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LET THEM READ THE BOOK

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It is a September morning in a first grade classroom in Anywhere, USA. The boys and girls come into the room, excited and eager. This is the day, their teacher has announced, when they will begin their first book. For several weeks now the boys and girls have been in readiness. They have learned letter names and beginning associations for consonant letters and their sounds. They have learned that reading goes from left to right and top to bottom. They have matched letters and words. They are now ready to read.

Ms. Teacher calls the first group. Quickly they come to the front of the room and sit in their little chairs. Ms. Teacher then introduces four or five words. The children put the words in sentences and read the words in sentences which the teacher has written on the board. Finally, after what seems an interminable ten minutes, the boys and girls are given their first book. They talk about the title of the book and then begin to read. They read three or four pages, first silently, then orally. The teacher then collects the books and sends the children to their seats. As they return to their seats, the children are obviously disappointed. Jill is heard to say, "I thought we were going to learn to read a book." Jim says, "Well, maybe we're going to read the rest of that book tomorrow. She took a long time to teach us those words. We'll probably read the whole book tomorrow." Jill says, "Yeah, you're probably right," and goes back to her seat to do her seat work.

Tomorrow comes. The boys and girls are called for their reading group. The teacher reviews the words she taught yesterday. They then re-read the same three pages they read yesterday and they do several pages in their workbook. This time, as they go back to their

seats, Jim says to Jill, "I was wrong. It's going to take all year if we ever learn to read that book."

Jill and Jim's reading group continues like this for the next six weeks. Each day, the teacher introduces several new words and the children read a few pages in their book. On the following day, they review those words and pages and do some work in their workbooks. Six weeks later, if they're an average-moving group, they complete their first real reading book, and, after a general review, begin their second book. Their excitement as they begin the second book is noticeably less than it was when they began their first book.

I have a three-year old. At several points during the day, we sit down and have a quiet time. He brings me a book or two to read. When we sit down to read the book, we have to read the whole book. In fact, often we have to read the whole book twice. He would, if I would, sit there while we read that same book all the way through three times. To little children, reading a book means exactly that. You start at one end of the book and you go until you finish the book. Much of the excitement about reading that first graders bring with them to school is dampened when they discover that it takes six or seven weeks to complete each book. What I am suggesting here is a way of using the same set of books you are currently using, and teaching the same skills you are currently teaching, but of beginning with the book, allowing the children to read the whole book, and teaching the skills from that book as they are experiencing the pleasure of reading the whole book.

Now let's go back to this first grade classroom, Anywhere, USA. And let's imagine what the beginning reading instruction would look like if the teacher began by allowing the children to read the whole book and taught the skills and the sight words as they were practicing reading the book.

I'm sure you are all wondering how beginning readers, who can't read, are going to read a whole book in one chunk. Actually, that is quite simply accomplished. Carol Chomsky (1976) first discussed a method of teaching children to read called imitative reading. Imitative reading is a very simple strategy. A book that is easy for the children to read (it can be one of the pre-primers, an easy-to-read book, or a picture book in which the pictures carry a great deal of the story) is taped. It is best to tape the book as you read the book to the children. Let them clap their hands when you turn each page. Ask them to be especially quiet because, as you are reading the book, the tape recorder is recording your reading

so that they can listen to it again and again. The teacher reads the book. The children participate by clapping their hands (once) when it's time to turn the page. After reading the book, the teacher plays the tape for the children to listen to. Time can also be given to a discussion of the book and how pictures tell part of the story. Once the tape is made, the group that is going to use this book for their beginning reading instruction gathers around the tape player and listens to the book at least twice a day. Each child has a copy of the book, and turns the page with the sound of the handclap while following along in the story. At the end of a week or two (ten to twenty times of listening to this book), most children can read the book. During reading group time, the teacher can introduce the words to be taught and teach the skills that accompany the book.

"But," you protest, "they haven't really learned to read that book, they just have it memorized." Well, in a way they do. They have it memorized in much the same way that children who learn to read before they come to school have learned by listening to favorite books again and again until they can read those books on their own. Often, in the process of memorizing those first few books, the children teach themselves a number of words as sight words. They also induct a great deal of information about how reading works. If, for example, it's a book with many rhyming words, the child who has memorized that book often learns that words that end alike usually rhyme. Many books have words in them which are alliterative, beginning with the same sound. The child who memorizes these books often inducts the fact that words beginning with the same letter often begin with the same sound. Sometimes children memorize books in which the pictures tell much of the story. In memorizing these books, children learn that pictures give clues as to what the words on the page are going to say. Memorizing books, and in the process of memorizing, learning sight words, inducting information about rhyming words, beginning sounds and the relationship between print and pictures, seems to be the way that children who teach themselves to read begin that process.

However, I'm not sure that memorizing is the best term to describe what children do with the book. When one memorizes something, s/he usually can recite it without any clues at all. Our teacher in junior English had us memorize a poem each week, and I can still quote:

"Into my heart's treasury, I slipped a coin,
That time cannot take nor a thief purloin;
More precious than the minting of a gold-crowned king,
Is the safe-kept memory of a well-loved thing."

I can recite this at any time and place and don't need anything to look at in order to do that. Very few children can recite a whole book without having the pictures and the pages and some of the words to keep them moving. What they do as they learn to read a book by memory is similar to what you and I do when we hear a song we haven't heard in "ages" and didn't even know we knew, but are able to sing along with it as we listen. Everyone who has had the experience of listening to the radio and found themselves singing along with a song they haven't heard in ten years will understand what children do when they memorize a book. We could not sing that song without the music to arouse the memory. Each word or note triggers the next. The rhyming word at the end of one line triggers the rhyming word at the end of the next line. The rhythm of the music carries the flow of the words.

The book, like the song, is not really memorized. Through several repetitions, it has become familiar enough that some words can be predicted from the pictures. These words trigger other words. Familiarity with the book and the language patterns in the book allows the beginning reader to experience the pleasure, pride, and success of reading a whole book!

Imitative reading is an especially effective teaching strategy to use with older children who have not learned to read or who are still at the pre-primer or primer level. A high interest-low vocabulary book of their choice is taped and they listen to the tape until they can read the entire book (or chapter of a longer book). Many "I don't care" remedial readers have been transformed into bookworms when they have accumulated a pile of books they can actually read!

Reading, like any other skill, requires instruction and practice. To provide beginning readers with the practice they need to become fluent readers as you teach them the skills they need, let them read the book.

REFERENCES

- Chomsky, Carol. After Decoding: What? Language Arts 53, March, 1976, 288-296, 314.