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THE RESURRECTION OF COMPREHENSION QUESTIONS¹

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There is a growing concern by the public that schools are not preparing their students to think critically. This is exemplified by the numerous articles appearing in newspapers and in magazines. It appears to be the contention of many parents that the primary goal of learning is the retention of factual information.

Some teachers, in various school systems visited by the writer, have likewise found, with increasing frequency, that many of their students respond merely with factual information to questions asked of them. Possible reasons for this phenomenon are: (1) the design of the comprehension questions presented to the student, (2) the emphasis that students respond to questions in a concise manner, and (3) the unwillingness or inability of the student either to elaborate or to respond in a manner that will promote meaningful discussions. Teachers, therefore, should not stop at the response that provides only factual information. They must lead their students to responses which require higher levels of thinking.

The comprehension questions accompanying a number of commercially available reading materials appear to have been designed merely to test the degree of competency of a student in some specific or isolated skill. Should the responses of a student to these comprehension questions be used for diagnostic purposes, then, in the writer's experiences, this may result in:

- (1) the teaching of each specific skill in isolation
- (2) the student's believing that there is little inter-relationship of comprehension skills.

PURPOSE

The purpose of this paper is to present and to discuss one set of comprehension questions found in *A Teacher's Guide To Accompany The Macmillan Readingtime Books* (4). This particular guide is not commercially available. It was prepared by the writer and has been in use, since 1971, in the developmental reading program of the Montvale, New Jersey Public Schools.

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THE TEACHER'S GUIDE

Description

The Macmillan Readingtime Books are among those materials which are used in the Montvale Public Schools for supplementary, recreational, and developmental reading. According to an informal survey conducted in a number of school systems (5), these materials are used for recreational and supplementary reading but not for instructional purposes.

The teacher's guide described herein contains comprehension questions, exercises, and activities related to the stories in the Readingtime Books. The reading levels of the 19 stories covered in this guide range from preprimer through 22. (Additional guides which cover the 31 and 32 reading levels are in preparation.) This particular guide was designed primarily as an instructional tool to help develop cognitive skills in a sequential manner and critical reading-thinking skills.

For the purpose of both brevity and illustration, only the comprehension questions related to the story entitled *Scared Kitten* (6) are included in this paper.

Format of the Comprehension Questions and the Rationale for Their Design

The format of the comprehension questions is presented in Fig. 1. An attempt has been made to phrase all questions in a manner that can be understood by the children. The answers to the questions have been included in parentheses that follow the questions. The teacher can accept from the student any answer that is similar in nature or paraphrased. Should the child's answer differ completely from that which has been provided, this too can be accepted providing it is a logical response. The reading-thinking skill that one is attempting to develop through the use of these questions is indicated within the brackets that follow the answers.

FIGURE 1

Figure 1. Comprehension Questions Related to the Story Entitled *Scared Kitten*, Reading Level: 22.

through page 7

1. Where did the mother cat make a home for her kittens?
(in an old doghouse) [recall of detail]
2. Why did she want the kittens to stay in the doghouse?
(in order that they be safe) [recall of detail]
3. What was the mother cat trying to do for her kittens by telling them to play inside? (protect them) [making inferences]

4. What was she really teaching the kittens?
(to be afraid of all dogs and boys) [making generalizations]
5. What words would best describe the black kitten?
(playful, curious, adventurous, daring) [vocabulary]

through page 14

6. What did the black kitten do when he saw the two kind boys?
(He ran away.) [recall of detail]
7. Why didn't he know that the two boys were kind? (He didn't trust any boys. He was afraid of all boys.) [perceiving relationships]
8. What happened when he met the kind dog and the children?
(He ran away.) [recall of detail]
9. Why did he run away? (The mother cat taught him to be afraid of all people and dogs and not to trust them) [perceiving relationships]

through page 19

10. The black kitten was afraid of boys and dogs. Did other things frighten him too? (yes) [recall of detail]
11. Why did he become afraid of big birds and people with big feet?
(He learned through personal experience that animals and people can be cruel.) [making generalizations]

through page 40

12. Discuss two pleasant or happy experiences that the black kitten had. (Melinda and Tommy gave him a home. The big dog saved his life. He was given another home by the old woman and the boy.) [recall of detail]
13. What did these experiences teach him? (All animals and all people are not mean.) [making judgments]
14. Did you boys and girls learn anything from the experience that the black kitten had? (yes)
What did you learn? (People and animals should be trusted until personal experience indicates otherwise.) [drawing conclusions]

() = answer to the comprehension questions

[] = the reading-thinking skill that one is attempting to develop through the use of these questions.

The questions are introduced in a sequential hierarchy of difficulty. They are designed to lead the student from the concrete to the abstract. As such, they attempt to teach the student to use the factual information directly stated in the selections to infer that which is not directly stated. In this manner:

- (1) recall of detail responses can then be used to elicit inferential responses
- (2) reading and thinking skills will not be developed in isolation by the teacher and will not be used in isolation by the student
- (3) the development of simple skills can be used to develop complex skills which in turn will develop more complex skills of reading and thinking at each level of learning
- (4) the student will be made aware of the inter-relationship of all comprehension skills

The schema for developing higher level cognitive skills is presented in Fig. 2. Each comprehension question requires an isolated response. An aggregate of responses, however, does not consist of isolated units since the components of the aggregate are all inter-related.

Furthermore, in order to develop higher levels of cognitive skills, the responses cannot be used in isolation. For example, questions 1 and 2 must be used not only to elicit the response for question 3 but also to develop the skill, making inferences.

FIGURE 2

Figure 2. Schema for the Development of Higher Levels of Cognitive Skills Using the Comprehension Questions Related to the Story Entitled *Scared Kitten*.

<i>Response:</i>	<i>To Question No.</i>		<i>Response:</i>	<i>For Question No.</i>
factual information and factual information	1 2	leads to	inferred meaning	3
factual information and factual information and inferred meaning	1 2 3	leads to	generalizing	4
factual information and inferred meaning and generalizing	2 3 4	leads to	associational thinking	7
factual information and inferred meaning and generalizing and associational thinking	2 3 4 7	leads to	associational thinking	9
generalizing and associational thinking and associational thinking	4 7 9	leads to	generalizing	11
factual information	12	leads to	making judgments	13
making judgments	13	leads to	reasoning	14

Additional Discussion

A Teacher's Guide To Accompany the Macmillan Readingtime Books is the outgrowth of an attempt to continue to develop higher levels of reading and thinking skills of students. The technique applied in using the comprehension questions in this guide is based upon methods employed while teaching in the classroom. The methods employed during this time stemmed from the fact that the comprehension questions contained in a number of the teacher's manuals accompanying reading materials:

- (1) often necessitated rephrasing in order that the student understand that which was asked of him.
- (2) were so designed that they required the asking of a number of additional questions in order to elicit a logical response.
- (3) lacked the sequence or the means to elicit a critical response.

CONCLUSIONS

Skills for the development of critical reading and thinking should be introduced at each grade level from the pre-reading stage on through each level of formal reading instruction. The degree of development of these skills and the format used for their presentation will depend, to a great extent, upon the maturity of the student and his instructional level of reading.

The following points should be emphasized:

- (1) Pictorial, printed, expository, and narrative materials can all be used in an effort to develop critical reading-thinking skills. Likewise, any kind of reading, whether it be developmental or recreational, can be used for the same purpose.
- (2) The design and sequence of comprehension questions should be of such a nature as to enable one to employ the inductive method of teaching.
- (3) It is possible to channel a student's thinking by guiding him from questions that require literal responses to questions that require inferred responses.

One cannot assume that a student will read and think critically unless he is taught to read and think critically.

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