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SOME REASONS FOR ORAL READING

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Few would question the appropriateness of oral reading in the first and second grades. Most experts feel that reading aloud is a worthwhile activity in the earliest years of school because the students have not yet developed sufficient speed in silent reading to make silent reading a valuable enterprise for them. Lewis and Sisk (1963) caution, however, that "from the time a child's silent reading rate overtakes his rate of oral reading, usually during the second or third grade, too much oral reading has the adverse effect of slowing down the rate of silent reading and encouraging unnecessary lip movement, thoughtless word calling, and daydreaming on the parts of other pupils, who neither follow the printed text nor listen to the reader."

What Lewis and Sisk contend is true for some students and, at the time that they said it, made more sense than it does today when the primary grades are generally ungraded, allowing students in the 5.5 to 8-year-old age range to progress at more individualized rates than were possible in graded primary schools. Lewis and Sisk were also writing before widespread busing caused schools to have the diverse populations which one characteristically finds in them today.

Despite the changes which have occurred, many teachers cling to the notion that oral reading should be phased out from the third grade on and should be virtually non-existent in the secondary school, particularly in the senior high school. Such teachers, it would seem, have failed to realize some basic facts which, if considered in depth, might lead them to revise their thinking on the subject.

The School Population

The base of education is ever broadening, the school population at any given level becoming ever more diverse. Ironically, schools are producing more good readers than ever before while simultaneously sending from the primary grades into the upper elementary grades more and more students who cannot read well. While high school populations are generally reading more effectively than ever before, most high schools must also face the fact that some of their students are unable to read. Many schools try to sweep this latter fact under the carpet, because they are supported by communities that expect them to process students, much as meat packers process beef, rather than deal professionally with students as doctors or lawyers deal with their clients.

The teacher who cannot teach a teen-ager to read is often viewed as a failure by people who forget that other professionals have been trying to teach this teen-ager to read since he was five or six years old. Such critics may also forget that the school deals with the youngster for only a small

portion of the 168 hours that each week contains. And such critics nearly always fail to realize that the teacher must sometimes be judged by standards similar to those used to judge the physician treating a terminally ill patient who is not judged by whether the patient lives or dies, but is judged rather on the appropriateness and judiciousness of the treatment provided; and it might be added that some of the best trained physicians — neurosurgeons, for example— experience very high death rates among their patients merely because they tackle some of the most difficult cases in the field of medicine. It must also be remembered that if a physician is accused of malpractice, the case is usually decided on the basis of expert testimony given by his peers, the only people who are really competent to judge his performance. All physicians are accountable, but not in the same way that many teachers in today's schools are held accountable. Teacher accountability is often determined by laymen's standards rather than by the standards of the teaching profession.

When Dorothy Tally found herself dealing for the first time with the diverse sort of school population that busing brought about, she was hard put to know how to meet the demands of her situation. She made some generalizations which helped her— and her students—through what might have been an impossible situation: "Most of the students in this class were from homes where verbalization was at a minimum. They simply had not heard many words common to the average student. Their attention span was so short as to be negligible. I met this problem by reading to the class every day from one of the books I had suggested for their reading. I brought three or four books to class, spoke briefly about each, and then let the class vote on the one they wanted to hear" (Tally, 1972).

Following Ms. Tally's lead, teachers can do a great deal to work on vocabulary building, on recognition and appreciation of literary style, on comprehension, and on students' enthusiasm for reading by making oral reading a part of every day's classroom activity for students who do not use the language comfortably and who do not read well. It is best to read from selections of which students have printed texts before them so that they can follow, an activity which will in many cases help them increase their own reading skills.

Jack Schaefer, the celebrated author of *Shane*, demands that teachers read to their students: "She (the teacher) is a fake, a swindler not earning even her relatively low salary, if she simply assigns outside reading for her students and then gabbles about it in class. She should often read aloud to them" (Schaefer, 1975).

Certainly well-read selections from carefully selected books can do a great deal to promote reading among students. It matters little whether the oral reading in class is done by the teacher or by students as long as it is done with sufficient volume and expression as to make listening to it a pleasurable experience.

Oral Reading by Students

Nearly everyone, at one time or another, has sat through oral reading

sessions that were painful and labored. Some students are better silent readers than oral readers and vice versa. But even students who read haltingly and uncertainly aloud should be encouraged to read orally and should be coached in the most effective means of doing so.

Two of the four basic communication skills—listening and speaking—are given short shrift in most schools. This is probably because most youngsters enter the first grade with considerable ability in these two skills and the teacher views it as his primary duty to help students gain mastery of the two skills which most of them do not yet possess, reading and writing. A not inconsiderable number of primary school teachers fail to realize the full extent to which all four communication skills are interrelated. By the time the typical student has learned to read and write, the school has moved even further away from stressing listening and speaking than it did at the primary level.

Actually, the teacher should encourage oral activities—which, incidentally, involve the class as a whole in listening activities as well—as much as possible, viewing this as a fundamental part of teaching communication skills. To teach such skills in a compartmentalized way is to deny their interrelationship.

Oral Reading as a Diagnostic Technique

It is doubtful that there exists any better way to diagnose some types of reading problems than by having students read orally. Sometimes a student should be asked a day in advance to prepare a short reading for the class, while at other times the teacher may have a class read a selection by having each student read a paragraph—the teacher should read an occasional paragraph, too—until the selection has been completed.

If the class contains non-readers, they should be passed over so that they will not be embarrassed. When this is done, it is very important that they be involved in the discussion of the reading, an activity which must follow every oral reading activity class. Emmett Betts tells of the grace with which this was done in one demonstration of which he was a part. A seventh grader was virtually a non-reader. He could recognize no irregularly spelled words. But “he could understand what was read to him from a seventh grade book. That is, he had the necessary hearing comprehension—verbal ability and concepts—to understand what was in his textbooks, although he was a total nonreader. Finally, he opened up in a big way—much to the astonishment of the conferees—when he contributed significantly to the discussion of what the higher achiever read to the group” (Betts, 1972).

It is particularly important for the teacher to realize on the one hand the need not to embarrass the deficient reader in the classroom setting and on the other the need to involve him as fully as possible in the intellectual activity which reading generates. Don Wulffson tells of an informal survey conducted by one of the students in his reading improvement class in which seventeen students were enrolled. The student’s questions and the answers he received to them are as follows: “Do you like to read? Fifteen ‘no.’ Does reading make you nervous? Sixteen ‘yes.’ Do teachers sometimes make

assignments you can't read? Seventeen 'yes.' Does being nervous sometimes make it harder for you to read? Thirteen 'yes.' Would you rather work with your hands than try to read something? Fifteen 'yes.' Do you like pictures better than words? Sixteen 'yes.' " (Wulffson, 1971).

As unscientific and limited as this brief survey was, it is indicative of the types of problems underlying some widespread reading deficiencies. The poor reader often develops a fragile ego, and the fragility of his ego increases as he moves further and further along in school and fails to master the skill essential to much learning at the secondary level.

Miscalling in Oral Reading

If oral reading is to serve a valid diagnostic purpose, the teacher must be trained in what to look for. At least a rudimentary knowledge and understanding of the dialects which his students use is essential for the teacher. William Labov writes, "Teachers of reading must begin to make the *fundamental distinction between a mistake in reading and a difference in pronunciation*. . . . For the teacher to make this distinction, it is necessary that he know what correct reading sounds like." Labov continues, "If a Negro child reads *He always looked for trouble when he read the news* as *He a'way' look' fo' trouble when he read* (rhyming with *bed*) *de news*, the teacher should be able to judge that he is reading correctly" (Labov, 1970. Labov's italics). Labov goes on to say that if the reader pronounces *read* so that it rhymes with *seed*, then he must be recognized as reading it incorrectly. Labov cautions the teacher not to assume that his students' sound systems match his own.

Akin to what Labov has said, Shuman, in an article dealing with student writing, contends, "If *preacher* is rendered *preeger*, *wif* rendered *wif*, and *someone* rendered *some un*, one can assume that the student is giving an accurate graphic representation of the word as he usually hears it. In that sense, at least, he is spelling correctly, but he is spelling within the confines of a dialect which is non-standard" (Shuman, 1975. Shuman's italics).

Lipton contends that "children miscall words because in their encoding process (defined here as oral output after decoding) the language they use is more coherent and meaningful to them than the language of the author. For example, children will often call out words like: 'a' for 'the,' 'was' for 'were,' 'do' for 'does,' 'in' for 'at,' 'can't' for 'cannot.' In calling out these substituted words in place of the words printed, it is not often clear to the teacher whether these miscallings are misperceptions or more a function of dialectal development. As children call out substituted words," Lipton continues, "they *may* actually *see* and *know* the words as they are written, but find it more linguistically comfortable to say the words as they do" (Lipton, 1972. Lipton's italics).

Certainly the reading teacher must be competent to differentiate between the student who is miscalling and the student who is misperceiving. Lipton points to the extreme necessity for the teacher to be able to make such differentiations in his statement, "In many instances in forcing a child

to call words accurately by continual reference to his errors and correction of them, we deny him the opportunity to read within the framework of his own language development. This condition has caused many children to avoid reading and to become failures with the reading process" (Lipton, 1972).

If the teacher considers seriously the interrelatedness of the communication skills, he will allow the child to read in his own dialect, realizing that a valuable learning process is taking place. Levine is correct in his contention that "every child achieves communication in oral language because his parents expect him to experience a long period of two to four years learning to pronounce words and formulating phrases and sentences. They would never dream of interrupting the child to teach him to correctly pronounce every word he uses and every phrase he fumbles with" (Levine, 1972). If the relationship of parents to children who are learning to speak were like the relationship of teachers to students who are learning to read, one might ponder whether our citizenry would be as articulate as it is.

Appropriate Types of Oral Reading Activities

The types of oral reading activities that one can use successfully and productively will vary with the abilities, interests, and backgrounds of the students being taught. But some oral reading activity should be a part of every language arts class every day.

Students in the primary years should be read to a great deal. Teachers and their aides may read to these youngsters. Recordings of poems, stories, and plays may also be of great benefit at this point in a child's development. Students at all levels should be read to occasionally, sometimes by teachers and sometimes by other students. They should also be exposed to oral English through recordings. Students with reading problems should be encouraged to follow the text of what is being read, trying to read along.

It is a very valuable experience for students to do interpretive readings of familiar passages from poems and plays and then to listen to the same passages as they are read by four or five professional actors or actresses. It is also interesting to compare a poet's reading of one of his own poems with the interpretation of one or more professional actors or actresses. And through all of this experience, the student, if he is following the text, is learning a broad range of reading skills, from word attack to comprehension and interpretation.

Students should be encouraged to read passages into cassette recorders so that they can hear how they sound and so that they can share some of their readings with their classmates in this way. It is useful occasionally for the teacher to have every student in the class read a brief, familiar poem or dramatic passage into the cassette recorder and then play back all of the readings to compare interpretations.

In a mathematics or science class, a similar technique might be used. For example, a fifth grader, after having been introduced to long division, might be asked to explain the principle of long division in terms that a second or third grader could understand and to record this explanation.

While students should be encouraged to read aloud in class, the teacher must be sensitive enough to the students' feelings that they will know when not to insist that someone read aloud. In many cases, the best material for students to read aloud is material which they have written themselves, since the vocabulary range, sentence structure, and reading level will all be appropriate to the level of the reader. I recently observed a seventh grade social studies class in which each student had read a brief biography and had then written a first person account of the person they had read about. Each student read his first person account to the class, and this was an excellent language arts exercise as well as a good social studies project. The exercise involved the four basic communication skills—speaking, listening, reading, and writing.

Some students are uncertain and unsure of themselves when they are asked to read before a whole class, but when paired with another student will read easily. Therefore, especially from grade 5 on, students should occasionally be paired for oral reading. It is also useful in situations where the logistics can be worked out to have fifth or sixth graders paired regularly for short periods with primary school youngsters to whom they read (Gartner, Kohler, and Reissman, 1971).

As one approaches the middle school and high school levels, reader's theater activities are also useful both in awakening students' interest in dramatic literature and in helping them to polish their reading skills. Some reader's theater should be done spontaneously in English classes, using such plays as Thornton Wilder's *Our Town*; some should be done more elaborately, possibly recorded on a cassette with appropriate musical background and sound effects.

The teaching of reading cannot be approached narrowly. Too much reading instruction has lacked interrelation with the other communication skills and, in some cases, even with books. Margaret Early cites an 18-year-old Yale freshman, Joyce Maynard, who reports, "There were no books in the Developmental Reading room—the lab. Even in English class we escaped books easily. . . . All through high school, in fact, I read little except for magazines. . . . My eyes have been trained to skip non-essentials (adjectives, adverbs) and dart straight to the meaty phrases. But—perhaps in defiance of that whirring black rate-building projector—it takes me three hours to read 100 pages" (Early, 1973).

If the reading experience is a sterile and isolated one, a clinical and compartmentalized one, even the student who masters the skill will not have the motivation to practice the skill once he has attained it. In teaching students to read, teachers must keep constantly before them the *long range* goals of reading instruction.

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