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DROPPED OUT OR KICKED OUT?

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The school drop-out problem is real and has been with us for some time. Unless proper, effective corrective measures are taken and all who teach do something positive, the difficulty is likely to not only remain, but grow worse. Most educators and many interested laymen are concerned with the fundamentals of this deplorably wasteful situation, but it would appear that the real causes are little known or understood (3).

Educational researchers who have studied the problem seem to agree that students who drop out of school give "acceptable" reasons for this action simply because only "acceptable" reasons assures them that they will be allowed to do so. The preponderance of excuses falls in the category of financial need. This is an "acceptable" reason, therefore students usually are given permission to drop out of school so that they can go to work and help support the family. But it has been discovered (3) that such reasons are merely excuses and are not the real causes of the student's desire to leave school. Further investigation has revealed that the predominant force motivating many pupils to leave school is the single, vital factor that almost all of what they do in class has little or no meaning. There is no significance or purpose to being in or remaining in school.

There are probably two basic reasons why school experiences have little or no value to the drop-outs or potential drop-out: (A) courses of study do not fit the present or proposed circumstances of the student, and/or (B) he obtains little or nothing from his reading in school (2). The curriculum problem is receiving the attention of experts and progress is being made, (4) but the second problem, reading, remains.

Reading is a problem because of the progressive requirements it demands of the student. The problem exists because many teachers concentrate on the mechanics of reading rather than on reading for meaning or comprehension. This erroneous emphasis usually begins at the first grade level and tends to remain about the same throughout the elementary grades. Unfortunately, all too few reading instructional programs are found at higher grade levels.

Generally the mechanics of reading have consisted of a superabundance of oral reading with little or no attention given to the meaning of what is read. Some ill-informed teachers erroneously assume that if pupils can pronounce words, they automatically under-

stand what the words mean. Those teachers usually fail to realize that oral reading is a skill distinct from silent reading because it calls forth and draws upon different reading skills possessed by the student (5). Actually, an individual who is reading orally is so busy concentrating on proper pronunciation, enunciation, phrasing, and voice quality that he can seldom attend to the meaning of what he has read (1). Most pupils, and for that matter many adults, cannot read orally and *at the same time* concentrate on the meaning of the passage. If adults have this difficulty, we can well imagine the problems facing the pupil.

A change is called for. To overcome this problem, teachers should stress oral reading only when it is necessary for students to *share* a thought with others. It should be used when there is only a single text available. Certainly, it should not be used as a method of teaching pupils to read for meaning.

Another important consideration about oral reading has to do with the fact that it is a skill little used in the present, modern, everyday lives of most people. Just about everywhere one comes in contact with others who are reading, it will be noted that the reading is silent. On the bus, train, or airplane readers read to themselves. In the home, in business, and wherever adults read for meaning or to understand what they read, that reading is silent. Imagine what would result in a library if everyone read orally as taught in school.

Of course, some oral reading is necessary. Teachers may have pupils read orally to find word attack problems or other reading difficulties. But the time expended is comparatively short. Actually oral reading is such a little used skill that teachers should spend less time on it and not force pupils to become proficient at it. Furthermore, the major emphasis of reading instruction should be on silent reading because only in this way do pupils learn to understand what they read and obtain meaning from reading.

It is the contention of this discussion that if pupils were taught to read for meaning, if comprehension instead of mere word calling were stressed, and if all readers grew up with a real understanding of this concept, then school would have more meaning to them and there would be fewer school drop-outs. If pupils were taught from the beginning that words have meanings, that individuals read to understand what the writer is saying, that reading is not only "talk written down," but thoughts expressed in a different manner, then probably much of the drop-out problem would be solved. If all students were taught to realize that understanding the printed word is the single, most

important reason for reading and that the writer is trying to say something, then the orientation of these students would be different from what it has been in the past. If they had this different orientation, they would grow up with the knowledge that thoughts and ideas are to be obtained from reading and that real reading does not consist of mere glib word pronunciation with proper phrasing and intonation.

It is believed that students must be taught the skills of silent reading as soon as possible and the sooner the better. It is also believed that because our schools stress textbook knowledge, students must know how to read for meaning. If they know how to do this and can have successful experiences in reading and at school, it will be a key factor in all efforts to keep students from dropping out of school.

Of course, it must be admitted that poor reading proficiency is only one of several factors causing pupils to leave school. There are others such as family background, aspirations, and physical and mental immaturity to be considered. Moreover, adverse and negative emotions rising from school requirements are not to be overlooked. But academic inertia is the chief cause and such failure usually stems from poor reading achievement.

Therefore, if teachers would teach pupils to read for meaning, to read to understand what the writer is saying, to not be satisfied with oral parroting, then those students would grow up with a much greater appreciation and understanding of the real nature of reading. As a result, they would become better students. If they understood more of what they read, then school would have greater meaning to them. If school had such meaning, then many students would realize how valuable it is to them and they would probably strive to stay in school longer. If they tried to remain in school and made a real effort toward that end, then part of the school drop-out problem would be solved. And isn't this just what most of us want? But if teachers fail in their task, aren't they in fact forcing students out of school? And isn't this just what most of us do not want?

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