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OVERSKILL

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A very wise person once conjectured about the relative merits of teaching children individual sounds in isolation before allowing them to speak. Only after a child had demonstrated mastery of phonemes (sound units) could s/he be allowed to advance to morphemes (meaning units). Thought units (T units or sentences) would follow. Under such a highly structured, individualized learning program, students could easily learn to say, "I hate school," by the end of second or third grade (depending on intelligence, socio-economic status, and motivation of course).

This analogy may be stretched to absurdity, but the author cannot help but notice a similar phenomenon in reading instruction—training in skills, subskills, strategies and techniques ad nauseam. This may be due in part to the "Back to Basics" movement, although the emphasis on "accountability" may also have contributed by causing administrators to seek out ways to *document* progress in reading instruction.

There appear to be two basic problems with the emphasis on skills instruction which some commercial reading programs and proponents of the "Back to Basics" movement seem to support. Such an emphasis fragments the reading process into minute shards and assumes that the students will be able to reassemble them into a meaningful whole. However, how often have reading teachers seen children who know phonics and structural analysis, but who read word by word, with minimum comprehension? Many children never really grasp the point that all of the "skills" are supposed to help them attain meaning.

Second, even if a child should somehow acquire all of the "skills" and be able to integrate them into a functional system for obtaining meaning, what is there in his/her experience with "reading" which would encourage him/her to read *after* reading class? In other words, what good are skills if they won't be used?

Furthermore, many students may not even be given the opportunity to apply their "skills" during reading class. Allington (1977) reports that an informal survey of students indicated that the average number of words read in context during a secondary remedial reading lesson was 43. The rest of the class was spent on "skills." As Allington says in the title of the article, "If they don't read much, how they ever gonna get good?"

The author does not propose the elimination of "skills" in reading classes. Certainly there are strategies and competencies which will make reading more efficient for students. However, many programs and teachers have scrambled their priorities in favor of easily recognizable, teachable, measurable, and reportable skills, at the expense of the more ephemeral and less specialized areas such as appreciation and overall fluency. The author knows a secondary reading teacher who tried Uninterrupted

Sustained Silent Reading (Hunt, 1970) fifteen minutes per day in her corrective reading class. She was delighted with the results and felt that more would be desirable, even to the point of spending the entire class period on silent reading, if the class so desired. However this has not been done because, as she put it, "How could I get away with calling that teaching?" Instead, the majority of each class period is still spent learning "skills."

Reading is a process which can and should be improved by practice. Just as one is not likely to improve one's singing solely by studying musical theory, one will not significantly improve reading by practicing phonics and structural analysis *alone*. Reading teachers must fuse everything into a meaningful whole, providing students time and encouragement, as well as an observable model, to read for their own purposes. Perhaps then, the needed "skills" can be taught individually or in small groups, as a need for them becomes apparent to the teacher *and* the student.

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