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Provocative Reading Experiences

by

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We are well aware of the complexities we face today in teaching our children to be able readers. It is a much bigger problem than to be able to verbalize words phonetically. Experts in the field of research in psychology, child development, and reading have contributed a great deal of valuable knowledge to aid teachers in the skill of teaching children to read. These ideas are being successfully practiced and we are producing capable readers. However, there is one phase of reading that needs greater stress. To derive the greatest benefit from living in our democracy and to cope with our fast changing world, our children need to be more than good and able readers. We must help our children do critical thinking through provocative reading experiences.

Learning to Read Critically

To be able to read critically children must learn to evaluate data and distinguish facts from opinions. They must learn to determine the relevance and to judge the reasonableness of content. Then generalizations can be made from facts. In the early stages of reading, children learn to distinguish fanciful stories from true stories. They realize a particular story cannot be true, because animals can not really talk or because there really are no fairies. This evaluation of reading material must be continued. As the children develop in reading and their reading includes a larger variety of materials, the distinction between the fanciful and the real and between opinion and fact is not so obvious. Children have to be taught how to read and interpret the material in the light of their purposes. We must help them to define their purposes to keep in mind what they read, and to not accept what they read as final. We must help them locate additional sources which will provide more ideas. Children, of course, are willing to accept what they learn from their first source of reading.

When children's statements are challenged, we often hear them say, "The book said so." This response gives us a clue to helping them

evaluate their information. Now children are showing a readiness to recognize the distinction between fact and opinion as they examine the printed page.

Values of Using More Than One Source of Information

The use of “a book” or “the book” is no longer sufficient. With scientific discoveries and changes in the political life of nations occurring at such a rapid pace, it is necessary to provide several sources of material so that children can question, compare, and challenge the information. Critical thinking skills will thus be emphasized and taught in a meaningful way.

To do critical thinking, children must have a background of information. They cannot be critical of something about which they know nothing. Whether a child is doing critical thinking will depend on his background of information and whether he is willing to suspend judgment regarding that information. Most children do not learn to think critically by themselves. They need help in becoming critical thinkers. This is the responsibility of the teacher and an important phase of reading to be stressed in the development of the reading program.

Children's Differences in Growth

Children are as different in growth in reading abilities and interests as in physical development. We do not hold them back in physical growth. We should not hold them back in reading. Let's permit our children to grow, develop, and expand in reading skills. There comes a time in every child's reading progress when he is ready to branch out, explore, and try his skills in a variety of materials. Each child reaches a maturation level when he no longer needs daily help with word recognition techniques. He is ready to think and independently try his skills. Children today have curious minds. They are observing. They want to know about the past, the world about them today, and more about what they see and learn on television. It is, therefore, our responsibility to not only allow but encourage children to read for various purposes.

The Value of Independent Reading

The daily "round robin" reading in groups from books alike is very aimless reading. A continuation of this pattern does not give the children the opportunity to do the type of reading they need. Children will not know what they can do with their reading skills if they are not allowed to attempt to read different materials and thus test their abilities. When children are reading material of their own choice because of an interest, they will demand to know what the author is telling them. There is then a purpose for independently using their skills in figuring out words and in using their efforts to concentrate on the material and comprehend what the printed page is telling them.

Eight and nine year old children at the third grade level are more than ready to explore and broaden their reading interests. Individualized reading is a means of encouraging children to read a wide variety of materials. To stimulate this enriched reading program, books of all types and reading levels are of course necessary in any classroom.

Children seek knowledge and information. They want to learn about things. One of their best sources is through books. In our third grade, books of all types—fairy and adventure stories, social studies and science books—are displayed on the library tables the first day of school. The children are encouraged to browse, examine, and explore this wide field of reading. Within a few days, they have made their selection and are ready to settle down to read.

Individualized Reading

In our individualized reading program each child comes to the teacher to read individually. At the beginning of the year there are some children who still need further help in reading with the teacher from a basic book. Word recognition techniques may be a difficulty. Grouping words into thought units, may be a problem. Help in the basic reading skills may still be a daily necessity for many children. However, this does not mean that they may not also be encouraged to explore other materials of their interest and at their reading level. It is never too early for a child to vary his reading and try his skills with all types of materials.

Children's Discoveries Through Reading

After the children have had an opportunity to recognize their interests and read extensively on a subject, they begin to show a desire to share their information. This is exciting to watch: their minds develop, their vocabularies grow, and they use terms and expressions which they have gained from their variety of reading. Critical thinking was now beginning to take place. For example, Mary was interested in the planet Jupiter. She read from *Discovering Our World* and was thrilled with her information. She wanted to know more about Jupiter so she read *The Picture Book of Astronomy*. She was then ready to share her information with the group. She was impressed mostly with the fact that Jupiter had eleven moons. The rest of the children were interested, too, for they knew the earth had only one. When the discussion was over, we gave Mary a third book to read which was *The First Book of Astronomy*. This book said that Jupiter had twelve moons. Mary came running to the teacher, very frustrated, to impart this information. We presented Mary's latest findings to the group. A discussion took place as to which was correct. Finally one child suggested that *The First Book of Astronomy* might be a newer book. So Mary got the first two books and looked up the copyright dates. Sure enough, one was 1947 and one was 1945. *The First Book of Astronomy* was published in 1959. This brought the generalization that when we are reading in science the information might differ because scientific findings are subject to change. We came to the conclusion that since the first two books were written, scientists had probably discovered that Jupiter had a twelfth moon. The children concluded that, "One book never gives you all the answers or perhaps even the correct one." They became conscious of copyright dates and interested in looking at them when they read for information.

Ann was reading about the planet Saturn. She, too, had some problems in thinking. She read *Exploring the Planets* which said that Saturn's three rings were pieces of moons which had been broken up by the pull of Saturn's gravity. *The Golden Book of Astronomy*, another source, said they were tiny moons and little pieces of ice. Here, another idea was presented. Ann read a third book, *The First Book of Astronomy*, which said Saturn's rings were fragments of rock and ice. These varied ideas were presented to the group. In their discussion the children came to the conclusion that the rings were made of frag-

ments of moons, that the rocks were from the moons, and that because Saturn was so far away from the sun, it was cold. Therefore, the particles were then covered with ice! But information from three books was necessary to get the true understanding of Saturn's rings. One book did not give us all the information.

John had many interests and read in many fields, but his main interest was dinosaurs. The sixteen books which he read on prehistoric life and prehistoric animals gave him a broad background. He often shared his information. We asked him if he found his information pretty much the same in his books. He said that this type of information did not change much except once in a while there were new discoveries. He went on to explain that the greatest difference he had found was in reading about prehistoric plant life. One book said that millions of years ago plants were washed up out of the sea and eventually took root, got water from the land, and developed into different kinds of plants growing in sun and air. Another book said the water dried up and left the plants on land to develop into land plants. "But," as John explained further, and in his own words, "the idea is basic." The rest of the children were able to comprehend this concept and soon they were using this expression in their discussions, "The idea is basic."

David was interested in insects. One day during our sharing period the subject of fireflies came up. The children wondered what made them light up. I explained what I knew. I said that I thought the fireflies had a chemical in their bodies which made them glow and we could see this glow when they lifted their wings. David was not quite satisfied with my answer so he tried to explain it, but found he was not too clear either. None of our many insect books at school answered this particular question on fireflies. David said he had a book at home which explained it and he would bring it to school. The book was "*The Boy's Book of Insects*." The next day he brought it and read it to himself and then explained it to us. He said that the firefly's body contained luciferin and when mixed with air it produced a heatless light. He further explained that this light is still a mystery to scientists who have not been able to produce the same effect. Although this information was comprehensible to the children, the words David used in his explanation were fascinating to them. For a while some of the children were referring to "heatless light" and "luciferin." But terms used in the insect world were very familiar to David and used with ease because of the vocabulary and background developed through his reading.

These are a few examples of critical thinking which children developed through reading. All of the children have experienced critical thinking in their individualized reading, but, of course, some more extensively than others.

Gains From the Opportunity to do Resource Reading

Children have to be taught and given the opportunity to learn to read critically. Thus, they develop and use comprehension abilities in reading for specific purposes and realize that they need to read many books for satisfactory information. We want children to be able to read and think and gain ideas not just to say words. When they are reading in an area such as social studies or science, the skills we are trying to develop in reading can best be accomplished by reading from a variety of books. If they are all reading from the same book, there is little opportunity to contribute new information or for exchange of ideas. There is only the one idea which everyone has read from the same book which must be accepted. There is little opportunity for interaction among the children or for stimulation of thought. The information is merely read and the children questioned until the information from the assignment has been exhausted. This type of reading requires little thought. The element of comparison of ideas is lacking. Third grade children are ready to be guided in their thinking and interpretive reading by using a variety of books.

There are many areas in the curriculum where purposes in reading may be established by the children with the guidance of the teacher. Too many times children are reading in a subject area with the assignment as the goal. When purposes are established, children are then stimulated to do provocative thinking.

The Development of Units Provide Reading Opportunities

The development of a typical third grade unit on pioneer life is an example of children reading with thought and purpose. The children have an understanding of the present through their units on home, school, and community life in the kindergarten, first, and second grades. In third grade the children are ready to be taken out of the present and realize there has been a past. A unit early in the year designed

to give them a more mature concept of their present community should precede the unit on pioneer life and help them to gain a more comprehensive understanding of the past. A background of information dealing with pioneer life and an introduction of the vocabulary which the children will encounter in their individual reading must first be established. This may be accomplished by reading several books on pioneer stories to the children, such as Laura Ingalls Wilder's books, *The Little House in the Big Woods*, *On the Banks of Plum Creek*, and *The House on the Prairie*. We find many times after one or two of these books have been read, the children will continue to read others themselves.

When background, vocabulary, and interest have been established, the children have sufficient understanding to set up their own purposes for reading. Children want to know how the pioneers lived, how they dressed, how they got their light, what they ate, what their hardships were, what every pioneer family had to take with them in their covered wagons, what their laws were, what types of schools they had, how they built their homes, the kind of entertainment they had, how they protected themselves at night while they were traveling.

Recognizing and Selecting Pertinent Information

Then many books and all types and levels of reading are made available to the children. They may be sets of readers, social studies books, or story books dealing with this subject. Many readers have stories entitled, "Long Ago," "Early Days" which will have ideas pertaining to the topic and will aid the children in their search for information. The children may decide on the length of time they wish to spend on this reading. They will no doubt say they need to spend at least a week! When working on this unit with our third grade we have allowed all their reading to be centered on this purpose. The interest is keen, the challenge to find as much information as possible in their designated time is an extremely high motivation. However, the children need to be taught how to do this type of reading.

With our individualized reading program we daily read with each child from the book of his choice. The information which would answer their questions was, of course, in story form. The answers they were seeking were not definitely stated. The information had to be in-

terpreted into their answers. This was a problem and was an experience in interpretive reading. A child would read a page and say, "There is no information there," because the story did not list "hardships of pioneers," for instance, in a one, two, three fashion. The information was hidden, woven into the story and not obvious to the child. He needed guidance in thinking through the material read in a passage to recognize that there was pertinent information.

After a few days of help with interpretive reading it was gratifying to see the children gain confidence in reading independently and single out information for themselves. In a few days they began to burst out in excitement and say, "Oh, I found the answer to how they build their cabins." Another child would say, "What book is that? I will give you mine. This one tells a lot about what they took with them when they traveled." And the books were exchanged. We could now see the children developing the principle that one book would not tell them all they wanted to know. They were realizing that they had to use many books to satisfy their many purposes.

Interpretive Writing in Relation to Reading

Interpretive writing was then busily begun. Each child had copied the questions which the group had raised. Space was left after each question to write in their information as it was discovered. The pages were stapled into book form. Their writings were frequently checked. Some wrote detailed, creative, interpretive accounts of the information found. Others needed help in clearly defining and interpreting their ideas.

The development of comprehension abilities was extremely important during this interpretive, independent, purposeful reading. The children in this natural, worthwhile type of reading situation learned to use skimming as a means of locating information they wished to read. They learned to evaluate information that was relevant to their purposes and that which was irrelevant. They learned to judge worthwhile material. They used critical thinking. They discovered that one book would say one thing and another book would give a different idea.

All of this development and growth in reading was evident during the discussion periods when the children were ready to share their

information. Several children had exhausted all of the material and had complete answers to all of their questions. Others read what they were able to. All of the children were praised for their efforts and everyone had a happy, satisfied feeling. Many children had added additional information to their papers which they thought was important but had not been suggested by the group.

Two or three questions were chosen for discussion each day. The children who were somewhat limited in their reading abilities and were not able to read extensively were usually called on first to make their contributions. All information was accepted as valuable. Everyone had an opportunity to share in the discussions and feel the importance of his contribution to the group. The more capable readers completed the discussions from their extensive reading from more difficult books.

The most gratifying results were to hear the children say in their reporting, "My book said so-and-so, or "One book said thus-and-so, but another book said such-and-such." The children were now critical readers. They were not satisfied with what one book said. They wanted to consult several.

This can only be accomplished by giving children free rein in reading when they are ready and by providing a large range of reading material. No grade needs thirty of any one kind of book. We want children to read for ideas, to read critically, and to explore materials.

There was a very important generalization which was an outgrowth of our study of pioneers. At the end of the study the children were asked, "Are there pioneers today?" After a few minutes of thought the children said, "Yes." One child said, "The astronauts are pioneers." They were then asked, "What do we mean by pioneers? What kind of people are they?" Several answers were, "They are adventuresome people." "They are strong and not afraid." "They are the first people to do things."

Purposeful, interpretive critical reading, as has been explained in the unit on Pioneer Life, can be carried out in many areas of the curriculum. Science, social studies, and health provide opportunities to promote reading where independence and thinking can grow and develop. Let's let our children grow in reading. To do this, we must provide a variety of material and help them learn the art of reading from all types of books.