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THE QUEST FOR COMPETENCY IN THE TEACHING OF READING: A LIBRARIAN'S POINT OF VIEW

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EDITOR'S NOTE

Dr. Jean Lowrie is director of the School of Librarianship at Western Michigan University. She has also served as president of the American Library Association. The following speech, given by Dr. Lowrie at the Western Michigan University Reading Institute during 1974, views the field of librarianship and reading, highlighting how each relates to the other.

I would like to do three things: first, share with you a picture of libraries as they are now developing programs and planning for tomorrow's needs; present some specific examples of library services which relate to reading needs; finally, explore some examples of today's reading materials which I hope you as reading specialists either know about or with which you will become familiar, and which you and your clientele can obtain through library collections.

First, let us talk about libraries today and tomorrow. You will note I am using the word libraries. Although most of you are oriented to a school library as a learning situation, I want to emphasize that all libraries can be of assistance to you, can relate to the needs of the learner. There are many kinds of libraries in today's society. We have the traditional school library which relates primarily to print materials (although there are few of these left anymore). We have the media center or learning resource center which in today's schools encompass all types of print and non-print media for pre-school through 12th grade students. There is the public library which contains special collections and gives service to children, young adults and adults, many of whom may not be too highly skilled in reading. Academic and special libraries are more limited in location and service. Nevertheless, the academic library program, which includes community and junior colleges as well as four year and university programs, can and does relate to the needs of a community's reading public. You yourselves are aware of the reference and research services available from academic libraries. Such services are important to you as you attempt to know more about the experiments being conducted on the teaching of reading, the theoretical essays, the reactions of the public and private schools, boards of education, etc., to the problems revolving around the teaching of reading.

The basic principle of librarianship today states firmly that patterns of service must be developed to meet the needs of the entire community. This means that public libraries must cooperate with school libraries and vice versa; that both of these must work with other agencies concerned about the needs of children and young adults.

Working papers by various groups within the American Library Association have been prepared recently which pull together many factors relating to library service. I would like to share with you those which seem to be most applicable to our discussion. Libraries today are attempting to devise opportunities which will: expand the knowledge of children and young adults; further their search for understanding of self and environment; satisfy the need for esthetic experience; develop their pride in their own heritage and an appreciation of other cultures; improve their ability to make critical judgments; help develop verbal, visual and aural communication skills.

A specific effort is made to ensure access by all patrons to information services including the diversity of media—print and non-print. Where there are pressures or difficulties which make access to the material difficult or impossible (e.g. physical handicaps, jobs or working hours, transportation, etc.) the library attempts to take the material to the users or potential users. Programs to stimulate interest in reading and the use of all types of media are encouraged. Opportunities to develop and use communication skills which will enhance enjoyment of life are organized. An atmosphere conducive to creative and informational pursuits of patrons with an awareness of the developmental need of children and young adults particularly is fostered.

In a user-oriented library, patrons should be able to choose which services they will use at any time in their lives. Among these services is the librarian's individual concern to identify specific information or recreational needs of a client. This is contiguous with his knowledge of the collection and his ability to select materials to meet these needs. Let me emphasize here that libraries and information science centers firmly support the premise of equal access to all. This means all media and all service as well as all peoples. Accordingly, program and collection are planned for all ages, all mental abilities, for physically handicapped, for anyone regardless of social characteristics, economic status, ethnic origin or religious belief. Furthermore, if the material needed to meet the individual requirements is not available within the specific library, interlibrary loans, regional networks for facsimile reproduction and now satellite relaying are all employed to bring to the user the specific material.

Within libraries, the selection policy should be flexible enough to reflect the changing interest and needs of contemporary children and youth, the pluralistic views of society, the diversity of the community. Consideration in a children's room in a public library, for instance, is given to the conceptual levels and capabilities of the young user. Continual evaluation is given to new material as well as to that already in the collection. A good library involves its patrons—children or adults—in selection of materials. It

maintains balance between reference and circulating materials, as these relate to the needs of a particular community. In addition, it is hoped that staff at all levels, paraprofessional, and professional, will be flexible, open, friendly and will respect clientele. Staff should be educated to meet the specialized needs of children, young adults, and adults. In addition, where a system is large, staff with expertise in working with functionally illiterate adults, with foreign speaking patrons, with culturally disadvantaged persons and similar groups, is employed.

In their efforts to meet and serve the user beyond the library's four walls, librarians work with academic, vocational and special education agencies. They will be found in recreational centers, churches, drug rehabilitation centers and coffee houses, in correctional institutions, homes for unwed mothers, mental centers and outdoors on the streets. They may be found in bookmobiles, in AV mobiles, with flower push carts/cum bookcarts. They will be in the heart of the metropolitan centers as well as on the side of the mountain in Appalachia—with Spanish speaking migrant children as well as with Native Americans on reservations.

Let me assure you that we recognize fully that libraries and librarians cannot be all things to all people, but they do have a responsibility to be aware of what is going on in the community and to give support where it is feasible.

I have gone into considerable detail here because I wanted you to realize the varied possibilities available to you as reading teachers and specialists—opportunities for materials to use in your teaching (formally or informally)—opportunities for you to use with your clientele. A library can relate to a reading program.

All of us are fully cognizant of the facts that a child will learn to read more easily if the material is relevant to his environment; if it relates to his emotional needs as well as being within his general vocabulary level. But to find the exact book or books for each child in the program you simply must have a library—a large collection of varying levels and interests in which both teacher and student can browse for the proper book. What applies to beginning reading also applies to continuing or lifetime reading. If there is not breadth of choice, then interest may be stifled. Many elementary children will enjoy a Dr. Seuss, Marguerite Henry's *Misty of Chincoteague* and an advanced book on space exploration, for example, all at the same time. As a variety in our adult reading is basic, so is it for the child's. Again, access to a library becomes a necessity.

Programs and activities which support your efforts can easily be coordinated into the library efforts. Storytelling, in the library, on the street corner, in the recreational area is a wonderful way to stimulate sharing through oral communication, followed by introductions to books which would be equally exciting, folk tales and short stories as well as "one thick story" (as one youngster described a fiction book).

Sharing of books read at home, in the classroom or in the library is basic and takes many forms—through classroom experiences, reading festivals, library book discussion groups, etc. but the enthusiasm engendered by peer

interest is immeasurable. If he cannot share these experiences, he may well lose his enthusiasm. Furthermore, you can teach a child to read but if you do not give him the opportunity to read, to read for his own personal pleasure and information, he will soon stop. I'm talking of course, about the joys of losing oneself in a situation which becomes your own intimate experience; no one else ever has quite the same reaction or feeling of excitement or stimulation as you receive from your own reading experience.

As a teacher, you are the expert in techniques. No librarian would attempt to usurp this responsibility. But the librarian can be of real assistance to you in finding the right book for your purpose because it is her responsibility to know the content, the interest, the vocabulary level of the material in her collection. She may also know something about the child which can be shared with you to assist you in understanding him. Perhaps the very type of book constantly being asked for will indicate the problem which must be tackled. All of us know that emotional difficulties can be among the greatest stumbling blocks in the learning to read process. So, a youngster who continually asks for a certain type of story, in which one sibling boy or girl (his sex) appears to be the dominant or successful figure in the story, for example, may clue us in to a home situation, a developmental need that is being effected; the student who checks out books far beyond his word understanding in order to not be different from his peers is surely telling us something about his attitude toward reading as well as a psychological problem.

We often hear the thought expressed "I don't care what he's reading as long as he reads." With the proliferation of printed material available in libraries today, that is a poor rationalization. Well written stories at all levels of comprehension and about all kinds of people and situations are available. We do not need to resort to the poor comic book, the shabby paperback, the simplified classic or the Hollywood glamour type magazine.

Please do not misunderstand me. There is a place for cartoons; paperbacks are a boon in our inflation ridden society, and periodicals are invaluable, but there are good ones as well as inferior ones. Every one has many levels of interest sophistication, but it is not necessary to stay at the bottom interest-wise or from a literary point of view. Neither you nor I should encourage readers to do so.

Among the exciting experiments which are being carried on by libraries in support of reading programs are those in branch libraries in the inner city. Here collections in Spanish on a simple reading level are to be found. Practical books which can be taken home by parents who comprehend very little English or whose reading level is only second or third grade are easily accessible. Here you will find programs specifically developed for the functionally illiterate. Often, reading teachers work in the library (which actually might be in a bar or a beauty parlor) to help these patrons overcome the hurdles preventing them from getting a job. Or you may find the librarian taking a course in linguistics in order to be able to understand ghetto languages and vocabulary and thus relate to the community. One cannot help a person to read or find material if one cannot understand the

patron's needs in the first place.

Again, a library in the park which shows puppet theatre, encourages creative dramatics, fosters a pet show, distributes paperbacks, has a story hour with a magical piper as storyteller is a library which will entice children and adults to explore the possibilities within books.

A recent study conducted by a faculty member of WMU indicated that prisoners who can read will adjust much better to society upon release. This ties in directly with a strong movement to develop libraries in prisons and other institutions. We've all read "Hooked on Books". We all know that accessibility to media encourages usage. So teaching of reading to prisoners, for example, must be supported by broad library collections, extensive in topic coverage as well as vocabulary level.

Often an audio-visual or non-print piece of media will be the stimulant needed. Again, let me point out that your school media centers, your public libraries, your community college resource centers all have films, tapes, slides, recordings which introduce stories, relate to books, stimulate discussion. One marvelous example, of course, is the Weston Woods Picture Book Parade which has reproduced the exact picture book story and illustrations in all media forms (film, tape, strip recordings). Here is the best in children's picture books. Weston Woods is now moving into other excellent, longer stories for children. Artistically done, they appeal to all children regardless of background. "Sesame street" is another media with impact. A tremendous number of youngsters have had the opportunity to view this through their public library neighborhood branches, children who otherwise would never have had this experience. Such opportunities have had a direct effect on a child's ability to learn to read and interest in further reading.

You can connect with your librarian to see what kind of program, what kind of supportive activity you would like to have developed for your clientele—be it group or individual.

Last but not least, let me share with you some of the exciting books which are being enjoyed by children today—filling their aesthetic, emotional, cultural needs.

There are many excellent writers today who are exploring contemporary life styles in society, who are enjoying words and sounds through poetry, who are assisting in a better understanding of our "small, small world". I want to introduce some of these to you, and I want to remind you of some of our solid favorites of many years. I hope also to show you that easy to read material can be delightful, that sad stories have a place because they serve as a catharsis, that beautiful illustrations can stimulate ideas, concepts and a desire to read.

Among the easy and picture books which have been published over the last several decades are these old familiar and beautifully designed books—Wanda Gag's *ABC Bunny* and Robert McCloskey's *Make Way for Ducklings*. In both we have a simple story easily related to the experiences of the young listener—family relationships, letter and number concepts, sounds (like Jack, Lack, Mack and Quack, etc.), humor and excellent art.

What more could you want for children? They are perennial favorites. But may I also point out the gorgeous color and design in Brian Wildsmith books, the delightful stories from Switzerland which Selina Chonz has written, and the fantasy which delights as exemplified by Sendak's *Where The Wild Things Are*. These are not only good read aloud (or two lap books) for pre-reading; they continue to be loved and read by the children themselves after they have mastered the techniques of reading.

The easy reading materials which began with Dr. Seuss' *Cat in the Hat* have proliferated and many of them have developed real literary style at the easiest reading level. Even though we have only included two on the list (because of space!), I suggest that you explore this group with your librarian. There is no need to stick to unattractive or dull reading material at the beginning level—fun, adventure, simple homey experiences are all available. Just listen a minute to *Frog and Toad are Friends*. Five short delightful episodes, each a complete story, make this book a delight to the youngster with a short interest span, one who wants a book with “real chapters”.

I am sure you are all acquainted with the excellent work of Ezra Jack Keats, [*Snowy Day, Whistle for Willie*] and here is *Pet Show*. Because Archie's cat was missing, he decided to take a germ in a bottle which on the spur of the moment was named Al. As you can well imagine, this stumped the judges—but only for a moment! “A blue ribbon for Al, the quietest pet in the show!” Marvelous color—good picture of life in a black community, a charming bit of generosity on Archie's part which is not too obviously didactic, simple vocabulary—all of this makes this story another one of Keats' excellent contributions in the area of interpersonal relationships for young readers.

In this same section, let me point out Blue's *A Quiet Place*, the story of a black foster child (9 years old), and Gray's *Send Wendell*, a youngest child (6 years old) who always gets sent on errands by his older brothers and sisters until he rebels; both good pictures of family relationships as well as black characters.

Moving to other minority groups and still for the younger readers, we have Miles' *Annie and the Old Man* and McDermott's *Arrow to the Sun* (add to your list). In the former, the simple tale relates the problems of a young Navajo girl who must cope with understanding that the Old One (grandmother) will not always be with her. This is a wise and poignant story. Annie tries to prevent the time when her grandmother would return to Mother Earth by unravelling the weaving done during the day, but her grandmother's quiet wisdom finally helps her to understand. A useful book from several points of view; family love, American Indian background, and a dignified way of presenting death.

Arrow to the Sun is just off the press and is gorgeously breathtaking in its color and design. It is a Pueblo Indian tale, a retelling of the universal myth of the hero's quest. “Long ago the Lord of the Sun sent the spark of life to earth”; so begins the tale of how the spirit of the Lord of the sun was brought to the world of men.

Folklore material has been with us since man first began to tell stories and share experiences. We have many beautiful editions of collections and of individual stories. Many of these titles are in paperback as well as hardback. (When choosing paperback, be sure the editors have retained the original illustrations and literary styles. There is no reason to accept poor quality.) A good example is H.C. Andersen's *The Ugly Duckling* with Adrienne Adams' delightful illustrations. As with all folk tales, there is a moral, even as there is in Sendak's delightful *King Grisly Beard* where the charming illustrations proclaim the reader to be a participant in the "theatre". Indeed, there are meanings which children understand albeit unconsciously in most folk literature. This point does not need laboring. The reader comprehends when he is ready. The great truths of humanity will be found in these tales, both the familiar ones and the new collections from Africa, Israel, and the Far East. Taste them yourselves and savor the knowledge of the ages. Share them with your children and let them browse in them by themselves. Courlander, the great collector of African tales, has said it clearly. "Moral values are basically the same and the human species is one species and (that) any racial and cultural subdivisions are merely subdivisions. Customs and traditions are developed as particularized human responses to deal with environmental and other realities. The basic needs are similar in every environment and the human mind works essentially the same way."¹

A quick look at poetry books reminds us that here is a read-aloud literary genre with a wide reaching public. Long before children can read, they enjoy Mother Goose rhymes and simple nonsense poetry. Sound, rhythm, new words and word pictures are all important aspects of learning to read as you know it. Don't be frightened by poetry. Use it. Enjoy it. John Ciardi's delightful relevant nonsense. Carl Sandberg's humor, rolling cadences and love of America, for older children are but two examples of poetic refreshment.

Fiction, of course, is a constant source of pleasure. There are so many kinds of fiction today, stories of fantasy, stories of problems, stories of history, for all ages of readers. Find the titles that may have meaning for you or that may have meaning for your clientele whether they are beginning readers, readers with problems about life, or readers with sophisticated backgrounds. There's something for each.

I want to refer first to two modern stories with different life styles, the Cleavers' *Where the Lilies Bloom* and Hildick's *Kids Commune*. Perhaps some of you have had the pleasure of seeing the film which Radnitz has just produced of "Where the Lilies Bloom". It follows the story quite closely and can be used as an excellent introduction to this book as well as other Cleaver works. Theirs are the stories of strong Appalachian families who are resourceful and worth knowing. *Where the Lilies Bloom* presents a good picture of wildcrafting, i.e., the gathering of medicinal plants, herbs which

¹Wolkstein, Diane. "An Interview with Harold Courlander." LIBRARY JOURNAL. XCIX (May 15, 1974.) p. 1437-40.

grow on the slopes of the Great Smokies; but it also is a strong, humorous, yet sad story of four children left without their parents who manage to survive by their wits.

Kids Commune is a rollicking tale of a group of youngsters who rebel against parental tyranny, being sent out of a party celebrating their new summer home because they were in the adults' way. They set up "Amerika First Kids Commune" although the experiment almost ended in tragedy; the "Bill of Rights" was mutually acceptable and both groups learned a lesson.

Completely different is Lynd Ward's *The Silver Pony*, a story in pictures for all ages. This is a stunning book of black and white lithographs and you obviously will have to read it for yourselves. Here is a young boy whose imaginative world is wider than his real farm one. With the help of a winged pony, he learns some things about people in other places—the blacks, the city dwellers, the Indians, war. A simple story that speaks to each individual in a special way.

Now to conclude. Two works of fantasy which every child should have the opportunity of enjoying, either read aloud or read to oneself. Fantasy is one of the special experiences which can come through reading. It is not merely escape literature, but more often a new way to better understand the problems of living. I suspect many of you will remember escaping with Alice and the white Rabbit, or perhaps identifying with the Borrowers or Mary Poppins. As adults, you may have succumbed to the land of the *Hobbits* and Tolkien's marvelous trilogy of *The Rings*.

And speaking of Tolkien, let me introduce you to Alexander and his cycle of the five books of Prydain. One of the best examples of modern fantasy writing for children and by an American author. *The Book of Three*, *The Black Cauldron*, *The Castle of Lyr*, *Taran*, and *The High King* constitute a tale of struggle between good and evil with Taran, assistant pig keeper and would be hero as the protagonist. Alexander has created an entire geography for this series and a philosophy of life which young readers will understand. Much of this is based on the great Welsh legends in the Mabinogia, and like such tales, there is strength, mysticism, tragedy and happiness. "Long ago I yearned to be a hero without knowing in truth, what a hero was. Now, perhaps, I understand it a little better." A grower of turnips or a shaper of clay, a common farmer or a king—every man is a hero if he strives more for others than for himself alone. "Once," he added, "you told me that the seeking counts more than the finding. So, too, must the striving count more than the gain," said Taran.

Last but not least is that eternally significant story of Kenneth Grahame's *The Wind in the Willows*. This wonderful tale of the animals who live in the River and in the Wild Wood, whose lives are always true to animal behaviorism and yet who symbolize so much that is human is a literary masterpiece. It is fantasy for all ages. It speaks anew to each generation.

This is really touching only the tip of the iceberg, but I hope you will go on from here. I hope most of all that you will see that helping people to

attain competency in reading can be a rewarding experience for the reading teacher and the librarian because we have so much to share.

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