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LEARNING BASIC (READING) SKILLS K-12

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Seldom in the history of American education has an issue received more public attention than the reading question is receiving today. Such an abiding concern about a basic skill is almost ironic in view of the fact that the last several decades have brought a flood of "innovations" in curriculum design and approaches to instruction. Prominent figures such as John Holt, Herbert Kohl, Neil Postman, Charles Weingartner, William Glasser, Ivan Illich, Carl Rogers, Alvin Toffler, and many more have called continually for radical school reform. "Relevance" and "change" have been by-words in virtually every piece of recent literature pertaining to education. A wide and largely receptive audience has heard call after call for "open" schools, ungradedness, team teaching, inquiry, process-oriented approaches to instruction, the use of "real-world" materials (newspapers, magazines, paper-back books, non-print media) in the classroom, community resources as working laboratories for students, and drastic changes in curriculum design and course offerings.

The desire to "change" and to provide "relevant" learning experiences for students in schools certainly is not new in American education. In fact, relevance and change occupy the cornerstones of the educational enterprise. From the one room school house of the 17th century to the comprehensive high school of today, the issues of change and relevance have been omnipresent in the progress of schools. We can rest assured that educators always will issue new calls for relevance and change, as indeed they must if schooling is to meet the needs and demands of tomorrow's students. But sane and serious educational reformers never advocate structuring or re-structuring schools to de-emphasize the basic skills. Many vociferous critics of change in education seem to believe that school reformers are merely advocates of permissiveness, who would be delighted to see the complete collapse of the most iconoclastic change advocates. Among all the reformers, Ivan Illich is perhaps the most radical. Although he calls for the abolition of schools as they exist today, even Illich would set up centers where students would master the basic skills:

Such centers could and should be established in industrialized areas, at least for those skills which are fundamental . . . such skills as reading, typing, keeping accounts, foreign languages . . .¹

¹ *Deschooling Society* (New York: Harrow Books, 1971), p. 130.

Many of the same self-styled “fundamentalists” and “champions of traditionalism,” who unfairly criticize serious reformers, sometimes demonstrate a disturbing naivete by calling for “one way” or “one program” that “surely someone can find” to ensure students’ improvement in the basic skills. An example of this over-simplicity pertains to the reading question. Many concerned but, alas, uninformed would-be-reformers—often from outside the community of professional educators—presently are calling for “*a program, a way*” to guarantee that students in schools will improve their reading skills. Obviously, since students are different, there is no “one way” nor “one program” that can be universally effective in helping students improve their reading skills. If the educational process were clearly a science, then perhaps “one way” would work with all students. There would be few, if any, variables. But teaching is perhaps far more an art than a science; therefore, both teaching styles and learning styles, as well as teaching materials, must be well-matched if significant learning is to occur. Some parents, politicians, school boards, journalists, and concerned citizens, in their well-meaning zeal to improve schools, are making unrealistic demands on educators to discover magical solutions to many perplexing and long-standing problems. Reading instruction is one of those problems.

To perceive the complexity of the schooling process generally, one can glance briefly at the history of learning theory.² Plato believed that the purpose of education was to train man’s intrinsic mental power, i.e., we already know and we must discover what we know. Students, therefore—through some mystical process—must be helped to discover innate knowledge. John Calvin, Johnathan Edwards, and the faculty psychologists believed that education should provide activities to exercise and to toughen the brain, which was thought to be a muscle. Rousseau believed that one’s emotions lead to truth, so education should permit freedom for the learner, without coercion or prescribed courses of study. Theorists such as E. L. Thorndike postulated that the more a response is repeated, the longer it will be retained, so drill-learning is “the answer.” To J. B. Watson and E. R. Guthrie, behavioral psychologists, education is a matter of conditioning. The human being is a machine, devoid of spirit. An appropriate dialogue between behaviorists might begin with, “Hi, you look O.K. How am I?” B. F. Skinner would give rewards, or reinforcements, after proper responses to a learning task. In his *schema*, education is a continuous process of systematic changes in the learning environment to increase the chances of desired responses. Gestaltists believe that a thing cannot be understood by its parts, but only by its totality (look-say *vs* phonics?). For the Gestaltists, learning occurs through sudden insights which one perceives in whatever is to be learned. Lately, attention is being paid to a theory which holds the brain is composed of two “hemispheres,”

² For a comprehensive survey of learning theories, see Morris Bigge’s *Learning Theories for Teachers* (New York: Harper and Row, 1964).

the left and the right. The left hemisphere is characterized by rational and linear functions, while the right handles abstract thinking. Schooling, the “hemispherists” say, has sorely neglected the brain’s right side. In this admittedly over-simplified survey of a few learning theories, one can readily observe the complexity, the obscurity, and the subtlety of the learning process. How does one learn to read, then? The answers are as diverse as the students to be taught.

When the “Right to Read” program began in the early 1970’s, one estimate indicated that about 50 percent of school children were deficient in reading skills.³ But, of course, anyone who teaches knows that reading problems abound in classrooms. Generally, pre-service education prepares elementary teachers to teach reading; however, because of many complex factors (over-crowding, lack of “readiness” and proper motivation on the parts of some children, poor home environments, a paucity of school funds and materials, etc.), many students enter secondary schools as deficient readers. As a result, secondary teachers, who rarely have been trained to teach reading, find themselves in a quandary over what to do with such children. Although secondary teachers—through in-service training and additional schooling—should be strongly encouraged by their principals to acquire competencies in reading instruction, such a solution is unrealistic for meeting the *immediate* needs of students who are deficient readers. So what can be done?

Among curriculum planners, there has been an increasing interest of late in discovering more effective ways of providing comprehensively developed curricula for students, *K-12*. Traditionally, educators always have been interested in such a goal, but few attempts to reach it have been successful. One pervasive reason for failure is the logistical difficulty of bringing *K-12* teachers together for long-range and in-depth planning. All too often, elementary teachers plot their own instructional designs; middle grade teachers plot theirs; and secondary teachers plot theirs. Even within each of the three groups, “conflicts of interest” arise. I learned recently that in one North Carolina high school, tempers flared in an English department meeting over one teacher’s use of *The Red Badge of Courage* with tenth graders because that novel had always been taught in the eleventh grade. Reportedly, an eleventh grade teacher angrily asked, “What will I teach in the eleventh grade if the tenth grade teachers use my material?” It is almost trite to declare once again that we must discover the needs and the achievement levels of our students before we decide on the content and skills to teach them. But, unfortunately, many teachers still ignore that axiom. The point is, if teachers on the same level cannot plan and work cooperatively, how can we expect cooperation among teachers, *K-12*? We *must have* such cooperation, if students’ needs are to be met in a curriculum designed for continuous growth.

³ John Henry Martin, et al., *Free to Learn: Unlocking and Upgrading American Education* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1972), p. 18.

Particularly with regard to reading instruction, elementary teachers have much to offer teachers in the upper grades. Time should be built into school systems' calendars to allow for sessions in which elementary and secondary teachers frequently meet together for the purpose of sharing concerns and advice with one another. Before school opens in the fall, a few skillful elementary teachers might be permitted to conduct workshops on reading for their secondary colleagues. Such workshops would focus on identifying reading skills, workable approaches, and creative activities for students. In elementary teachers, every school system has practical, experienced, and capable resource people for improving the teaching of reading at the secondary level. Such cooperative sharing among teachers can help to meet the immediate needs of students with deficiencies in reading skills. In formal workshops, or simply in seminar sessions, elementary teachers can advise secondary teachers as to ways of enticing students to read, of using print and non-print materials in the classroom, of making effective use of the library, of identifying sources of free reading materials, of suggesting techniques for diagnosing different types of reading problems, of using reading tests, and of suggesting alternative approaches to reading instruction.

Finally, teachers at all levels should consider taking the following additional steps to improve reading instruction:

- Subscribe to and read *Elementary English*, *English Journal*, *The Reading Teacher*, *The Journal of Reading*, *Reading Horizons*, and other professional journals in the field. All teachers, K-12, should read regularly *all* of these minimally.
- Teach at least one reading skill each day (for secondary teachers, in conjunction with their content area) and keep a record of skills taught.
- Group students to avoid continuation of student failure; carefully place students in groups which create a cooperative, rather than a competitive, learning atmosphere.
- Use a wide variety of print and non-print media, with constant attention to "reading relevance" for students.
- Discuss departmentally ways in which each teacher can teach reading skills (all too often, faculty and departmental meetings are occupied strictly with "administrivia").
- List reading materials and equipment in budget plans, and pressure principals and supervisors to place high priorities on reading instruction.
- Create a reading environment in every classroom, with rugs and

carpets; scores of games (puzzles, scrabble, etc.); racks of magazines; hundreds of paperback books (solicited from students themselves and the community at large); some reading machines, workbooks, and typewriters; several daily newspapers; and occupational reading pamphlets and brochures.

- Have frequent periods of non-evaluative types of learning experiences for motivational purposes; the “super-efficient” teacher, who believes nothing will be taught without testing, will find this suggestion hard to accept.
- Make frequent use of peer-tutoring techniques to assist in individualizing instruction.
- Regularly conduct school-wide activities, such as Read-In’s (time allotted during the school day for free reading), to promote interests in reading as a habit.

With a system-wide (K-12) approach to improving reading instruction, in a cooperative spirit among teachers at all levels, students can begin to correct their reading deficiencies. Also, critics can be silenced. No magic programs, formulas, and approaches exist. Improvement of reading requires a total, system-wide effort in every local education agency.