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READING: WHY?

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The question in the title is open to some variety in interpretation. Among the options are the following: "Why should we read?" "Why do we read?" It is to this latter question that this article is addressed.

The first exposure that most of us have to reading is reading for enjoyment. Listening to nursery rhymes, fairy tales, and stories read by parents, brothers and sisters, grandparents, baby sitters, or other adults provides this introduction. Almost all children, without exception, respond very favorably to this experience.

The next experience with reading comes when a child enters school and begins to learn more about reading and to be able to read independently. While the child is learning the pleasurable aspects of reading are still evident at this stage. Teachers who read to children for a short time each day continue to provide for them the pleasures that come from listening to good literature.

It seems difficult to reconcile the fact that reading should be a pleasurable activity for both children and adults with the fact that reading does not seem to be a favorite leisure time activity for the majority of adults. A simple check of the television viewing habits of adults and their reading habits would, I suspect, indicate that in most instances much more time is spent by those individuals in television viewing than is spent in reading.

There may be a number of reasons for this. Just who is the adult reader? Although listed as a single group, adults may range in age from 18 or 21 years of age to 90 years of age or older. Thus, it would not be surprising to expect that the reading habits and interests of these people would be quite diverse.

Besides the wide age range, there may be a wide range in educational background. This may extend from adult illiterates to those who are mature readers. In between these two extremes are many readers of varying capabilities. Thus, the types and amount of reading engaged in by adults is sure to be different. Regardless of how avid a reader anyone may be, however, it is highly unlikely that s/he would be inclined to spend three or four or even more

hours a day in reading, although this much time might be spent in viewing television.

Because the early years in a child's life are those in which s/he is introduced to reading, that experience should have a significant effect on the way s/he views reading and its purposes. In order to determine more specifically how children view reading, a survey was taken of the views of a class of children just completing third grade. The questions these children were asked included:

1. Why should children learn to read?
2. Why do adults need to read?

The third grade was chosen as a great deal of the requisite learning for success in reading takes place by the end of the child's primary school years. The bulk of the material children read up to this point in school is narrative in type. After this period, although narrative type material is still included in the child's program, a shift to informational type material takes place.

The children who were surveyed were from a suburban elementary school. Most of the parents of these children had attended college and were professional people. The experience of these children was probably not typical of that in most elementary classrooms as they were given time each day to read for pleasure, and their teacher took time each day to read to them. Thus, their most recent experience in reading included the pleasurable aspects of reading. We might hypothesize then that their responses to the questions posed would give most weight to the pleasurable aspects of reading. Let us see if this is true.

The tables on the following pages summarize the reasons for reading supplied by the third grade students. A written summary of their views will accompany the tables.

Why should children learn to read?

The largest number of responses was categorized under utilitarian purposes. Seven children indicated that it would be important for them to read when they were grown up because they will have to read a lot in their lives, including reading for such duties as filling out forms.

Six responses were related to learning from reading. One student stated, "It is a neat way of learning." Another commented that it was essential for passing to

Table 1 - Why Should Children Learn to Read

Job Related

1. When they grow up they will have a better chance of finding a job.
2. Because they need to read when they get a job.

Utilitarian

1. When they grow up they will need to.
2. Because they will fill out forms when they drive.
3. Because they have to read a lot in their lives.
4. So they know how to read when they grow up.
5. So they can read when they grow up.
6. Because they should be able to.
7. Because when they go to fill out a form they have to read it.

Pleasure

1. Because it's fun and interesting.
2. Because it's fun, and you can learn a lot.
3. So they can read books.
4. So they'll have something to do.
5. So they can read to their children.
6. Because it's fun.

Knowledge

1. Because you can hardly do anything by yourself.
2. Because it's a neat way of learning.
3. So they can pass to another grade.
4. Because it can help you learn.
5. To learn new things.
6. So they know something.

another grade. "So you can learn new things," rather succinctly sums up most of the comments in this category.

Another six responses reflected the pleasures to come from reading. Under this heading students stated that reading was fun. One child stated that it was fun and interesting; another that it was fun and you could learn a lot. These comments really cross over into a second category, that of knowledge to be gained from reading. One child thought that learning to read would make it possible to read books. Another indicated that it would give children something to do. A final child said it would make it possible for them to read to their own children in the future.

Why do adults need to read?

Fourteen responses for this question were related to obtaining a job. Eight mentioned it was necessary to get a job. Another child went beyond getting the job and stated one must be able to read in order to keep the job. Reading contracts, filling out forms, and reading directions were other reasons supplied here. One child thought the adult needed to learn to read because s/he might become a teacher.

The next largest number, five, was related to utilitarian purposes such as obtaining a driver's license, reading labels on food, reading directions on a computer, or reading bills. Only one response included reading for pleasure, and that was for the reading of letters.

Discussion

A comparison of the need for reading by adults and by children illustrates that there is quite a difference represented for these divergent ages. (See Table 3)

The children in this study saw reading for obtaining a job as the most important use of reading by adults. Sixty-six per cent of the children responded that job-related reading was most important. In contrast only 9% of the children indicated that reading would be necessary for them to obtain jobs in the future.

Utilitarian purposes were listed as important for both groups. Twenty-four per cent of the children indicated this was an important purpose for adult reading, and 33% indicated it was important for children.

A marked difference occurred in the pleasure category. Only five per cent of the children thought that adults read for pleasure, while twenty-nine per cent of the children stated that they read for pleasure.

A second difference almost equal in size was that for the knowledge category. None of the children thought adults read for this purpose, but twenty-nine per cent of the children stated that children read to gain knowledge. Apparently they might think adults have already gained as much knowledge as they will in life.

It is encouraging to note that children place almost equal weight on the importance of reading for utilitarian purposes, pleasure, and knowledge for themselves. Not quite as encouraging, however, is the fact that job-related purposes and utilitarian purposes account for ninety

Table 2 - Why Adults Need to Read

Job Related

1. So they can get a job. (8 responses)
2. They couldn't work properly.
3. Because they have to read to get a job, go to school, read contracts & a lot of other things.
4. Because if they want to get a job they have to know how to read.
5. Because they might be teachers.
6. So if they get a job and they go to do something and not be able to because they can't read what it says.
7. Fill out forms, get information, and read directions.

Utilitarian

1. To read directions on a computer.
2. So they can read bills.
3. So they can read labels on food.
4. They can't get credit cards, jobs, or car driver's licenses, and if they have children, they cannot help them with reading or homework.
5. To drive.

Pleasure

1. To read letters

Other

1. Yes

Table 3 - Reasons for Reading

| | Job-Related | Util. | Pleasure | Knowl. | Other |
|----------|-------------|-------|----------|--------|-------|
| Adults | 66% | 24% | 5% | --- | 5% |
| Children | 9% | 33% | 29% | 29% | --- |

per cent of the reading done by adults with only five percent of their time spent in pleasurable reading and no time spent in reading to increase knowledge.

Summary

The above rankings make apparent the fact that the hypothesis must be rejected. These children do not see reading for pleasure as the most important reason for reading by either adults or children.

Although there may be a number of reasons for this view of reading, two seem paramount for this particular group of students.

1. These are children of professional people. It is highly likely that they do much work associated with their profession that involves reading.
2. These parents are undoubtedly interested in their children's education. Thus they might stress the reading to learn aspects.

Although we cannot be sure these children did not observe their parents reading for pleasure, it is most important that they are able to do this. If they observe parents reading during their leisure moments, as well as reading for job related purposes, it would help to ensure that the balance in reading patterns observed in these children would carry over into the adult lives. That, after all, is one of the goals of our educational program, the development of interested and avid readers not only now, but throughout their entire adult lives.