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Aspects of a Caring Reading Curriculum

Timothy V. Rasinski

Education in America has traditionally maintained two basic mandates: one academic, the other social (Commission on the Reorganization of Secondary Schools, 1918; Levine and Haselkorn, 1984; Wynne and Walberg, 1985). The first mandate is the education of the young in academic skills that will enable them to lead productive lives. Reading, obviously, is one academic area that schools teach in order to fulfill this responsibility.

The second mandate for American schools is the development of prosocial attitudes and behavioral dispositions. This goal reflects the ideal of a caring citizenry, concerned not only for the well-being of self, but also for the welfare of others (Jeffreys, 1971; Wynne, 1985). Reading and reading education, being social phenomena (Bloome, 1985; Templeton, 1986), present fertile soil for the fulfillment of both mandates in the schools.

The American educational system has, in general, addressed the academic purpose of education to the benign neglect of the socialization purpose (Rasinski, 1984). Education curricula have been developed that attempt to lead students to "mastery" of academic content and skills. In the quest for this goal, students are often placed in social environments that have little resemblance to the one for

which they will enter outside of school. Moreover, they are kept from social tasks and activities that may help them develop prosocial dispositions.

This situation is true for reading. In many schools the need to have students achieve well on tests of reading achievement has resulted in the development of school reading programs that, at best, are neutral in the fostering of prosocial attitudes and behaviors (Rasinski and Nathenson-Mejia, 1987). Motivation through public ridicule or intensive competition, attention focusing through physical isolation, reading skill development through the use of materials having little socially redeeming content, and maximizing academic engaged time by having students spend most of their time working alone are ways in which some school reading programs have addressed the need for academic excellence in the reading curriculum.

Winograd and Smith (1987) have pointed to the trend in American schools to treat reading as a competitive activity. Ostensibly, the purpose of the competition is to improve reading performance. However, as Winograd and Smith point out, the irony of the situation is that the very students for which the competition is supposed to be beneficial are the ones who are the most hurt. It becomes apparent that programs incorporating such approaches are not addressing the full range of student needs and school goals. In programs that employ these sorts of methods a hidden curriculum (Eisner, 1985) can develop that promotes selfishness and a "hyper-individualistic" attitude among students (Oldenquist, 1983). Indeed, students coming from such narrowly defined reading programs may be fully capable of reading but may have difficulty adjusting to life in the larger society and contributing to the well-being of their communities.

A caring reading curriculum

Recent commentaries in *The Reading Teacher* have called for some fundamental changes in the way reading instruction is perceived (McMillan and Gentile, 1988; Rasinski, 1988; Rasinski and Nathenson-Mejia, 1987). These articles have argued that reading is often consciously taught in a social and moral vacuum. What is needed is a caring reading curriculum: an approach to reading education that helps children learn to consider and care for others while simultaneously promoting academic success in reading. An optimal reading program, according to this view, is one that seeks to satisfy the dual purposes of education. A caring reading curriculum helps to insure that programmatic changes to enhance the academic achievement of students are not made at the expense of the equally essential socialization aspects of the curriculum.

While calls for a caring reading curriculum do not resound through the profession, the idea is not new and is not limited to this author. The era of progressive education saw educators voicing a concern for the social development of students in all areas of the academic curriculum (Bode, 1938; Cremin, 1961). Much of interest in progressive education and the prosocial development advocated by the progressives succumbed to the crisis in education spawned by Sputnik (Cremin, 1961). More recently, advocates of a whole language approach to literacy education promote methods and techniques that acknowledge the social utility function of literacy as well as foster growth in literacy (Goodman, 1986). Yet, despite the positive social and altruistic outcomes that result from the whole language approach, the focus of the approach is on learning literacy, not on prosocial development. A caring reading curriculum needs to be the product of conscious decision making by informed teachers.

But how does a teacher establish a caring reading curriculum? In attempting to develop a caring reading curriculum or in evaluating the caring quality of an existing reading program, certain aspects of the program must be considered. This article attempts to identify and discuss certain specific aspects of reading instruction that are critical in developing a caring curriculum. The purpose is not to dictate a philosophy or methodology, but to help sensitize teachers to the social and caring consequences of certain parts of the reading curriculum that may have been thought of previously as devoid of or neutral in social and altruistic value. Four aspects central to a caring reading curriculum are the classroom environment, reading material, tasks and activities, and models of caring persons. Each of these aspects will be discussed briefly in terms of their potential contribution to a caring reading curriculum.

Classroom environments

The classroom is the place where students spend a majority of the day for nine months of the year. The important question to be considered is does the classroom environment offer students opportunities to interact with one another visually, verbally, and physically? In order to learn to care, students must be given opportunities and space to be together so that they can see, talk and work with each other. In a caring reading program desks might be arranged in groups of four to six in which students face one another. This is in contrast to the traditional rows of seats in which students only see the back of the head of the child in front of them. Moreover, a teacher sensitive to the need to maximize social interaction will change seating arrangements often so that students have opportunities to sit near and interact with a full range of personalities.

In a caring reading curriculum, physical isolation, which prevents potential for social interaction and growth, is avoided. Thus, little attempt is made to isolate students using walls, dividers, or any other physical item. The goal is to maximize interpersonal contact. Students are grouped heterogeneously as often as possible so that students of various ability levels can work together, each contributing her or his own unique talents. In a caring reading curriculum, one will often find a comfortable and inviting reading commons area where students can gather to read alone or in groups. An old couch or a soft rug with pillows invites students to come together to read or work together.

Bulletin boards, classroom walls, and hallways are viewed as places where all children's reading and writing activities can be displayed and celebrated. Rather than use neat and trendy commercial materials for display areas, teachers sensitive to the notion of caring will see the celebration of children's work through display as an opportunity to demonstrate their valuing of and caring for children and their work.

Reading materials

In a caring reading curriculum the materials for reading need to be considered in terms of the social messages, if any, they present to students. In his study of award winning books for children, Shannon (1986) found that most books portrayed the main character in a self-serving role as opposed to a role in which the character's actions were for the benefit of others or the community at large. A preponderance of such materials can send a subtle yet unmistakable message of self promotion to the reader. Certainly in a caring reading curriculum students need to be exposed to materials, both in trade books as well as basal materials, in which the main characters are also motivated by prosocial

and altruistic interests. And when students do read about characters who appear driven by self-interest, classroom discussion will focus on the source of character motivation.

Academic tasks and activities

Perhaps the most important aspect of any reading curriculum involves the tasks the students are asked to perform. This is also true in a caring reading curriculum. The caring reading curriculum is marked by students working cooperatively in groups on shared projects and activities. Groups of students will be assigned tasks for which the group itself will bear responsibility. In many cases the groups will be made up of students from a wide variety of ability levels. Research by Robert Slavin and his associates (Slavin, 1979; Stevens, Madden, Slavin and Farnish, 1987) and David and Roger Johnson and their colleagues (1984) provide generic models of cooperative group learning that promote both the academic and socialization goals of education. While the major focus of their research has been on the academic improvement (as measured by tests) afforded through cooperative task structures, Slavin and the Johnsons have noted the positive social and altruistic outcomes of putting students together on group academic tasks. Perhaps the easiest method of involving students in cooperative group activities is by having them read together and discuss real books for children. Hepler and Hickman (1982) described the groups of readers that evolved in their classroom observations as "communities of readers" as students, reading together, learned to share insights and personal reflections as well as the actual reading task with one another.

In a caring reading curriculum students might also be paired into partnerships. These pairs of students work together, listening, monitoring, evaluating, and providing

feedback on each other's reading. Here, too, models of cooperative dyads in reading instruction exist and have been found to be highly successful (Boraks and Allen, 1977; Koskinen and Blum, 1986; Larson and Dansereau, 1986). Dialogue journals are another way for students to integrate literacy learning with the development of personal and caring relationships with one another or with their teacher.

In all forms of grouping, the teacher, in the caring reading curriculum, must pay close attention to the dynamics of the group. The teacher will not allow the makeup of the groups to remain static. Groups and pairs will be reformed several times throughout the year so that students get to know and work closely with a wide variety of individuals, especially those with whom they might not otherwise associate.

In a caring reading curriculum students will also be given opportunities to use their literacy skills to help others outside their own classrooms. Cross-age tutoring (Nevi, 1983), for example, allows older readers to work with and help younger, less able readers. Research suggests that both members of the partnership benefit academically. Students can also be paired with older members of the general community. In a study reported by Rasinski (in press) middle grade students were paired with residents in a retirement village. Together, the pairs worked through several literacy related projects, such as conducting an interview and writing up an oral history of the older partner, that both partners found interesting and satisfying. Students received academic credit in English for their participation in the project.

By being involved in situations which require students to cooperate with others in order to successfully fulfill an

academic task, students develop empathy and friendship with others and learn to give and accept help. At the same time they are practicing reading skills that will enable them to gain proficiency and independence in reading.

Models of caring people

The importance of modeling in reading education cannot be underestimated (Gillet and Temple, 1986). A caring reading curriculum would be rather sterile if the students did not have any real life examples of what it meant to live out one's life in a caring way. The teacher needs to be the prime model of how caring is enacted in a person's life.

In a caring reading curriculum the students will recognize their teachers as a source of encouragement and help. Students will not be afraid to ask for assistance from teachers, knowing that they will give it without condition and in abundance. Although teachers may find the duties of teaching to be stressful at times, they will attempt to deal with each student with patience regardless of how exasperating and repetitive some students' questions and requests for help may be.

The teacher will talk to and discuss frequently with the class about what it means to be a caring person. This may be a discussion that follows the reading of a story on sharing or, conversely, one on selfishness. Or, it may be leading a talk, role play, or readers' theater play about the social skills that lend themselves to caring and cooperating situations.

The teacher in a caring reading curriculum may also ask parents and other volunteers to come to the class in order to work with less able readers or to share a special book or experience with the class. The teacher will help the class see that these visitors are coming as helpers who are,

in their own particular way, caring for others. Times such as these may also offer opportunities to talk about the importance of being helped and cared for and the ways in which people being helped can respond.

Conclusion

My purpose is not to diminish the academic goal of reading instruction. Rather, I am attempting to make the point that reading instruction that focuses only on the academic aspects of reading instruction may not be optimal in terms of the overall benefits to students.

A second goal of schooling is the development of citizenship and social responsibility in students. Reading educators need to realize that to learn to read in a context devoid of thoughtfully planned social learning and interaction is a less than notable achievement. Achieving full humanness involves learning to relate to other persons in a subjective and caring manner (Buber, 1958).

Reading instruction offers educators excellent opportunities to develop curricula that help children learn to care for one another while simultaneously becoming readers. Four aspects of creating or evaluating a caring reading curricula have been suggested here. A reading curriculum for caring provides an environment that invites group activity. In a caring reading curriculum, students read and discuss stories that involve examples of prosocial as well as self-centered behavior. Teachers find ways, in a caring reading curriculum, to involve students in reading tasks that enable them to work with others within and outside of the classroom. And, in a caring reading curriculum, students see caring personified in the daily actions of their teacher and other significant visitors to the classroom.

Surely other aspects of a caring reading curriculum can be suggested. However, this discussion offers a starting point for the serious consideration of making the development of socially responsible and caring citizens an important component of any reading curriculum.

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THEMED ISSUE ON READING RECOVERY: CALL FOR MANUSCRIPTS

In the spring of 1991, *Reading Horizons* will offer a special issue on the theme of Reading Recovery. Contributions in the form of case studies, commentaries, and articles about all aspects of the Reading Recovery program are welcomed. Manuscripts will be evaluated following *Reading Horizons* standard review procedures. (See the Call for Manuscripts on the final page in this issue.)

The co-editor for the themed issue will be Dr. Jim Burns of Western Michigan University. Manuscripts submitted for this issue should be postmarked no later than January 15, 1990.