

EDITOR'S COMMENTS

Teaching Children, or Teaching Subjects

A lot of my friends are teachers. And whenever I tell those teachers how disappointed I am about the tiny amount that young children are expected to learn in most schools, they almost always give me the same sanctimonious smile and then tell me the same sanctimonious cliché: "I teach children, not subjects." They mean to tell me that my high expectations are dangerous—that giving children too much information too soon will so tax their feeble new brains that they will be psychologically damaged and probably, even, turned off learning forever after.

Well, I don't believe that, of course. I don't believe it because I myself do like to think, and because my experience with children suggests that sizeable numbers of them like thinking also, and thrive on having information they can think about. The idea that information is bad for young children emerges from what strikes me as a profoundly anti-educational assumption—that thinking about and learning about the world in which we live are inherently boring, not fun at all. It's the same anti-educational assumption that causes teachers to look around for glitzy ways to make learning fun—as if it weren't inherently enjoyable itself; and I suspect that far too many children quickly figure out the hidden message here—that if you have to make it fun, then it must not be fun itself.

Since I believe that information is not inherently funless, I get mad at teachers who tell me they teach children and not subjects. And I tease them about it. Well, I say, *what* do you teach children? Do you teach them to be children? No, they say, of course not, children know how to be children already. Well then, I say, do you teach them to be adults? No, of course not, they say, I wouldn't want to spoil their childhood by making them grow up too soon—that's the horrible, evil thing that you want to do, Nodelman. Well then, I say, *what* do you teach them? The answer is always pretty much the same—they teach the children in their charge positive attitudes.

In fact, they really do try to teach children both how to be children and how to be adults, for teaching children and not subjects operates on the assumption that teaching is really a therapeutic activity, a branch of social work: we send children to school to learn to get along with others and have positive self-images and all, not to learn about arithmetic and social studies and literature.

The trouble with this is merely that teaching children how to be better people assumes we know what makes some people better than others. I'm not sure I do. That's why I try to teach subjects rather than people—it leaves people free to be themselves.

It's for that reason above all that I am delighted by the recent efforts of the ChLA to develop a curriculum of literary study for the primary grades. The participants of the symposium that met last year in Charlotte emerged with the profound conviction that children could be, and indeed ought to be, taught a subject—the subject being literature. Because the report of that symposium sums up so many of my own education concerns, I'd like to reprint an excerpt from it here. What follows is a list of the basic principles that participants in the symposium developed as guides in the creation of the proposed curriculum:

1. The study of literature offers various sorts of information, and helps us to gain understanding of ourselves, of our society, of our history. But its main purpose is always a better understanding and appreciation of literature itself; the focus must be on the understanding of literary texts, not on the use of those texts to promote other forms of learning.

2. Current classroom practice allows children to make what they wish out of a work of literature, without any attempt to channel their response or focus their attention. But literature is a form of communication, involving the demands of the text as well as the consciousness of the reader. Consequently, any work of literature can be best understood as a *transaction* between text and reader. We should show children that works of literature have specific meanings and attitudes to communicate, and that even though different readers may interpret those meanings and attitudes in different ways, close attention must be paid to them if we are to gain the most knowledge and the most pleasure from them.

3. Each work of literature is unique; one of the goals of criticism is to help readers to appreciate that uniqueness.

4. One of the ways of doing that is by being conscious of the qualities a work of literature shares with other works of literature; there are recurring themes and patterns throughout literature, and aware readers know about them and make use of that knowledge. For that reason, children should be given access to a wide variety of literature—works of other centuries so that they can see how patterns develop and change (and in the meantime, develop a sense that literature does not have to be immediately relevant to one's life in order to be pleasurable or useful), and works of popular literature so that they can compare formulaic treatments of patterns with more distinctive ones.

5. The goal of any program of literary study is to develop discernment: to show students the differences between distinctive literature and mediocre literature, and to broaden their ability to appreciate the distinctive as well as the mediocre. Such a broadening ought also to protect students from propaganda; the ability to discern how a work of literature is designed to be persuasive prevents one from being persuaded unconsciously.

6. Literature has a complex part to play in the processes of society; it offers pleasure and information, and conveys conscious or unconscious attitudes. Meanwhile, different children have different needs at different times.

Consequently, a curriculum should be eclectic enough in its approach to offer a variety of different approaches to be used with different children at different times. In the long run, this eclecticism should make each child conscious of all the various ways in which any given work of literature may be seen or used. The idea is not to force children into seeing literature in one way only, but to offer them a menu of approaches, and an attitude that response to literature requires flexibility, in hopes that they will choose those approaches most significant to themselves.

7. That implies an important last principle: literary study is a process, pleasurable less in its results than in the search for those results. We must try to teach children the pleasure involved in the search for understanding rather than focus on the goal itself. Those with a deep attachment to literature are almost never content with their conclusions about it.

Those guidelines do not just suggest a way of understanding literature that is deeply enjoyable and deeply meaningful; they also imply a deep respect for children and their capabilities, and an attitude toward education that would allow teachers to teach, not just subjects, and not just children, but rather, to teach subjects to children. And surely that is what education is all about.

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