Children model the illiteracy of "the American way."

Do it with books: The why and how of reading

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Whereas:

Most adults do not read
Parents and teachers seldom read to children
Many classrooms contain no real books
Reading clinics use books as only supplements to more important work
Reading lessons rely on workbooks and ditto sheets
Tutoring is fragmented word drills and "meaning" in isolated paragraphs
Libraries are seldom included in reading programs.

Therefore:

We should not be startled to learn that children read poorly or not at all. They simply imitate the model set by the school and the nation. Their illiteracy is merely "the American way."

If lifelong, voluntary, independent reading is the true goal of reading instruction, the classroom must demonstrate positive aspects of literacy. Reading programs must **show** rather than **tell** the power of reading to the young who ask "why read?" Not until students have experienced the joy of reading can they be taught how. Media fads come and go, but there has been no substitute for the pleasure and the power of books.

In this golden age of literature for children and young adults, books indeed are mirror to the soul. Because they treat, more realistically than ever before, the difficulties contemporary young people face, they entice lifelong reading as an avenue to problem solution. Children who are led to see books as a way to make sense of their lives become reading adults. Because their authors vary in style and content, their prose and poetry becomes the staff from which reading instruction should be based. Surely, the **how** of reading is better founded upon materials that also demonstrate the **why.**

We have chosen here to present the integration of the why and how of reading instruction as a reading ladder of books for young people. With these books, kindergarten through twelfth grade, based upon a contemporary theme, objectives for reading instruction can be reached.

Using multiple titles of trade books often causes the teacher problems in focusing the class in small group or overall, general class activities. For that reason, we have chosen books with a theme to demonstrate how a variety of titles may be used and at the same time class cohesion may be maintained. The theme is broad and may best be stated as viewing and understanding older persons.

In today's complex and fragmented world, understanding aging and the aging process is a psychological survival skill. As we use books concerned with aging, the intent is to span the spectrum of what aging means to our students. The outlook of a 5-year-old sibling toward his 12-year-old brother is in many ways as psychologically important to him as are his relationships with his 50-year-old grand parent; therefore, age differences apparently great and small will be our concern.

Why age and aging? Simply because we all are a part of the process, and, perhaps, because we live in a youth-oriented society, it is an underlying social theme which is rarely discussed among young people and often kept in the closet by those over 30. Some of the books suggested have as their main theme relationships with people of different ages; others only tangentially touch upon this topic; however, a teacher can utilize this major or minor theme to engage students in pre-reading, reading, writing and discussion activities. Remember, as you read this, you are getting **older!**

Our book choices here are not intended to be exhaustive but simply to demonstrate how this single theme might be developed in K-12. Dozens of other titles could be added easily to the various grade levels represented.

Of course, the reading-language arts teacher is concerned about skills. We do not choose to ignore this need. Our contention, however, is that skills programs can be developed only about materials of the "real world." Further we suggest that those real materials teach reading more effectively than the canned pap found in many classrooms. A major difference in this approach is that the teacher chooses skills from the content and style of the books rather than superimposing alleged skills upon whatever materials are at hand. In other words skills emerge from the literature rather than being forced to fit.

Viewing and Understanding Older People

Primary. Pre-reading.

Reading Skills: Sight Words. (Child's Name, Mother, Father)

Book: **Are You My Grandmother?** Libbie and David Hilberman.
Palo Alto, Calif.: Kinfolk, 1976.

Activities:

1. Read the book with the child.
2. Paste pictures in the book.
3. Print in names.
4. On large, lined paper, child practices printing his/her name and other sight words.

Primary. First/Second Grade.

Reading Skill: Recognizing past tense verbs.

Book: **My Grandson Lew.** Charlotte Zolotow and William Pene du Bois.
New York: Harper and Row, 1974.

Activities:

1. Read the book with the children.
2. Using the verbs presented in the book, analyze the present tense verbs they know, printing them on the board or in class dictionary.
3. In small groups, children read the story aloud.
4. Children identify the past tense verbs of the story.
5. Children may write a story of something that happened yesterday.

Alternative Book: Nana Upstairs and Nana Downstairs. Tonie De Paola.
New York: Puffin Books, 1978.

Alternative Objectives for these books:
Use of apostrophe.
Concept words, up, down, below, over, etc.

Primary Through Third

Reading Objective: Understanding Comparison and Contrast

Book: **Kevin's Grandma.** Barbara Williams and Kay Chorao.
New York: E.P. Dutton, 1978.

Activities:

1. Be certain that children understand family relationships. Discuss families and grandparents with them. Ask them to tell of their own parents and grandparents. Some children may share pictures of their grandparents.
2. Read the story with them asking them to point out contrasts. Develop with them, too, the contrast of humor and credibility.
3. In small groups children may read the story again, color or paint the scenes described, and write their own stories of a day with grandma.

Alternative Reading Objectives:
Understanding the Absurd.
Remembering Details.

Alternate Book: **William's Doll.** Charlotte Zolotow and William Pene du Bois.
New York: Harper and Row, 1972.

Intermediate 4-5-6

Reading Objective: Understanding Characterization

Book: The House Without A Christmas Tree

Activities:

1. Discuss family relationships with the class. How would it be to live without a father? A mother? What special relationships do we have with grandparents? What relationship do our parents have with our grandparents? How does it feel to be different? Do we feel badly when other children have things we do not? Do we resent being told "no" without a reason?
2. Introduce the book **The House Without A Christmas Tree** about a family who is different because they never have a Christmas Tree. As a part of the book talk, read passages that describe the main characters: Adelaide who hates to be called "Addie," pages 13-14; Grandma, pages 10-12, pages 64-65; and Dad, pages 31-32, pages 34-35.
3. Individuals from the class will want to read the story and report back. You may want to read the story, one chapter each day, in the two weeks before Christmas.
4. Students will be able to discuss the characters as they are developed. In particular, ask them to predict the probable attitudes of Adelaide, Grandma and Dad toward the various events of the story.
5. They may write short themes about who is kindest, who is most understanding, who is "right" in each segment of the controversy.

Alternate reading objectives for this book:
Understanding Cause & Effect.
Vocabulary Through Context.

Seventh Through Twelfth Grades

Reading Objective: Recalling Sequence and Details

Book: **The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman. Gaines, Ernest J., Bantam Books, New York, 1971.

1. If the book is to be made available to all students, begin a general discussion of the oldest person students know. Do students know anyone who remembers World War II, World War I, or the Spanish American War? It would be helpful to place a time-line on the chalkboard. Using the group's knowledge of American history, place on the time-line important events as far back as they can recall; the teacher may add and explain other events. After the time-line has been developed, ask students to copy it and place on their time-lines when their ancestors arrived in America.

A general discussion, using the time-line, should follow, and the class should share the details of each others' geneology in America. After this discussion, the teacher may place on the chalkboard time-line the name "Ticey" near the year 1864 and on the year 1962 the name "Miss Jane Pittman." The students are now told that the novel they are about to read is about a woman who lived from the 1860's to the 1960's, and that they will keep their own time-lines of Miss Jane as they progress through the novel. They are to place on their individual time-lines what

they consider to be the most significant occurrences in Miss Jane's life.

2. The introduction is read aloud, and the teacher may wish to point out that the author is using a literary technique in writing a novel which appears to be an actual oral history. (You **may** wish to discuss this after the novel has been completed.) Questions on why the history teacher wants to interview Miss Jane should be asked, and what does he mean when he says Miss Jane is not in the history books? Ask students if their parents or grandparents are in the history books? Who gets in history books and why?

3. Students should read the book at their own pace and add to their individual time-lines of Miss Jane's life as they read. The teacher may wish to interrupt the reading at key chapters and discuss a particular section of the novel and/or read aloud sections to students or have students read specific selections. There are numerous passages rich in language, such as the naming scene on pages 17-19.

4. Upon completion of the novel, there are a multitude of discussion topics; however, to investigate the theme of age and aging, attention should be given to the question of how Miss Jane changed from the opening chapters of the novel to its conclusion. The students' individual time-lines should help in developing this discussion. Students may be placed in small groups to begin this dialogue and return to the larger group with their groups' generalizations.

5. Other activities: Ask students to interview or tape-record an older relative or community member or perhaps do an oral history project of their school or particular aspects of their community. Have students write "autobiographies" of other students or of someone they know.

Other Objectives:

Understanding dialect.

Understanding point of view.

Seventh Through Twelfth Grades

Reading Objective: Predicting Outcome

Book: **Let A River Be. Cummings, Betty Sue, Atheneum, New York, 1978.

1. Show the dust jacket to student(s) and elicit responses to what clues the title provides about the possible content of the novel. Why is "Be" underlined? What visual clues does the dust jacket offer regarding the novel's topic?

2. Read the first paragraph of Chapter 1, pages 3-8 aloud (The student(s) or teacher may wish to do the reading). Question student(s) on what they think of Ella Richards from the initial description. What would it be like to be a 76-year old arthritic woman? Why might she call the River hers? What mental pictures do they have at this point of Ella? What are her major concerns in life?

3. During the oral reading of Chapter 1, interject questions which will aid the student(s) to predict what may happen in the following pages. Page 1: How does Ella feel about the River? Why is she concerned about the River? How do people feel about Ella? What is her financial condition? What might the "Swamp Beast" be? Who is Doc, and how does Ella feel about him? What generalizations can be made about Ella after completing Chapter 1, and what is her lifestyle and outlook on life? Ask the student(s) to list specific things they know about Ella from reading Chapter 1.

4. Chapter 2 further develops the reader's understanding of Ella and introduces another major character, Reetard. Questions dealing with Ella's treatment and final acceptance of Reetard based upon what the reader has learned about her should enable the student(s) to gain an understanding of how the author has established Ella's characteristics.

5. Ella calls the River "Old Woman," and, by questions, the reader should be made aware of the parallel in the life of the River and Ella's life. What does the reader think will become of the River, and what will become of Ella and Reetard? There are numerous points in the novel when student(s) can be asked to predict what might happen to these three main characters and, when appropriate, the teacher may elicit oral or written predictions. Upon concluding the novel, the student(s) predictions can be compared with the actual outcome of the story.

6. Culminating activities: Write a physical description of Ella or Reetard. Draw a portrait of Ella or Reetard or of the pelicans from a particular chapter of the book: e.g., Reetard in Chapter 1 when Ella first encounters him; Ella in Chapter 45 at Reetard's funeral; Reetard's sculpture of the pelican; etc. Write about the course Ella's life may take after the book ends. Discuss people student(s) know who are like Ella.

Other Objectives:

Characterization.

Vocabulary Development (Especially regarding river ecology)

*Student interest often overcomes reading levels. High interest—about 5th grade reading level.

**Some words and scenes possible objectionable to parents or school. Read before use.