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FOCUS ON THE LEARNER

Sara R. Swickard

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There is perhaps no area of human experience that has as many "authorities" as are involved in the continual controversy concerning the teaching of reading. These "authorities" range from nuclear scientists to almost any layman who has achieved fourth grade proficiency in reading. This search for *the* answer may prove to be the greatest deterrent to a vibrant, zestful program involving the honest quest of children.

When the search is for *an* answer, the searcher often becomes involved in a narrow re-searching of past programs; a new kind of manipulation of children, a reappraisal of skills needed and available materials. The results are a new system, a new set of books to replace the old set, a new arrangement of children to fit a new arrangement of materials and techniques.

Eager, creative, professional teachers are asked to fit into narrow, rigid, stereotyped "systems." Energetic, searching, growing boys and girls are asked to respond to materials which have no real content or meaning once the pictures are removed. Children are placed in sorting machines and fed into bins marked "slow," "average," "fast." Human dignity and the feeling of personal worth are made to suffer in order that the "system" may be served.

Could it be that the answers are being sought in the wrong places and by the wrong people? Is it not reasonable to assume that an intelligent, professional teacher working with an individual child knows more about that particular child and his learning nature and power than does anyone else? Is it inconceivable that a professional teacher is in the ideal position to look at a wide range of systems, books, materials and help an individual child select those that hold promise of helping him to grow confidently and with dignity?

Children deserve something better as a teacher than a mere cog in the machine, an accomplished practitioner. Children deserve professional teachers with vision and courage who act on principles rather than dogmas. They deserve teachers who are dedicated to the worth

and dignity of every child. They deserve teachers who seek endlessly to fulfill their function of teaching each child by using those materials and methods which appear to hold the greatest promise for him.

In a school system dedicated to the optimal development of all children, there is need to be more realistic in the approach to standards of achievement in reading. Any arbitrary standard carries with it a subtle acceptance or rejection of certain children. The school tends to accept those children who meet or surpass the standard and reject those who do not. The children in turn tend to accept or reject themselves on the same terms. Thus, the child who is labeled by the school as an under-achiever sees himself as a poor reader and often checks reading off as a way of gaining ego satisfaction. He may cease to try because the task appears impossible.

A flexible standard which is realistically based on the individual child's growth offers him encouragement and self-dedication. If he can be helped to see his successes, however small, he becomes more willing to put forth effort. If he can maintain self respect through the process of learning, then learning becomes more desirable and goals more positive.

If arbitrary standards and pre-designed systems seem to work a hardship on children, then what might take their place? Perhaps what is needed is a set of principles which guide the reading experiences and which allow for the freedom of both teachers and children to pursue realistic, worthwhile, personal goals in reading.

These principles need to be arrived at by groups of teachers and others who know about children and how they grow and develop and learn. These need to be people who are familiar with the research in the field of reading. Some ideas which might serve as a launching platform for such discussions follow.

Children Should Have Teachers Who Read

Young children's main avenue of learning is through imitation. For this reason, many teachers decry the fact that all children are not brought up in reading homes. Of even more concern is the fact that some children arrive at school with no aspiration to read. They love their non-reading fathers, mothers, uncles and aunts, and hence they have no apparent interest in changing the family pattern.

Unfortunately, some teachers spend considerable time regretting the background of these children but do little to change it. Many of

these children do not find any more inspiration to read as a result of the day by day living with the teacher than they found in their own homes.

The teacher may give little, if any, evidence of reading beyond the grade level books from which he or she teaches. The day is spent in routine, dull, skill-building drills and the door to reading aspiration remains closed.

Other teachers, who enjoy reading, leave no stone unturned in helping these youngsters find the magic and thrill of reading which has enriched their own lives. These are the teachers who read vibrant, exciting, dynamic tales to open for these children the wonder of books. They record the children's own stories and help them develop pride in authorship. They "feed in" ideas from their own adult reading which help children extend their ideas and their vision of the world. They provide many books concerned with the real interests of children. Every opportunity to read is utilized.

This teacher is characterized by statements such as: "John, try this book. You will like it." "By the way, Harry, did you read the directions? You will find them helpful." "I think you are right, Beth, I found that same point of view in a book I read last week." Children are encouraged to see how reading "works" and to experience the fun and joy and excitement of books so that the willingness to work on skills develops naturally within the child. He does not just learn how to read—he becomes a reader.

Children Should Have Teachers Who Observe Them and Who Regard Them as Individuals

An honest interest in children must precede any attempt to teach them to read. The first concerns should center around the total development of each child; his interests, his language facility, his experience background, his reaction to stories and books, his physical, mental, and psychological development. A good program for any child must start where that child is.

Many children who have reading problems have them because of the arbitrary choice of material and the arbitrary decision concerning the date on which reading is to start. In other words, a child who may be "closing the gap" between what he *can* read and what the school says he *should* read may find himself in a school situation which starts children reading at the "should-be-able-to" level. When this happens,

the child often tries desperately “to catch up.” Sometimes it is possible for him to do so. On the other hand, it is more likely that he will become discouraged and cease making the effort to read even those books which he can read.

Most of our children want to learn to read. Reading is important to them for it helps them to learn what they want to know. If schools would encourage teachers to engage in the kinds of activities that allow children to reveal their real interests and concerns, then teachers would know where to start and what materials and methods might serve a particular child for his best reading growth.

This means, then, that time should be provided for reasonably free, self-directed activities which afford the teacher the opportunity to observe and record important information. The child who, during library time, picks up a dozen different books and discards each one almost immediately is very different from the one who picks up one book and becomes “lost” in its pictures or content. The child who can express his ideas in a clear and interesting fashion is very different from the one who speaks in such a disjointed way that no one can understand his message. The child who has many rich broad experiences in his home and neighborhood is much more ready to use context clues than the child whose background is fallow and limited.

Too many failures result from children being expected to read material which is either geared above or below their reading level. The former become lost and withdraw from reading, the latter become bored and also may withdraw from the situation. Teachers, then, need to take more time to look at children and put effort into hearing what their behavior is trying to say. The individual child must be the first concern and methods and materials are significant only to the degree that they can serve to help the child move forward. This is the exact reverse of what is happening in many schools where the material and methods are examined and chosen and the child is forced to do the adjusting.

Children Should Experience Success in Reading

Every child needs to be helped to see what he *can* read, rather than be confronted constantly with what he *cannot* read. This does not mean that children should be given a false impression of their own reading skill. It does mean that methods of grouping, choices of teaching methods and materials, and the teacher’s attitude toward the

child's reading should be designed to help him see his progress, not his failures. He needs to believe that he can read and that the task is worth the effort. Some teachers who accept the importance of success are doing interesting things with "lost" readers.

One way which appears to bring results is to present the child with several books below his actual reading level. After he reads a few pages of each book the teacher informs him that the book is too easy for him. By the time the teacher presents a book at the child's actual reading level, he is able to look at a whole stack of books which the teacher has termed "too easy." Now the problem changes, it is not that he can't read; but rather, that he needs to develop more skill. Somehow this makes a difference to many poor readers who have always been shown what they cannot read.

Creative, professional teachers find other ways to build this feeling of confidence to move forward. No effort should be spared to kindle the child's view of himself as a reading person. Most people find it impossible to keep trying to develop any skill, or solve any problem, when the results are continuously frustrating.

Children Should Have at Least "Equal Time" Provided for Reading Materials of Their Own Choice

In some situations, basal reading books are used as the prime source for teaching children how to read. Certainly other materials must be used for practicing this growing skill. Children must not be permitted to assume that the basal reading book is the whole of reading. Why learn the skill at all if it has no functional use in the life of the child?

Teachers and others must make sure that every school is equipped with many and varied books. If reading is important, then books must be available and time must be planned for reading and sharing these books.

One small community asked a consultant for help with the reading program. The children of this community did not appear to do much reading. The consultant discovered that the school did not have a library and that there was no library in the community. How can children feel that reading is important when money is not allocated for the purchase and housing of the main ingredient in a good reading program; namely, something to read?

If it is believed that books can add to the richness of life and can

be sources of new insights, new information, and new pleasures, then many books and time to read them become musts.

Children and Teachers Should Utilize Opportunities for the Joint Evaluation of Growth in Reading

In an era of tape recorders, teaching machines, programmed books, and the like, there appears to be new opportunities for helping children evaluate their own reading skills.

Some teachers find it helpful to make at least three tapes of each child's reading. This practice allows the child to record his reading and then listen to himself. It also allows him to hear his progress from one tape to the next. Such a plan permits the teacher to raise questions, make suggestions, and help the child move forward in terms of what he believes he needs to do. Learning to read more effectively becomes the responsibility of the learner and the teacher becomes more of a teacher and less of a judge.

Many teachers are working out plans for listening to each child read individually, on some sort of scheduled basis. One teacher reviewed her program and discovered two ten-minute periods each day when nothing of importance seemed to be happening. She started listening to each of four children read for five minutes every day. With a total of thirty-two children, this means that she hears each child read alone at least twice a month. Now the children are helping her look for more time as they feel that this undivided attention to individual problems is helpful.

The above list represents only a small fraction of the many ideas which need to be explored if reading is to be improved. The responsibility of individual teachers and school systems is great. No one can deny that following an organized system is less time consuming and less strenuous. The rewards of a creative approach to problem solving are also great. Usually, those teachers who seek constantly to find new and better ways to teach reading are rewarded by better reading and infinitely more satisfying living in the classroom.

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