

Essay on the Skill of Reading in Education

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Reading is surely one of the most important skills that a person can develop over the course of his education: indeed, a person who cannot read well will not be able to make a great deal of progress in most intellectual disciplines. the purpose of the present sample essay provided by Ultius is to more thoroughly discuss issues regarding the skill of reading within the context of education. The essay will proceed through four main parts. The first part will consider statistics regarding literacy in the United States today. The second part will then turn attention to the way in which reading is generally taught in schools today. The third part will then discuss whether this common method does in fact convey the skill of reading to students in an effective way. Finally, the fourth part will consider alternative possibilities for reading education that may have better and/or more sustained effects on literacy.

### **Literacy in the United States**

To start with, the relevant statistics regarding literacy (or the capacity to read and write) in America would seem to suggest that there is at least some cause for concern in this regard. As Kirsch, Jungblut, Jenkins, and Kolstad found, for example, in an important study on adult literacy conducted in the year 2002: "Twenty-one to 23 percent—or some 40 to 44 million of the 191 million adults in this country—demonstrated skills in the lowest level of prose, document, and quantitative proficiencies;" and there were significant demographic disparities found, with minority racial/ethnic populations and older adults demonstrating significantly less reading proficiency on average than members of other demographic groups (p. xvi). Moreover, it was found that about a quarter of the national adult population performed at only one level higher than the lowest level mentioned above.

Now, to an extent, this issue can be explained by factors that are extrinsic to literacy skill per se. For example, Kirsch et al. found that a fairly large portion of adults who performed at the

lowest level for literacy were immigrants who were just beginning to learn the English language, and that another portion of the people in that group had visual disabilities that interfered with their ability to actually perceive (and not just comprehend) text material (p. xvi). Nevertheless, that still leaves a large number of American adults who would apparently seem to be just barely able to read, even though English is their mother tongue and they should have been taught how to read through the natural process of going through the educational system.

Moreover, the evidence indicates that a lack of reading skill has broad-ranging consequences that can negatively affect a student's relationship with society as a whole. DoSomething.org, for example, has reported the following: "2/3 of students who cannot read proficiently by the end of 4th grade will end up in jail or on welfare. Over 70% of America's inmates cannot read above a 4th grade level"—a finding that is especially trouble, considered in light of the other finding that "1 in 4 children in America grow up without learning how to read" (paras. 2-3). If one is almost baffled regarding how this could be the prevailing state of affairs regarding literacy within a highly developed nation such as America, one would be quite justified in this sentiment. In light of these statistics, it will now be appropriate to turn attention to reading education itself, and to the way in which the skill of reading is generally taught to students. If this many Americans grow up without acquiring full-fledged reading skill, then this would seem to point toward not an individual-level failure but rather to a structural problem within the educational system itself.

### **The Way that Reading is Taught**

One of the most common ways that educators teach reading to students is to focus on phonics: this refers to focusing on the individual sounds of letters and words, and then encouraging students to piece together more complex structures through an awareness of these

basic building blocks. As Cromwell has indicated, phonics is a basically analytical approach to reading education, and it is primarily good for students who naturally have an analytical style of cognition; "and "if the systematic teaching of phonics doesn't take place, analytic learners can fall behind and fail to develop the tools they need for decoding words" (para. 11). On the other hand, however, a focus on phonics to some extent inherently limited, insofar as it tends to dissociate sounds and words from the more global contexts of language use within which they emerge in the real world.

Within the common method for teaching reading, there would seem to exist an internal tension between this focus on phonics on the one hand and a more global approach on the other. Cromwell has written that these two approaches seem to play off of each other in an almost dialectical way over time, with the pendulum swinging from the one end to the other as stakeholders begin to respond negatively to the dominance of the one focus over the other. Ideally, the two poles—phonics and whole language—would seem to be complementary in nature, though it would seem that more often in practice, an antagonism develops between them. Educators who advocate whole language tend to dismiss phonics as primitive and artificial, drawing attention away from the actual nature of reading itself; and educators who advocate phonics tend to see whole language as neglecting the structure and basic of reading skill development, leaving students relatively confused, unorganized, and unable to develop higher-order literacy in the future (Horsfield, 2013).

### **Evaluation of the Common Method**

The common method for teaching reading has clearly met with a great deal of failure, insofar as success is defined in terms of the ideal of universal literacy within the nation. As Brady and Moats have indicated, the relevant research on this subject over time has converged

on several key conclusions, including "insufficient awareness of the sound structure of words (phoneme awareness)" and "poor and inaccurate of decoding of single words (inability to read new words)" (para. 4). Interestingly, these problems would seem to span both the phonics and whole language aspects of the common method for teaching reading, which would seem to imply either that the aspects of the method itself are inadequate for addressing the problems confronting reading education, or that the balance between the aspects of the method is off in some crucial way.

In particular, the common method would seem to have a significant blind spot with respect to actually detecting warning signs of reading failure in students and taking the appropriate and individualized steps that would be needed in order to avert such failure. As Cooper, McWilliams, Boschken, and Pistochini have noted, failure can often occur not only at the level of recognition but also at the level of comprehension: that is, the student may either not be able to read a given word or sentence, or he may not be able to understand the meaning of the word or sentence he has just read. Clearly, both of these things are serious problems; and depending on the way in which the common method is applied, failures of comprehension may be especially overlooked by educators until the student has reached a more advanced grade level where such failures begin to cause serious and noticeable problems. In short, the common method for teaching reading would not seem to have failsafes built into itself in order to detect and prevent its own failures in a timely way.

Moreover, this becomes especially problematic if one considers the relationship that reading skill on the one hand and self-esteem on the other, or the fact that a student who falls behind in reading early may begin to develop a resentment toward reading in general that will make it all that much more difficult for him to ever actually address his deficit (Hisken). In other

words, reading deficits tend to spiral over time in an exponential way, as the student fall farther and farther behind his peers, making it increasingly difficult to go back to the foundations and provide the student with the education that he would actually need in order to develop his skill in this regard. Early detection of reading failure would thus be a key aspect of improving the literacy rate within America, and the common method of teaching reading would seem to be especially bad at such detection, possibly because the individual skills associated with literacy are often evaluated in a relatively piecemeal way and without a clear reference to some broader or global context.

### **Reflection on Possibilities**

One alternative possibility for reading education would be to teach reading with a key context in which reading is actually used for pragmatic purposes: that is, in the comprehension and appreciation of literature. This is what Atwell has had to say about this matter: "Enticing collections of literature—interesting books written at levels they can decode with accuracy and comprehend with ease—are key to children becoming skilled, thoughtful, avid readers. . . . Surrounded by good books, they decide which ones they'll read. Because they decide, they engage" (para. 5). Essentially, students could learn to read simply by developing serious curiosity about the things that are out there to be read, and then engaging in the immersive experience of gradually assimilating meaning and comprehension from the materials to which they are exposed.

From this perspective, the common method of teaching reading is fundamentally flawed from a psychological as well as pedagogical perspective, insofar as it expects students to engage in a serious way with the teacher in order to learn a skill whose inherent value they do not perceive and in which they have no inherent interest. Almost no learning, at any age level, can be

effectively take place in such a serious absence of actual engagement; and if the contemporary classroom setting seems to be a failure in producing adequate literacy achievement as well as other achievements in students, then this could perhaps be largely traced back to this fundamental disregard for salience. On the other hand, if students are surrounded by books and encouraged to explore on their own in accordance with their own interests, then the chances are very good that they will naturally feel compelled to develop their reading skills, so that they can pursue the objects of their interest in a more effective way.

### **Conclusion**

In summary, the present essay has consisted of a discussion of the skill of reading within the context of education. After considering literacy statistics within America, the essay described the common method of teaching reading, evaluated that method in a critical way, and finally considered alternative possibilities for reading education. A key conclusion that has been reached here is that the common method of teaching reading does not produce adequate literacy results, and this is perhaps largely due to the fact that the method fails to engage the interest of the students or make clear the salience of developing literacy in terms of the actual uses of literacy in congruence with the interests of the students. The suggestion can thus be made that reading education should be revised in such a way that it comes into congruence with the natural psychological processes that inspire and motivate students of any age level to engage in the learning process in the first place.

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