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THE SCIENCE OF READING

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Those who teach children to read are continually seeking answers to several questions that will improve their approaches to helping children learn.

“What is the best *method* of teaching reading?”

“What is the best *curriculum* for teaching reading?”

“What is the best *organizational plan* for teaching reading?”

Unfortunately (or perhaps fortunately) teachers usually discover that there is no *best* method, or curriculum, or organizational plan. There is instead a process that works for them as individuals and, critics of reading notwithstanding, most teachers do a commendable job of teaching children to read. Still, it might be worthwhile to offer a different perspective on the art of teaching reading that can assist teachers in their quest for improvement.

“SCIENCE” is a useful acronym that can be used to evaluate any reading program. It stands for success, curiosity, interest, enthusiasm, nurture, challenge and enjoyment. “SCIENCE” can be used to monitor and assess your own program whether it is traditional or eclectic.

Do children have a feeling of SUCCESS? Glasser (1965) has correctly pointed out that what children learn by failing is how to fail. It follows then, that successful experiences can facilitate the learning process by shaping attitudinal values in a positive manner. It is conceivable that a program the teacher perceives as successful does not encourage feelings of success by the student. The probability though is that teacher perceptions of whether children feel successful are somewhat accurate. The value in assessing a program from this perspective then is in determining relative nature of the success. Programs that marginally foster successful attitudes in the child need to be examined to find where they might be improved.

Is their CURIOSITY aroused? A strong basis for learning is the ability to build on experience, but when what the child is expected to learn is already known, little curiosity is generated. It may be true that children come to school full of curiosity but it seems true also that this curiosity is severely diminished after a brief period.

Does the program maintain a high INTEREST level? Like curiosity, interest in what is being undertaken should be high and should stimulate the interest of children. Certainly there may be times when material to be discussed is mundane, but a critical look at such material often permits the teacher to present it in an inventive and imaginative manner. To paraphrase McLuhan, a dull medium likely means a dull message.

Do children feel ENTHUSIASTIC about reading? Several months ago,

I heard a prominent reading person suggest that what is important in reading is that children learn the skills and that it is of no consequence whether or not children enjoy the act of reading. Such a position is without merit from my point of view. Certainly we learn, perhaps master, a number of skills throughout life but those skills we utilize are used because we value them and are enthusiastic about them. Those skills we do not value fall into disuse and get rusty. It does not seem unreasonable to suggest that people who do not enjoy or value reading read less well, certainly less frequently, than those who are enthusiastic about the activity.

Each of the acronym words build on the other and excepting nurture and challenge for a moment, lead to the final question: *Do children really ENJOY the process?* Encouraging and building on success can help students maintain their curiosity, interest, and enthusiasm for reading. Elkind (1975) speaking of early reading mentions the “. . . dull and unrewarding process of learning to read” (p. 36). Learning to read, reading itself, need not be a dull process and certainly not an unrewarding one. Simply speaking, when we enjoy some activity, we tend to repeat it. It seems this should be a primary reading goal.

Including the elements of nurture and challenge in the acronym is important. No philosophy can be predicated on the suggestion that all one has to do is provide a climate conducive to learning. Therefore, the questions: *Are you NURTURING growth in reading?* (and) *Does the activity provide a CHALLENGE?* are important ones. Nurturing growth is an integral part of any program but when one focuses on the attitudes of children there may be a tendency to ignore this aspect. The idea of making things fun or enjoyable should not presume that activities must be within the child's level of mastery. A challenge must be present, an activity that the child is willing to undertake. Previous success in exploring unknown elements can encourage continued effort to master something new thereby promoting growth and nurturing the ability to read.

The following checklist might be an effective self-assessment device to look at your own reading program.

A PROGRAM VALUE CHECK-LIST

	(5) Always or nearly always	(4) Usually most of the time	(3) Sometimes about half of the time	(2) Seldom infrequently	(1) Never not at all
1. Do kids have a feeling of Success?	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____
2. Is their Curiosity aroused?	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____
3. Does the program maintain a high Interest level?	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____

4. Do the children feel Enthusi-
astic about reading? _____
 5. Are you Nurturing growth
in reading? _____
 6. Does the activity provide a
Challenge? _____
 7. Do children Enjoy reading? _____
-

If you have a series of checks below the four or five category, it does not mean that your program is poor. It does suggest that children may not be building very positive attitudes about learning to read, or valuing the skill. It would seem warranted then that teachers who objectively rate students' attitudes somewhat low conduct programs that would likely profit from modification. The change might be curricular, methodological, or organizational, possibly a combination of these strands. Junking a program is not the point, facilitating the improvement of an existing program is the goal.

SOME SUGGESTIONS FOR HOW-TO

SUCCESS:

Shape questions and activities to individual abilities, enhancing the probability that a specific child will be able to respond successfully.

- Accentuate those positive accomplishments of the child.
- Keep and share with the child a record of learning growth.

Design group work that permits children to use their particular strengths.

Encourage peer tutoring. Children typified as less able probably have skill strengths they can share with others.

CURIOSITY:

Keep up to date on the interests of children and attempt to gear activities to those interests.

- Indicate the idea of "finding out more" about a topic, and provide the materials to undertake such activity.
- Pose questions that encourage thought rather than a predictable answer.
- Maintain classroom displays: gadgets, collections, puzzles and similar stimuli children can explore.
- Have a wealth of children's literature available and use some time to read aloud to children from such material.

INTEREST:

- Depart from the traditional reading circle organizational approach and encourage children to read about their interests.
- Exhibit curiosity about the child's interest and be receptive to that interest.
- Search for added topical materials that can help to maintain interest.

- Locate resource persons who might stimulate and encourage interest in a topic.
- Attempt to end activities on a high note, before interest ebbs.

ENTHUSIASM:

- Exhibit personal enthusiasm for the topic at hand.
- Provide intangible rewards such as compliments, growth charts, and communications to parents.

NURTURE:

- Know the instructional level of each child and provide opportunities within that frame.
- Identify particular skills whose mastery provide a demonstrable advantage to the child.

CHALLENGE:

- Encourage the child to venture into the unknown to explore some new aspect of the topic.
- Design materials that begin at the child's mastery level and progress to more difficult stages.
- Provide materials that are related to areas of interest, but are unfamiliar to the child.

ENJOYMENT:

- Develop a classroom environment that children look forward to being part of.
- If the task, whatever it might be called, is busy work – junk it.
- Progress toward an organizational approach that is flexible.
- Vary the curricular and methodological approaches used in the classroom.

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