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FUNDAMENTAL PRINCIPLES UNDERLYING GOOD TEACHING OF READING

Gwen Horsman

Today we are teaching all of the children of all of the people. The less selective the school enrollment, the greater the number of deficiencies found among the student body. The enriched curriculum requires a knowledge of reading skills far greater in difficulty than those required to master the "reader" of twenty years ago. Social promotion sends into the secondary schools many students who have failed in one field or another. In a surprisingly large number of school systems, guidance in the teaching of reading ceases at the completion of the sixth grade; in all too many systems it is discontinued at the end of the third grade. The rapid social change from a quiet agricultural community to a confusing whirl of industrial living forces new demands on young people today. The greatly increased amount of reading materials requires a broader knowledge of reading skills and a keener insight for interpretation than ever before.

It is evident that the majority of students today will not learn in spite of the teaching process but only because of good teaching procedures. The responsibility of raising the standard of teaching to promote a higher level of learning rests directly on the shoulders of the teacher. Observance of essential principles in teaching should go far in combating retardation.

Because students are entering classrooms in droves with inadequate backgrounds for comprehension and interpretation of the subject matter to be assimilated, the need for an introduction period, or a readiness period, is evident. This calls for preparation on the part of the teacher—a time during which he goes over the subject matter he intends to teach with the idea of selecting the concepts or ideas, the words and phrases which represent these concepts, which will be new to the student body. In other words, he anticipates the difficulties the children will encounter. If these are carefully selected and recorded, the instructor is in a fine position for presenting the new material with an understanding heart and an enthusiastic

voice. During the presentation of the new material, he encourages students to contribute ideas and comments which come as a result of experience or observation. While *they* are learning about a new subject, *he* is learning about them. From their contributions a teacher is able to gain a fair idea of students' individual backgrounds and experiences. Instruction immediately becomes a personal thing instead of following the mass production plan. Questions can now be thrown to individual students or groups of students. Pupils who exhibit a lack of the background and experience necessary for learning can be seated in the front of the room where they may receive a greater amount of individual attention than would be possible if they were in the back.

During the introduction, or readiness, period when the teacher is presenting new words and phrases (or old words with new meanings), it is important that they be written on the blackboard in a large clear handwriting that can be seen from the back of the room. Since so many people are visual-minded, it is a valuable practice to write the words as they come up for discussion, especially when they are terms which are unique to a particular content field. The social studies instructor is responsible for the teaching of such terms as "radical" and "conservative" since they are words which require understanding in his field. It is true that many students may be able to read them but to understand their significance in social science is essential. In a reading or literature class students could read with understanding such a sentence as "The conservative old lady did a radical thing in purchasing a huge red hat," and still be unable to define the terms as they are significant to social studies.

In a literature class which was discussing the character traits of Frank Buck, one student insisted he was cruel. When asked to justify his statement he produced as evidence this sentence from the text, "Excited onlookers watched as Mr. Buck lashed the leopard cage to the foremast of the ship." A familiar concept of the word *lash*, plus careless reading, resulted in toppling Frank Buck from his heroic pedestal. A teacher of an American literature group, intent on establishing a background for the reading of Poe's "The Cask of Amontillado" wrote the word *catacomb* on the board and asked for a description of it. The first contribution was a glowing description of a steep waterfall gushing over rocks high on a mountain. The concept of *cataract* carried to Poe's story of a catacomb would render the reading of it difficult indeed! And yet, what a natural mistake! How many children have ever seen a catacomb? How many adults? Teach-

ing words and concepts peculiar to any selection or material is a fundamental principle of teaching. Without meaningful word associations, little real reading is accomplished. Thus, it follows, every teacher is a reading teacher.

A second fundamental principle of teaching is definite guidance in helping the child to comprehend the meaning of the printed word. What message is the author trying to impart? Many children are able to give back the words of printed text but fail woefully in the ability to attach any meaning or significance to them. Rote recitation or mere repeating of words, is no measure of learning. When a student is asked simple comprehension questions, such as "From what point did the journey start?" or "What did the pioneers do to protect themselves at night?" it is possible for him to give a correct answer without realizing in any way the real life lessons involved. "The journey started at Pittsburgh" may be the correct answer, but the significant fact that this would enable the party to travel swiftly by flatboat on the Ohio River instead of traveling slowly by covered wagon is entirely lost by the student. The pioneers may have "backed their wagons into a circle around the campfire at night" but all the advantages which accrue from such a procedure are entirely lost on the group as a whole unless a discussion is stimulated which creates so accurate a mental image that they are able to see at once the entire situation. Lively examination and consideration of the textbook material is an essential part of classroom teaching. Unless time for it is provided a dull and passive student body files from the room no richer for having been there and with a "so-what?" attitude toward learning in general. Again, it is not so much what they learn as how they learn it. An inquiring attitude accompanied by sound thinking and the exercise of good judgment can be developed, under thoughtful guidance, in all students. This attitude takes into the printed page not only an interest in what the author said, but an insight into much that he didn't say, and an idea of many things he would like to have said! Practically all children can be taught to read the line, many learn to read between the lines, and in the classrooms are those gifted enough to read far beyond the lines. Sound teaching promotes growth in each of these phases of learning so that the printed word becomes a vital experience.

Until a few years ago when a teacher was asked, "What is your ultimate goal in teaching?" the popular response was, "To teach the children to comprehend the material in my course." Today we realize that with this as an ultimate goal the job of teaching is far

from complete. Vast numbers of students are able to comprehend but are unable to live richer lives because of it. What they read and learn has no effect on them; they remain coldly impassive to the ideas gained through study. This lack of effect, or response to ideas, leads to another fundamental principle of teaching. Gray¹ states this principle as follows: "Good habits of recognition, comprehension, and speed of reading are not sufficient, however. Of even greater significance today in both school and adult life are the reader's reactions to, and his use of, the ideas apprehended. In this connection he not only recognizes the essential facts or ideas presented but also reflects on their significance, evaluates them critically, discovers relationships between them, and clarifies his understanding of them."

If a teacher accepts the responsibility of teaching so that students will experience a reaction, what are some of the techniques involved? Consideration of some of the reading problems faced by boys and girls will suggest a few of these techniques. After children leave the primary grades, where their aim is to learn to read, they begin intermediate grade work which stresses a complete about-face; they read to learn. This latter phase presents so many difficulties, as they continue it through life, that careful and considerate guidance is necessary. Experiencing, vicariously, events of other times and scenes in new places requires the skill most children must be taught before they can interpret any reading material which is so far removed from their experiences. The teacher can aid in the development of this skill by providing time in which he can help the students draw comparisons and contrasts between life as they know it and life in a remote time and place. Discussions of pictures, slides, movies, museum models, and exhibits will help build a background necessary for interpretation of concepts.

In many school systems emphasis is placed on "covering the curriculum." This emphasis makes the harassed teacher feel that time spent in reflection on ideas, in critical appraisal of them, and in discovering relationships between them is outside the purpose for which he was placed in the classroom! He feels he is there to get the pupils through the book. But when the emphasis is spent on reflection and critical appraisal of ideas and the relationships between them throughout a child's school career, he is able, as he progresses through the grades, not only to cover the curriculum but to read

1. William S. Gray, "Recent Trends in Reading," Volume 1, University of Chicago Reading Conference Proceedings, 1939.

extensively printed materials that go far beyond the realms of the classroom textbooks.

Teaching students *how* to think conditions them in *what* they think. Would that the modern classroom were a place in which children were taught to reflect, meditate, and think profoundly on issues that govern the highest kind of living! In many schools it is.

The application of the ideas learned is the fourth important principle of education. And yet, today, our schools are filled with children who have committed to memory the weighty textbook disclosures without the remotest idea as to what to do about them. Why has this fourth fundamental principle of teaching fallen down in so many instances? Perhaps because it has been taken for granted that a fact memorized will be applied. When a science teacher has told the class that metal expands when heated, has he not done his job? No! When a child is caught in a spot where that piece of information might help him, he does not recall an image of the teacher, the classroom, nor the fact. He is just stuck. If, at the time the fact is taught, every possible effort were made to fit it into definite and specific life situations, the words would become a part of living. In fact, children will seek an opportunity to use ideas gained through reading. They are proud to know them and anxious to see them work.

A consistent attack on teaching reading, observing the four fundamental principles, will go a long way in reducing the numbers of pupils who fall into the category of "remedial readers."

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