HOME READING: AN EXPERIMENT

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Dr. Butler, in his *Meaning of Education*, says: "Modern education in its adjustments is bringing the child into his literary inheritance in a new spirit. The study of literature must always have a prominent place in education. It admits of no substitute." Are the usual grade readers and supplementary material supplying this inheritance to the fullest extent? It seems to me that school men generally would say "No." We do not yet give to reading the proper emphasis in our program of work. An editorial in the *Elementary School Journal* for May, 1917, says: "Reading may not always stand out as the most important of human activities, but the democracy for which our nation has taken its stand depends today and tomorrow on the ability of our people to think independently and to get their ideas each for himself." We school superintendents must see to it that the boys and girls read wisely and widely. We are concerned about what the youngsters see at the "movies." But there seems to be a widespread lack of interest in, or direction of, the child's out-of-school reading.

Especially important is this matter of much and good reading out of school hours in a community with a large portion of foreign-born parents. These people, surely, know very little about the child's world of books. In some homes there is almost no English spoken or read. Should we wonder that the children of such parentage find it difficult to understand their geography lesson, or that they cannot work their arithmetic problems because they do not understand what is given

or required? Such boys and girls need literally to be "steeped" and "soaked" in English.

I am a strong believer in the leavening effects of good literature, suited to the age of the child and taken in generous doses. The public libraries of the country are doing nearly all that they can to direct the children's reading. It is time that the schools took a more active part in this work. In Munhall the school and library are working in the fullest spirit of co-operation. We started to have the children read voluntarily certain books from approved lists. We now make this home reading compulsory. Why we made the change and how it works is the object of this article.

With the assistance of the local Carnegie Library, which furnished all the books, we inaugurated the Munhall reading course in the fall of 1915. The idea of reading books at home under direction of the school is not new. Some states even have pupils' reading circles. We have used their ideas with thanks. We decided to give a reading circle certificate to each child who read, and received credit for reading, ten books from the approved grade list. To receive credit the pupil was to talk over his reading with some teacher before his book could be counted on the certificate plan. We do not employ *written* reviews of the books. Herein we differ from many other plans.

First of all, we accepted almost *in toto* the list of books for home reading given in the course of study in English for the graded schools of Toledo, Ohio. For each grade there was a list of from forty to fifty books, from the fourth through the eighth.

We felt that there must be some check on the children's work. We did not like the written examination or review. It seemed best for the pupil to talk over his reading with someone who knew the book. That meant that these two hundred titles should be known by the teachers. It was too much to

expect that the grade teacher should know the contents of the books on her grade list, at least during the first year. We decided to divide these two hundred books among the entire teaching force. We included the high-school teachers. Why not? Were they not to reap the benefits from such a course of reading by receiving later boys and girls with a better English foundation? The next problem was how to assign the books. There were thirty-two teachers. That meant about six titles to each.

Thinking that each teacher might find her books from looking over the entire list, I asked each one to check such books as she knew and could talk about intelligently with the child when he came to make his report. In substance this was a teacher-survey without such intention on my part. The result revealed the fact that we, as teachers, were far out of touch with the child's world of literature.

This is what I found: Practically all thought that they could ask intelligent questions on *Black Beauty*. Seventy-five per cent knew *Mrs. Wiggs of the Cabbage Patch* and *Robinson Crusoe*. Sixty per cent were willing to take *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*, *Swiss Family Robinson*, *Christmas Carol*, and *David Copperfield*. Half knew Stevenson's *A Child's Garden of Verses*. About the same number knew *Beautiful Joe*, *Five Little Peppers*, *King of the Golden River*, *Treasure Island*, and *The Last of the Mohicans*. About one-fourth knew *The Little Lame Prince*, *The Wonder Book*, *Gulliver's Travels*, *Grimm's Fairy Tales*, *Little Men*, *Jo's Boys*, *Tanglewood Tales*, *The Jungle Book*, *An Old Fashioned Girl*, *Tom Brown's School Days*, and *Anne of Green Gables*.

My two hundred titles were not exhausted by this method of choice. Further search revealed the fact that about five teachers knew *Aunt Jo's Scrap Bag*, *Fifty Famous Stories Retold*, *Goody Two Shoes*, *Jack and Jill*, *Little Colonel*, *Biography of a Grizzly*, *Weidi*, *Under the Lilacs*, *Arabian Nights'*

Entertainments, Timothy's Quest, Hoosier School Boy, and The Talisman.

These books were almost unknown: *Ten Boys, Land of the Blue Flower, Adventures of a Brownie, Love Songs of Childhood, Story of Patsy, Posy Ring, Story Hour, Story of a Bad Boy, Toby Tyler, Mr. Stubb's Brother, Eight Cousins, Training of Wild Animals, Two Years before the Mast, Uncle Remus*, books by Coffin, *Captains Courageous, Oregon Trail, Men of Iron*, and *Being a Boy*. I hesitate to say that no teacher knew any of these books. But the fact is that the returned checked lists seemed to indicate what I have stated.

Such a result will, I have no doubt, be found by an inquiry of almost any group of teachers and superintendents. The findings opened my eyes to my own needs and the needs of my teaching staff.

It seemed that my duty was clearly defined. The method of choice had not solved the problem. The only way left was to give each teacher about two of the books she had checked and then to assign to her four other titles with which she would have to become familiar. This helped each to enlarge her horizon in children's books. In this manner it was arranged that each of our thirty-two teachers had six titles from the list of two hundred.

As was stated earlier, the pupil's work was voluntary at first. Only in the third year of the plan did we change to compulsory work. Very many began to do the reading with a will only to find that, after the lists had been posted in the children's room of the library, the pupils of the adjoining borough with three times our population had "gobbled" most of the books. The library thought that they had made liberal provision. In spite of this handicap, we kept at it. At the end of the year we had a respectable group of children who had read at least ten of the recommended books. Many had seals attached to their certificates indicating that they had

read in an approved manner ten additional books. Some had read forty books. A neighboring librarian made the "commencement" address.

None of this reading was permitted to interfere with school work. Poor classroom marks automatically carried with them the withdrawal of library privileges. Contrary to expectation, the parents were very few in number who said that their children were to read no library books during the school year. There have been no complaints the last two years.

The second year of the experiment we had the children's library of books at the school building. The children's librarian gave one-half day of her time at the school issuing books. Pupils of the various grades came down at regular periods for exchange of books. The reading was still voluntary. Teachers varied in their emphasis of the work. Practically every child in one room under an energetic teacher did the reading with no bad effect on school work. It is a great comfort to a supervisor to see teacher encouragement of this sort. Blessed are the memories of the teachers who fall in with a superintendent's "hobby."

The past year saw a further modification of the plan. The work became compulsory. Each pupil was required to read four books each semester and receive credit for the work. For the failure to do this a deduction was made from the reading grade— $2\frac{1}{2}$ per cent. for each book not read. The plan has worked. I am satisfied that much good comes from it.

One of the best features of the plan, it seems to me, is this of having the pupil go to a few teachers other than his "home" teacher and talk over the books he has read. In this way he gets acquainted with the teachers in grades above the one where he is placed for the year. The teacher also learns to know a few new faces which she will see in later years. The fourth-grade pupils report to teachers of the primary grades. The fifth-, sixth-, seventh-, and eighth-year children find the

majority of reporting teachers in the grades above and at least one in the high school. This device gets the teaching force united on one problem and also partially removes the child's dread of a new teacher. He will have met her during the year and will have found that she is not as terrible as he supposed. Each teacher tells the room from which pupils may come to her what hours are best suited for this reading conference. It takes little of the teacher's time and does not interrupt the regular day's work.

The book lists have been carefully pruned from year to year. There are now on the lists fewer titles. Very few of them do not have the same grade classification, as in the children's catalogue of 3,500 titles as compiled by Miss Corinne Bacon.

We now have one copy of each book in the grade room. These books are still furnished by the local library. A pupil librarian charges out the books and so gets library practice. Most of the pupils are able to get a book without going to the main library one block from the school. Even this plan does not reduce library attendance and circulation in the children's department. It seems to "whet" the appetite. The library is greatly pleased with the success of the work.

It will be my pleasure to send to any interested people our present lists of books. This article has been written with the hope that more school men will in a much clearer and more logical manner describe the working out of some feature of their school procedure. Only by such frank interchange of experiences can we grow in the profession.

The following directions are circulated among the pupils at the opening of the school year. A corresponding set of directions goes to the teachers. There are cards for recording the readings and a final certificate with stars for those who have completed the work satisfactorily or in excess of the requirements.

PUPILS READING COURSE, MUNHALL PUBLIC SCHOOLS

"Books are the windows through which the soul looks out. A home without books is like a room without windows."—Selected.

INSTRUCTIONS

You are to read carefully, and make a report on, four books each half-year. These books should be ones you have never read before. The purpose is to get you acquainted with new authors and new books. I am sure that you will like most of them.

After reading the book make a report on it and receive credit for the reading. If your teacher sends you to another for this report, consult the extra sheet posted in your room to learn where to go. The number in parenthesis after the book is the number of the reporting teacher.

If you read and report on two extra books, making a total of ten for the year, you will receive a certificate signed by your teacher, president of the school board, the librarian of Carnegie Library, and your school superintendent. To this certificate will be added a gilt star for the reading of ten additional books from the list.

Make good books your friends. Follow these suggestions in a spirit of good-will and you will soon cease to care for poor books. You may like some of these books so well that you will desire to own them. A book worth reading once is often worth reading many times. Build up a library of your own, if possible.

Very cordially your friend,

CHARLES R. STONE