

# READING AS CONTACT

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THE teaching of reading in our schools today is lost in a jungle of detail and outdated beliefs and procedures. There is a tremendous need to climb to a point where the essence of what we now know about children and how they learn and our contemporary understandings of what reading really is, and its true goals can put the acquisition of the art of reading into more accurate perspective. From such a vantage point we can set our course to reach our goals as directly and effectively as possible.

In all our normal, natural, self-directed aspects of living, we determine our objective and move toward it as directly as possible, detouring around roadblocks as necessary. Only in our highly contrived cloverleaf highway construction do we turn east to go west. Here we must give up dependence on our own knowledge and expertise and give ourselves over to the direction of others—the signs. Too many of our procedures in reading start children out, like the cloverleaf, in opposite or unuseful directions unrelated to real goals, which, unlike the cloverleaf, may hinder or prevent expeditious arrival at the destination.

Our goal in reading, as virtually all will agree—even though we may not express it in these terms—is to achieve maximum communication with such pleasure and satisfaction that individuals choose it with regularity and for a wide variety of purposes from a range of readily available alternatives.

## Communication

The key in reading is “communication,” communication of ideas, feelings, understandings and information. We now realize that effective communication takes place through either oral or written media to the extent that the individual can bring personal meaning to *these* ideas in *this* context. Personal meaning is developed through contact. This experience must be direct and personal until such time as enough background has been accumulated in each type of situation that it may be synthesized by the individual. Only then can it provide a basis for bringing personal meaning to the reading vicariously. Individuals may be able to attach similar verbalizations to various situations but this may only reflect others' statements and carry virtually no real meaning.

This does not happen automatically, even with experienced adults. One must first be able to abstract or generalize meaning from the experience, for only generalizations transfer. Next, one must see the relationship between the experiences. Both of these abilities require considerable maturity and familiarity with the situations. Many times adults fail to be able to use transferred meanings as vicarious experience to bring meaning to new situations. Expecting children to make abstractions in the first place and transfer them to a new situation they do not understand very well, is highly questionable.

### **Pleasure and Satisfaction**

Referring to our previously stated goal, the next important concept is "pleasure and satisfaction." A common rather cynical interpretation of what brings pleasure and satisfaction to children has developed too much out of experience with them when confined to the quite indefensible situations existing in far too many of our classrooms. Here the *teacher* determines goals and purposes, the materials and activities which *he* decides the children are to use to reach them, and *his* evaluation of how well each had learned what *he* wanted them to learn. This results in children's finding pleasure and satisfaction in something non-school. "What do you like best about school?" "Recess."

However, children must have a significant part in planning and deciding on the activities which will result in their needed learnings. As they feel some measure of success in their own accomplishment, they gain great satisfaction and pleasure, since these activities hold personal meaning for the child. In these

situations we more often hear, "Can I stay in at recess to finish my project?"

Today we know that children can successfully become increasingly self-directing, self-evaluating and that their greatest drive is toward a feeling of adequacy. This knowledge must be put to use in all learning situations.

Back to our goal for teaching reading, we find next the real basis for evaluation of success—"that individuals choose it with regularity for a wide variety of purposes from a range of readily available alternatives." The one who *can* read but *does not* may well be worse off than the one who cannot but wants to. The former first must overcome his feelings of discomfort, disinterest or inadequacy which have become associated with his experience with reading. He has found it too hard, or too easy, or meaningless, because of its inanity, or his lack of contact with the ideas or situations involved, or because reading was always a threatening situation since he never felt he could do as well as the teacher expected.

On the other hand, any child who has learned to talk *can* learn to read for it is a far less difficult process. That is, he can if he has normal use of his eyes, if it can be as meaningful an experience for him and if the school situation does not set up too many activities which are confusing and meaningless to him or demand responses beyond what he feels he can perform.

We have looked at goals for the teaching of reading and explored a little each part of the statement. Now let us see what some of the implications may be for setting our course to reach these goals.

Since our first concern is communica-

tion, each child must be able to bring personal meaning to what is to be read. He must have had personal contact with a reasonable proportion of the concepts and situations involved. One criterion is that *no one can read what he cannot talk about in some meaningful way*. The more immature the reader, the more this is true.

### Personal Meaning

There are several implications if schools are going to insure that each child can bring personal meaning to his reading:

1. More of the school time needs to be devoted to real experiences not already a part of those particular children's lives, to which each can bring meaning, thereby enriching each child's personal contacts with his world.

2. The school should help children explore and clarify their contacts with their physical and social world by providing opportunities to express them freely, both orally and in writing. (This may first be by pictures and dictation until the physical writing skills come more easily.)

3. Since each child is the only one who really knows what is meaningful to him, he must have free choice of what he is to read and write. This is just as important in the content areas of the curriculum as in "reading class." One cannot read "reading." What is read is *about* something whether fictional or informational. The child should be aware of the purpose *he* has for reading though it may only be a sincere, "I want to"; not "I'm supposed to." As various experiences and real life situations are discussed, some aspects seem

more important to some children than to others. For some reason, often hard to identify, certain aspects of a problem have more personal meaning. Material a child finds related to these concerns will be read with far more learning, of both process and content, than material which has been assigned.

As he feels free to express himself, every person, child or adult, is eager to talk about that with which he is involved. As he has opportunity to write about it in a non-threatening way (he is helped but not criticized—does not have errors pointed out), he seeks the help *he* feels he needs. He also eagerly looks for and reads related materials and seeks help as he needs it for better understanding. This describes the child every teacher hopes to have: self-directing, self-evaluating and taking the responsibility and initiative for his own learning.

### An Approach to Reading

If this is natural behavior for children, and we believe it is, then why does it not happen more often? What are some logical natural ways we might explore to secure such behavior?

1. Provide a variety of activities or opportunities for experience from which each child may choose, or accept his own chosen activities which may be different from any provided.

2. Help children plan together how they can live and work together, using any problem situations as bases for their rethinking or extended thinking on the matter.

3. Help children recognize their goals and purposes and plan with them ways of implementing these. Such planning can enable children much more effec-

tively to structure their own time to meet their own real needs. It can also free much teacher time for helping individuals or small groups who have a particular need at a particular time.

4. Help children learn more effectively to evaluate their learning and to identify their own needs. If we are to be able to do this usefully, teachers will need to look at *all* a child's performance as evidence of his present learning—real learning which results in significant changes in what he does and how he feels. When evaluation is viewed in this way then mistakes become cues for learning not yet achieved, not behavior to be punished.

Children see much sincere teacher correction as punishment; words corrected in oral reading, red marks on papers, being sent out of the room for reading help, having to "read" twice a day when most only read once, having to have a different book from what everyone else has. Instead, all children need opportunity to participate in choosing their own materials, encouragement in helping one another, and in asking the teacher's help, not to get his answer but to explore what it is he needs to know and through what experiences he can best learn it. As the teacher and child agree on what needed learning he has not yet achieved, the teacher can effectively teach—arrange needed contact—so that the child can effectively learn.

Children, before their entrance to school and each day afterward, have learned so much just from living in this world, that it is highly presumptuous for anyone to say in advance that all children in a class need the same experiences. Such teaching results inevi-

tably in a tremendous amount of wasted time. What is worse, children who already have passed the need for such teaching, those for whom it has no personal meaning, and those who have solved the problem by a different route are confused or may reject it and are thus not only wasting time but are also thereby less able to learn.

As teachers provide opportunities for individuals and small groups to meet pinpointed needs, while others work ahead on their own identified concerns, the effectiveness of learning increases tremendously. We can think of this as personal contact at point of need.

There is another way that involvement, eagerness and enthusiasm, resulting from meaningful experiences in a rich school environment, increase reading effectiveness. As children become more interested in more things they search for more and more related reading materials, to find out more or just for the pleasure of contact with this area of involvement. As they search they learn to make increasingly better choices, choosing what is meaningful to them, what they feel communicates best, what most effectively provides them with what they need. And having contacted such material they have a better basis for choice.

Since we know that no one can make anyone really learn anything, why do we not stop requiring? Why not, instead, provide inviting situations in which children can be psychologically comfortable, widely increase their personal contact with many aspects of their world, and follow their natural desires to extend their personal meaning and therefore the learning that it brings? ❧

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