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## "Look, Ma, He's Reading"

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# "LOOK, MA, HE'S READING"

*Pauline Lucas*

You learn to swim by swimming. You learn to sing by singing. You learn to drive a car by driving. The same truth holds for reading; you learn to read by reading, to really read that is, not merely to pronounce words. Why, then, don't we as teachers spend more time and effort leading children to the joys and habits of reading—volunteer reading for fun, for recreation, for sheer enjoyment? Seldom does this habit come by chance with a *laissez faire* attitude. It must be cultivated. It must be developed.

Just recently a mother approached me and said, "I just can't believe it. George is reading, reading without being told to, reading a book a night, and asking for more. He's not the same person. He used to be glued to the TV or to be constantly 'in his sister's hair,' pestering her because he had nothing to do. It's wonderful I tell you. How did it happen?"

I answered, "Basically, it was simple. I found a book which really appealed to him. That led to another one like it. Soon George was awakening to the fact that reading was fun, and not a painful ordeal in a reading corner that teacher made him sit through each day as he wiggled and waited his turn." Reading for him became alive. It was purposeful and exhilarating. Why shouldn't he read?

In a few months' time that same mother might approach me and say, "You know, George likes school this year. It's the first time I haven't had to fight to get him to go each morning. He practically gobbles it up. I think he's learning a lot too."

I will smile to myself and say inwardly, "I knew it, I knew this would happen. It usually does. When a student has discovered the joy of reading and becomes addicted to its stimulation, there is a carryover. He reads in content areas more easily. He understands what is said, so almost miraculously his studies become easier and much more enjoyable. He has transferred his activity of reading for information and understanding. And probably he will not stop there. The habit, once entrenched, becomes his for all study type material. He will no longer be satisfied with the minimum essentials. The habit of reading will entice him to search out reference details and additional facts.

To instill the love and the habit of reading into a child is the work of the school. It takes careful guidance, it is almost a lost art.

The stimuli of the movies, TV, and radio compete for a child's time. These can be a great stimulant with guidance. But without guidance, they may supplant free reading entirely.

It doesn't seem reasonable that we should work and struggle so zealously to have a child reach standards of mid-literacy and then do little to assure steady progress. We must be convinced that it is just as much our job to teach a child to learn *TO LOVE READING AND APPRECIATE BOOKS* as it is to teach him to read and learn the necessary skills in the first place.

Surveys show that middle graders are sometimes struck with a "reading craze." We must turn that craze into a passion. We must direct those skills we've so carefully fostered into useful channels. How foolish it would be to painstakingly teach a child to swim and then simply to let him go his merry way, never encouraging, never giving opportunity for practice. Would you expect him to maintain his skills? Could he really learn to love the experience? Yet that is substantially what we as teachers do. We just take it for granted that youngsters will start reading under their own steam. Just when they have reached their reading peak, we blithely stand by and let them drop it. We do nothing concrete and consistent to keep them interested, to keep them going.

"Well," you say, "what can we do? If we teach a child the skills and he knows how to read, why doesn't he?"

There may be many reasons. One, and perhaps the foremost is that he hasn't found books he really likes, books that have fitted him to a "T" and served a real purpose for him. An adult selecting a book for a child can be like spanking him. It might give the adult satisfaction and make him feel that he is doing the child good. But it may cause the child to have a distaste and even an antagonism for reading.

A child's choosing his own book is like his planning an excursion, a delightful trip into the yet unknown, a probing for something to satisfy his longings, his tastes, his interests—equal to his abilities. And when he finds the one that fits him we know it; we can see it—the eagerness, the joy, the exhilaration.

∴ We, as teachers, must bring the right book to the right child. Then there will be "wedded bliss." Then real learning will take place. To do this, we must be two-fold lovers—lovers of books and lovers of children. We must have a wide acquaintance with children's books and be on speaking terms with the best of them. And then, we must have a sincere interest in our children, no pretense, no false front.

Children can immediately sense a phony. We must accept each child for his own worth and try to understand his particular problems and interests. Interest inventory sheets help a great deal. Questionnaires on their hobbies, favorite TV shows, what they want to do when they grow up, their favorite heroes, three wishes, what they would take with them to a desert island, and what they want for birthdays are fun for them to answer.

When we've studied a child and learned all we can about him, then subtly and gently we must give encouragement, hints, and suggestions for books. We say, "John, I think I've found a book especially for you. It's about a boy who actually rode a space ship." Or we say, "Mary, didn't you tell me that you wanted to be a nurse? I wonder if you've read this one?"

There are hundreds of good children's books, written on all levels. Some of the best authors of modern times have chosen to write literature for children, literature that is interesting and vivid, truthful and meaningful. It is far different from the verbal hash dished out a couple of decades ago.

^In general what kinds of books do middle graders like? Surveys show that boys like action, humor, suspense—no romantic love, and not necessarily a happy ending. They are interested in science, sports, adventure, and violent adventure. Girls, on the other hand, like humor, suspense, and surprise. They like to read of home life and people. They are fond of feminine school adventures, fairy tales and animal stories. Girls like cowboy stories and adventures, but adversely, boys will have little to do with fairy tales and girls' home stories.

When at last we've wedded that right book to the right child, slowly but surely we see the magic power take hold. We begin to see children transported one by one into the wonderful world of reading. First one, then another says, "Boy, are there more books in the world like this one?" or "Say, I've read this whole book already. May I tell the rest of the kids about it?"

Naturally, all the students aren't so easily reached. For some, more dramatic, persistent means must be used. Opportunities and experiences must be provided which will bring books and reading to the forefront and keep them there. There are many ways to do this and I shall discuss a few of the more effective ones. Of course, not all of these could, or should be used, by any one teacher. They are simply suggestions and ideas to be tucked away and to be taken out and used as the stimulus and directed encouragement are needed. It is also to

be understood that these opportunities and experiences would not supplant the regular daily reading study program. They would supplement it.

**Reading Climate.** In the first place, there must be a good climate for reading, an atmosphere where reading is natural and expected as a matter of course. There should be a cozy reading corner, with plenty of books carefully selected and neatly arranged, with perhaps a lamp, a rug, or even a rocking chair. This reading nook should be available for all book lovers to enjoy as their own.

**Browsing Table.** Then there should be an attractive, colorful browsing table with books on display, varied according to seasons and current interests or study topics. "Frosty" or "St. Nick" or "Cupid" could seasonably suggest good reading. New books, book jackets, and reviews should be featured—using various approaches and eye-catchers such as "What's New," "Wouldn't You Like to Know?" or "Have You Seen This One?"

**Bulletin Boards.** We should also make good use of the bulletin board. A part of this can be used all year near the reading center with timely changes for continued interest and new learning. Here we can put up catchy slogans such as "A book is a friend always," or "Reading is fun, enjoy it." Good book summaries written by students, a list of books recommended for certain hobbies, pictures of well known authors, scenes from books or a picture of a child engrossed in reading, all could be posted. I've found too that a personal message tacked up goes a long way towards motivating—such as "Joe, I think you will be pleasantly surprised if you look for a book on Mexico today."

Then, of course, the bulletin board is the best place to post each child's reading record. One year it might be a rocket in a pocket (a half sealed envelope) for each book a child reads. When he has read five books he would be launched into his first layer of space. Then for each succeeding five books, he climbs a new layer until he finally lands on the far off heights of the planets. This progress would all be charted.

Another year, the children might go traveling via shipboard around the continents. For each book read, he would reach a new port and his ship would move up the itinerary chart or across a large map. Needless to say, record keeping and charting doesn't make a child read

but it does give recognition and peer approval, so important to middle graders. It helps generate tremendous enthusiasm, also.

**Story Time.** Scheduling a regular daily story time is important, a time when the teacher reads feelingly and without interruption from stories, poems, and whole books, not for testing or questions and answers, but for pure appreciation and for spreading the contagious joy of reading. This practice welds the whole group into one unit, all sharing mutually the best in literature. It is a never-to-be-forgotten time of togetherness, of warmth, and of a first hand magical experience in seeing how much books have to offer. This should not be “slipped in” if there is time or permitted only for those who have their work done. Story time should be a daily treat open to all.

**Student Librarians.** To use children as librarians and library helpers on a rotating basis stimulates interest. If a child helps keep books in good order and checks them out and in, he becomes acquainted with them. He handles books that he never knew existed before. He keeps books arranged according to subject matter, he looks at them, he touches them. They are his precious possessions, his responsibility. Sometimes he is even inspired to “drum up business” and write advertisements for his favorites.

**Class Book Selection.** There is real interest set in motion too, if one consults the children when ordering new books. It is a good idea to have several suitable titles and themes picked out. All will have personal opinions and become genuinely interested in having a part in choosing books for “our” library. Then when the big day finally arrives, make it a red letter day. Browse, examine, enjoy them thoroughly. You won’t have trouble getting those books in circulation!

**Discussions.** Children love to share, and what they love to share most is something they’ve enjoyed, something which has become a part of them. This can be a book. They get so excited in sharing some funny incident or mysterious plot, they make the book sound irresistible. And that’s what we’re after, isn’t it? Children must be taught in sharing how to relate only the significant parts of the plot, and to build up important details. This comes with practice. Quite often it is more intriguing not to tell the ending, only to hint at it. This really spurs interest. Discussion not only helps introduce the books but also gives recommendations. This is important, for any child is greatly influenced by another child’s opinion. A “Book of the Week” featured by some

child is good stimulation. Selling a book, having book clubs, having panel discussions are other good ways to get books talked about.

**Dramatizations.** Children are born actors so why not let them dramatize interesting scenes from books to arouse curiosity? The real value of reading depends upon how well a child can relive a story and how he can identify himself with the characters and action. He gets great satisfaction if he can experience this and portray his feelings to his friends. The more interested he has become in one book, the more intense will be his desire to read another. Guessing games with pantomimes, charades, and “What Am I?”, “Who is it?” type of acting are fun and easy. A simple dialogue, adapted from a play which several have read, makes good motivation. Keep it simple and planned by the children! Anything elaborate or too time consuming wipes out the purpose. A make believe radio broadcast with screen, announcer, and simple sound effects awakens interest. So do puppet shows with pipe cleaners, clothes pins, or hand masks. Have each child actor read conversation directly from the book as he rewrote it specifically for the scene, in a voice befitting the voice of each character. Kids love this, but beware of too much, it could easily become “old stuff” and monotonous.

**Art Expression.** To be creative is the thing! Show what you feel inside and express it. This can be done through drawing and art work. Attractive book jackets can be displayed on the bulletin board or in the hall. These could show a scene or character on the front cover with a brief summary on the back, and a picture and descriptive paragraph taken from the book stapled inside. A gallery of book characters made from clay or soap, or from chalk or crayon drawings awakens interest as does a mural made from scenes in a book. A diorama or a sand table reproducing a setting make real conversation pieces. Some children like to make moving pictures of a book, which is a series of pictures on paper rolls attached to rollers. Some like to illustrate travel or animal books with scrapbook pictures and captions.

**Language and Writing.** Besides art, one can develop interest in reading through written work. A letter to a friend, real or make believe, recommending a book, a letter to an author expressing appreciation, original endings to a story or book, are some means of written expression showing book interest. Some pupils enjoy keeping a booklet on “My Favorite Pictures” which are descriptive paragraphs from books

giving definite mental images. Others enjoy making their own poetry anthology books.

A card file with brief student evaluations of books is interesting for others to examine. They love to see what others have said about it. In the same way, a loose leaf folder with students' summaries is interesting for all. These should not be tedious or time consuming. They should include only such simple answers to dittoed questions as, part you liked best, name of main characters, brief description of best liked character, brief summary telling in a few sentences what the book was about, encircling a suitable word that tells what kind of a book it is, and encircling a word that tells what was the opinion of the child about the book. These summaries should be voluntary, should be available to all, and should be filed alphabetically.

**Correlation With Content Subjects.** In addition to art and language work, volunteer reading can fit very well into the content subjects such as geography, history, and science. Understandings can be stretched and horizons broadened by reading from related books. A child cannot help but develop a deeper love for history as he struggles along with Lincoln in the one room cabin and sprawls with him in front of the open fire, as he hears Patrick Henry's eloquent impassioned plea "Give me liberty or give me death," or as he races madly down the road with Paul Revere on "the 18th of April in '75." History can come alive and reading will help make it so.

**Audio-Visual Aids.** In passing, we could mention the audio-visual aids toward motivating interest in books and independent reading. Recording stories on tape, film strips and film versions of books, long playing records, and using TV and radio programs to incite interest are modern methods of appealing to the youth of today.

**Book Clubs.** Encouraging children to join book clubs such as the Arrow Book Club or the Weekly Reader Book Club provides an excellent way of exciting interest and of initiating ownership of highly recommended books, which are reasonably priced.

**Lending Library.** When children own books of their own, they are often impelled to lend them to their friends. This should be encouraged. Set up a few shelves for a "lending library" and you're in business. Each child takes care of his books and of their distribution. How proud he feels to see books stacked on the shelf behind his name! And how

glad he is to see another child share his enthusiasm about a book that was “tops.”

**Parent Cooperation.** Finally, in your voluntary reading program, get the parents behind you. Talk with them, have them visit you, help them to understand and share your enthusiasm. Too many parents still have the notion that only lazy kids read and that reading is a waste of time. They mistakenly believe that Johnny is reading so he “won’t have to mind the baby.” Some believe that a “kid ought to learn to do homework and not sit with his face in a book all night.” How wrong and misinformed they are! Show them, tell them! **READING IS LEARNING**, and the reading habit firmly entrenched now can make Johnny a happier, more well rounded, more understanding citizen of tomorrow, And don’t stop there. Make it clear to them that today, right now, Johnny is already reaping the harvest.

He is showing steady growth in reading by using the skills of reading and reaching out for meaning. He is using leisure time wisely, he never lacks for something to do. He is expanding his outlook and broadening his scope. He is seeing the wonders of people and the world. He is building up a stockpile of impressions, he is seeing through the eyes of others and multiplying many times his own experiences and insights. He is learning to discriminate and appreciate good books through his own literary escalator. And finally he is learning to better understand himself by seeing vicariously examples of courage, responsibility, ambition, and initiative.

No, mother, don’t stop him. Let him read. And teachers, encourage it, nurture it, foster it! Make volunteer reading a regular part of your school program, not something peripheral or extra-curricular. To encourage recreational, voluntary reading, and to provide opportunities to establish it, is a legitimate and desirable activity. It cannot be left to chance!

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