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BRINGING CHILDREN AND BOOKS TOGETHER

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The author of good children's books devotes his talents to creating new worlds into which continuing generations eagerly seek entrance. How can teacher help children to discover these new worlds? It has been said that in order to help children develop an interest in reading and a desire to read, the classroom teacher must be familiar with children's books. Much of the literature dealing with the teaching of reading seems to indicate that capitalizing on interests is a relatively recent practice, however, a glance back to the seventeenth century demonstrates that at least one individual would have been an ardent advocate of this procedure.

John Locke presented definite ideas on how children should be taught to read.

When by these gentle ways he begins to be able to read, some easy, pleasant book should be put into his hands, wherein the entertainment he finds might draw him on (Meigs and Others, 1969, p. 54).

His comments sound remarkably similar to recommendations being made today.

In all reading tuition the first aim should be to produce children and adults who want to read and who do read; the second aim should be to help them read effectively. If the second aim is given priority, it is probable that the first aim will never be achieved. In other words, neither recreational nor functional reading can be expected to be the end product of extended intensive instruction in reading skills. Reading must consist of recreational and functional activities from the very beginning (McKenzie in Williams, 1976, p. 53).

Contrast these recommendations with Bettelheim's (1976) comments about the reading materials used to teach reading today. He believes that meaningful reading rarely enters the life of a child before third grade and by third grade the child's basic reading attitudes are fully established. He goes on to say our primers offer no meaning to children, and strongly urges that meaning be placed at the beginning of reading instruction, for this is the purpose of reading - to find meaning (7).

Is it possible to build a good reading program which capitalizes on children's interests? A firm, "Yes!" is the answer to this question. One way to

capture their interest is by reading to the children as a part of the regular school day. An example from my elementary school teaching experience demonstrates the ease with which this may be accomplished.

A short period each day was devoted to reading to my second grade students. One of the authors most enjoyed by this class was Eleanor Estes. Several of *The Moffat* books were read to the group. Although these were children enrolled in a suburban school and about as far removed in actual setting and experience as they could be from the children in the stories, they could not wait for the chapter to be read each day. The feelings and activities of the Moffat children are universally found in each generation. This is one of the qualities which helps to ensure that a book will continue to be popular with children for years.

My own class of college student teachers have been required to spend a short period each day reading to their students. In one of these classes the student teacher found seven children who did not speak much English. The book she chose as the first one to read to the group was one of the *Frances* books by Russell Hoban. Only one little girl did not pay attention at first. By the middle of the story her interest had been piqued, and by the end she was up with the rest of the group at the teacher's end of the table looking over the top of the book to see what the teacher was reading.

In addition to acquainting the children with some of our literature, they also profited from these sessions in other ways including developing listening skills, increasing vocabulary, and becoming acquainted with various language patterns.

A second way to capture interest is to provide for children the opportunity to choose and read books in which they are interested. For this purpose the school library should provide picture books, story books, and informational books along with the opportunity for children to come frequently to the library to make their selections. The librarian can also play an important role by scheduling storytelling sessions for teachers and their classes.

The argument that the core of the reading program must be based on skill development is not a sound one. Huck supplies the best counter-argument.

One of the best kept secrets in education is that children learn to read by reading. Most teachers overteach the skills of reading to the detriment of reading practice and enjoyment. Many primary teachers spend over half of their day teaching children how to read without ever giving them the opportunity for reading (1976, p. 600).

A second argument that there have not always been good books available can also be disproved by an examination of children's books, many of which were attainable early in our country's history. Just a few of the categories-- adventure stories, humor and fantasy, family stories, historical fiction and history-- provide ample evidence that there has always been something to appeal to each child's tastes.

Adventure

One of the tales which was intended for adults, but which was enjoyed by children was *Pilgrim's Progress*. It is an allegory which describes the Christian soul on its journey to everlasting life, but children enjoy it as a good adventure story.

A second book written for adults, but once again enjoyed by children was Daniel Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe*. It, too, is an allegory, but the theme of it, man against nature, appeals to the adventurous spirit in all children. The story blended fact and fiction into an enticing tale that stimulates a child's imagination.

The third book which was written for adults and taken over by children was another adventure story, *Gulliver's Travels*. It is an allegory which again combines adventure and suspense in a fictional setting. It is similar to *Robinson Crusoe* in that it deals with shipwreck and survival, but unlike *Robinson Crusoe* it deals with more than man's struggle with nature; it deals with man's struggle with man.

Howard Pyle's 1883 publication, *The Merry Adventures of Robin Hood of Great Renoun, in Nottinghamshire*, continues in popularity at least partially because Pyle based his theme upon a struggle that all children understand, the struggle between good and evil. It contains some historical and geographical facts concerning medieval England, yet these are woven into a fabric of adventure and fiction which fascinates children.

Pyle expressed very well the impact that a good book has on young readers.

In one's mature years, one forgets the books that one reads, but the stories of childhood leave an indelible impression, and their author always has a niche in the temple of memory from which the image is never cast out to be thrown into the rubbish-heap of things that are outgrown and outlived (Nesbitt in Meigs & Others), p. 287 from Abbot, C. *Howard Pyle: A Chronicle*. New York: Harper, 1925.

Humor and Fantasy

In 1865 Lewis Carroll's *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* appeared. This story was first told to children for their entertainment before it was written. It is a story of adventure filled with many improbable characters and situations. Perhaps it was one of the first stories with no other purpose than that of entertainment.

The Tale of Peter Rabbit developed out of a letter written to an ill child. The small size of the book and the very delicate and small illustrations done by Beatrix Potter are extremely well suited to children's taste. It seems strange when one considers the fact that this book has continued in popularity for seventy-five years that initially it had to be printed at the author's own expense.

Another book not favorably received at first was Kenneth Grahame's *The Wind in the Willows*. This book had its origin in bedtime stories Grahame told to his son of a water rat, a mole and a toad.

C. S. Lewis wrote the first of the Narnia series: *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe*; in 1950. It was followed by six other books. From the first trip through the back of the wardrobe to the Land of Narnia, children are held spellbound by Lewis's stories.

Stories of Family Life

Henry Steele Commager wrote in the Introduction to *A Critical History of Children's Literature* :

. . . Young Louisa Alcott, the spinster who never really understood children, and who wrote perhaps the greatest book to come out of the New World . . . Those little women of Concord have gone all over the world, they have gone into the hearts of children everywhere, giving them a feeling for America that nothing else gives in quite the same way.

Little Women is indeed an outstanding book. Alcott possessed the ability to make characters who live for the reader. She provided for children what they seem to want and need.

The *Little House Books* give to children a picture of life in an earlier time. Wilder's stories which contain an account of the life of the Ingalls family are very realistic. Although they were not written until the author's late middle age, they are very accurate. Details of life during those early times and in such a different setting from that familiar to today's children make these extremely appealing to young readers. Laura Ingalls Wilder, like Louisa May Alcott, was able to impart to children the feeling of love and security found in a strong family unit (Fisher, 1975).

Historical Fiction and History

Allan Wheeler (1971) summed up very aptly the values of using trade books in the classroom.

. . . Good trade books breathe life into people and places . . .
Factual material will never be able to present the joys, sorrows, and problems of other times and people . . .
The quality of writing and the beauty of the illustrations in good trade books will recreate the charm and lifestyle of other times and places. From such quality literature children can build a mental pool of experiences lost to them through purely factual reading materials.

Historical fiction is of great benefit in helping children to understand and appreciate history. It goes beyond the factual presentation found in textbooks and brings events and people to life for the reader.

Using information she had found for her biography of Paul Revere, Esther Forbes wrote *Johnny Tremain* which is very true to life. "It actually is a fictional study of the Boston Tea Party and the events leading up to it (Fisher, p. 162)."

Hendrick Van Loon's *The Story of Mankind* was the first Newbery winner. It, too, did more than present facts; it truly made history real for the reader.

Only a few of the very well known children's books have been included here. Even that small sample provides evidence that there have always been books which hold great appeal for children. The teacher's task is a two-fold one—to become acquainted with books for children and to see to it that children and these books are brought together as a regular part of the school day. To do this is to provide the key to the new worlds to be discovered in books and through such discovery reap the rewards to be derived from reading so well described by Arbuthnot.

Books are no substitute for living, but they can add immeasurably to its richness. When life is absorbing, books can enhance our sense of its significance. When life is difficult, they can give a momentary relief from trouble, afford a new insight into our problems or those of others, or provide the rest and refreshment we need. Books have always been a source of information, comfort, and pleasure for people who know how to use them. This is as true for children as for adults (Arbuthnot & Sutherland, 1977, p. 4).

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