

The Importance of People

Column Editor: Peggy Brogan

"A Collection of Sounds"

PETER points a chubby finger at a word on the first page of his book and looks expectantly at his teacher as if to say, "I'm ready to start reading when you're ready to listen."

"No, Peter. Not there," explains Miss Clarke, noticing that Peter is pointing to the last word in the line instead of the first. "You always begin reading here—on the left side of the page. Remember."

Peter doesn't exactly remember—any more than he remembers when Miss Clarke helps him to write over the note he has started for his mother inviting her to visit school. To Peter the confusing part of the note is the fact that he knows he spelled "Dear Mother" right. After all, aren't these the very words along with ever so many others that Peter has learned to sound out during his summer vacation? "Dear" and a few other important words were on a page along with a lot of other silly words in a lesson book his mother bought especially to help him. "Mother" came much later in the lessons and was also on a page along with a lot of other silly words; but Peter remembered "dear" and "mother" and felt good when he could write them on his paper at school. But it seems he wrote "dear" on the right margin of his paper instead of on the left . . . he "wrote backward" was the way Miss Clarke said it.

So now it seems that reading and writing words is even more complicated than it was when he and his mother practiced sounding them out every day except Sunday all summer long. Words start certain places and stories start certain places and letters written home start certain places and Peter can't seem to remember even when he knows his teacher is going to say, ". . . on the left side . . . remember."

Peter's teacher is concerned, particularly when she notices that Peter has trouble remembering when the gym teacher shows him how to kick the big rubber ball with his right foot, seeming always to prefer his left. Still he crayons with his right hand and seems to have no trouble.

And Peter's mother is more than worried when she comes over to school for a conference about Peter's reading. Perhaps she didn't follow directions carefully enough when she taught Peter to sound out the words during the summer. Perhaps Peter is in one of those awful schools she reads about—a school where the teachers just don't believe in sounding out words and therefore are not willing to work with Peter in terms of what she has taught him. But there must be something terribly wrong with Peter, she thinks, if he can't learn to read the way the book said *all* children are supposed to be able to learn.

Archie rushes eagerly into the house after school. "Did the mailman leave me a package, Mom? Did he?"

Yes. The mailman has left a package for Archie, and his mother wonders just what it is that is so important to her son. Before long he shows her—twenty-four religious mottos for hanging on the wall which he, Archie, is going right out to sell.

"I didn't even have to pay for them, Mom. See. All I do is sell them and keep a lot of the money myself or else win a bicycle or sleeping bag or fishing kit . . ." and Archie is off on his new adventure.

It is difficult for Archie's mother to know what to do and even more difficult two weeks later when he says: "But I don't understand it, Mom. My comic book said I wouldn't have any trouble. Look right here it says: 'They will sell like wildfire at 35¢ each . . . neighbors buy the instant you show them . . . many buy six or more.' But I've only sold three—to grandma and Aunt Alice and Mrs. Hoak. And now my time is up and I don't even have enough money to send the pictures back. What am I going to do, Mom?"

What is Archie going to do? And what is his mother going to do? They are living in an age when adults who have learned to read and spell feel free to send persuasive messages to other adults and even to children—messages which make all sorts of promises to the person who is able to read what the words say and do what they tell him to.

Ben looks at the note Johnny has just passed to him before arithmetic class begins: "Mom says I can't have you to my party because you're a dirty

jew." The writing is clear-cut. No word is misspelled. Johnny has not confined himself to the basic vocabulary of his reader in sending Ben his letter. Having mastered the sounds of the alphabet, Johnny has the whole world of words at his disposal for sending messages. And he is more than a little smug about this skill he has perfected. After all, isn't his mom always bragging about her son who can read anything that's written? And look at Ben! You can almost see him hurt. Haven't Johnny's words hit their mark with just as much accuracy as a physical message of some kind—say a slap or good hard push?

What Does It Mean To Read?

Mr. Tipton looks at his notes for the opening meetings of school. What will he and his teachers talk about this year? Last year was so good. Sure. There were kids coming on double session and one group had to meet in the auditorium. And the PTA got all excited once because the children seemed to be spending too little time on reading. But by and large people were working together to do something about their problems. The PTA committee came over to school and visited and they saw that the children were learning to read in a very important way when they studied the persuasive techniques of advertising and when they signed up for jobs on the big bulletin board in the front hall and in many other realistic ways. "It's just different from when we went to school, but then we didn't have the same reading problems," was the way one PTA member expressed it, and before long a meeting was given over

to discussing some of the reading needs of today's children.

And their plans for new buildings—now here was something to really feel good about—three new schools for primary children to be built in the next few years—schools where the community's youngest members could have their best possible chance to learn good feelings about themselves and others in their earliest school experiences.

Most of all, they really seemed to be getting somewhere on this business of helping individual children to learn in patterns right for them. How proud he and his teachers were that visitors to the school couldn't identify one set system as *the* way all children were supposed to be learning. There was a togetherness about the way in which teachers and administrators and children and community members kept constantly looking for better ways for learning. They were beginning to develop ways for communicating with one another so that their anxieties as well as their pride in accomplishment could be shared.

But now there was this new reading scare to do something about—one brought about by a book everyone seemed to be reading. With all the demands being put on teachers' time of course there would be some tempted to try this oversimplified method by which *all* children are supposed to be able to learn. With all their many reasons for feeling anxious, of course there would be some parents who would welcome this easy answer—and who would be putting pressure on the school to welcome it too.

But what does it mean to read—for

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a human being to read—a human being living in a democratic society, that is? Perhaps reading is just a collection of sounds in certain arrangements when it is looked at *out there* somewhere. But what does it look like inside a human being? What does it look like in Peter's living? Archie's? In Ben's and yes, in Johnny's?

Why don't Peter's hands and eyes and feet move easily together? Is it because he hasn't learned certain sounds or to start on the left side? Or is there something more basic to human integration—something so basic that it might differ from person to person depending upon many kinds of circumstances in living?

Why wasn't Archie able to see through the persuasive advertising of his comic—advertising written by members of an earlier generation who learned to read by an earlier generation's successful methods? Perhaps for Archie too there is more to reading than knowing how to pronounce words. Maybe the ability to pronounce and spell words without even needing to know the context, and to call this pronouncing and spelling *reading* is too oversimplified for a real alive boy living in a world where real alive adults *do* pay attention to context when they write things especially for this real alive boy to read.

Perhaps Johnny and his mother should not feel so pleased about his skill. They may need to be helped to realize that reading in the living of alive people is a skill in communication. Perhaps they need to be helped to see that the messages which Johnny has learned so accurately to send are not so accurate after all—not accurate,

that is, when looked at in terms of the kind of communication Johnny needs to have between himself and other people in his democratic society.

Maybe Mr. Tipton should feel furious instead of discouraged—furious that he and his hard-working staff and children and parents have met this interruption to their important problem-solving. Perhaps there is more to reading than just an organized collection of sounds when it is viewed in the living of real people in a democratic society.

Perhaps there is a responsibility that goes with writing words that other people will read—especially when the words have to do with children's learning. Perhaps no one person has a right to defy the uniqueness of human personality by selling one little system that will work for all human beings. Perhaps no one person has a right to say that a system borrowed from the past supersedes all of the collective effort of all of the people who have been spending countless hours without extra pay trying always to find just one more clue that will make teaching-learning more meaningful to that one kid who doesn't seem to latch on to any of the ways that work with others.

Perhaps in the insecurity of times which seem to invite oversimplified systems for solving many problems, it is important for school people to renew their faith. Little systems which aim to abstract learning from individually unique and socially significant living fall short in the face of a belief in the importance of people.

—PEGGY BROGAN, *professional staff, Child Education Foundation, 535 E. 84th Street, New York 28, New York.*

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