

Reinforcing Reading in Young Minds

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Introduction

Many students entering college today do not have the reading skills needed to do effective work in their courses. A related problem is that students often lack the skills required to think in a clear and logical way. What is needed is the need to develop effective reading and clear thinking. Students now live in a culture where people watch on an average over five hours of television every day. All that passive viewing does not allow much time for reading. Reading is a skill that must be actively practiced. Therefore, it is necessary to make our students think about why we should read and reinforce the benefits of reading in their minds.

Reading Improves Concentration

Those students who read often and widely, get better at it. Reading exercises our brains. Reading is a much more complex task for the human brain than watching TV is. Reading strengthens brain connections and actually builds new connections. Reading improves concentration. Reading improves a child's vocabulary, leads to more highly-developed language skills and improves the child's ability to write well.

Reading to Seek for Facts and Improve Knowledge

Students who read do better at college. And they don't just do better at subjects like English and Communication. They do better in all subjects and they do better all the way through college. In books we may find all the wisdom and knowledge attained by men over the ages. We need to know what books to use, and how to use them. We need to establish the accuracy of facts and be dissatisfied with the guesses and wide generalizations which mark the immature mind. The scientist or technologist, and any person who wants to be accurate will use reading to check facts and discover errors by the use of books. The young adult, as he begins his training in his workshop, or at the accounts desk, will turn to his books and check and re-check until he is sure he is right.

Reading Enhances Our Creativity

Reading develops a person's imagination. This is due to the fact that when we read our brains translate the descriptions we read of people, places and things into pictures. When we're

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engaged in a story, we're also imagining how the characters are feeling. We use our own experiences to imagine how we would feel in the same situation. Reading helps students develop empathy.

Reading Gives Us Pleasure

Much of our reading is for pleasure. Reading is a great form of entertainment. A paperback book doesn't take up much space so you can take it anywhere and you'll never be lonely or bored if you have a book in your bag. You can read while waiting in a queue, while waiting for a friend who's running late or during a flight delay at an airport. . Reading relaxes the body and calms the mind. This is an important point because these days we seem to have forgotten how to relax and especially how to be silent. The constant movement, flashing lights and noise which bombard our senses when we're watching TV, looking at a computer or playing an electronic game are actually quite stressful for our brains. When we read, we read in silence and the black print on a white page is much less stressful for our eyes and brains.

Teaching Reading

Therefore teaching reading in schools and colleges is as important as teaching the other language skills. In teaching a student to read we want him to be able to understand and enjoy what he reads; to understand and obey instructions; to discover new facts and information; and to find his errors and correct them. Clearly the teacher has to do more than teach children to recognize the words. Teaching reading with these aims in educating a student would ensure success.

Teaching to Make Understanding Clear

To understand meanings requires more than the simple answer to the question, 'What does this mean?' It also requires that the student must think of the meaning, of its associations and of its particular meaning in a sentence. Understanding also helps a child to sort out ideas in what he reads. The student has to learn to sort out these ideas and recognize that some are more important than others.

Reacting to What Has Been Read

All of us react to what we have read. We will laugh, will be sad, we will wait for the ending. Later, if these reactions are guided to be thought-provoking, everything we read will have an effect on us. We may agree, disagree, be enthusiastic or critical, or even refuse to read what has been written because the author is, we believe, writing what is untrue. This ability to read so that one can judge and make balanced judgments while one reads, is the mark of the civilized man.

Changing Ideas and Behavior

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Students have to learn to change their behavior and their ideas in response to what they have read. Having made good judgments, the next step is to take from their reading the ideas and attitudes towards daily living, which will make them people who can deal wisely with problems, have a better understanding of people and situations, and have wider interests. To read and to remain quite unaffected is a waste of time; but it is also a waste of the accumulated, stored knowledge, experience and wisdom that books can bring into our lives.

The Habits of Attention and Discovery

Certain habits can be formed through reading. The habit of attention is important and it is linked with the habit of working within a time limit. This may sound old-fashioned advice, and certainly it would be wrong to let the clock rule life in the classroom. The habit of discovery is one the teacher must try to train. It is linked with the child's huge natural curiosity. What the child discovers for himself is more valuable than what he is told.

Learning to Think

The habit of thinking has to be inculcated in the student. This is the habit of seeing a relationship, a link, an association, and of using what has been learnt previously. The teacher inculcates it by the way she makes sure that the foundation is good, that a child understands 'this' before he attempts 'that'; even by the way she reminds her children of 'what we did yesterday'; and also by the way she refuses to answer the children's 'why?', but smiles and says, 'You tell me'.

Using Imagination

The teacher has to encourage children to solve a problem - often enough good questioning in the classroom leads a student to discover the answer for himself. She has to encourage a student's power to see a picture in his mind or to imagine a situation. She can stimulate imagination by gentle encouragement.

Attention, Discovery, Thought and Imagination All Play a Part in Learning

The Pattern of Learning

Thus the pattern of learning in a student takes place in the following way:

1. He discovers and attends
2. He thinks and imagines
3. He remembers and recalls
4. He solves problems and produces work which is honest and conscientious

5. The student becomes a happy and useful member of his institution.

Students Are Individuals

Each student thinks and works at his own pace, and is happy because he is not being driven beyond his ability, or kept back so that he works too slowly.

Why Is Reading So Important?

The spoken word is so often used to disguise our thoughts, but in books we can read what men and women thought in the past, and what they are thinking in lands far away, where we would not even understand the spoken word. Through reading we become part of a big community of civilized people; meet so many different minds of different ages and races and places; interact with so many people whose wisdom and experience are greater than our own.

The Community of Authors and Readers

There are the great teachers like Confucius, Jesus, Mohammed or Plato. There are people in the community who can present to us a picture of our own world, so that we seem to see it more clearly. There are people who have thought of an idea and have given us their thought in a book. The man who invented the wheel did not need to write a book. But the men who evolved a method of using the power of water to generate electricity needed to describe their method very clearly in order to help other people to make use of their ideas. Some men have experienced great suffering or intense love, or have seen great courage. They have given us the opportunity to recognize in our lives, or in the lives of other people, the same kind of experience, so that we can better understand ourselves and other people. Some authors have laughed at the world, or at a little piece of it; and we can laugh with them.

Through books we can become greater than ourselves. Alone we face the world and all the confusing people, places and events in the world, each with his own puny intelligence, and limited experience. Of course, we might learn from watching other people. But in that way each community would learn slowly, and each step in the progress of civilized man would have to be taken over and over again. Reading can help us make use of the past and of the experience of great, noble people.

Reading Ability

The factors involved in reading ability are:

1. General maturity
2. Level of general intelligence
3. Abilities of visual and auditory recognition and discrimination of word patterns

4. Environmental factors in reading ability
5. Emotional attitudes of interest, individual application and confidence.

These five sets of factors, mental and environmental, act interdependently to produce the composite power of reading ability.

General Maturity

We may define degree of general maturity as the level of growth reached by a pupil as assessed by development in a number of different directions in relation to chronological age. We may, therefore, think of any 18-21 year old as having grown: (a) physically (b) intellectually (c) socially and (d) emotionally. Obviously development in each of these four fields is uneven in most students; there is often a difference in the levels reached in the four areas. Sometimes, of course, there is development beyond the norm, so that some of them are advanced intellectually, their social behavior is superior to that of most of their friends and they show stable emotional attitudes. At the other end of the scale are college students, whom we all know, are physically and mentally subnormal and socially retarded. The pattern of growth is very much an individual matter and hence to lump together measures of different kinds and to call the product general maturity has severe limitations. But nevertheless, it is a serviceable concept for use in educational and psychological work, provided we are continuously careful to note the many separate deviations that may blur the result.

Increasingly, during the past two decades, general maturity has been stressed as a factor in reading ability. This has been due to the attention that has been drawn to the relation between immaturity and reading failure leading to the postponement of formal reading and to the introduction of programmes of preparatory reading or reading readiness, of varying quality and length. Therefore, teachers should wait at the college level before launching all students on the same formal task for which some are not at that point sufficiently well equipped to succeed.

If students are physically or mentally or experientially immature, then we are predisposing many of them to failure in early reading instruction if we do not first do something about their particular immaturity. Vocabulary development, environmental background, motivation, physical maturity, particularly of vision and hearing, mental maturity and emotional stability, are all involved in producing reading achievement. But we must remember that there are also plenty of examples of students coming from good schools who are completely normal, but fail to progress in reading.

Level of General Intelligence

While measures of intelligence may be a guide in planning reading instruction, and in terms of expectancy of result, yet we should provide for each pupil's reading needs with something of an open mind. There are some intelligent children, who fail to make normal

progress in reading, while one can find numerous examples of rather dull pupils who can read quite fluently.

Abilities of Visual and Auditory Recognition and Discrimination of Word Patterns

In addition to general intellectual power, ability in reading requires normal powers of perception in respect to the visual and auditory patterns of words. These aptitudes, partly inborn, partly acquired, embrace first of all, an ability to discriminate and remember the visual patterns of words, and next, the ability to associate sound units of words with the correct groups of letters - partly a breaking-down and partly a building-up process. Obviously, efficiency in these abilities is to some extent dependent upon normal powers of sight and hearing. Defects in either of these senses can cause acute reading deficiencies. This is evident from the cases of pupils whose intelligence, language background and emotional attitudes are normal, but who exhibit gross reading disability in either the visual or the auditory perceptual fields.

Environmental Factors in Reading Ability

Environmental factors in reading ability are language background and extent of experiences - the former dependent to a large extent on the latter. Although the college does and can do much in the matter of language background and general experiences with which speech and vocabulary are so intimately entwined in their growth, this element in reading ability is a concomitant of home conditions. There is now substantial research evidence establishing the close relationship between reading and social factors. But home background is a wide and embracing term and includes influences of an emotional as well as a material kind, influences subtle as well as direct in their effects.

Home Background Can Include

- a. economic conditions such as ones relating to income of the family, size of home, sufficiency and regularity of meals, sleep, etc.;
- b. opportunities for play and for social experiences of different kinds - these, of course, are linked with the growth of concepts and vocabulary;
- c. nature and amount of speech and language patterns of children particularly as they are influenced by the talk of their parents;
- d. attitudes towards reading and writing, the amount of reading done in the home and the availability of books of varying levels of difficulty;
- e. quality of family life in terms of inter-parental relationships as they influence the child's security and personality growth generally.

Effect of Adverse Emotional Conditions

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While research has generally revealed that pupils with rich informational backgrounds and high verbal opportunities make more rapid progress in reading than those whose backgrounds are meager, yet it would seem that these conditions are also linked with the kind of emotional relationships between parents and children that exist within the family unit. There is ample evidence to show that disability in reading is very frequently associated with adverse emotional conditions within the family, such as those of overt parental hostility, parental rejection, neurotic conditions, and separation of parents.

Superior reading ability is associated with the number of books in the home, educational level of the parents, and favourable attitudes of the child to the college.

Emotional Attitudes of Interest, Individual Application and Confidence

Ability in reading, as with other learning skills, is just as sensitive to positive and negative emotional attitudes. The student learns best when he is eager to try and when he is interested. Some teaching methods produce these attitudes, others result in certain students developing a feeling of failure and frustration. Some teachers, too, show a sensible attitude towards the student's reading problems by widening his experiences, praising his efforts, and not expecting unduly high standards in the early stages. Others do the opposite by limiting the child's opportunities, robbing him of confidence, or pushing him along too fast, ultimately, down into the abyss of confusion. Some students need extensive therapeutic help before remedial teaching can even commence. Others need opportunities for emotional expression parallel with their specific instruction in reading. In fact, those working with cases of reading failure are almost inclined to regard every case as one of personality disturbance as well as poor reading achievement.

Training in Comprehension

Comprehension has different purposes. A consideration of the function of reading in relation to different forms of material, immediately suggests that understanding and interpreting differ in purpose under different circumstances. The boy who so avidly wants to know how to train pet dogs requires to extract an accurate step-by-step understanding of what he reads so that he can put it into practice. The boy who is reading about racing cars and their drivers is mostly satisfying his curiosity at the enjoyment level, in much the same way as he goes to the cinema. He brings away with him a few facts, but it is immaterial whether he remembers them or not, except in order to recount them to his peers. So with different material in different situations the purpose and level of understanding varies. The dog trainer is not unlike the student; he must understand and remember all the facts, the only difference being that some of the facts remembered by the student may be worthless; and this will not stand the test of practical application.

On the other hand, the student may at times just skim certain passages to glean the main general idea, or he may read an article, a play or a novel to supplement his knowledge or experience in a general way, or from a particular angle. At other times he must search his material with top level intellectual power to select facts that fit into an argument or a theory. On some other occasions he must marshal every fact with completeness and closeness, discarding irrelevant issues, if he is to make the correct inference or arrive at a logical conclusion.

There will be situations also in which the reader may be seeking to interpret the deeper and perhaps more sensitive or aesthetic meaning of the writer or the poet, through his choice of words or phrases, his form of imagery or rhythm, or the nature of his plot or the philosophy of his message.

Now while all these various forms of comprehension and interpretation in reading come only through much reading allied at times to writing, it should be the function of the teachers to help students to make the fullest use of reading in every sense. In other words, it should be a major objective of colleges these days to lead children to effective comprehension and interpretation.

No doubt some of the weaknesses found in colleges regarding these aspects of reading instruction lies in the fact that they are not regarded as responsibilities of the college but of schools. Too often colleges believe that children will have developed powers of comprehension and study skills for themselves. While this is probably true of the top thirty or forty per cent of students, it is not true of the majority. We need to include in our time-table periods when we help older boys and girls to form study habits, to understand what they read and to build up a deep and lasting interest in reading. American research has shown that we can contribute considerably to the improvement of comprehension and the development of study skills by teaching methods of both a direct and an indirect kind.

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