



Talking Point - Is our reading scheme really necessary?

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Article Category:

Talking Point

Byline:

Do some of the things done in schools, primary and secondary, actually discourage children from seeing books and reading in a positive way?

Do some of the things done in schools, primary and secondary, actually *discourage* children from seeing books and reading in a positive way?

Jill Bennett asks **Is your reading scheme really necessary?**

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I teach a vertically grouped infant class in an outer London school and for ten years I have been helping children learn to read. Very early on I decided that reading schemes and 'reading books' had no place in what I was trying to achieve.

My chief aim as an infant teacher is to help children become readers who see books as an important part of their lives and who will continue to enjoy literature as they grow up. The best way to achieve this, I believe, is to teach them to read by using *real* books right from the start. As I see it reading is not about look-say, word-by-word decoding, phonic analysis or a progression from one boring non-story to another through a reading scheme whose controlled vocabulary must be slavishly followed. Reading is, first of all, a matter of getting meaning from print, and children must be made aware of this from the very beginning. The ability to read is developed through reading, and here I see *story* as the basis of everything. I expect my children to learn to read with real books and to enjoy doing so.

As adults we don't read at the same level and in the same way all the time; at one moment we may be tackling something really difficult and at another relaxing with something completely undemanding. Why should we expect the learner reader to be any different? And yet we often place severe restrictions on children's choice of reading material.

This is not the case in my classroom where for example comics, Mr Men and Scarry, as well as non-fiction titles, are available alongside the picture books which form the main reading diet of the children. The latter are arranged on a series of shelves with those of approximately the same level grouped together, and this arrangement is explained to newcomers.

At the same time, a selection of the whole range is displayed face out so that a five-year-old may select say **Burglar Bill**, which he cannot read for himself, and ask a more experienced friend to read it to him, or merely enjoy browsing through it himself. On the other hand, an older child may return to a well-loved simple story and read it on his own, or to one or two younger children.

I also have strong views about hearing children read, and each child reads to me every day. But this must not become a 'two pages a day' chore for teacher and child. So, when finding a book to read aloud to me, it is essential that the child chooses one that is within his capabilities, otherwise he will not get the meaning, reading becomes a senseless task and the enjoyment is lost. This approach provides a marvellous opportunity for a teacher to talk with a child about the book

he is reading. 'Reading to teacher' then becomes a valuable shared experience rather than being something children do to 'get on to the next book', 'beat their friends' or 'please Miss'.

A fuller account of Jill Bennett's approach, together with an annotated list of over 100 books she uses in her classroom, can be found in **Learning to Read with Picture Books**, Jill Bennett, A Signal Booklist, £1.20 post free, from The Thimble Press, Lockwood, Station Road, South Woodchester, Stroud, Gloucestershire GL5 5EQ. The books listed in **Learning to Read with Picture Books** can be hired as exhibition from the National Book League (Telephone: 01-493 9001).

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Source URL (retrieved on Sep '20): <http://savfkn.booksforkeeps.co.uk/issue/1/childrens-books/articles/talking-point/talking-point-is-our-reading-scheme-really-necessary>

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