

# READING FOR ENJOYMENT AND PERSONAL DEVELOPMENT

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IN ANY discussion of reading it is important to remember that the first literature classes were called reading. These early lessons consisted solely of oral recitations. The major objective was to see that the pupil could associate sound with symbol and produce the proper sounds from the printed page. Whether this activity changed the pupil in any way was not a consideration.

In contrast, today the pragmatic view which says that nothing is important or even exists if it does not make a difference is generally the basis on which we teach reading. In applying the pragmatic test to reading we say that teaching the skill is not defensible if it does not make a difference in children.

Since the days of the *New England Primer* we have had the feeling that reading can help create a virtuous life. We are here neither reviving nor supporting the didactic approach of this early period. Nor are we saying that the prime outcome of reading should be virtue. But things do happen and must happen if reading is to be worth the effort. Our position includes literature and assumes that the best reading is the reading of literature. We will use the terms *literature* and *reading* interchangeably.

The good reader savors the versatility of style and the music of the diction in a piece of literature, just as a concertgoer savors the artistry in a sonata. And like the student of music, the good reader becomes an out of school and post school reader of literature.

The good reader is helped to solve some of his more important personal problems through reading. Insight into himself is the first consideration, for only if he comes to understand his own uniqueness will he be able to understand others. Reading carries him, it is hoped, quickly beyond himself and into the lives of others.

The timid child finds that others are timid, too. The handicapped child finds that other human beings have been handicapped and have overcome the burden. Other children find that loneliness is a common human condition. Still other children learn that our world which is full of beauty has a great abundance of ugliness, too. Accepting first, and then attempting to remove this ugliness can be an outcome

of reading which has "made a difference." In the feelings of belonging, sharing and achieving, the child comes to view his world as less formidable and less forbidding. The thoughts which he cannot express to another being he thinks aloud to himself as he reads and finds acceptable answers.

Matthew Arnold said that conduct is three-fourths of life. If one assumes that reading and literature can make a difference, that they can affect conduct and character, they then become essential ingredients in life. But let us emphasize that the reading of literature is complete only when the reader himself goes on to consider that it can or may make a difference in him. John Ciardi says that a book can make a reader "quietly passionate" about an idea, an event or a person. Teachers have witnessed this phenomenon quite frequently, such as when a child is so absorbed in a book that he fails to notice that other children have gone to the playground for recess. The lure of other activities fails when good reading and good reader meet.

### **Reading For Pleasure**

Enjoyment, like beauty, may be its own excuse for being. We, therefore, do not have to defend the pleasure that one can find in reading; as teachers we should expect and insist that it occur. However, enjoyment is not an automatic outcome. Nor will it occur from the same reading experience for all children and youth. They respond to reading according to their experiences, personalities and preoccupations. Their interpretations differ just as their tastes do. And we should not forget that one interpretation may be as true or honest as another. Most of all, we must remind ourselves that their pleasures may not be our pleasures, nor the same as those of other class members.

We read at four levels: (a) We associate printed words and sounds. (b) We read for literal meanings. (c) We interpret what we read. (d) We undergo the "shock of recognition" when we encounter a new idea or undergo a new experience. The last two types of reading are the ones most relevant to our discussion here. They rest on skill in handling emotive and connotative language. The very young child will derive pleasure simply from getting sounds from the letters on the page. And readers with specific objectives will enjoy finding facts. In general, however, the pleasure which reading gives comes from interpretive and recognition reading, from emotive and connotative language. Unfortunately we know little about these last two types of reading, but some research is being done on them.

The findings are fragmentary and disjointed, but we now know that children do not respond strongly to the commoner literary devices, for example, personification and metaphor, before they are in their teens. We know that children suspend objectivity when they are emotionally involved in reading. As a third example of our limited knowledge, we know that to enjoy fully a piece of literature a reader has to combine knowledge of the sensuous, the connotative, and the technical aspects of language.

We are becoming more perceptive of what a good reader must know to increase his skill. We are learning that we can still teach a child the shorthand which a poet

employs and not destroy the poet's artistic creation. We have come a long way from teaching all children twenty-six figures of speech. Such an approach is viewed, and correctly so, as antithetical to pleasure.

Reading presents human nature—the best, the worst, the in-between for inspection and study. The great range of diverse, diffuse and divergent ways in which we human beings have acted and thought, and are capable of acting and thinking, are laid bare. Perhaps it even exceeds the personal example in shaping character.

To relive, through another person's account, moments of history in the lives of people of consequence and those not so consequential can only have great relevance to what one thinks and believes. To obtain vicarious security where such stability in one's life is impossible; to achieve through the derring-do of others; to dream when the elements of fancy or beauty must forever remain outside of oneself and one's immediate environment; and to find love where it is otherwise unknown are all common outcomes of reading. They are necessary elements in the full, normal development of children. Frequently they can be provided only by reading.

### **The Teacher's Role**

Implicit in this discussion have been many things which teachers can and should do in fostering reading for personal development and for pleasure. Uppermost, of course, must be to know children, reading, and books. Enthusiasm and love of all three can almost overcome a knowledge gap, if there is one. Enthusiasm and love are exemplified by the teacher who reads to children—at offbeat moments—selections she has enjoyed and which she knows they will react to. The current emphasis on oral language is based in large part on the value of giving children the tunes of our language as well as the technical knowledge of its makeup and function.

Books like food or dress must be offered in an attractive and esthetic fashion. Timely, frequently changed, accessible displays of books must lure and trap the reluctant reader. The weak reader must be nurtured and nourished by a most satisfying diet if he is to gain strength in his reading. Finally, frequent reading which ends with the act—no postmortems, no wakes, no attempts at reincarnation of the writer must be an oft followed dictum. Holding the reader and his reactions, feelings, successes and frustrations as more sacred than the act of reading or the selection he reads cannot be stressed too strongly. The value of reading must be measured by the difference it makes in the reader.

To sum up, it should be emphasized that reading should keep its present major position in the curriculum only if it helps the individual in some of his more important personal problems. It will maintain its popularity—and there is very great room for improvement here—only if it gives readers great enjoyment. With children this means that it must prove a strong competitor for other attractions.

We only have to look to the great popularity of the "How to . . ." books in any of our public libraries to recognize that people are aware of what reading can do to them and for them in meeting their needs. While such books are not literature, the devices employed in their writing and the motivation which makes people read them are two important considerations for reading in our classrooms. ☞

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