
May 1972

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Recommended Citation

Johns, Jerry L. (1972) "A Letter to Three Teachers," *Michigan Reading Journal*: Vol. 6 : Iss. 2 , Article 3.
Available at: <https://scholarworks.gvsu.edu/mrj/vol6/iss2/3>

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A Letter to Three Teachers

or

A Child's Eye View of Reading

By Jerry L. Johns

Dear Pam, Judy, and Evelyn,

Thank you for permitting me to come into your classroom to ask your students some questions about reading. As you know, this study focused on how students in the intermediate grades viewed the reading process. To gather information about how your students viewed the reading process, three questions were asked:

1. What is reading?
2. What do you do when you read?
3. If someone didn't know how to read, what would you tell him that he would need to learn?

As your students gave their responses, they were recorded on tape so they could be analyzed and classified into logical categories. Let's take a look at some of the responses to question 1, "What is reading?" As you can see from Table 1, the responses were classified into five categories. You are probably interested in some examples of typical responses which were placed in each of the five categories.

Categories and Sample Responses to Question 1

Category 1: No response, "I don't know," or a vague, irrelevant, or circular response. Examples of the latter responses included "When you read," "You need it," and "Reading is reading."

Category 2: Classroom procedures. This category included responses which reflected classroom procedures or activities generally associated with formal reading instruction. Some

typical responses were, "You read a story and do workbook pages," "You read to your teacher and to the kids in your class," and "We take turns reading out loud in a circle."

Category 3: Word recognition (decoding). This category included responses ranging from "Saying words" to "Well, it's something when you got a couple of letters and they form a word and more letters that form other words and you read them."

Category 4: Meaning or understanding. This category included responses which defined reading as a process of getting meaning from words or understanding a story. One typical response was, "It's when you read a story and know what it's about."

Category 5: Meaning and word recognition. This category included responses which defined reading as a process of saying the words and understanding the story. A typical response was, "You learn the words and read the story and you're supposed to know what it means."

Summary of Responses to Question 1

I know that you can examine Table 1 to arrive at the results; however, I think that the following is clearly evident:

* There is an apparent lack of understanding of the reading process as evidenced by the percentage of responses in Categories 1 and 2. Of the 100 students asked, "What is reading?" 71 per cent gave responses which were essentially meaningless.

* Very few children viewed reading

TABLE I. Distribution of Responses to the Question: "What is reading?"

Grades	Category 1 I don't know Vague Irrelevant		Category 2 Classroom Procedures		Category 3 Word Recognition (Decoding)		Category 4 Meaning or Understanding		Category 5 Decoding and Understanding		Total	
	Boys	Girls	Boys	Girls	Boys	Girls	Boys	Girls	Boys	Girls	Boys	Girls
Grade 4	6	5	7	12	7	5	1	2	2	3	23	27
Grade 5	16	6	9	10	2	3	0	1	1	2	28	22
Total Boys & Girls	22	11	16	22	9	8	1	3	3	5	51	49
No. of Responses	33		38		17		4		8		100	
Per Cent of All Responses	33		38		17		4		8		100	

as a process involving meaning as evidenced by only 12 per cent of the responses in Categories 4 and 5.

Summary of Responses to Question 2

In Table 2 you will note that the same five categories were used to classify the responses to question 2, "What do you do when you read?" The major results for question 2 are summarized below:

* There was a lack of understanding of the reading act as reflected by the percentage of responses in Categories 1 and 2. Of the 100 students questioned, 52 per cent gave responses which revealed little or no understanding of the reading act.

* Many students (31 per cent) gave word recognition responses but only eight per cent of the students viewed reading as a process involving word recognition *and* meaning.

Summary of Responses to Question 3

Table 3 contains a summary of the responses to question 3, "If someone didn't know how to read, what would you tell him that he would need to learn?" In summarizing the results:

* It was readily apparent that the vast majority of students (61 per cent) believed that children who didn't know how to read would need to learn how to identify words (word recognition).

* Only ten per cent of the students viewed meaning or understanding as an important element of the reading process.

A Brief Discussion

As you study the tables containing the raw data, you may be shocked, surprised, or even dismayed with the students' responses to the three questions about reading. It certainly seems as though the vast majority of the students have little or no understanding of the reading process.

Since very few students mentioned meaning as the essential element in the reading process one might wonder if this might have some measurable effect on their achievement in reading. It seems that students should understand what they are supposed to do when they read. If meaning does not play a major role in students' reading, perhaps they are content to merely "say the words" and believe that they are reading.

I'm sure you realize that these responses represent only a very limited sample of students. In addition, no children in the other elementary grades were asked to respond to the same questions. Perhaps you think if more studies were done the results would be quite different. Unfortunately, this is not the case. I've asked almost 200 children from kindergarten through the sixth grade these same three questions about reading and the results have led me to conclude that *the vast majority of students in the elementary school have little or no understanding of the reading process.* If this is the case (and the available evidence strongly supports this conclusion), teachers probably want to do something about the situation. Now you're probably thinking, "What do I do? Research is supposed to *help* the classroom teacher."

A Few Suggestions

First, you should look at the results again and decide what *you* think should be done. After all, you work with these children daily and should be in an advantaged position to suggest some of strategies which might be undertaken to help your students develop a better concept of reading.

Second, because you are teaching children reading, you should not assume that you are also providing a basis for understanding the reading process. It appears that some direct instruction is needed in attempting to promote an understanding of the reading process.

TABLE II. Distribution of Responses to the Question: "What do you do when you read?"

Grades	Category 1 I don't know Vague Irrelevant		Category 2 Classroom Procedures		Category 3 Word Recognition (Decoding)		Category 4 Meaning or Understanding		Category 5 Decoding and Understanding		Total	
	Boys	Girls	Boys	Girls	Boys	Girls	Boys	Girls	Boys	Girls	Boys	Girls
	Grade 4	4	6	3	8	11	9	2	3	3	1	23
Grade 5	14	10	5	2	5	6	1	3	3	1	28	22
Total Boys & Girls	18	16	8	10	16	15	3	6	6	2	51	49
No. of Responses	34		18		31		9		8		100	
Per Cent of All Responses	34		18		31		9		8		100	

**TABLE III. Distribution of Responses to the Question:
"If someone didn't know how to read, what would you tell him that he would need to learn?"**

Grades	Category 1 I don't know Vague Irrelevant		Category 2 Classroom Procedures		Category 3 Word Recognition (Decoding)		Category 4 Meaning or Understanding		Category 5 Decoding and Understanding		Total	
	Boys	Girls	Boys	Girls	Boys	Girls	Boys	Girls	Boys	Girls	Boys	Girls
	Grade 4	4	5	2	2	15	15	1	0	1	5	23
Grade 5	8	4	3	1	15	16	0	1	2	0	28	22
Total Boys & Girls	12	9	5	3	30	31	1	1	3	5	51	49
No. of Responses	21		8		61		2		8		100	
Per Cent of All Responses	21		8		61		2		8		100	

Permit me to suggest one strategy you might like to try. Write *sinkbox* on the chalkboard. Ask a child to *say* the word. Ask another child whether or not he agrees. Continue the process until you get agreement that the word is *sinkbox*. Now, ask another child if he can *read* the word. *Most* children will probably say that they can read the word because they view reading as merely word recognition. When you reach this point you might ask the class, "How do you know that you can *read* the word?" Many children will respond by saying something like, "I can read the word because I can pronounce it." Sooner or later, one of your students is likely to ask what the word means. Ask the class what the word means. Now you have an excellent opportunity to lead students to the conclusion that reading involves *understanding*. I'm *not* suggesting that you tell the students. Your task is to help students reach this conclusion by themselves. It might be useful to make a distinction between being able to say the word and knowing what the word means.

The above suggestion represents a meager beginning. It is doubtful if all students will grasp a worthwhile concept of reading during your first presentation. It will probably take considerable teaching to finally get this beginning concept developed. Later, you might extend this activity to larger units of reading (phrases,

sentences, paragraphs, and stories).

It is not very difficult to evaluate your success in developing the concept that *reading must involve meaning*. Suppose, when you ask students to tell you words they are unable to read, that one student says, "I don't know how to read *dugout*. I can pronounce the word but I don't know what it means." It strongly appears that this student recognizes a distinction between pronouncing a word and knowing what a word means.

A Final Word

As you teach reading, remember that children need to develop an understanding of the reading process. Specifically, you will want to emphasize the crucial role of meaning in reading. I suggest that you begin with words like *sinkbox*, *kingcut*, and *tutu*. By the way, can you *read* these three words? Be careful. Your answer may reveal considerable insight into *your* concept of reading!

For Further Information

Johns, Jerry L. "Reading: A View From the Child," *The Reading Teacher*, 23 (April, 1970), 647-648.

Johns, Jerry L. and Johns, Annette L. "How Do Children in the Elementary School View the Reading Process?" *The Michigan Reading Journal*, 5 (Fall, 1971), 44-53.

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