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READING ABOUT 'READING'

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The centrality of an abundance of books to the task of learning to read is undisputed. No-one writes a book about reading without stressing the importance of experiences with books. Some authors claim that general fiction books alone are sufficient in order to teach a child to read (Bennett, 1979 and Moon, 1977), while others make strong claims for the role of the reading scheme.

Neither reading schemes, nor general fiction books, have escaped critical scrutiny. Explorations of children's books for racism, sexism, ageism, and countless other 'isms' are frequent. The underlying assumption of all those explorations is that there is a relationship between the books and the behaviour of the children who read them. There seems little disagreement amongst authors (although there is, in fact, little actual evidence) that the behaviour of children is influenced by what they read.

It is the way books represent aspects of life that is actually examined. The frequency and form of particular images are often the critical features under consideration, and it is often the frequency and form which are claimed to indicate the status of certain values or beliefs.

It is difficult to understand why, if this aspect is so important, that no-one has seriously considered whether the way literacy itself is represented can influence children's understanding of, beliefs about, and attitudes towards reading and writing.

Considerable efforts are made to make books attractive. They have bright covers, interesting contents and, usually, high quality illustrations. And yet it is not difficult to wonder whether the contents of children's books really reinforce the notion, surely held by publishers, teachers and parents, that reading and writing are purposeful and important activities. The reason for 'wondering' is simple—characters in children's books hardly ever engage in literacy acts.

Where many children are concerned such anxiety is irrelevant. Such children come from homes where they are surrounded by purposeful literacy activity. Their parents continually engage in literacy acts and frequently discuss that behaviour with their children. Many of those children are already well on the road to being readers by the time they start school. They

know that literacy has both general and particular purposes.

Too many children, however, do not experience those benefits and it is likely to be those children who reject literacy as being devoid of personal significance. Such children may well have had few positive literacy experiences. Their parents may be illiterate or uncomfortable with literacy, and there may be few, if any, books in the house. When those children arrive in school they are not so eager to learn to read. Indeed, many of them are unclear about what reading is or why it is important. The research of Reid (1965) and Downing (1970a), and other subsequent research, makes it clear that some children attach little significance to literacy and have little understanding of its purpose.

Frances (1982) studied closely, over a period of two years, the literacy progress of ten children. She wrote 'the major problems of understanding the nature of reading and of learning to read which faced at least five of the ten children were based on the combination of finding the task in school somewhat incomprehensible and of having no particularly relevant prior or background experience to draw on.'

How are these children to become aware that literacy is a purposeful activity? How are they to become aware of the kinds of activities that constitute literacy?

Sensitive teachers recognize the difficulties and attempt to create a climate in which literacy activities have meaning for children. Teachers read to children and provide good books. They label pictures and objects in the classroom, and they introduce children to writing by basing it around the children's own experiences. In doing this teachers are attempting to convey the message that learning to read has validity. The message is that reading is of importance and is purposeful; but do the books to which children are exposed fully support this message?

There is clear evidence, from both the United States and Britain, that the majority of reading schemes do not fulfill their potential for clarifying children's ideas about reading. Snyder (1979) examined ten basal series and concluded that the books were failing to provide the message that reading was 'necessary, valuable, and pleasant'. Hall (1983) examined six British reading schemes and concluded that their message is that 'Reading is a marginal activity, certainly not very functional, highly school-based, and not particularly pleasureable; all the characteristics of a low status activity'. This certainly is not the message intended by the editors, authors and publishers - but is it the message children actually get?

On the whole, characters in reading schemes simply do not read and write. On those few occasions when they do, the reading or writing is either school based or utterly decontextualized. It therefore carries little social meaning. It is extremely rare for any character to read in order to achieve a predetermined purpose.

It is unfortunately very easy for children to divide the world into things that they are forced to do and things that have personal significance. School activities are easily subsumed within the first category if the child lacks the broader understanding that school is a means to an end. Children with limited understanding about literacy are likely to perceive the task of learning to read as a purely instructional activity; something in which they are made to participate by teachers. It may not be seen as an activity invested with personal meaning or having particular purposes.

Teachers need all the help they can get to aid these children develop their understanding of literacy. In America and Britain, Reading Schemes, in failing to illustrate literacy in action, are not providing as much as they could. Downing (1970b) wrote that teachers should 'Reject materials and schemes which give children a false impression of the purpose and relevance of reading and writing.' If teachers carried out Downing's request, what would be left?

The search for materials in which, as Downing (1970b) put it, 'the content is focussed on helping children to understand the communicative purpose of the written form of language', led to a recent survey of 1500 picture books. Picture books are likely to be the form of book most frequently encountered by pre-school children. Do they show children the 'communicative purpose' of print? No, they do not. Only by stretching the definition of a picture book, and by including some picture books more suitable for older children, was it possible to generate a list of 26 books that conveyed positive and consistent images of literacy in action.

As in the reading schemes characters seldom read or wrote. There were instances of books which featured environmental print but too often this was completely incidental to the theme. Frequently the attempt to provide environmental print had proved too much for the illustrator; newspapers had lines indicating chunks of text, and labels and signs were often lines of illegible scribble. Books did sometimes have single instances of literacy behaviour but again these were frequently incidental and had little purpose.

It would be unreasonable to expect every picture book to feature extensive and appropriate portrayal of literacy acts. There is certainly no point destroying a good story for the sake of being didactic. But this surely does not mean that more books cannot involve literacy in a purposeful way. That it can be done is evidenced by the 26 books found in the survey.

It is likely that picture books are not the only offenders. D'Angelo (1983) examined Caldecott and Newbery medal winning books. She considered the extent to which they had the power to influence children's understandings about literacy. She found that, with very few exceptions, these distinguished and popular books did not feature literate behaviour.

Thus it seems that the overall impression is that the contents of books do not carry too many positive messages about their own functions. They do not, through the contents, demonstrate many of the vast range of purposes for reading and writing.

Books are only a part of the experience that teachers provide and there are, of course, many positive aspects of books regardless of whether their content carries messages about literacy. There is, however, a peculiar and sad irony that the contents of books should be so deficient at representing literacy in a meaningful way.

The point of this article is not to suggest that children should suddenly be deluged with books containing forced stories based around contrived literacy events. Children's books must first and foremost be good books. However, it is surely reasonable to request that authors and publishers give consideration to increasing the availability and number of books which do demonstrate that literacy has a purpose, that it is a valued activity, and that it is a worthwhile activity; in other words, books that show literacy as having all the attributes of a high status activity.

If, as many people believe, children can be influenced by the content of books, then why not, more often, allow these attitudes towards, and beliefs about, literacy be influenced. Are there more positive educational acts than helping young children appreciate the nature, purpose and pleasure of being literate? Teachers of reading would do well to look at the books in use in their classrooms and ask if they really do help present the acts of reading and writing as being varied, important and enjoyable. Do they really enable children to read about reading?

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