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TOWARD A MORE POSITIVE CONCEPT IN READING

Marcia Lynne Pennington

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"Hi!" I greeted George as he lazily ambled across the threshold into my classroom.

"Oh, hello. Here I am again," he blurted as he sank reluctantly into his chair.

I could see that it was going to be one of those days. George was a student who had very little interest in school and no interest in reading. At least he showed up today. He usually cuts class whenever possible.

There are students like George in classrooms all around the country. Why are so many unmotivated to learn good reading skills? What can teachers of reading do on a daily ongoing basis to improve the self-concept of students and thereby stimulate motivation in the reading situation? What activities can build self-concept? How can the teacher be ready for a student like George?

There are no clear-cut answers to these questions. However, there are things that the teacher can and should do to promote a positive self-concept.

PROVIDING THE ENVIRONMENT

The first step in providing a good, positive environment in the reading class is the establishment of a good working relationship between the teacher and student. The student should be made to feel that although he may be but one member of a class, his interests, thoughts, and feelings are important. This self-worth should be built up through continuous positive feedback from the teacher to the student. There should be materials in the room at the student's independent reading level and free reading time should be encouraged. There should be at least three books, magazines, or periodicals of interest to each individual in the class. It is not difficult to take an interest inventory (one can either be self-made by the teacher, or borrowed from the library) at the very beginning of the school year to find out what these various interests might be. Free reading and recreational reading should be encouraged as much as possible. The student will then tend to see that reading can be an enjoyment as well as a task. Wilson gives a good definition of reading for enjoyment which is as follows:

Free reading in this case implies reading which is not followed by question and answer periods and reading in which the child is relatively free to choose the desired materials. As the child understands that free reading can be fun and is important enough to

take school time, gradual change in attitudes are likely to be noted (Wilson, 1972).

The teacher must be sure to create an interesting and meaningful environment in reading materials for each student. The student must see that the teacher is on his side and willing to help.

AFFECTIVE GROWTH AND DEVELOPMENT

The teacher needs to assess not only the student's academic strengths and weaknesses, but also be attentive of the affective area of growth and development. The task of learning to read begins in the affective domain. The student must feel good about himself and his environment in order to be positive toward the act of reading. If the student's feelings about himself are negative, it becomes the teacher's job to turn those feelings into positive ones. One way to do this is through assessment of the student and his actions.

Any of the following indications may show that there is a self-concept problem:

Does the student often make negative comments about himself? Does he avoid working with peers, or do his peers avoid him? Is he made fun of by others in the class? Does he crave constant attention, or does he seldom volunteer for anything? Does the student manifest negative non-verbal behavior such as sulking in his chair or making negative social expressions? Any of these symptoms alone or as a combination may indicate self-concept problems. The perceptive teacher will spot these problems and deal with them according to the needs of the student.

CLASSROOM MATERIALS FOR AFFECTIVE GROWTH

When the problem has definitely been identified, how does the teacher relate to this person and try to create a better situation?

Many things can be done in the classroom to build attitude and self-concept. The first of these is the use of appropriate activities and materials. The reading teacher should start a folder on each student at the beginning of the year or whenever the student enters class. Strengths and weaknesses in the academic area should be assessed through individualized informal inventory as well as standardized tests. In using the Informal Inventory, the teacher can more easily pinpoint specific skill deficiency or problem areas on a one-to-one basis with the student. An informal inventory gives the more personal relationship needed to promote good feeling and show that the teacher is concerned and interested. Follow-up conferences should be set up to discuss the test results, as well as individual strengths and the reasons for studying certain specific skill areas. Interests and student feelings about school and outside activities should also be discussed so that the teacher will not only know what level of reading materials to provide, but also what types of books each person will enjoy.

When setting up individual conferences, the positive points of the student's work should be emphasized. It is a good opportunity to show the student all the good papers he has done and give a sample of that work to the student for review and reference. The conference is a time to plan activities that will remediate weaknesses and be meaningful to the student as well. The conference is especially important in a larger class or lab situation, so that the student will see that the teacher is interested in him as an individual.

THE USE OF BIBLIOTHERAPY

Another way to stimulate positive attitudes is through Bibliotherapy. Bibliotherapy is giving students books to read that will help them to think about people in various life situations which may be similar to their own. The stories usually concern people with problems trying to work things out for themselves. The problem reader can learn from reading about problems and personalities of others. These problems may relate to problems the student himself has had to face in his own life situation. In using Bibliotherapy and giving students a chance to read and pick out books at individual independent levels, Joseph Sanacore suggests that the teacher "organize parts of the classroom into small libraries containing books and materials at various interest and reading levels. Include at least five books per student, magazines, newspapers, film strips, and creative bulletin boards." (Sanacore, 1975)

It is important that the teacher arrange the room appropriately to meet the various needs of each individual student. The reading material should always include stories about people and situations that the pupils can learn from and identify with. Materials should always stimulate positive student growth in the affective domain as well as the cognitive skill areas.

OBJECTIVES AND ASSESSMENT OF GOALS

Once the classroom has been set up with appropriate materials and the teacher has had several conferences with each student, the next step toward positive self-concept is assessment and reassessment of teacher objectives. The teacher must continually chart and re-evaluate the progress of each individual on an on-going basis. The affective domain has been too often neglected in these evaluations. If the student is to be motivated, then objectives must be set towards that goal as well. The student should be encouraged to do tasks that have a high probability of success. When students are apathetic towards reading (especially at the Secondary Level) it may be that they have failed for so many years previous that they do not feel they can succeed at anything. If their reading is poor, they will have trouble in other areas of schoolwork. The failure will increase and the attitude will become more negative. There may also be a bad home environment negative toward or not conducive to learning.

It is the reading class which really takes the most responsibility for

building self-concept and attitude. If the student learns to read, he can begin to use these skills to success in other academic pursuits.

WORKING WITH FUNCTIONAL SKILLS

There should be a time set aside in the reading class to work on functional skills and to help build self-confidence in the content areas. Specific units dealing with practical tools and skills the student needs in Math, Science, and Social Studies will show the individual that reading is a practical tool needed in all academic areas.

If the reader has a negative attitude about other subjects and using reading as a practical tool, then the best way to begin work is through interest and enjoyment factors. In the article, "The Case of The Reluctant Readers," an English teacher, Gloria Chantland suggests that using mystery stories and books to intrigue will stimulate interest.

"They were read to orally until a crucial moment in the story and then told that if they wanted to know what happened they would have to read the ending of the story from the ditto sheets on my desk. There was a race to the front of the room and then silence as they read—reading because they wanted to find out what happened."
(Chantland, 1976, p. 32)

Mrs. Chantland further suggests getting students interested in observation of detail, figuring out clues to mysteries, and then having students write their own mystery stories. It is important to be sure that the students find success with these types of stories. Most secondary students (although they may be disinterested in learning good reading skills) are interested in good mystery stories and adventure books. Therefore, a generous supply of high interest, low level materials of this sort would be a good asset to the reading class.

Since individualized instruction is highly recommended in building attitude and self-concept, tutors and teacher aides should ideally be incorporated in the program whenever possible to create the one-to-one situation the teacher cannot always provide on a daily basis. Students with significant self-concept and attitude problems should have someone continually there to build on their self-esteem through Language Experience as well as the regular skill activities.

USE OF THE LANGUAGE EXPERIENCE GROWTH

Through the Language Experience Approach the student is made to feel good about himself and to see that what he knows about is important. The teacher or aide has the student tell about an experience or interest and they compose a story about it together. The teacher writes the story in the student's own words, and then the student is asked to read it back at his own pace. Since the story has been written in the student's own words, and using

his own language system, it should not be difficult for him to do. Most students enjoy Language Experience and it helps them to build confidence in their ideas and what they know about. This approach can also be used with pictures. The student can pick out a picture to write about and discuss. The use of a picture file by the teacher or aide can help stimulate interest for the students who are not sure what they like or don't like to write about. Language Experience can help a reader develop hobbies and interests as well as realize the fact that he is projecting original knowledge and ideas to compose the story.

OTHER MATERIALS TO AID LANGUAGE SKILLS

Along with Language Experience, tape recorders, video-tape, and books with tape dialogue to follow along (such as the Reader's Digest series) can be used with several students and an aide, or by individual students. It gives the student added confidence to hear himself on tape, or be able to work the recorder and attachments by himself.

Some helpful hints for teachers in building self-concept are outlined by Bernard Kingsley when he states, "Directions should be simple enough so that work can proceed independently. Techniques are not to be used as whole class drills, but instead should be of high interest and used to fill a specific need of a group or individual. Activity should be of high interest level, questions thought provoking, and paragraphs worth reading." (Kingsley, 1973, p. 30)

SELF-CONCEPT AND BEHAVIOR

Dechant describes self-image or concept as "that organization of qualities that the individual attributes to himself. Self-esteem is the degree of similarity between the self you are and the self you would like to be." (Dechant, 1973)

The individual's self-concept then has a direct influence on the behavior of that individual. Responses of others towards that person are very important to how the individual will see himself. This will influence his self-concept and guide his behavior.

Dechant points out that "Educators believe that good education generally (and reading instruction particularly) should enhance the personal and social adjustment of the student." (Dechant, 1973)

In secondary schools especially, adolescents are going through many physical and emotional changes. The reading teacher needs to understand that these changes are also being complicated by pressure to do well in school as well as being accepted by one's peer group. If the teacher can set up an environment where hobbies and interests are stimulated for the teenager through reading, this will promote a more positive self-concept. It is of ultimate importance that the student succeed in reading, even at the simplest levels. A little bit of success will restore confidence and self-worth to the individual.

“Reading failure will always be with us. Failure of any kind makes the satisfaction of the student’s needs rather difficult. Failure in reading is a continual block to normal development. For the poor reader, self-esteem and self-actualization rarely become a reality.” (Dechant, 1973)

The poor reader has not compared well with his peers. He is often made fun of and looked down on. He has failed to meet the competition. It could just be that he has not been taught what his modalities of strength are and how to use these strengths fully. Perhaps no teacher has really taken the time to help that person. Whatever the cause the teacher is responsible to make a positive atmosphere for the student. If the student has been previously programmed and pegged by parents and teacher to be “slow,” this effect will remain with the student even though he may well have the ability to achieve. Dechant stated that “most emotional reactions in reading disability can be explained as the learner’s frustrated reactions to a task that is compatible perhaps to others but not compatible to that student. One of the really great rationalizations in the classroom for doing nothing is that the student is emotionally disturbed.” (Dechant, 1973)

Emotional problems retard reading growth and the pupils will have more difficulties in the other academic areas as time goes on. If the reading ability improves through careful programming and direction, self-concept will build and reflect positively onto other subject areas as well.

STUDENT MOTIVATION AND ATTITUDE

To achieve in reading the student must want to learn. The teacher should find out what the student’s interests are, and build upon these interests to provide not only interesting and readable material, but to perhaps broaden and enrich the lives of the pupils. The stories and magazines should be lively and involve people in real life situations which students can identify with. Provide class time for recreational reading and book clubs or hobby clubs based on readings of appropriate material. The classroom atmosphere should be flexible, but organized. The attitude should be positive and tolerant of others. Students should be able to confer with the teacher on an individual basis to assess progress in goals and objectives, as well as share interests and feelings.

The perceptive teacher, who is organized and interested in the students cannot help but improve general self-concept in each student. The teacher must try to broaden and stimulate student interest by introducing new varieties of taste and thought through reading. Since motivation flows through interest, without motivation there is no will to do, and no drive to learn. The student will never develop into a mature reader without the will to do so.

After thinking, planning, and using the techniques that will build motivation, perhaps a scene with a student like George and the reading teacher next year will go something like this:

"Hi Mrs. Smith. I'm taping a story today about bikes."

"Bikes, George," she said. "That's great. It should be interesting to read. Will you write it for us when you are finished taping?"

"Sure I will. That is, if I can get the recorder to myself so that I can copy down what I've said when I'm done."

She had reflected on the change in student attitude and hoped that she had helped it to come about.

"George," she said, "I'd really like to read that when you're done. It sounds like a good story."

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