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READING INSTRUCTION IN THE MIDDLE 50's: WHAT TOMORROW'S TEACHERS REMEMBER TODAY

Jerry L. Johnson and Nancy Galen

NORTHERN ILLINOIS UNIVERSITY READING CLINIC

“When I try to think of my introduction to reading I keep expecting to come upon a memory of a specific instance during which I learned to read. I can remember learning to ride a bike, learning to dive off the high board, and I can even remember that time I learned what was meant by the terms *noun* and *verb*. Then why can't I remember learning to read? It's made such a dramatic difference on how I've lived each day, and I probably couldn't function without it.” This is the opening paragraph of one student's recollections about learning to read. As part of the requirements for a course entitled “The Improvement of Reading in the Elementary School” at Northern Illinois University, fourteen advanced education majors were asked to record their early impressions of reading. The students recalled their concepts of the construct “reading,” early instructional techniques, the development of their interest in reading, and the qualities they liked and disliked in their teachers. Most of the students could recall bits and pieces of their early reading experiences; those instances recounted precisely were special enough, in one sense or another, to remain vivid for the fifteen or more years that have passed since these students began learning to read. Here, then, is what a group of tomorrow's teachers remember about yesterday's reading instruction.

On The Construct Reading

“It's amazing how every year ‘reading’ seemed to get farther away from something we were supposed to be enjoying. If it weren't for the good feeling I had when I first started reading, I never would have survived the rest of the progression through formal reading instruction.”

On Early Instructional Techniques

“My first grade groups were named ‘Old Model T Ford’ (low group), ‘Chevy’ (middle group), and ‘Cadillac’ (high group) . . . I was always deeply upset when I had to move my seat to the Old Model T group.”

“Reading often consisted of a ‘round robin’ group in which each person took his turn to read aloud. You would nervously fumble with your book on your lap when it came your turn to read. When that turn did come around, you prayed that you wouldn't make any mistakes, for fear of being called ‘one of the dummies’ . . . You also hated to hear ‘this is so easy, I don't think you're trying hard enough.’ It seemed the teacher thought you enjoyed making mistakes.”

“While we waited for our turns, most of us became bored and fidgety. Sometimes we’d daydream, read ahead, or whisper to the person sitting next to us. Because of this, we’d frequently lose the place where we were supposed to read.”

“I would hold my place until it was my turn to read out loud. I had already finished reading the story and would flip to the back and read all the other stories, too. I was reading a story about owls when I was discovered and *ordered* not to read ahead anymore . . . So I learned to be real sneaky and feel guilty every time I got bored and started reading ahead again.”

“While listening to the other kids read, I would feel impatient with them if they hesitated or stumbled over a word that was easy for me . . . In contrast, when I helped the three slower readers in a small group, I did not have the feelings of impatience that I did when I was with the entire class.”

“I was always in the ‘best’ group, and although I easily grasped the material, I was afraid that if I made one mistake I would be placed in another group.”

“We were reading the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*. Maybe two kids in the class understood the books; the rest of us just got stuck on the names of the characters.”

On The Development Of Interest In Reading

“Our house was and still is full of books—covering about everything for all ages. I was always thumbing through and looking at pictures . . . I can remember that magic moment when everything seemed to click and I started to recognize nursery rhymes by the words and not just the pictures. It was a Sunday morning and I was the first one up. I had the book and was thumbing as usual but suddenly I couldn’t wait for someone else to wake up so I could ask if that’s what it was to ‘read.’ The funny thing is I don’t remember anyone’s reaction except my dad smiling at me.”

“My great-grandfather had books, books, and more books. I used to go to his house after school and pick out a book and try to read the words to him . . . He went to the library every week and so did I. Then we would go home and I would read those books to him.”

“At home I’d see my brothers fighting for the jokes of the Sunday paper and then plopping on the floor to ‘read’ them. Soon I found myself fighting along with the rest and then proceeding to spend about five minutes looking at the pictures and sort of trying to ignore all those confusing things at the top of the page.”

“Almost every week or two my mother would take us to the library. I was a Dr. Suess freak—each week I’d bring an old one in and trade it for another he had written . . . I didn’t really think this was unusual though because my brother had been checking out Sir Lancelot continually for the last two years.”

When I was four years old my mother took me to Norway to visit relatives. I can remember how my little cousin and I would fight over Donald Duck comic books. These comic books were printed in Norwegian,

so I couldn't read them but could look at the pictures and understand what the story was about."

"I can recall with pride the first time I took my reader home . . . to read to my parents. Because of the excitement they exhibited in my success, reading from first grade on was a very successful experience for me."

"One of my older brothers was a fanatic about reading. He consumed books. My parents could hardly get him to turn out the lights at night because he was always reading a book. He, probably more than anyone else, influenced my attitude toward reading."

"I found the *Bible* very hard to read and not to my liking. I would read it before bed and almost always fall asleep shortly after I started to read. Reading still puts me to sleep better than almost any other activity I can think of."

"I felt it was a great waste of time to be seated reading when I could be out actually doing something. Playing football seemed much more important than did a book."

"Well, for me just finding a good book was an act of God; then I'd finally find a series of books I really enjoyed and every time I went to get the next book it would be gone. The frustration was just too great; slowly but surely I gave up reading for pleasure."

On The Qualities Of Liked And Disliked Teachers

"My new teacher . . . was the best teacher I ever had. She used to read us a book, a little at a time, each day."

"She really wanted us to enjoy reading and would sometimes read an entire book to the class. We thoroughly enjoyed this and were entranced in the process."

"We had a current events session each day. I liked my teacher and wanted to impress her, so I tried to read and bring in the best clippings."

". . . we could read books of our own choice—for the first time not from a list compiled by the teacher. We just gave her a rundown on the book: what did it mean to us, was it a waste of time or did we enjoy it. Not the usual boring book report—she tried to get us to think about what we had read. If we needed book suggestions she would help us choose something she thought we might be interested in; but if we did not like that she understood, too."

"In first grade I had to stay after school because I was not reading the words on the flash cards correctly. It made me afraid to make a mistake. The teacher only had the bad students stay after school. No one wanted to be a 'dummy' and stay after."

"The teacher used to catch people off guard and then ask them to read. If you weren't paying attention, you were scolded or punished in some way . . . I would always get in trouble because I would be reading ahead and wouldn't be following the class."

"When a child stumbled over a word or made miscues . . . our teacher would correct him in a bored and impatient voice. When this happened to me, I became so flustered I couldn't even finish the sentence."

Implications For Today's Teachers

The data presented above were gathered and analyzed in an informal manner. Still, some interesting and perhaps thought-provoking conclusions can be drawn from the recollections of these students. For example, only one remembered a teacher who consciously tried to spark her students' interests in reading. The rest recall becoming interested in reading because of family influence: a great-grandfather, mother or brother whose enthusiasm for books was contagious. That interest in reading was promoted in the home is certainly laudable; but why didn't the students remember equally enthusiastic teachers? Those who now truly enjoy reading seemed to develop their interest in spite of, rather than as a result of their reading instruction.

A second point about which the students agreed was that they remembered feeling dislike for "round robin" oral reading. Most recalled being extremely anxious about making mistakes; some countered their impatience and boredom with the oral reading sessions by whispering, squirming, or reading other stories. What did these students learn from their experiences with oral reading? One admitted learning to "be real sneaky and feel guilty" every time she got bored, almost certainly not one of her teacher's objectives for the class.

This student's concluding remarks summarize the opinions of her classmates regarding teachers and teaching techniques: "By looking at what happened to me during those important years, I found that . . . the personality and manner of the teacher had great impact." Some teachers assume that the classroom syllabus is more important than the method used to teach it. Postman and Weingartner (1969), however, emphasize the impact that teaching techniques can have upon students: " 'The medium is the message' implies that the invention of a dichotomy between content and method is both naive and dangerous. It implies that the critical content of any learning experience is the method or process through which it occurs." The students' recollections seem to validate this theory. Nuances of personality and the manner in which a teacher dealt with her students were remembered easily; few had content-related memories.

Reading instruction has certainly changed in the fifteen or more years that have elapsed since these students entered the first grade. New techniques for reading improvement are advanced every year; teachers of reading are continually searching for methods that reach all students. Instructional strategies are important, but teachers also need to acknowledge the importance of students' attitudes about reading and reading class. In the year 1992, some of today's first graders will be seniors in college. If asked to recall their early impressions of reading, how will they respond?

REFERENCE

- Postman, Neil and Charles Weingartner. *Teaching as a Subversive Activity*. New York: Delacorte Press, 1969.