

A Teacher's Statement On Reading

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The first thing I want to say shouldn't come as a shock to any of you but it might if any of you are first and second grade teachers of long standing. I want to suggest that even though we'll spend an hour and a half talking about reading, and even though the teaching of reading weigh heavily on you. reading is not the only important thing to 6, 7, 8, 9 and 10 year olds—especially the 6–9 year olds.

Therefore, even though I'm willing to spend a great deal of time worrying about reading, both learning how to teach it and then teaching it—you should keep in mind that there are other things I would like to have happen to my children, and other things that are at least as important—speech itself, productivity, expressiveness, social development.

That's a very outlandish statement to make in this culture and that's what I want you to understand that most first and second grade teachers have been trained to think that their job is to teach their children how to read and that's it—that's as far as it goes. And, I'm suggesting that it's not the end of the world if a child doesn't read until he is nine. Your first response may be shock, but your second is probably recognition. Of course, if the system that the child is in doesn't bear down on him so heavily that he suffers, then he could learn when ready. So, if the teachers had a system in which it didn't matter if a kid didn't learn to read until he was nine then it doesn't matter, obviously—and it only matters because the expectation has been set up that way. In a broad sense, of course, it is important to learn to read—especially in this culture, since reading is basically a cultural matter. Reading is not part of an intrinsically human system of modalities, like sight, even though it engages the symbolizing faculty. You can hardly prevent a child from learning to speak, since speech is intrinsically human; but it's easy for a child not to learn to read unless he grows up in a reading culture.

The reason I feel under pressure sometimes and the reason I put certain of my children under pressure is because we live within this culture. It's like what we were saying yesterday about long division—you have to recognize that certain kinds of things are important for children to be able to respond to, just because of where they live. They perceive such things as absolutes in their environment. We may know that they're only relative matters, but the child doesn't. And so, if his parents say why aren't you reading and if his older sister says why aren't you reading, then he's under intolerable kind of pressure and it really is your job to teach him to read—even if he's not ready. So that's why a preliminary statement about reading sometimes is—it ought not be—a crisis for the kid, and then you ought to respond as such. That's why I feel so ambivalent about reading—I know it's important but I hate to make a crisis out of it. But sometimes I have to respond as if it were a crisis, because for the poor child (and his parents) it sometimes is.

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Reading is one part—it is *only one part*—of a language program. When you’re planning a reading program it is important to keep in mind how this part of your program affects the language development of a child. In effect, the development of language as both an expressive and manipulative tool is probably one of our prime goals—along with *expressiveness* in general. And thus, clearly one important element in the open classroom is the involvement of kids in the materials because materials obviously are language provoking. A basic element in your reading program is the materials which will engage your children in speech. Really, what this means is that in order to teach reading you must teach the whole child. Reading must develop in a context of his language, which means it must develop in a context of him—who he is.

If you are thinking about a reading program *per se* the first thing to think about is what the child’s language is like. Does he talk to you? Does he talk to strangers? Does he talk to his friends? What’s he talking about? Does he talk dynamically? Does he use sentences? Does he ask questions? Or respond to you when you talk to him? What kind of categories does he use? Things like that. That would be one of the first things you would look for if you were beginning to think: “Here I am a teacher. How do I know what kind of program to use?” That’s the first thing you would look for—language development and activity.

If you have a 4, or a 6, or a 7 year old whose language is poor, then you don’t want to start the reading process in the formal sense unless you are under specific parental pressure to do so. And, there are notable exceptions even to that rule.

Another thing I look for when I’m watching for a beginning reader is a kind of manual eye-motor coordination. This particularly is important in classrooms where reading is tied to writing, but it’s also important in any classroom. The eye coordination is important because when you get down to the technique of reading, it is, in part, a question of eye training in a very specific unnatural way. We don’t have any natural tendency to read from left to right or from top to bottom. It’s just as possible to read from right to left as to read the other way around. This directionality is something we have to learn and it’s something that takes a vast amount of our own energy. The eye movement across the page is probably the single hardest thing to master in learning to read. Sequencing. So that’s the second thing you look for and you can see it by watching the child do whatever he’s doing; by having him write or watching him weave, or having him work, or draw, or manipulate blocks. It is important to look for increase in motor skill. That is accompanied, presumably, by increase in eye-skill.

The third thing I look for seems very important to me, but it may seem an odd thing to say. I look for a developmental shift from a 5, 6 year-old very imagic, dynamic, emotive mood to the beginning of a more objectifying one. I don’t like to use the word objective—it has too many overtones. You look for a change in a child in being able to project himself out of himself and begin to use critical faculties in a minimal sense. That is, instead of drawing pictures of houses that are circles with two holes in them, he would draw pictures of houses showing all the details.

Do you see the difference between the two things? The child is paying more attention to the externals of the things out there rather than how they feel to him; he is beginning to do in general what I call small worlds. children begin to build structures that are houses or models, or drawings that have incredible details. A better example is when someone’s drawings suddenly change from bursting figures to detailed pictures. They also have a dynamic quality to them and hopefully they’ll never lose that dynamic quality. But, they’re beginning the possibility of language directed towards the characteristics of an object rather than only to what the object looks like or what it reminds them of or whether they like it or not. It’s not a rigid distinction,

but it’s certainly a tendency that occurs, roughly speaking, around six or seven—somewhere in there. That’s when you might begin to look for a beginning reading situation.

I’d say a good 70% of the time you will find that girls will learn to read easily and early; and boys will learn to read later and probably with more trouble and that in any disability class or remedial reading class a good 90% of the population is male. And that’s true, of course, of almost any extreme behavior. I don’t know if you know that, but the male sex runs to extremes, always. There are always some females at either end as well, but the bulk stay in the middle. There are probably more men of a very high IQ and there are probably more men of a very low IQ than there are women of either extreme.

We can speculate forever as to why this is so, particularly in reading. Partly it seems that females are often ready to take on a more concentrated, docile, role earlier than males. Also, on the whole, males mature more slowly. This culture, I think, suggests to girls that they should behave themselves in school; that it is somehow more appropriate. The culture pushes little girls into being docile and it sort of says to little boys that it’s all right to be naughty. Anyway, just as a general rule, if you have any doubts as to a child’s readiness, especially if the child is a male, it would be better to wait than to go too early.

Now we have been talking in a general sense about readiness. But deciding that a specific child is probably ready for a specific approach to reading does not herald the beginning of the reading program. I mean, if you pick up on somebody that it is time for him to be moving towards reading, that is not the beginning of his interaction with reading as a formal process. There are a lot of things beyond the literal technical approach to reading that you do in the classroom that suggest reading as an activity to children. The first thing is, of course, you read to them; and reading aloud to children is just about crucial. You express things and the children respond. I don’t know if you were aware today how many questions, spontaneous questions, I was getting while I was reading; and that’s what I’m looking for. I’m glad when they stop me and I don’t have to stop and ask them.

They’re beginning to say, “I’m really listening to this story. what’s it about, because I really want to know.” That’s what I want—that’s a good thing to have happen.

Out of reading aloud to children you get a lot of curriculum sometimes you get a lot of social studies curriculum for instance. But, also by reading aloud to children and by telling stories and letting children tell stories you’re beginning to use language in a direct sense. you’re beginning to suggest to them that not only the spoken language but the written word has certain qualities of thinking, of description, of expressing. You are setting up a model for them about what reading can be and it’s a fairly important thing to do. You are giving them an idea of the meaning and importance of reading long before they are actively able to read.

You also have labels on their work—and that’s another way of introducing the written word into the classroom so that kids become familiar with it. Never forget that by having a lot of speech in your classroom you are laying the ground work for all other language processes—you are laying the ground work for meaning in written-spoken interaction.

Reading aloud to the whole group and putting their work up on the walls with labels is a way of letting the written word be in the classroom. Having books around the room to look at is another important one—lots of books. If they’re 4 and 5 year olds, you don’t just have 4 and 5 year old books, you have all kinds of books—reference books on animals or cars, or whatever. The way in which a child interacts with books before he “reads” is important to note—how he holds them, whether he shares them.

When you start a 5 or 6 year old on the dictation process, he is in effect embarking on the reading process even if he doesn’t literally pick up a reader until he is a nine year old. The dictation process is the beginning of a sequence that goes roughly like this: dictation—taking down a child’s stories. This might last for years and overlap the other steps in the sequence. Then asking him to copy parts of it; maybe take a word and say, “You wrote a story about dragons, I would like you to try to copy the word dragon. “ That’s called direct copying. You’ve written it here and he’s written it right underneath. You move from that to something called indirect copying. What you’re doing is moving a child from direct copying to having to keep his place on a page and on a line. Also through the copying process, you begin to introduce word attack skills—that is, you are saying the names of the letters, asking him to help say the initial sounds. You’re introducing the idea of initial sounds and final sounds, all these very technical things which we’re going to get into in much greater detail later.

The point being that it is a technical matter, and as such is not too available to a child. But he’s at least involved with the words he says himself. So, his dictation stays expressive—as much as it can and that’s the thing that you should keep in mind. *You must maintain the expressive*—if you lose that at any level you probably lose a reader. If you don’t keep that personal kind of pull in itself, somehow the reading itself will never have any kind of personal pull in itself and that’s too bad. I don’t know if you all like to read or not—maybe you don’t, but you know reading is really neat when you’re into it.

I’ll give you an example of indirect copying—a child brings you a drawing and says he’s ready to write and you take another piece of paper and you write down what he says on that and then he re-copies from that piece of paper to his own drawing...so he’s no longer copying directly underneath.

Let me take a minute to back-track a little and say that the copying process is a prime factor in introducing a left-to-right motion—it’s also the prime factor in introducing word separation. That is to say, the notion that these words are separated. You don’t speak separated words and when a child speaks he’s not conscious of the word—he’s conscious of the flow of the whole thing. It doesn’t mean five separate words or ten separate words—it means a sound that has a meaning and it comes out of him and all kinds of dynamic things are happening to it—gesture and voice and the way your face looks. When you suddenly write that down on a piece of paper it becomes linear and terribly removed from his experience—very removed.

You could well suggest that a child could remain at a copying or dictating stage for a long, long time—a couple of years maybe. There’s no reason why not. A nice example may be Jed who is very young for this work and who I’m not pushing at all—he’s doing direct copying and, in fact, he has spontaneously done indirect copying himself. His language is still very restrained and I’m not going to ask for any real reading behavior for quite a long time, but simply maintain the casual written work in the course of which he will learn many of the important word attack skills, but also will be involved in a process that has meaning: the spoken word. It would be better to wait as long as you could with a child like this. The longer I teach the more I feel that—but often we can’t wait, because not too many people understand that point of view and consequently the children suffer pressure. I’ll tell you a story in a little while—I love to tell stories myself—about a child learning to read under pressure.

Now you’ve got a copying process in the course of which you have been introducing technical matters like the names and the sounds of letters, the beginnings and ends of words. You are also paying attention to what may constitute organic and sight vocabulary for that specific child, and also finding out what his sense of graphic pattern (word families) might be.

When you find that the kid can really identify and isolate certain sounds, and has some sight vocabulary, move into the third step of the sequence called independent writing.

Have all of you seen the word cards in my area? Do you understand what they are? This is a technique I use for getting a child to begin to write on his own without as much copying as before—he's still copying but you're beginning to suggest to him that he has a fund of his own words that he doesn't need to copy. You do it by providing some kind of dynamic dictionary—a dictionary that he's helped in creating. You can do it with an individual dictionary or word cards or whatever. I find this particular way very useful and satisfying to me and to the kids. You cut out blank cards of cardboard, one for each letter of the alphabet. I also cut out one for the **ph** and the **sh** because I do not feel in this process that there is such a thing as the optimal letter to be used first or the optimal sound to be used first. I don't think you have to know **d** before you know **c** or the vowels before you know consonants or the blends after you know single sounds. Blending is usually harder, but if a blend like **th** or **sh** comes up early, then introduce it. I think you introduce the notion of the beginning of the word and the end of the word simultaneously. Often people have a theory that it's best to start with the long vowels or it's best to start with consonants, then long vowels or whatever. But the kids' experience isn't like that. An adult has come along and found a certain logic in a situation and decided that it's logical for children, but the children don't see it that way at all. Their logic is not ours, so that what I do generally is introduce the technique when it comes up in the kids' language. So that's why I have **ph**, **th**, and **sh** in my word box.

When you say to a child you would like for him to use a word card, here's how it works: he brings you a picture and you say "What do you want to say?" and he says, "These two men are happy." like Trevor, for instance, and you say, "These"—well "these"—that's a very hard word (**th** is a very difficult sound) so you say to him "That's a **th** card, get me the card with the **th**. If I am working with a kid like Trevor, I wouldn't ask him what the sound is, I simply would tell him. He gets the **th** card and you write that down—"These"—showing him how you write it—he's standing right next to you so he can see you writing, so he can see your hand moving. (That's also very important, incidentally, in the dictation process: have the child placed as if he were you so that he's getting a visual body-model for himself.) Then he takes the card and writes "these" on his paper. Maybe he can write "2" himself, so he comes back with "These 2" on his paper. Then you say "These two men... men—what sound does that start with?" Now "M" is fairly easy to identify, and so maybe he knows, and gets the correct card for you to write on. When the child is really into this sounding business, he will bring you the card before you ask him, and then you know he's really getting somewhere. Gradually he will build up a sight vocabulary (especially if you encourage him to try it on his own) and he will bring you cards only when he needs them. Somewhere along the line the child will start to spell independently and badly. He has been able to free the process from you. He does not need to come back to check each word with you. This is a big day—when a child starts to attack his writing on his own no matter how badly he spells. At first I don't correct at all. I don't want to inhibit the sense of independence. The next step in the process is the beginnings of editing. A good example is Adam. "This is a man and the parachute drops out of a plane." Most of it was spelled very well—and I didn't bother to change it at all—it seemed like a very admirable attempt. Plane was spelled "PLAENNE" and that's a little complex—I said to him "That does say 'plane' and I know it says 'plane' but there's an easier way to do it," and I showed him the other way but I didn't ask him to rewrite it. (My experience is that children, once they learn the vowels, will often put all of them in.)

The vowel process is probably the most difficult one of all. Think how it is with you. I don't know if any of you are spellers, but I'm not and I just never know which vowels and double consonants that's what I have problems with myself. Anyway, we have a child embarked on an independent writing process that will itself lead, in the long years to come, to various forms of expression such as poetry, description, journals, stories, research.

In an ideal sense you would wait until the child was doing independent writing before you put him in a formal reader. You probably won't be able to do that because he'll be under pressure and he'll want to be in a reader. In Trevor's case, for instance, being in a reader and doing independent writing have come simultaneously. I'm not sure which one came first—in fact, I think being in a reader came first—because in a sense he pushed and pushed and pushed and pushed and you can't say "no" because you've caught a kind of enthusiasm there and don't want to destroy it. Nevertheless, ideally (and often in fact) you wait, and begin to choose readers for a child when he is ready. In the beginning the teacher chooses them. At school we use a reader with a graded vocabulary—that is the words are not too complex nor introduced too quickly.

Hopefully, the person who has written the reader chooses the words with some kind of sense of what words are easily available, either through phonics or intrinsic value or pattern. But, almost invariably they don't and you have words like "here" and "they" and "are" which are, I guess, very important words in a sense. But, they're the hardest words to sound out. They are those **h**-words and those **th**-words which are the most difficult words to attack. On the other hand, they're fairly important for fill-ins. But a word like "here" is also pretty dull—it doesn't give any impact—so there's not ever any kind of dynamic attached to it, so you're sort of at a loss as how to get it across. The technique with these words is to fill in for the kid a lot—you give them a word like "here"—I've never asked them to be able to sound it out 'til they've worked for quite a long time.

As soon as a child is doing independent writing you're building in sight words—words like "us" and "the" and "to" and sometimes words like "car", "elephant", or "castle". They get built in with use or interest. It's true that children can learn to recognize some words by the configuration, but it's not something you want to depend on, because it gets to be too complex a technique after a while; that is, there are too many words that look alike. You know what I mean by configuration: the outlines of a word. That's a very favorite technique in some schools of thought, to have children try to recognize words because of the numbers of long and short letters in it. It only works at a limited level, and it doesn't really give them a secure skill to build on.

When you start putting a person in a reader you've reached the real heavy stuff of decoding and you've reached the spot where it may become such a bore and so difficult and so foreign that the child won't want to read any more.

The important thing to remember when you put a child into a reader is that, if possible, it should be something that's amusing. If possible, he should read it in units, not page at a time and then drop it. But if possible, he should be helped to some conception of the totality of what he's reading so that it makes sense to him. That's a thing to keep in mind. What I do is, I build in a notion of preparation before they read with me So that they're reading by themselves and preparation comes, I hope, very early, so that they learn that they can read by themselves or at least look at the pictures and try to figure out what's going on. Then they come to me and I talk about the story with them. I ask what's happening in the story and if possible I laugh with them. More and more I realize that's really important. If you can laugh with them over the story

that’s a good thing to do. In other words, if the story is funny or amusing or there’s something in it that they like, that’s what you hang on to. That’s what will sustain interest, even when decoding becomes difficult.

Davis is a good example and it’s easy to do with him because Davis has a great sense of humor. He even loves just plain sounds. One day he was trying to figure out “up” and that’s hard because it begins with a vowel and I said “Uah-pp” and he just laughed. The combination of “ahupp”, as he said it himself just tickled him and I also laughed—I mean we took a little time laughing because that’s a good thing for you to do.

When you start that process of introducing a reader you hopefully support the enjoyment. I am very frank about “Are you enjoying this book? If you’re not, let’s not read it. Let’s find something else.” I’m also fairly frank that it’s all right to read a book that’s easy. It’s all right to read a book over again. It’s better to read a book that’s too easy than a book that’s too hard, and I try to get the kids to see that. They get this idea that a reader has got to be harder each time, because they know that they’re moving in a progression and you can’t hide it from them. There’s nothing you can do about it. But, it’s all right. You can break in there by saying once in a while “You can have a rest, you know. It’s all right to read a book that’s easy and it’s more fun to start off in a book that’s easy.” Or “Why don’t you read a book you’ve read before?”

That’s one of the advantages, of course, of having children read individually. They’re not so terribly aware of comparisons with everyone else, even though they know which book comes before which book as well as you do.

While the child is reading in a reader with you, you must try to keep all of his modes, natural and emerging, as expressive as possible. Reading that degenerates into merely decoding writing that is *only* a skill, usually means a reader or a writer lost. You must maintain whatever expressive representation the child is doing, spoken language, drawing, whatever it is he’s using to represent. At the same time, new skills have to be put into the expressive context. that’s why it’s important to continue to read aloud, even to read parts of the child’s reader for him, and to continue to laugh with him about his work.

It’s frustrating to teach this way even a little bit, because you’re always losing something. If you’re not losing square dancing, you’re losing something else, like soccer, or electricity or something. I never can keep track of all the threads that I want to keep track of at once. I never am able to have the total curriculum that I plan to have. I never can keep it up, and it’s true with the reading process as much as with everything else. I never can quite make sure that everything is happening that I want to have happen.

Now, getting back to reading, the child reads along and after a while you sense that he’s reading very easily, and it’s no big hassle. So, you begin to suggest he doesn’t have to read in a reader, you then choose books together, and he can read on his own. If he tells you what he is reading, you don’t have to hear him read every word. Beginning readers you hear every day, but with more advanced readers, you discuss the story, you pick out a word here and a word there that you want to make sure that they’re able to read, but you don’t have to hear them all the time, every word. That’s something that has shocked some teachers in workshops. We were talking once about teacher expectations, of structures, and I was saying that I expected my children to read to me once a week, to do number work with me once a week, and to write once a week. A teacher said, “What’s the children’s level at the end of the sixth grade?” I said, “I think it’s about like every other kid, they read and they’re all average, relatively average.” She was really sort of surprised because she has her kids reading and writing every single day and

they still don’t come out any further “ahead” of the game than our kids do who read formally only on the average of once or twice a week. And, it really hit her very hard that there’s possibly something developmental going on here rather than instructional. And certainly that’s the case, I think, with reading. Once you think the child has started on the process comfortably and there aren’t any major hang-ups, you don’t need to spend hours and hours on reading, because it will come. Once he has started, you encourage him and support him and it will come very naturally. It’s when and how you start that’s crucial, not how much time you, as a teacher, spend after the child is started.

It might be important to say a bit about the importance of a thorough understanding of techniques at this point. When a kid starts to copy, as you’re writing the word for him you’re saying “m-a-n” or “man” or “Do you know the first sound?” You are constantly engaged upon a verbalizing of the decoding process for him without being too explicit. In order to do this you have to learn the process yourself. That is, you know what sounds are easy, what sounds are difficult, how you can approach them, where they’re made in the mouth, all that kind of technical thing. If you have a grasp of techniques yourself, you’ll never need any reading program that was ever made by anybody—you can make your own. If you don’t understand, then you are dependent on programs which teach this attack first, then this skill, then this skill and this skill. If you know the skills that are necessary, you don’t need someone else’s program, you can do what each child needs. You see when you get down to decoding, you’re getting down to absolutely petty details. You’re getting into which words are easiest, which words you watch out for, which sounds are difficult, what blending is, and these are things you learn almost word by word as you do it.

These skills are introduced to the child in the process of copying. I would not introduce it at the dictation level because I want the flow of the language. I don’t want to bog the kid down in waiting for me to say all the letters, I want him to talk and me to write it down. Same thing applies even at the beginning of the copying level. I often will say to the child, “Tell me the whole thing first, don’t try to tell me word by word as I write it down, say the whole thing in one sweep.” Often it’s important for him that I have his words in my memory. I operate for him as a memory. Then he can tell me the whole thing and if he forgets while he is trying to write, I’ve got it.

That’s another point to remember: you operate as a memory for children very often in this process of reading, but also in other matters, too. In your whole planning for a child’s day, you have to remember what he did the day before and you have to remind him, “Remember you did this yesterday, do you want to do it today?” He’s likely to have forgotten. He’s out of context and if he’s out of context, it’s gone, so you have to be his context, you have to be his time, you have to know how to be his continuity. You have to be able to do that in much the same way that you have to remember his words for him until he’s got flow. Once he’s got it, he doesn’t need you any more.

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NOTE: The Prospect School is one of the first institutions in the country to have been authorized to certify teachers independently of any university affiliation.