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SO WHAT IF JOHNNY CAN'T READ

Donovan Russell

DEPARTMENT OF PUBLIC INSTRUCTION, NORTH CAROLINA

Editor's Note -- We believe the viewpoints expressed by Donovan Russell deserve your careful attention. If you have a rebuttal to offer, we will be glad to hear from you. Since Dr. Russell brings an impressive educational career to his writing, his ideas are not to be taken lightly.

Back to the basics! State Legislatures and Boards of Education have been jumping up and down in the last few years because "Johnny can't read." Educators have been put on the spot by everyone including parents and members of Congress because Johnny is so different from the Johnny that made this country great. And until people across the land began jumping on the "we are overtaxed bandwagon" there were special funds appropriated for reading projects every thirty seconds or so. As usual, politicians managed to use the issue in the service of their careers.

Being a how to do it society we have taken the typical approach of quantity. "Let's put more resources behind this. Let's re-emphasize our commitment." We are not very good at looking beyond how to do something. We are not very good about asking why and why not questions.

How important is it that Johnny be able to read like his Mom and Dad? Does Johnny have something that we don't know about? Is reading unimportant to Johnny because he is ahead of us in some way? Or are we so out of touch with our children's world that we just can't communicate with them about reading or anything else?

Being an avid reader, my personal bias is that it's a crying shame that Johnny can't read or doesn't choose to read. But that's a moot point. If we don't get beyond sentiment we haven't solved anything. Maybe it's not such a shame. Perhaps we are the handicapped ones and just don't realize it.

Our kids have been growing up in a vastly different world from the one you and I experienced as youngsters. Since the day of entering the crib they have been exposed to non-stop electric media. Their senses must be different than ours. In a way their environment has been much richer than ours. They have, no doubt, developed sensory capabilities that are foreign to us. Indeed we may be the impoverished ones. Now, how does an impoverished teacher get across to a more fully developed human being? Perhaps we are asking a lot when we demand that youngsters come down to our sensory level in order to learn how to utilize one sense (the visual) in isolation from the others.

What are we asking when we try to get our students interested in reading? We are asking them to employ the visual sense apart from the others. We are asking them to become interested in sterile symbols. We are

asking them to see products on paper, of a process that has already happened. To the kids of today this must be an unreal, irrelevant, and anemic approach. To our kids this must be an amazingly artificial and unnecessarily specialized approach to the world of knowledge. Indeed the tools we ask them to employ limit knowledge to a single dimension. We must seem as simple to them as they seem myopic to us. They are probably silently incredulous at our asking for visual solutions in a multi-sensory world. They are probably silently outraged that we would have them segregate the senses and screen out that which is not dependent upon visual learning.

I'm sure the mysterious gestalt of our young people is threatening to us. After all we are proud of our rigorous specializations built on sense separation. After all we are proud of the precision and exactness of our knowledge and of our approach to gaining new knowledge. We act on the basis of understanding not intuition. Seeing is believing.

Our blurry eyed youngsters are a puzzle to us. They appear uninterested in intellectual discipline as we know it. They have no understanding of uniformity, of order, of standard, and of completion. They pursue the strange, the non-standard, the mythical, the non-intellectual, and the unknown. We see them as never emerging from adolescence. But maybe they grow up long before we know. Maybe they are precocious in ways that we'll never understand. Maybe our willingness to probe their world, as worthy, is causing us to continue attempts at educating them which are deprived and limiting.

The world of non-stop media into which our young are born must have a profound effect on sense lives and mental processes. Non-stop media has called upon our young people to use all of their senses at once. Perhaps they have a capacity for sensory interplay and instant synthesizing that we can never have. Perhaps they are engaged and involved in a now world that we can only visit as short-term spectators. Is it any wonder that our broken and fragmented approach doesn't touch them?

About the Author

Donovan Russell did his Ph.D. at Cornell University. He has studied at the Universities of Maryland, Rochester, New York, and at UNESCO in Paris. Dr. Russell has just completed a comprehensive study of education in North Carolina. He has served as Regional Adult Education Project Leader for Cornell University, Director of Reorganization for Prince Edward Island, and Executive Director of the Canadian Federalist Organization. Dr. Russell has also worked as a School Principal in Canada, teacher in New York and Maryland and Master at Stanstead College in Quebec. He has written for many journals and magazines.