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PARENTS, TEACHERS, AND THE PRIMARY READING PROGRAM

Judith Johansen

Educators are aware of the importance of good home and school relations in achieving the goals of education. Parent-teacher cooperation is emphasized as an essential factor in effective guidance of children and youth. Dawson and Bamman write:

. . . parents are very much a part of the educational processes which we, as teachers, attempt to foster in the classroom.

. . . most parents are both interested in the child's progress and eager to aid the school in furthering that progress.

. . . The happiest and most successful teacher in the school is most often the one who regards parents as helpmates and friends of education. (2:297-298)

The Value of Parent-Teacher Cooperation

In the elementary grades teachers often work very closely with parents. The contributions of both are necessary for a comprehensive understanding of the child, his needs, and his development. The teacher cannot carry out the entire educative process alone; she needs support and help from parents. If the aims and efforts of the teacher and parents are harmonious, the educative process will be enhanced. The parents are the child's first teachers and, probably, the most important. The habits, attitudes, appreciations, skills, and knowledge learned in the home are difficult to alter; and the most zealous teacher cannot fill the voids caused by an inadequate home background. If there is understanding and cooperation between the parents and teacher it is likely that the child will experience greater consistency in his life. He will not find one set of expectations at home and a different set at school. At the pre-school, kindergarten, and primary levels children are especially close to their home and parents; therefore, the efforts of parents and teachers should supplement each other particularly at these levels.

Parents and teachers are concerned with the child's work in all areas of the curriculum, but when he is in the primary grades, both seem especially concerned with his progress in reading. Most parents realize the importance of reading and desire their child's success in this area. They realize that reading is the heart and the foundation of the entire curriculum. However, they do not always understand how

the modern classroom operates, how reading is taught, and what is expected of children at various levels of development. Whether they know it or not, they actually help prepare the child for reading before he enters school, and their influence continues to be an important factor in the child's reading progress. The teacher who has the co-operation of the parents in connection with her reading program is fortunate, indeed, because parental reinforcement will surely expedite her efforts.

The Attainment of Good Home and School Relations

In order to have good home and school cooperation, a warm, friendly relationship must be established between parents and teacher. Usually the teacher is the one who must exert a special effort. She must make arrangements for conferences and home visits, and she must encourage parents to visit the classroom and attend special programs and parents' meetings at school. She may participate with parents in child study groups or parent-education programs. Mutual respect is a vital part of parent-teacher cooperation, and it can be attained only if the teacher shows that she respects the parents. She must accept them as they are and never make accusations or in any other way cause them to feel inferior or inadequate. Since the parents' attitudes toward the teacher are influenced considerably by their child's attitude toward her, good pupil-teacher relations facilitate the teacher's work with parents. In all of her contacts with the parents the teacher should show a genuine interest in them and in their child, and she must make the parents feel that they are partners with her in education.

Parents must have confidence in the teacher and in her method of teaching reading, and this confidence is developed, in part, by an understanding of her reading program. The teacher may explain and discuss her reading program with parents at individual parent-teacher conferences or at group conferences, or meetings, involving many parents. She may discuss certain aspects of reading, explain the methods she employs, and show some of the materials which she uses. Also, the reasons for and methods of grouping during the reading period may be presented. Parents frequently ask questions about phonics. They wonder if it *is* being taught and if it should be taught. The teacher should explain that phonics is one part of the reading program and that other techniques and methods are also being used. Parents should be helped to understand the new methods of teaching reading and the value of these methods.

Parent-Teacher Conferences

The teacher contacts parents in another important capacity, that of reporting pupils' progress. Grades and report cards are one means of reporting to parents, and the parent-teacher conference is another means. Frequently, the teacher uses both. The conference affords an opportunity for parents and teacher to become better acquainted. Through such meetings, parents gain a greater understanding of the school, the organization of the classroom, and the teacher's responsibilities. At the same time, the teacher gains a fuller understanding of the child's home situation and his parents' attitudes toward the child, the school, and reading. The progress report at the parent-teacher conference can be quite thorough, and sufficient time should be allowed for the conference so that the parents and teacher do not feel hurried. The teacher should discuss positive aspects of the child's progress as well as areas in which there may be difficulty. She may present school records, samples of the child's work, test scores, anecdotal records, and other material to support her report and recommendations. Whatever material and methods she employs, the teacher must be as honest and objective as possible in reporting the child's progress to his parents. She should not dominate the conference but, rather, must encourage the parents to contribute and to ask questions. The teacher should answer each question as honestly, simply, and specifically as possible, avoiding "talking down" to parents or using vague terminology. Together, the teacher and parents should formulate suggestions which the parents can follow to help their child. This will help the parents realize that they play an important part in his education.

Greater Insight Concerning Children

In order to guide and help children effectively, parents and teachers must continually ask, "Why?" They must search for reasons. The parent-teacher conference provides an opportunity for a joint investigation of this type. When discussing the child's growth and development, scholastic progress, and behavior, the teacher and parents must pause frequently and ask, "Why?" "Why is Jack unable to read well orally?" "Why is he inattentive during the language arts period?" "Why does he respond to directions at home but not at school?" The *why* questions frequently are difficult to answer, but the answers lead to a better understanding of the child and his problems. Those who work with children must realize the importance of dealing with the causes, not merely the symptoms, when problems arise.

Sometimes the teacher may guide parents in understanding certain concepts of child development which are related to their child's progress. For example, the teacher of beginning reading may lead parents to understand that all children have different rates of growth. Some children walk at an earlier age than others; some cut teeth before others; and, likewise, some begin to read sooner than others. Furthermore, each child progresses at his own rate. Thus, the teacher can help parents understand that some children will be ready to begin reading before others but that this does not mean that children who are not in the first formal reading group are "dull." Also, parents should be led to realize that their child's rate of growth and development may fluctuate. At times he may advance very rapidly, but then at other times his progress may be extremely slow. If parents understand this aspect of the child's developmental pattern, they are less likely to become overly concerned when such fluctuations occur.

The teacher should help parents realize the importance of the role they play, and have played, in their child's reading progress, and she should stress the fact that she needs their assistance and support. Not all parents will be able to help their children to the same extent. Factors such as educational background, financial status, home situation, employment situation of both parents, and size of family may determine the degree to which parents can help their child. Although some will be able to do more than others, all parents can be led to understand the importance of their role and to find specific ways in which they can help the child.

A Healthy Self-concept

In order to learn to read and make satisfactory progress in reading, the child must feel good about himself, see the importance of reading, have a genuine desire to learn to read, and have a wealth of experiences to bring to his reading. Parents play a vital part in each of these areas, and it is through these areas that they can contribute greatly to their child's reading success.

In order to feel good about himself, or have a healthy self-concept, the child must have love and security; he must feel that he is worthy and adequate, and he must experience success. Thus, the type of home in which the child lives affects his reading performance. A home which is pleasant and peaceful and free from undue pressure, tension, and commotion is conducive to success in reading. The child feels secure in this kind of home, and such an atmosphere encourages reading activities. The type of discipline in the home is another factor which

affects the child's reading performance. Discipline which is consistent, kind, and firm is conducive to satisfactory progress in reading. The child should always feel that he is an important part of the family. Parents should never do or say anything which might create the impression that he will no longer be accepted if he does not succeed in reading. When the child enters first grade or begins formal reading instruction, they should not put undue emphasis upon his reading. Such pressure may make him feel that he will lose parental acceptance if he does not quickly learn to read and make rapid progress. Parents should not attempt to teach the child to read, nor should they drill him in reading. Such activities may confuse the child and put excessive pressure on him. There are, however, many things that parents can do to help prepare their pre-school child for school and help develop his reading readiness, and much incidental learning in the area of reading may occur in the home before and after the child starts to school. The teacher may suggest activities that the parents can carry out to promote their child's reading readiness and progress. The child should be encouraged, but not forced, to participate in these activities, and it must be remembered that all reading activities should be carried out in an atmosphere which is free from tension and pressure.

The child's feeling of worthiness and adequacy is another factor which affects his reading performance. In order to succeed in reading, the child must feel that he is capable of succeeding. He must feel competent. His individuality must be respected, and he should not be made to feel inferior or "different." Therefore, he should never be compared with his brothers or sisters or with other children. If the child's progress is not satisfactory, punishing him, pressuring him, drilling him, or removing his privileges will only aggravate the situation. When such techniques are employed, the child will not feel very good about himself or about reading. His security is threatened, and reading becomes something to fear and dislike. These feelings may carry over into his other studies and affect his entire attitude toward school. If the child's reading problems are such that the teacher recommends a special reading class, help from a reading specialist or other professional, or consultation in a reading clinic, the parents should cooperate in every possible way. Both the teacher and parents should help the child understand that such techniques are being employed to help him and that he *can* improve his reading ability. They must stress the fact that he is not a failure. Although the child should realize the importance of reading, he must understand that

other things are important, too. Every child can succeed in some area, and the parents and teacher would do well to emphasize the areas in which the child has experienced success.

All those who work with the child should help him experience success as frequently as possible. The child must learn to cope with failure, but he meets ample failure in his daily life; therefore, parents and teacher must provide him opportunities for success. If he succeeds in reading activities, not only will his feeling of adequacy be enhanced, but also he is likely to enjoy reading. If he enjoys it, he will probably engage in considerable reading; and the more he reads, the better his reading ability and his chances for success will become. Thus, success builds upon success creating a spiral effect.

Parents can do a great deal to help their child succeed in reading. One of their most important contributions is that of providing conditions which will promote his physical and mental well being. The child's general health and the condition of his eyes and ears play a vital part in his reading performance. Another way in which parents can contribute to their child's reading success is by providing opportunities for the child to acquire verbal and communication skills. From the time the child is an infant, his parents should talk to him. He should have the joy of becoming acquainted with words, stories, and poems. As he grows older, his parents should encourage his curiosity, give him plenty of freedom to investigate, and take time to answer his many questions. They can help him become aware of things around him and observant of details by encouraging him to listen and look carefully. His parents should listen attentively to the things he tells them. Then, when the child begins to read, they should encourage him to read aloud to them but not force him to do so. They should listen enthusiastically as he reads and praise him highly. It is important that they let him know he has succeeded. If the child hesitates or makes errors in his reading, parents should correct his mistakes very tactfully, if at all. He must not feel that he is losing their approval. They should help him when he needs and requests assistance, but all their help should be given in a manner that will increase the child's self-confidence and not jeopardize it. Encouragement from his parents will help the child succeed in reading; criticism will not.

A Realization of the Importance of Reading

Another factor which will help the child progress satisfactorily in reading is that of realizing the importance of reading. There is

much that parents can do to help their child see the value of reading. One of the most essential and enduring contributions they can make is that of setting an excellent example. If there are books, magazines, and newspapers in the home and if these are read and discussed frequently by the parents, the child will sense the fun and value of reading. He will want to imitate his parents when they read. If the entire family frequently enjoys a reading time together, the child will feel that he is very much a part of the family and will desire to make his contribution. Such reading hours can strengthen family bonds, create genuine interest in reading, and substitute for radio and television programs. Members of the family should make use of reading activities and reference books when they want to discover answers to their questions or find out something of interest. The child will thereby learn that much exciting information is contained in books, and he will want to unlock that information himself. The child and his family should visit the public library together regularly so that he will learn about the library and have access to a wide variety of reading material. The parents' attitude toward reading and their reading interests and tastes are very important models for the child. In fact, they shape his own attitude toward reading and his reading tastes. In many ways, then, the parents' example affects the child, and parents should be aware of this.

Parents should not only set a good example, but should also provide many books for the child and help him learn to enjoy them. If the child becomes acquainted with stories and poems from the time that he is an infant and if he has books of his own and a place in which to keep them, he will learn to value, enjoy, and care for books. Books make excellent birthday and Christmas gifts and need not be expensive. However, those purchased for the child himself to read should be appropriate to his reading level so that he can read them successfully and, thus, not become discouraged. Parents know their child's interests and should provide books for him which are related to those interests. His teacher can suggest books dealing with his interests and written on his level. Many parents find that reading to their child at bedtime is relaxing and pleasurable for both themselves and the child. Older brothers and sisters often enjoy sharing reading activities with a younger member of the family, and these may be outstanding learning situations for all the participants. Alert parents can use television as a means of generating interest in reading, and even the irritating comic books may be used to create interest which can be transferred to better quality reading material. It requires effort for the

parents to supply their child with good books and to help him learn to enjoy reading, but the results are invaluable.

A Desire to Learn to Read

The child's desire to learn to read and to progress satisfactorily in reading is closely related to his perception of the importance and enjoyment of reading. Therefore, parents can foster their child's desire to read through the previously emphasized means, such as: exposing him to a wide variety of interesting material, promoting his curiosity, encouraging him in his reading, and enjoying reading themselves. Since children love words, have vivid imaginations, and enjoy dramatizing, it should not be difficult to delight them with reading and create in them a desire to read.

A Rich Experiential Background

If the child is going to learn well the entire reading process, which, according to Carter and McGinnis, involves identification, interpretation, and evaluation (1:7), he must have a rich background of experiences. Parents are the principle individuals who supply these experiences. Trips, outings, shopping, and visits to museums and zoos are a few of the important things that contribute to the child's "mental content," or storehouse of experiences, which he brings to his reading. (1:15) They give him something to think about and talk about, something to which he can relate his reading, and, thus, something which gives his reading fuller meaning.

In many ways, then, parents play a vital role in their child's reading performance. The impact of their role extends from the child's pre-school years, into the period of beginning reading, and through the remainder of his entire life. Since their influence is so great, the teacher cannot afford to be without their help and support. She must help them understand their role more completely and guide them in finding ways to help their child. Concerning the parents' role, the teacher should remember and might advise parents that:

Helping your child in reading requires your *time*, your *encouragement*, your *understanding* and your *help*. All of these you have to give. Be exceedingly generous!
(7:64)

A united endeavor requires much effort on the part of both teacher and parents, but the parents' contribution is vital since it greatly facilitates the child's reading success and his entire education.

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