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Teaching Children To Read For Meaning

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The child's apprenticeship in reading has long been a matter of serious concern for teachers and parents. This is an important professional and social problem which is shared both by the Spanish speaking world and by the English speaking people. It is quite natural that many alternative methods should be proposed for teaching such an important subject and that problems should arise about them. Let us focus on one of the most serious and important practical problems for teachers of reading whether the language be Spanish or English — the problem of teaching children to read with comprehension instead of merely parroting sounds of words meaninglessly.

Alternative Teaching Methods

Both in Spanish and in English, the educational profession is constantly complaining about children who "bark at print". They call out the words but do not get the meaning from the text. This is related to the old controversy over the relative merits of the whole word method versus the method of teaching children to analyse words into their constituent phonemes. For example, Marcos Sastre (1852) claimed that his method of teaching reading in Spanish which avoided analysis into letters and sounds would inspire a fondness of reading for its communicative purpose. In English, Huey's (1908) famous book on *The Psychology and Pedagogy of Reading* likewise attacked the "insidious thought of reading as word-pronouncing" and urged teachers "to place the emphasis strongly where it really belongs, on reading as thought-getting." But the opposite point of view has had its equally strong champions both in Spanish and in English. For example,

Andres Ferreyra's *El nene* is a well known early Argentine text advocating the analytic-synthetic method for teaching reading in Spanish, and there were numerous counterparts in the English speaking countries. Berta Perelstein de Braslavsky (1973) has reviewed the history of this controversy in Argentina and Gray (1956) has done the same for reading in the English speaking as well as other countries.

Sometimes authors have claimed that the characteristics of a specific language require that its reading be taught by one method rather than another. For example, Lourenco Filho (1962) in Brazil claimed that the whole word method is not suited to Latin American languages. He asserts that the method was "taken from the North Americans who have to teach reading almost word by word because of English spelling "and it" has resulted in our overlooking one of the great facilities of our language: its almost completely syllabic nature". But careful investigation of this accusation of a kind of "colonialism of reading" reveals that it has little, if any, truth. Recently a comparative survey was made of the teaching of reading in 14 different countries (Downing, 1973) with nearly as many different languages (including Spanish and English). In every country and in every language, even in Chinese and Japanese, the same two alternative types of methods exist and each has its own champions. On one side there are the teachers who believe that the first priority must be given to reading for meaning and therefore they begin with large chunks of meaningful language such as sentences, phrases or words in the materials to be read by the children. On the other side are the teachers

who believe that the first priority should be to teach the child the key to the printed code for speech so that he can quickly develop independence in unlocking printed words for himself. This second group of teachers prefers to begin with the *atoms of language*, such as the letters and phonemes of Spanish or English. The former side believes in emphasis on the *communicative function* of written language. The latter stresses the *mechanics* of "decoding". This is equally true both in Spanish and in English. Berta Perelstein de Braslavsky (1973) has shown that the letter-sound relationships in American Spanish are more complex than people generally believe. These relationships are even more complex in English, but they are not the determining factor in the choice of the method of reading instruction — even though some advocates of one method or the other have claimed that their method is best for their particular language.

But these two opposite opinions on how to teach beginners are exclusive only in the minds of narrow theorists. Most practical teachers want to teach *both* the mechanics of the code and its true purpose in communicating meaning, no matter what may be the prevailing fashionable theory among professors in the university or officials in the department of education. Therefore, let us set aside these two extreme theoretical viewpoints and instead consider some of the practical ways of making sure that pupils will read for meaning from the beginning by whatever method.

The Miracle of Reading Comprehension

The current President of the International Reading Association, Constance McCullough (1972) has very aptly likened the professional teacher's role in developing reading for meaning to that of a juggler. She relates the Christmas story "of the little juggler who, penniless, took refuge in a monastery. He alone of all the people there, had nothing to offer the Virgin. There

in the chapel he watched the monks as they offered their gifts. Then, to their horror, he stood before the statue of the Virgin and gave his only treasure, his skill at juggling. At the end of the juggling act he knelt, and the statue, moved by the quality of his mind and heart, reached out and touched him in blessing." Constance McCullough's story fixes in our memory her point that "the teacher of reading . . . is, in many senses, a juggler too" because the teacher is constantly engaged in "juggling that creates in the child the ability to evoke the author's conception and intent, the juggling that *impresses the child with the idea that reading is a search for understanding.*" (Italics added).

Dr. McCullough does not have any miraculous prescription to bring this about. She provides examples of how the "true teacher evokes the miracle through his own study and art and skill, and faith in the human potential." She suggests that an essential foundation is that "because both the teacher and the child are at work at the frontiers of understanding — neither of them an ultimate authority, but both reflectors in the presence of a phenomenal human invention, they develop and enjoy a mutually motivating and enlightening relationship."

Some Psychological Principles and Research Evidence

Let us consider how Dr. McCullough's general educational principle can be put into practice in classrooms in Spanish speaking as well as English speaking countries. What are some good ways of juggling with the materials and activities in school which may help to impress the child with "the idea that reading is a search for understanding"? What follows does not have Dr. McCullough's authority. It is only one possible interpretation of her general suggestion.

First, two general principles based on the psychology of children's learning and development might be helpful

guides to ensure that every piece of work we do with the written or printed medium is a reliable signpost to reading for meaning:

1. *Make it a firm general rule that every reading and writing activity in the classroom has a genuine communicative function for the pupil. Children learn best from observing reality. Therefore make it a reality that reading has the purpose of getting meaning.*
2. *It follows that all instruction in subskills such as letter-sound associations should be organized so that they appear to arise quite naturally from the pupils' desire to learn the easiest and most efficient ways of getting meaning. Isolated mechanical exercises or drills should be avoided because they obscure the true relevance and real function of reading and writing.*

There have always been great teachers who intuitively have understood the need to make reading vitally relevant to their pupils. Instinctively they have rejected abstract, artificial and mechanistic teaching methods which make reading and writing mere rituals which children must perform to satisfy the incomprehensible whims of the grown-ups. Sylvia Ashton-Warner (1963) is one such great teacher. She reveals that intuitive genius in her own description of her adventures in teaching Maori children in New Zealand. She says:

"First words must have an intense meaning.

First words must be already part of the dynamic life.

First books must be made of the stuff of the child himself, whatever and wherever the child."

This led her to develop the "key vocabulary" method in which the youngest beginners were asked every day "What word would you like to learn today?" The child said his word, Sylvia Ashton-Warner wrote it for him on a card, and he took it home. The

next day the child's card showed signs of wear and tear but the word was never forgotten because it was his word chosen for himself for the intense emotional meaning it had for him. Most popular words were those like: "skeleton," "ghost," "monster".

This same intuitive understanding that reading and writing activities need to be essentially relevant to individual children if they are not only to learn the associated skills, but also to become life-long readers by choice is shown by another great teacher, Sybil Marshall (1963). In the following quotation, she is writing about art education in the primary school, but she applies the same principle to all her teaching including reading and writing:

"Every teacher should, however, be able to understand the fundamental principle of the change: that before the new movement it was the adult conception of what art was that was applied to the child. . . . The new conception of child art simply takes into account that children are not solely adults in the making, but creatures in their own right, as tadpoles differ from mature frogs, or caterpillars from butterflies. They have their own set of emotions, abilities, and techniques. What is expected of them is child-like, not pre-adult work."

This does not mean playing down to children in their reading books, and Sybil Marshall is emphatic on this point:

"The ability to turn again to childhood and see the world truly through childish eyes is given to very few men, though among them we number some of the literary geniuses of our language. The absence of this ability, on the other hand, accounts for a good deal of nauseating whimsy found in story books for children and the illustrations that decorate them."

Indeed, such "playing down" and "whimsy" arise from the failure to recognise the essential point which is made by the work of such great teachers as Sybil Marshall and Sylvia Ashton-Warner. Children are not just miniature adults. It is the qualitative rather than the quantitative differences between the child's and the adult's view of the world which are stressed in this approach to education. Such differences are of great importance because what may be relevant to the teacher may seem a meaningless ritual to a child of six.

One of the chief defects of traditional "chalk and talk" methods of teaching is that they usually assume naively that children are merely miniature adults whose minds simply need to be "filled up" with "the facts" that the teacher knows. All she has to do is to tell them. Blackie (1967) puts it like this: "The old type of teacher was all the time rather like an electric current. When he was switched on something happened. When he was switched off it stopped". But the inadequacy of such a teaching approach ought to be clear from what research tells us about children's cognitive development.

Jean Piaget's (1959) theory of the development of thinking, which is supported by a wealth of evidence, does not address itself directly to the problem of learning to read and write. However, it certainly applies to the learning of such skills. At the conventional age for beginning reading, abstract ideas are least appropriate and the child's ego-centric view of his environment and his pre-school experiences are not likely to lead to a natural understanding of the purpose of written language, which is an artificial two-dimensional product of civilization.

Direct research evidence on this problem was obtained by the Russian psychologist Lev Vygotsky (1962) in his investigations designed to "account

for the tremendous lag between the schoolchild's oral and written language". He concluded that the child "has little motivation to learn writing when we begin to teach it. He feels no need for it and has only a vague idea of its usefulness."

Working quite independently in Scotland, Jessie Reid (1966) arrived at similar conclusions. She intensively interviewed five-year-olds three times during their first year in an Edinburgh infants school and found that for these beginners reading is "a mysterious activity, to which they come with only the vaguest of expectancies". They showed a "general lack of any specific expectancies of what reading was going to be like, of what the activity consisted in, of the purpose and the use of it"!

The author of this paper has himself conducted several research studies of this problem (Downing, 1970, 1972, 1974; Downing and Oliver, 1974). In their new book in Spanish, *Madurez para la lectura*, Downing and Thackray have reviewed all this research evidence and they conclude that *good progress in learning to read depends on a clear understanding of the communication purpose of the written form of language*:

Some Practical Suggestions for Developing Meaningful Reading

The above two psychological principles probably are sufficient guide to the general kind of actions teachers need to take to help make sure that their pupils will develop "the idea that reading is a search for understanding". However it may be of assistance to illustrate these principles by a few examples of the many alternative practical techniques teachers have invented to produce and maintain this idea in children's minds. Here is a list of ways of keeping the focus on reading for meaning:

1. By using the "language-experience approach" as a major part of the reading curriculum. A fuller guide

to this technique can be found in the publications of Allen (1961), Herrick and Nerbovig (1964), Lee and Allen (1963), Stauffer (1965 and 1970). Briefly the language-experience approach consists in using the child's own language and experiences to construct his personal materials for reading. In the beginning the teacher writes down what the child wants to express about his experiences. When the child can start writing independently he writes down his own ideas himself. This method can be used individually, as a group activity or the whole class may create a combined composition. In time, individual pupils and groups of pupils become authors of their own little books which they share with each other. In this way the child quite naturally becomes a reader for meaning because *as an author he knows the communicative purpose of books*. A good example of the use of this method can be seen in the work of Olga Cossettini (1961) in Santa Fe, Argentina, where reading is based on lively original material arising from excursions to the post office, stores, the market place, the hospital, the river, and so on.

2. By encouraging children to read their own stories and their favourite stories from books to each other.
3. By letting those children who can read help those who cannot, especially when the non-reader wants to get some information from a book.
4. By having daily assignments which are communicated to the children *in writing*.
5. By collecting the best *classroom* library by whatever means is possible. Making the books in it easily accessible to the children. Having non-fiction and fiction books covering a wide range of children's interests. Trying to include as many books as possible suited to the

pupils' levels of reading ability.

6. By demonstrating the meaningful purpose of books by reading them to the class.
7. By creating special "how to do it" books or cards. For example, making a recipe book for preparing food. With the youngest children reading it for them. Later letting a child reader extract the meaning for others who may not yet be able to read it. Eventually all the children will be able to follow their own recipes.
8. If a child is going to read orally to you, by having him prepare it first by silent reading.
9. By having children answer your questions by searching for the answers in silent reading of the text.
10. By not interrupting the reader to correct errors of pronunciation.
11. By encouraging children to work out the meaning of unknown words from the meaning of the rest of the sentence.
12. By playing reading games (such as a treasure hunt) in which the fun is derived from getting the meaning out of written messages.
13. Before teaching letter-sound relationships, by making sure that the child understands that speech can be analysed into smaller units, words, and phonemes. When this is not done, pupils become confused in synthesizing letter-sounds because they do not see its purpose. Then their attention becomes focussed on this difficulty and they lose sight of the purpose of getting meaning from the printed page. This precaution is only one, but a very important method of preparing the child before introducing him to the task of learning to read. (This and other aspects of pretraining are described in *Madurez para la lectura*, Downing and Thackray, 1974).
14. By teaching letter-sound relationships always in the context of get-

ting meaning from print. The purpose of "decoding" is not to turn a set of meaningless visual symbols (letters) into another set of meaningless auditory signals (phonemes). We decode to get a meaningful message. This must be made obvious to the child by all the decoding activities we provide in the classroom.

Sometimes we find a child who unfortunately has been taught by methods which conceal the true communicative and expressive purpose of printed or written language. Then we need to use many of the above mentioned techniques in a more emphatic manner in order to undo the damage that has been done in the child's conceptions of reading and writing. For example, the pupil may persist in sounding out words letter by letter long after the time when he should be able to recognize the word as a whole. Strong encouragement for rapid guessing should help. Words and then phrases and sentences can be displayed for only a brief moment so that letter by letter reading is impossible. These flashed word, phrase and sentence cards should contain the answer to a question, a command for action, or some piece of language which is related to getting a meaningful message.

In these and many other ways we can juggle with the child's experiences in our classrooms so that he may come to believe that the written or printed word is like "this world" was for the English poet Robert Browning:

*"This world's no blot for us,
Nor blank; it means intensely, and
means good:
To find its meaning is my meat
and drink."*

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(This is the English translation of a speech given in Spanish by John Downing, at Bogota, Columbia, South America, December, 1974.)