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ORAL READING: CONSIDERATIONS BEFORE UTILIZATION

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One of the most revealing diagnostic devices used in the elementary school is oral reading. By using oral reading the teacher can evaluate the child's ability to respond to punctuation marks, to apply phonics, to recognize basic sight words, to phrase correctly, and to apply other reading skills. The child's strengths and weaknesses can easily be determined through the use of oral reading, and an individual improvement program can be based on an evaluation of reading skills as reflected by oral reading. Without question, oral reading is an essential activity for effective teaching.

Oral reading, however, is not an extensively used activity. Oral reading is not often utilized outside the classroom. Most reading is silent, and, even in the classroom, silent reading is used more often than oral reading.

Oral Reading in the Classroom

The purpose of oral reading is to share with others. This sharing may range from reading to the teacher for diagnostic purposes to reading to the whole class for skill-development, information, or recreation (Smith & Johnson, 1976).

Practice in oral reading can make some enduring positive contributions to the child's growth. When reading orally, the child can develop poise, social status, self-confidence, a feeling of success and belonging, a good speaking voice, the ability to read while having eye contact with the audience, and a positive self-image.

A good oral reader can give the listener a reading pattern to emulate. Also, the reader who correctly applies reading skills can give the listener a feeling for language. Just as an artist can paint a picture using oils and a brush, an author can create characters, scenes, and plots through lines of print; and a good reader can bring these lines to life.

On the other hand, while the child is reading orally, the peers may perceive him or her as a poor reader who unwittingly mispronounces words and changes perfectly readable print into an enigma by ignoring punctuation marks and by misapplying word attack skills. Therefore, an oral reading performance could result in the reader's loss of poise, social status, and confidence.

Oral reading is used in three settings in the elementary classroom. One setting is the teacher-pupil conference where the child reads to the teacher in a one-to-one relationship. This conference should be "as private as possible; ideally, with only the teacher listening" (Durkin, 1970). This is an excellent diagnostic technique for making an assessment of the child's growth in reading skills and comprehension.

Oral reading is also used in small subgroups where children have been placed according to need, interest, or achievement. The teacher is better able to meet the individual needs of the children by using this homogeneous grouping. When reading orally in this situation, the child will read to a limited number of peers who have comparable ability and achievement.

At other times, the whole class may constitute the reading group. In this situation, the child will read orally to all members of the class. This activity tends to be competitive and unfair to the less capable children unless the reading material is on a very low level, or the slow readers have had an opportunity to read the material orally with teacher assistance prior to the reading period. In addition, the teacher's disciplinary control is spread thin in this situation, and children are more prone to make derogatory remarks about poor readers. This would constitute "an undesirable audience situation" (Dallman, et. al., 1974).

The possession of the necessary skills for oral reading should not be the only criterion used for selecting a child to read. The child should also be emotionally, socially, and physically ready. All of these areas must be considered before a child is called on to read orally in a group situation with an audience. Of course, the same rule applies to other academic activities as well.

Restricting Oral Reading

Too often, teachers perform acts in teaching that are not only non-productive but are detrimental to learning and the child. Obviously, no injurious act should be performed in the classroom. There are times, however, when oral reading can hurt the child.

Perhaps the teacher-pupil oral reading conference presents the least threat to the child because it excluded a peer audience. Small group and whole class reading sessions can be threatening, and, in these situations, the teacher must decide whether to involve the child in oral reading. The decision must be made with consideration being given to all aspects of the child's development and achievement.

When specific conditions exist, the teacher should be very concerned about requiring the child to read orally:

1. The child has distracting mannerisms. It is especially harmful if other members of the class point out and laugh at a child's mannerisms.
2. The child stutters under stress or strain. Reading problems produce stress and strain, and stress and strain produce stuttering. The child's stuttering causes problems in reading, and the cycle repeats itself.
3. The child does not have the vocabulary or reading skills necessary to cope successfully with the reading material.
4. The child has some distracting injury which is readily noticed by other children in the class. Children naturally become curious and distracted. These injuries are often seen in school: a black eye, a cut on the face, or a cut or bandage on the head.
5. The child has recently had a traumatic experience. These are very emotional experiences for children: a death of a parent, death of a

- brother or sister or some other close family member, or some other catastrophic happening.
6. The child has some permanent disability which has resulted in emotional trauma, extreme self-consciousness, or introversion.
 7. The child has a temporary dental problem. After losing some front teeth, the child must learn to compensate for this loss before he or she can be understood by others.

These conditions, which are representative, do not have the same impact on every child. Some children having one or more of these problems should be kept from reading orally because of possible injurious effects; whereas, other more emotionally secure, self-confident children with the same problems can be actively involved in oral reading activities without repercussions.

Children at different ages have diverse attitudes toward reading and reading problems. Younger children tend to be less conscious of mispronunciations and other errors made during oral reading. But as they grow in age and sophistication, the children become more perceptive of the lack of good reading skills. As they progress through the various grades, the children's range of achievement and the number and complexity of their reading problems increase; and the children become more acutely aware of their reading problems and those of others.

Oral reading is more demanding on the child than silent reading. Since oral reading is a demanding activity, the classroom teacher should consider more than basic skills when calling on a child to read aloud. The teacher should consider the child's social, emotional, and physical levels of maturation. When reading silently, the child has the opportunity to mispronounce words, skip words, and ignore punctuation without the loss of social status or self-confidence.

Every child is unique; therefore, each individual reacts differently to personal and academic problems. The teacher must judge each case to determine if oral reading in front of peers should be curtailed, and if so, for how long. The teacher must be cognizant of the problems that confront pupils, and he or she must make judgments accordingly. Oral reading is an excellent teaching device, but there are times when it can be counterproductive, and even detrimental.

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