

**WHY CAN'T THEY READ?**

If you were ill, would you want your doctor to prescribe quinine? It is a medicine with wonderful curative powers, but you would not want to be given quinine unless it was what you needed. So with the reading ills of our age. For years library books have been prescribed for poor readers; studies have been conducted to show the successful progress made by participating pupils. And yet the writer makes bold to liken the plan of prescribing library books for poor readers, in general, to the attempt to cure all diseases with one medicine.

Librarians are interested in and concerned about reading inability; and rightly so. But, as a librarian, the writer became curious about why children failed to learn to read and about what could be done to help them. Leaving to others the fun of helping *eager* children find the right book, she became involved in helping children learn to read. For-saking a career as a school librarian, she made special studies in the teaching of remedial reading, and became a special teacher of reading in Greensboro Public Schools.



*A small group being taught according to demonstrated needs of the pupils.  
Special reading classes, (Proximity School) Greensboro.*

The principle causes of reading failures are discussed here, with implications for librarians.

Causes of failure in reading fall into four general classes: mental, social and emotional, physical, and educational. These causes seldom appear singly, but rather in constellations.

High on the list of causes of failure is the lack of mental maturity and reading readiness at the time reading instruction is begun. North Carolina accepts a child for the first grade if he is six or will be six by October first. This chronological age, however, does not assure the child's readiness for reading activities. Research finds that, in general, *mental age* of at least six years and six months is desirable for beginning reading. A child whose intelligence quotient is one hundred will reach the mental age of six—six by September if he was born before April of that year. I. Q.'s from ninety to one hundred—ten are in the normal range. An average child who reaches his sixth birthday near the opening of school will profit more from several months of reading readiness than from formal reading. With delayed instruction he will read just as well, likely better, by the end of the third grade, and with less attendant nervous strain.

Not only should a child's mental age be high enough to give a good prediction of success in beginning reading but his physical development and his social and experimental backgrounds should be adequate.

Some children, at six, particularly boys, are not physically mature enough for school lessons and their eyes are not ready for print.

A child must be able to work and play happily with a group; to express his ideas for others' understanding; and to have had experience, either actual or vicarious, that will enable him to interpret symbols. A reading class is a social activity: children work in a group, follow directions, discuss. In the beginning stages, only words already in the child's speaking vocabulary should be met in symbols; a child with a limited background is handicapped from the start.

The inclination is to connect reading readiness with six-year olds, but, if the dull normal child should have reading readiness activities until he is, perhaps, eight and the low grade moron until he is twelve, each might then be able to profit from reading instruction. There are many shades of differences between the older slow-learner and the young, normal child but, in general, both groups react best to short, simple material with a familiar background.

The child who has reading before he is ready for it and fails is apt to become a social problem and either tends to withdraw or to become antagonistic. A block is formed against reading; this greatly increases the difficulty to teach him when he is mentally mature enough for instruction. Conversely, the socially or emotionally maladjusted child sometimes fails in reading.

Until a poor reader can read on about a third-grade level, there are few books he can manage alone, except textbooks. Reading is taught first by sight. While a stock of approximately two hundred words is being acquired, the child should have auditory discrimination exercises; these lead to the use of phonics, based on the words recognized, to identify an unknown word. For instance, in the sentence, *A New boy came to our room*, if *room* is the only unknown, it may be filled in by sense and by relating the initial sound of the known words, *run* and *ride*. An average child learns to use this skill with the help of the teachers long before he applies it voluntarily; the same may be said of subsequent skills of phonetic and structural analysis. The misnamed "easy books" section in an average children's library is not filled with books which beginning reader can read by himself. He needs a controlled vocabulary, almost entirely words he has met previously and a minimum of others to be fitted in through context.

At the readiness stage and thereafter, failure in reading may be caused by defects of vision, hearing, speech, and general health; lack of physical and visual maturation was mentioned above in the discussion of readiness for reading. The librarian is concerned mainly with vision. She should know that the Snellen chart, commonly used to screen school children's visual acuity, tests one eye at a time at far point, while reading is done at near point with binocular vision. The librarian, with the teacher, should observe evidences of eye strain and note excessive blinking or covering of one eye; proper steps should be taken to have the child sent to an eye-doctor. If he finds no default but evidences of eye strain continue, ask that the child have another examination preferably without drops. Recommending wide reading is not the treatment that a poor reader suffering from a visual handicap needs.

Reading is a skill that is learned. Children fail in reading because they have not been taught by a method or in a way in which they could learn. These children need definite instruction, step by step, skill upon skill, and not wide, unguided reading.

Reading involves word-recognition, comprehension, interpretation. Reading may be done for the purpose of getting the general idea or details; it may be skimming or closely studying. A pupil may be a good fiction reader and have poor study skills. Speed and the adjustment of rate to the purpose of reading are important. To help a child improve in reading, a careful diagnosis of his aptitudes, abilities, and weaknesses should be made and, from the results, a plan formulated to attack the phases upon which work is needed.

Quinine is a useful tonic. Perhaps a dose of it won't harm you if you take it for a cold but more than likely it won't cure your ailment. If a child needs to learn the "sight words," reading a library book will probably not help him to distinguish between *then* and *when*. A reader who has good comprehension but lacks speed because of word-by-word reading is going to plow through his library books practicing his bad habits.



*A regular classroom reading class with the reading specialist and the grade teacher giving individual instruction and guidance within the group.*

### How Librarians Can Help with the Reading Problem

The librarian will seldom have the opportunity or the needed training to give reading instruction. She can, however, help develop readiness for reading in pre-school and immature children by making simple books easily available to them. She can help the child who, possibly because of his reading failure, has become a social problem, by finding a way to make friends with him and to let him derive satisfaction from the library. She can put on her shelves books that may look useful rather than beautiful; she can stop being afraid of having books of the textbook type on primary reading levels and have the assurance that she is providing material that will be beneficial and pleasing to beginning and poor readers.

Children's rooms in public libraries help develop reading readiness by allowing pre-school children to participate in story hours. Visiting the public library is an enriching experience. Borrowing books for home use is helpful. School libraries could do much in preparing their future patrons by encouraging older sisters and brothers to borrow books for the younger ones at home and by permitting pre-school children to come themselves when a public library is not accessible. Too, the immature school children who are not ready for reading and, so often, have not had books before coming to school, should certainly be allowed to take Mother Goose and other appropriate books home.

Tensen's *Come to the Zoo* and *Come to the Farm* should initiate a new era in attractive trade books within the basic sight vocabulary; so far, however, they are unique. A wide, generous supply of all attractive readers from preprimers through second readers not owned in sets by local schools is recommended for libraries who want to attract and help poor readers. Such appealing books as the *American Adventure Series* and the first two titles of the *Aviation Series*, listed in the *Library Book Catalogue* issued by the North Carolina School Book Depository, January 1, 1952, and Scott, Foresman's *The Box-car Children*, by G. C. Warner and following titles should not be overlooked. Libraries without primary textbooks are setting up a barrier between themselves on one hand and beginning and poor readers on the other.

Because of her wide knowledge of books, the librarian rather than the average teacher can encourage the highest form of reading, interpretation, by stimulating discussion with small groups or individuals: "What did you think would happen when — — —?" "Wouldn't you have loved being with — — —?" "Have you known anyone like — — —?"

Interest is a valuable ally in the work of improving reading ability. That is the reason why the library's extensive collection is important to remedial reading. It is indispensable in the case of a child who can read but has not read enough to develop his vocabulary and rate. It is with this type of problem, particularly, that the librarian may take over some of the work of the reading teacher.

The basic rule in remedial reading instruction is that the pupil must meet success. For a non-reader or near non-reader books, even thin picture-books, are "too full of words" to be used. The child's dictated sentences or word-cards are preferable for beginning work. Too, books may have unpleasant associations for him.

Reading is important. Efficient reading is more needed today than ever before. Yet the facts should be recognized and kept in mind that there are some who will not profit from reading instruction and others who can be expected to achieve on a low level only. These unfortunate ones must be accepted and made to feel that they have a place in society—and in the library. . . . Yes, Reading is important!

—MISS SIDNEY HOLMES,  
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