

Letters to the Editor

An Approach to the Teaching of Reading

Cleveland, Ohio
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Editor, *Educational Leadership*

Dear Sir:

The teaching of reading has always been a central concern of educators. This was true when the school curriculum was narrowly limited to the teaching of the "Three R's." It has perhaps been even more true during recent decades since the curriculum has been expanded and enriched. Educators have done more research in reading than in any other field. The professional literature abounds with significant studies about reading. People in the related disciplines of psychology, biology, anthropology, and sociology have contributed richly to our information about factors that influence children's ability to read.

Sometimes it would seem that this research has been directed more towards an explanation of why some children make slow progress in reading. We have been more sensitized to the effects of emotional problems, environment, varying learning rates, eye development, learning capacity, and the like. This information has made us more understanding, perhaps more patient. It has also provided us with some legitimate excuses for our less successful teaching efforts. This has been comforting. The knowledge that we have gained has had less of an effect, however, upon our ways of teaching children to read.

To be sure, we more nearly recognize the importance of the pre-reading period. We plan excursions with the children and record the events in "experience stories." We introduce children to the wealth and wonder of the glorious children's literature. We make liberal use of pictures to study sequence of activities, likenesses and differences. We help develop auditory discrimination through the use of rhymes and sound games. We use standardized instruments to help evaluate the child's readiness for reading and, later, his progress.

When we begin to teach reading *per se* it is the general tendency to do so in small groups. The traditional number is three. It is becoming less popular to call these groups "Red Birds," "Blue Birds," "Fairies," "Butterflies," or similar fanciful names. It is somehow considered better taste or more modern to designate them "Mary's Class" or "Tom's Group" or "The Class Reading 'Skippy.'" Each group takes its turn in joining the teacher for the reading of the day's story. Once the class has assembled the usual pattern is to introduce the new words, ask the children to read the material silently, and then have each child read a portion of the story aloud. Interspersed with this process questions are asked to test comprehension and to invite reaction to the story. It is customary during this reading class to have some children whose attention wanders, be it to harmlessly looking

out the window or to annoyingly teasing the classmate in the neighboring seat. There are others who become quite bored with the slow pace of the reading. Their turning of the pages is more rapid than the majority so that when it is their turn to read aloud they must be brought back and shown the place.

Every teacher has experienced the dilemma of grouping children for reading instruction in an acceptable manner. Learning rates and potentials vary so. Within the limits of the traditional three groups the range is often so great that the teacher has misgivings about the group assignment. Would it be better for Jim to be thought of as a "good reader" in the middle group or would it be more stimulating for him to be considered a "fair reader" in the top group? Sometimes the teacher resolves this quandary by having Jim meet with both groups. Every teacher has experienced also the social pressure that some parents exercise in relationship to the reading group assignment of their own child. Social prestige is threatened by an assignment to the middle or lowest group. True, usually the child does not recognize the status threat but the parents feel it keenly! There are times when a teacher regroups a child in order to protect him from parental attitudes.

Individualized Reading

In spite of some of the instructional disadvantages to the traditional reading groups, some of which are suggested above, the pattern continues to be the accepted one. There are some voices being raised that advocate a different teaching method, namely, an individualized reading program. Some teachers have been quietly using this plan for years. Out of their own experience they learned that this was a more effective ap-

proach to reading. Some of these teachers have written about their work as indicated by occasional articles in professional magazines. Teachers College, Columbia University, has developed, under the direction of Alice Miel, an excellent film entitled "Individualizing Reading Instruction in the Classroom." Perhaps the experiences of these people will encourage other teachers to explore the possibilities of this different approach.

The need for an individualized reading program is probably greater on the upper elementary level than the primary. The biggest reason for this is the ever broadening range of reading abilities that becomes apparent. Within almost any average class group we find a reading achievement differential of several years. It becomes increasingly difficult to group the children effectively for instruction. Many teachers have learned that it makes better sense to help the children select appropriate books and then let them read at their own rates. During the reading periods the teacher visits with the individuals—perhaps a dozen one day, a different dozen the next—sometimes hearing them read a portion of the book aloud, perhaps just chatting about the story. Sometimes written book reports are required. Often children are invited to talk about their books to the total class so that appreciations may be broadened and reading further stimulated. There are usually some in the class who would benefit from a small reading group experience. The teacher then meets with those children as a group during a portion of the reading period. In association with the reading done in the content subjects, the teacher promotes such particular reading skills as scanning, outlining, summarizing, etc.

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cial scientist. In this event, there might have been the anticipated use of the methods of the social scientist. In no explicit way does one find the readings centered around problems upon which students might hypothesize, criticize or structure eventual discussions.

A second controversial issue is entitled "The Problem of Desegregation." This is, however, not a problem in and of itself, but rather one phase of a larger question, the issue of second class citizenship. To what extent is the existence and maintenance of second class status—for not only the Negro but the Spanish-American, the Oriental, the Mexican—compatible with the democratic process?

A volume dealing with education and society should be concerned at length

with the intellectual schizophrenia of our society. The root of this problem lies in the existence of absolute values in a culture which also has relative values. Values derived from the experimental method are unlikely to maintain compatibility with values derived from something beyond nature. This is the critical factor which no consideration of the school and society can overlook. Although Meltzer, Doby, and Smith have envisaged their book as a supplement rather than basic text material, it will be difficult to justify their failure to get at the heart of the issue of value conflicts, to discuss its causes and—even more important—its effects.

—Reviewed by DAVID Z. TAVEL, *Colorado State College, Greeley, Colorado.*

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There has likely been less experimentation with an individualized reading program on the primary level. Yet some teachers have discovered the rich possibilities here and would recommend it to others. Perhaps the most rewarding efforts come from using the individual method with those children whose reading achievement lies most distant from the median—that is to say, the more advanced children and those who are making the slowest progress. We tend to retard the abler children when we hold them to a group situation and have them wait their turns to read. They should be helped to soar and feel the absorbing joy of the printed pages. The slower child usually gains more from five or ten intimate minutes with his teacher and his book than he gains from a half hour in a reading group composed of his classmates. His attention can be more easily

held and he benefits emotionally as well as academically from "time alone with teacher." Of course the teacher must keep a record of each child's reading progress. This might be a notebook with several pages reserved for each child upon which are noted the book title, page, vocabulary problems, phonetic weaknesses, and similar teaching guides.

In recent years we have frequently heard the term "action research." This writer would like to encourage more teachers to pursue this type of research as related to an individualized reading program. Let us question the long accepted tenet that reading is best taught in groups. Let us search for other methods that may be more productive.

Sincerely yours,

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