without reaction from the reader to the material read. I once heard Mary Ellen Chase say that a creative writer must have a creative reader if his book is to fulfill its destiny—if the communications process is to complete the cycle. Without reaction of the reader to the concepts expressed in the book, and without his reaction to the ways in which the concepts are expressed, there can be only word-calling, not reading.

The teaching of reading and all reading guidance must have as the central objective helping the learner to become increasingly able to analyze and interpret what is read, not to memorize words—to read ideas, not words alone. As an article published in the *Reading Teacher* of January, 1967, says: "The ultimate aim of teaching children to read, it would seem, is to make it possible that they encounter literature and respond to it throughout all their years." But we all know that, in spite of our laws to keep children in school and presumably, therefore, reading until they are sixteen years old, many grow up without finding that "bequest of wings in books" of which Emily Dickinson wrote. And we know that, although we are continuously extending and improving public library service and school library service, many boys and girls become adults without finding in books the realms of gold that would extend their horizons and enrich their personalities, without encountering and responding to literature which might provide for them experience and understanding, that might stimulate, or excite, or move them,—or in any way enrich their lives and their experience. Young readers will come to know and to enjoy good books and to continue reading them, because they have had many enjoyable experiences with them. I believe that this is the only way in which they will learn to read, to develop the habit of reading, to become discriminating in choosing what they will read. Perhaps the most dangerous pitfall in teaching children to read is failure to analyze for ourselves, and for them, the reasons why they should learn to read. When we as adults read, we are usually seeking answers to questions, solutions to problems, or seeking torches to lighten the darkness which obscures our vision or seeking escape from the humdum routines of our everyday lives, so that we do not see clearly ourselves and our fellows and the situations in which we move—we're seeking reading to serve us as runners on the mountain tops. Young people, if they are to learn to read, also must have experiences with books which will serve these ends.

Too often, in the urgency of our efforts to teach children the mechanics of reading, in our haste and our compulsion to teach them how to read, we forget, or even impair, the motivation to read. So we have many members of our society who can manipulate the mechanics of reading—they have learned how to read, but they do not read. And, of course, the man who can read but doesn't is no better off than the man who doesn't know how to read. And there are many other of our former pupils who can read and do read—something, anything, sometimes, chiefly periodicals, but who do not know what to read, how to choose the best for themselves.

Our objective for the young reader must be the development of a love of reading, and learning to read to enjoy, to understand, to interpret, so that the reading does help the reader to have deepened and broadened insight into human nature— his own and his fellows'; so that the reading does help him to develop a sense of the past and of the future, as well as the present; so that the reading does help him to develop his own code of values and standards; and, most of all, so that the reading does take him "lands away," does give great personal enjoyment and satisfaction.

Unless we achieve this, we cannot hope to help boys and girls to become increasingly discriminating in their reading, and increasingly appreciative of the best in literature. When we are helping middle-grade children to learn with Wanda Petronski the satisfaction of achievement through creation, and to realize with her classmates the importance of the individual personality, we are using golden opportunities to teach reading. When we are giving younger children the opportunity to share the loyal friendship of Charlotte and Wilbur and to know the fulfillment of Charlotte's destiny, sad as the moment of her going might be, we are using valid purposes for teaching reading. Books like these will help us to teach a child to become a reader—a real reader—because they do satisfy so many of his psychological needs, especially because they give enjoyment and therefore are likely to lead him to read more; and because, while they entertain him and enable him to identify with the heros, they also are building into the very fabric of his personality values which can last a lifetime. For example, perhaps one of the most dramatic moments in *Charlotte's Web* comes when Wilbur finally escapes from the barnyard to the complete, uninhibited freedom which he had not the courage to take for himself for such a long while. Now, having achieved it so easily and through so little effort of his own, he knows not at all what to do with it, so that he immediately returns to the security of the fenced-in barnyard.

The suspense and drama of the story at this point provides adventure for the young reader; he is likely to realize the philosophy much later and enjoy it all over again. I am reminded of another illustration of this way in which reading enriches the young reader immediately, and later on. One Monday morning, one of my students came in to let me enjoy with her an experience of her weekend. She had overheard her fifth-grade brothers as they discussed a member of the community, with patent disapproval. Suddenly, one of them said, "Oh, well, everyone knows he's a 'bear of small brain'."

But none of the many values which reading can and should contribute to the reader will be derived unless the actual reading experience is enjoyable and satisfying. I cannot really believe, for example, that a great many junior high school boys and girls who are now in classes in which all members are required to read *Great Expectations,* are likely, as a result of this experience, to choose another novel by Dickens for vacation-time reading, just for fun, or even to choose one set in the same time and place, or with a similar theme. As one young teacher who with her students was required to follow that pattern, said, "The best readers read the whole story within a few days after we started it in class; the least mature readers have struggled with it, many of them with little or no enjoyment." We say that the two ingredients which the teacher must have if he is to succeed in any program of reading guidance are: (1) understanding of the individual reader (his needs, interests, ambitions, hopes, frustrations, past successes and failures, his past reading experiences, his reading abilities); and (2) wide and deep knowledge of books. And we say, also, that our primary objective in all programs of reading is to help boys and girls to become readers—persons who read widely and deeply because life would be incomplete without reading, who are continuously growing in their ability to distinguish among those books which are truly fine and timeless; those which are timely and interesting and enjoyable and useful now, but not likely to become a part of our heritage of remembered treasures in literature; and those which are trash, which are unworthy of the time necessary to read them. And I do believe that in reading, as in everything else, each individual is always in a process of becoming.

And if we want our young people to set their feet upon the road of becoming enthusiastic readers of the best, we must provide them with books which are, indeed, the best for them at the very time we are working with them, guiding their reading. The best definition I have ever heard for a good book is this: "A good book is a book

which is good for a particular reader at a particular time." So I should prefer to see those elementary-grade readers given the opportunity and the careful guidance to read some of the fine books by authors like Carolyn Haywood, Eleanor Estes, Miriam Mason and others who are listed in the bibliography in that reader, instead of having them waste time and dull their powers of perception of that which is truly good writing on the trivial, unsubstantial story which upset my fine student. And instead of seeing all junior-high youngsters required to read *Great Expectations* at the same time, I should prefer to see many of the fine titles now available in paperbacks made easily available to them, and introduced to them in ways to help them to read, first of all, with great enjoyment, and then with increasing ability to analyze and interpret and evaluate—to read in-depth, as well as extensively.

There has been much talk in recent years about a thematic approach to reading, and this seems to me to hold great promise as a means of leading young readers to read widely books of many kinds; to read deeply in order to identify the author's purpose and his theme; to analyze the ways in which he has developed his theme; and to evaluate the validity of the theme and the literary craftsmanship of the author. If the general theme or problem around which reading is centered is one of real concern to the young people, and if there are many books of many kinds easily available, and if there are opportunity and encouragement for individuals to try out on the classroom teacher and the librarian and on their fellow-students their own reactions to what they read, there is little doubt that there will be much reading, that it will be broad and deep, and that it will be enjoyable.

So, I should say that the selection of books to be given to boys and girls, and from which they should be allowed and encouraged to make many of their own choices—the selection of the titles to be made available and to be introduced to them is the first and perhaps the most important consideration in any program of reading instruction or reading guidance. And the selection must depend upon the teacher's and the librarian's understanding of the individual reader, and their deep and wide knowledge of books. Teachers and librarians must read, read, read, and read some more. If we believe that reading is a functional skill and that the process of reading is a very functional one, and that the only valid purpose for teaching young people (and adults) how to read is to help them to use that skill to live more fully—to know themselves and their fellows better, to accept themselves and other people, to become more insightful into human nature, to understand and appreciate better the physical and sociological world in

which they live; if we believe all this, then we cannot ever be satisfied if a pupil is content to say simply that he likes or does not like a book. We can be satisfied that our young learner is becoming the creative reader whom Mary Ellen Chase says the creative writer must find, only when we know that he is gradually, with careful, skillful guidance becoming a reader—one who finds joy and satisfaction in truly reading, one who is increasingly aware of and increasingly finds pleasure in the subtleness, the vividness, the economy and the simplicity, the honest sentiment devoid of sentimentality, the proper balance, the freshness and originality of concepts and expression, the movement and action, the accuracy and thoroughness, the sincerity and integrity which characterize good writing. When we see a boy move away from the Hardys to Stephen Meader and Jim Kjelgaard and then perhaps to the Nordhoff and Hall adventures, and then perhaps to Cousin's *Dr. Schweitzer of Lamberenn* or even to Paton's *Cry the Beloved Country,* or dozens and dozens of other titles that I'm sure you are remembering just now—when we see this kind of becoming in process, we know that we are teaching, and that our young people are learning both how to read, and to read.

This indicates that at the very heart and core of the reading program there must be the library—a well-selected, well-stocked library administered by librarians who understand the purposes and processes of teaching and learning reading, who understand the elements necessary to success in the undertaking, and who are able to work with classroom teachers, guidance counselors (all other teachers, in fact) and with boys and girls to make books and reading truly "realms of gold" for them. Books Are For Reading. If our boys and girls continue to read at all when they leave us, they will read books, magazines, newspapers, pamphlets—not machines and not just textbooks.

The only valid reason for increasing reading speed is to be able the better to enjoy, to interpret, to appreciate the very best of writing. I have been much frustrated to hear that some school systems have appointed special reading teachers in schools in which there was practically nothing in the way of real library service. How can a special reading teacher work at all without adequate library service? Indeed, how can the regular classroom teachers teach reading without it?

If this be true—that library service which is worthy of the name is necessary to the teaching and the learning of reading what kinds of books must the library provide, for use within the library, in classrooms, in homes—wherever the children are? And how shall we select

them, how evaluate them? Our basis for all selection must be, of course, what we know about the nature of the boys and girls at varying developmental levels, and what we know about our individual boys and girls within these levels. We know, for example, that children are tremendously interested in real-life stories at about third and fourth grades, and that if we nurture this interest well, they become readers of fine biography and historical fiction. And so we include in our libraries books by Clara Judson and Jeanette Eaton and Genevieve Foster and Katherine Shippen and Elizabeth Speare and Armstrong Sperry, and on and on. We see that our boys have a chance to sail on a whaler with the Sea Bird, and to join Johnny Tremain on that exciting night in Boston harbor, and to join Juan De Pareja in learning painting from the great artist and the slave's master, Velasquez. We give our girls the opportunity to stand in Kit's shoes as she is accused of witchcraft along with the other witch of Black Bird Pond, and we let them share the struggle between the old and the new in an ancient culture as the younger ones join Sue-Msi in defending her father's wheat crop. We let the older girls share the loneliness and the triumph of the young heroine of *Let the Hurricane Roar,* and with Abbie Deal, feel the searing winds which parched her skin and the fields which she and Will had worked so hard to cultivate, and with her, too, grow in personal strength and courage and loyalty, and face the struggles of pioneering with good sense and a sense of humor. We show our boys and girls, through Elizabeth Yates's description of Amos Fortune, the meaning of self-respect and industry and resourcefulness and human kindness, and rejection of the vindictiveness which so often impairs integrity.

We know that the major undertaking of every young person is self-identification, and that this becomes especially urgent in adolescence. Let's give our young adult books to help with this, books about people worth identifying with—books depicting the courage of the young men of Kon-Tiki; the fear and the tenacity to overcome it of the young hero of *Red Badge of Courage;* Jade Wong's respect for the tradition of her parents' culture coupled with the determination to find her own destiny in modern America. And books to help them wonder about the meaning of life, with all the other readers of *Portrait of Jennie,* for example.

These are among the kinds of books we need, along with many others to provide chuckles like those we share with Mr. Wilmer in Robert Lawson's book, and with Papashively in *Anything Can Happen,* and many, many, others.

And, having provided the books, how shall we stimulate and guide our young people to read them?

I am always immediately frustrated, rebellious, and discouraged when I hear an adult say a certain child is a non-reader, or that another child won't read, for I believe that any child who has the usual physical and emotional and intellectual equipment can become a reader, and will become one if the adults who are responsible for him, know and love him, know and love books—many books—and are enthusiastic about both, and feel that books can and must help the child to fulfill his destiny, to achieve his best potential. When such an adult brings the book and the child together, an alchemy results, and it cannot be prevented.

But how to bring them together? Well, there are many books describing many techniques for reading guidance—reading records, book talks, group discussions, dramatic play, reading menus and other types of lists—on and on—. They all may be summarized, I think, by two statements: (1) A love of good reading is more likely to be caught than taught; (2) The only ceiling on effective ways of bringing books and people together is the creative imagination of the adult who is the guide. And so—Books are for reading.