

Governor's Conference on Reading

by Deborah McCabe

Rockingham County Public Library

More than 1,000 people attended the Governor's Conference on Reading, held in Winston-Salem September 22-24, 1975. The conference consisted of five general sessions, six units of concurrent sessions, and exhibits and displays. The conference was well organized and well run. The speakers, some from as far away as California and New York, were very interesting and contributed much to the success of the conference.

The Governor's Conference on Reading began the Year of Reading in North Carolina, by proclamation of the Governor. The opening remarks outlined the problem through statistics. In North Carolina, 983,000 adults are functionally illiterate. This is 19% of the population. It should be pointed out that over 660,000 adult illiterates are white. Of this number (983,000 adult illiterates) 265,000 have had five years or less of schooling. 53,000 adults have had no formal education at all; with little exception they can neither read nor write. 22.3% of North Carolina's draftees fail the written exam designed to demonstrate a person's ability to meet mental requirements for military service. According to military officials, the exam could be read with ease by an average junior high school student. Elementary school students in North Carolina are 4½ months behind the national average in vocabulary, and 6 months behind in reading comprehension. There is a problem.

Three concepts which were discussed throughout the conference were reading as

a life-long process, balance between home and school, and self-directed learning.

Everyone seemed to agree that reading is more than translating code into sound. Reading is a life-long process. Dr. Paul Ylvisaker stated that the right to read is the right to know is the right to grow. Dr. James Gallagher described reading as a celebration of the past and an anticipation of the future. Dr. Wilson Riles thought that literacy has become necessary for humanitarian and economic survival. Dr. Paul Ylvisaker spoke also of the constant need to learn and relearn in our rapidly changing society. Libraries can contribute to this life-long process with materials for all ages on all subjects.

Dr. Alvin Granowsky said in his speech that home is the biggest factor in a child's success in school. He also stressed the importance of having real-life reading materials, such as magazines and newspapers, available for learners. John Holt emphasized that learners should have access to the types of materials that they are interested in. Several thought that it is important for children to hear stories and poetry read aloud. This is certainly an area where public libraries can supplement home and school. There is a wide range of materials available to anyone. Besides traditional story hours, cassette-book and record-book kits are available so children can listen to as well as look at stories.

The third concept which had widespread support was self-directed learning. In his small group session, Dr. Malcolm Knowles contrasted teacher-directed learn-

ing (pedagogy) with self-directed learning (androgogy). Even in formal education, many teachers are using the learning contract which allows the learner to develop his or her own objectives, resources and strategy, and basis for evaluation. People are naturally, instinctively, learners. John Holt said, "There are two things children cannot be told: to learn and how to learn. They can and do, and they're better at it than we are." Libraries are well-suited for self-directed learning. Materials are readily available, as is assistance, if desired.

John Holt shocked the conference participants when he said, "Reading is a problem made by adults, and conferences like this make it a worse problem." To emphasize his theory that a compulsory situation is counter-productive, he somewhat facetiously suggested making reading illegal until 12 or 14 years of age. Younger children would all learn to read, just as they learn things now, "like the one word that's never misspelled." While we tell children that reading is fun, and that they should know how to read, the real messages of compulsory schooling and compulsory reading programs are: (1) If we didn't make you read, you lazy, good-for-nothing, you'd never learn, so we're going to make you, (2) Reading is so difficult and you are so stupid, we'll have to give it to you a little bit at a time. It is impossible to teach those who don't want to learn. Holt's hypothesis is that anxiety blunts perception and eventually blocks it entirely. Students react to a coercive situation with anxiety and fear. Especially when punished, learners are afraid to be wrong. If the basis of the problem is compulsion, the problem cannot be solved while it remains in a coercive environment.

My major impression from the Governor's Conference on Reading is that many people are ignorant of public libraries. It was especially surprising to me that people so interested in reading could be so unaware of public library services. In so

many instances, teachers, administrators, and reading specialists were ignoring library services and yet at the same time stressing access to a wide range of materials. Many librarians attended the conference, and spoke up often to promote understanding of library services. In one small session, the leader said she felt that the conference had been infiltrated by librarians, as though librarians have no interest in reading.

Several libraries had good exhibits. Greensboro Public Library's Early Childhood Education Program had video tapes of their programs and a display of materials. Some of the ideas they used, such as cards printed with large letters, were based on the book *How To Teach Your Baby To Read* by Glenn Doman. Cumberland County Public Library used the theme of old-time silent movies for their slide show. Slides of library activities, interspersed with silent movie signs, were automatically shown on a rear projection screen. Large glossy photographs of library activities were mounted on the two side boards. Taped silent movie music accompanied the show.

Librarians must continue to promote libraries and library services. Libraries are exactly what many educators are calling for. Materials for all reading levels and all interests are available to anyone. Libraries have the real-life reading materials, newspapers and magazines, called for by Dr. Granowsky. Libraries are better than the paperback book store advocated by John Holt. Libraries are more widely accessible and use of materials is free of charge. Librarians can provide assistance ranging from help in the use of the library collection to information on educational opportunities in the area. Although many speakers described library characteristics and services, they did not mention libraries by name. Libraries must take the initiative and make this connection apparent to educators and learners.