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THE 'VIRTUES' OF ROUND ROBIN READING

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The goal of education is preparation for life. The goal of literacy training is preparation for education, not just formal education but life-long education, education in the broad sense. School practices which contribute to this process of education for life should be widely accepted, even applauded. But they aren't, or at least, not all of them are.

A ready example of such an educational practice is the much maligned technique of round robin reading. Round robin reading, as is well known, is the practice of having one child in a reading group (or whole class) read aloud while the others follow along in their books. Each child is given his/her turn in some predictable fashion. That is, the oral reader reads a paragraph or page and so on around the group until everyone has had a turn. What could be more democratic? Everybody, without regard to skill, gets a chance at the spotlight.

Now, this practice has been condemned for any number of fanciful reasons; reasons which need no detailed review here. The fact is that this practice is so well-keyed to education as preparation for life that we felt it imperative to speak up on its behalf. Consider these virtues of round robin reading.

1. It is stultifyingly boring. At first blush, you might say that's hardly a virtue. But, consider this. Can we say we have adequately prepared students for life if we have not exposed them to boredom? Have not given them the opportunity to be bored beyond belief and not show it? Have not given them opportunities to develop tolerance? Reflect upon your own lives—how frequently are you bored but dare not show it? Aren't you glad you learned to hide your boredom in school? If you are one of the lucky ones who were exposed to round robin reading early and frequently—the lessons you learned in those reading groups have served you well for years. Be thankful.
2. Round robin reading teaches one-upmanship. The child reading orally comes to a word that s/he doesn't know or mispronounces. Suddenly, there appears a forest of waving hands. The teacher says, "Who can help Robert(a) with that word?" There are numerous positive rewards in this situation. First, the child whose hand was first up has the satisfaction of knowing that s/he was the first to spot the mistake or impending breakdown. This alert child is thereby immediately rewarded for his/her alertness. Second, the child who gets to "help" Robert(a) is uniquely rewarded. Can there be a greater joy in life than the implicit put-down under the guise of assistance? Third, of course, is

Robert(a). Robert(a) learns not only a lesson in humility but also lessons in vigilance and the virtue of precision. Nobody would want to have very many of these mistakes on his/her record and, so, will work even harder to avoid them in the future.

3. Round robin reading teaches the virtue of being prepared. When the teacher moves from reader to reader in some predictable and consistent pattern, alert children can learn much. First, pattern recognition, which can be an invaluable aid on any number of standardized tests. Second, arithmetic. They should be able to count the readers ahead of them, count the paragraphs to be read, and thereby locate whichever part they must read. This allows the alert student to check his/her portion of the reading for any "trouble-makers." If trouble-makers are found, the student then has the time to try to puzzle them out. Of course, the wise teacher wants to take advantage and augment virtues such as this. Thus, s/he occasionally (not too frequently—it mustn't be abused) does a fast change-up by having one child read more than his/her predictably allotted share or skipping a reader or something. This teaches rapid retrenchment as well as introducing an element of suspense. Virtue number three leads naturally to virtue number four.
4. Round robin reading teaches children the virtue of appearing alert when they are not. The child who is practicing virtue number three above knows that s/he must not appear to be doing so. Therefore, a certain amount of stealth is called for. Can anyone underestimate the worth of this ability in real life? In meetings, in conversations with colleagues, in conversations with spouses, students, children—we draw heavily upon it. Those who learned it early and learned it well are, we suspect, even now our leading politicians.
5. Round robin reading eliminate (or diminishes) eye-voice span. Eye-voice span (Buswell, 1920) is the phenomenon of the eye being some number of letter spaces ahead of the voice in oral reading. That is, the words being spoken by the oral reader are not the words that the reader's eyes are trained on at that moment. We submit that the EVS, as it is called, is probably not a good thing. In fact, we find it faintly un-American. It seems to us that a reader should be looking at whatever word s/he is speaking. Round robin reading, during which the followers—along concentrate on the words as they are being read, would seem to go a long way toward eliminating this pernicious habit.
6. Round robin reading teaches inference skills. In round robin reading, the story line is often overlooked to the extent that even the most clearly stated information is obscure. This gives children the opportunity to make substantial use of the skills of inference in order to create any sense whatsoever out of the story. This skill is especially important in the case of the teacher who mixes questions about the story with round robin reading. We should point out here that too much concern about understanding what is read can nullify many of the virtues of round robin reading. Consider how valuable these inference skills can be in later life, for example, when reading government documents.

The virtues of round robin reading we have listed here are, we are certain, not a complete listing. Nonetheless, we feel they are powerfully persuasive. Given the relatively high frequency with which round robin reading is practiced, we believe many teachers are well aware of these and other virtues. If you wish your students to have the experiences and opportunities we have described, then extensive use of this heretofore unfairly criticized technique is for you.

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- Buswell, Guy T. "An experimental study of eye-voice span in reading" Supplementary Education Monographs, No. 17. Chicago: University of Chicago, Department of Education, 1920.