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We Suggest

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WE SUGGEST

Eleanor Buelke

McCracken, Robert A., and McCracken, Marlene
Reading Is Only the Tiger's Tail
San Rafael, California: Leswing Press, 1972. Pp. 222.

The humanness of life depends above all on the quality of man's relationships to the rest of creation—to the winds and the stars, to the flowers and the beasts, to smiling and weeping humanity.¹

The authors of *Reading Is Only the Tiger's Tail* are optimistic humanists who constantly evidence faith in children's ability to learn, and who hold deep respect for the charm and dignity of children as human individuals in their own right. The two writers of this book about learning to read believe that children demand more than entertainment from reading: "They want to feel secure—to feel that they are a part of humanity"; they respond to "inner pacings"; they react to good literature, using their perceptions "as mosaic tiles in developing patterns for understanding humanity." In writing about their experiences with their RIOTT* reading program, the McCrackens support and manifest their optimistic faith. This approach to the teaching of reading is grounded in the understanding that perception emerges from meaning; that meaning for reading really comes from *within the reader*; that, essentially, reading is a *human* act. Consequently, motivations, attitudes, feelings, interpretations, responses, and applications are the emphases in instruction and practice.

The all-important motivational aspects of attitudes and feeling are given prime-time consideration in the RIOTT program. First, children learn to love books and stories. Comprehension is deliberately emphasized as a concomitant component of any, or all, of the aspects of learning to communicate. Word recognition and vocabulary development proceed simultaneously with the development of concepts; these then become "the raw material for the beginnings of reading and writing."

It is the experience of these authors that the most natural way for children to learn awareness of sounds of the English language is

¹ René Dubos, *So Human An Animal*. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1968, p. 8.

* A name made by combining the beginning letters of title words of the book.

through *encoding*. This means learning how to listen to speech and how to write the sounds they hear, and the wish to use these skills to express their thoughts. Writing is taught as an integral part of the thinking-communicating process—as humanistic, rather than mechanistic, in nature.

Thinking and communicating skills are developed in various ways. Chapters II and IV give detailed suggestions and instructions for stimulating pupil willingness to express thoughts and feelings openly, and eliciting full, thoughtful responses. Creative art and dramatics are also regarded as valid, valuable media for fostering thinking skills. Independent writing and sustained silent reading are vital parts of the daily program. Interesting ways to promote individual authorship are discussed. Many samples of children's stories, books, and illustrations are cited and reproduced to substantiate the authors' faith that their program opens new doors of learning for children, that when teachers live and work in these ways children will have the freedom to learn—and they *will* learn.

In the concluding chapter Robert and Marlene McCracken discuss factors that affect the success of the RIOTT program. They recognize that some factors affecting any learning program are beyond the teacher's control; other important factors can be controlled, either partially, or completely, by teachers. Here they are concerned with contributing factors like timing, and developmental expectations; attitudes of teachers, and "labeling" of learners; attention spans and interests of pupils; the "theme" approach to learning and use of materials; and the high potential offered by open education. They view classroom openness as three-dimensional and hierarchial in pattern: educational openness must come first, followed by environmental openness, followed by behavioral openness. "Teachers who move first toward educational openness have a high possibility of success. Those who begin with environmental openness only invite difficulty, and those who begin with behavioral openness court disaster. Environmental openness and behavioral openness must grow from educational openness, which simultaneously allows freedom and teaches responsibility."

To cultivate high quality experiences for children through mind-to-mind interaction; to observe and assess children's learning behaviors with genuine concern for meeting their personal needs; to move toward humanistic, truly open education which gives rise to autonomous, creative intercourse among teachers and learners, and the intercourse of these persons with their environments—these are the larger chal-

lenges for teachers in the RIOTT program. The rich realization for both teachers and learners resembles Illich's conditions for "conviviality": "individual freedom realized in personal interdependence and, as such, an intrinsic ethical value."² It brings within the realm of possibility the tapping of "the one resource that is almost equally distributed among all people: personal energy under personal control."³

² Ivan Illich, *Tools For Conviviality*. New York: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1973, p. 11.

³ *Ibid.*, pp. 11 and 12.