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We Suggest

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WE SUGGEST

Eleanor Buelke

Kohl, Herbert

Reading, How To

New York: E. P. Dutton & Co., Inc., 1973. Pp. xiii + 224.

There is no reading problem. There are only problem teachers and problem schools. Most people who fail to learn to read in our society are victims of a fiercely competitive system of training that requires failure.

In *Reading, How To* the writer of the statement above pleads the case for natural, not mystical, and minimal, not technically complex, conditions for learning to read. In the preface he sets forth what he considers to be ten basic conditions for learning and perfecting skill in reading:

1. a person who knows how to read and is interested in sharing that skill, and who has
 2. a nonelitist, noncompetitive attitude toward sharing knowledge and information as well as
 3. some understanding of the process of learning to read and
 4. a belief that reading is an important human activity that the young should master;
 5. pencils or pens, writing surfaces and printed material if possible;
 6. a context for learning in which learners feel secure enough to make mistakes and ask questions;
 7. respect for the culture and mind of the learner and therefore an ability to understand and use what the student brings to the situation; and finally
 8. patience—a sense that there is time to learn.
- In addition there should be learners with:
9. the ability to use some language as well as reasonably intact senses and
 10. a desire to read or at least curiosity about reading.

Kohl believes that anyone who possesses a certain degree of competence in reading, regardless of age or previous educational training, can teach others who read less well. He suggests that, in a sense, anyone who reads is still learning to read, and is capable of guiding, assisting, stimulating others to similar interests and skills. Through sharing their competencies with others, skillful readers may help alleviate the feelings of "isolation and powerlessness in our society. Teaching is a form of connection for the teacher as well as a gift to the learner."

Kohl sees schooling in our society as elitist and competitive, elevating the winners in academic games to superior status, while eliminating the losers by compacting them into an increasingly restricted area for growth and achievement. Here, the attitude of the teacher toward learning is crucial. If learning to read is viewed as a competitive phenomenon, with the hurdles of sequential skills and behavioral objectives set up to separate the winners from the losers, then, to justify this view, losers must be designated. "If one cares to help people read, to share one's own skills, then the phenomenon of failure on the part of students is out of order."

People who are to teach others to read need to know some things about the process of reading. This author has organized his knowledge of the process into a schema which categorizes reading competencies into these simple, but rather unique, levels: *beginning, not bad, with ease*, and *complex*. *Beginning* reading instruction should promote familiarity with the format of printed material in our culture; enable the teacher to discover how many words the learner knows, and those that are of personal importance to him; be a place where games may be used to further the learning of the alphabet, as well as words that connect and words that place; help learners understand the regularities of sounds and combinations of sounds in our language system, and ways of dealing with the irregularities; and aid the beginner in acquiring "sentence sense" by employing sentences that contain the natural rhythm and movement of the spoken word.

At the *not bad* level, instruction should provide for learning more complicated combinations of sounds. The reader should be able to make an intelligent guess at the sound of almost any word. At this stage, "the more learners play with language, modify sentences and descriptions, write crazy things, the easier and more natural reading other people's writing becomes." At this point, too, learners acquire skills in "everyday" reading such as telephone books, posters, ads, instructions for games, and the *TV Guide*, increasing their sense of power over their own lives. "The crucial thing for the not-bad reader is reading experience."

Four aspects of *reading with ease* are discussed: developing strategies for dealing with unfamiliar words; encountering many different forms of writing; distinguishing among voices speaking in books and appreciating how various voices give character and style to the writing; and becoming familiar with special skills involved in test taking.

Complex reading is regarded as open-ended and on-going, concerned with increasingly sophisticated study and analysis of language

itself. It encompasses special uses of words and certain concepts, as well as the use of special languages, such as those in technological, scientific, or professional areas. Because serious reading may often be a springboard for creative thinking and action, the reader ought to examine what he reads from many different aspects, with critical consideration.

On each of the four levels it is essential to consider how the learner feels about his capacity to learn how to read, and how the learner deals with the process of reading, of life, and the written word. *Panic* in the face of new and strange material, *evasion* of reading and refusing to accept help, *copying* that consists of the habit of skipping over, or guessing at, unfamiliar words—all of these are negative addends in the sum total of understanding. Skills in *dealing* with the things one doesn't know, when one wants to, are among the positive addends. Physical condition and stamina, determined by intent and attentiveness, as well as by bodily health, are basic at all stages of learning to read. Diagnosis, teaching, and learning are continual and interrelated activities. Fundamental to the whole process is the learner's "feeling easy" with the written word, coming to view the written word as a focus from which he can move to explore important areas and meaning in his life.

If the larger goals of education are a human, just, and equitable society, with learners becoming a competent, skillful part of such a sane, cooperative culture, then teachers themselves must embody a human, full way of living. They must care about students and become sensitive to their needs; provide resources, options, and encouragement for students to learn at their own rates; and create a social microcosm where students function with each other, where they know and care about each other's learning, where they can indulge their own styles of learning without oppressing others.

It is adult impatience, anxiety, condescension, and anger that makes reading a problem for some young people.

It is important for people who care to help others learn to read to have patience and understand that the crucial thing for learners is to learn as much as possible how to teach themselves.