

THE STRUGGLE FOR PLEASURE IN READING AT SCHOOL



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IS SCHOOLING ABOUT PLEASURE? The call for papers for this issue implies that the answer is, “Not anymore!” We’re told that today’s schooling is to prepare infants, children, and youth for the future – becoming college and career ready – in order to keep each individual and the nation competitive in a global innovation economy. The stakes are high for American schooling because our students are behind their peers from other nations, and therefore, our business is losing its comparative advantage over all others. By proving her- or him-self through rigorous examinations, each student develops informational, intellectual, social, and cultural capital, attracting employers who’ll pool collected capital to raise a company’s productivity and profits. Through reverse engineering, annual exams enable teachers, schools, the public, and employers to track precisely each student’s accumulation of college and career readiness across the grades, providing schools with a time table of what is to be learned, how well it is to be learned, and when it is to be learned. By checking the numbers then, all can be assured (or not) that America’s future is bright.

None of this implies pleasure or any of its synonyms—happiness, delight, joy, gladness, glee, satisfaction, grati-

fication, contentment, enjoyment or amusement. Rather schooling seems to require focus, work, dedication, perhaps perseverance, and resilience in order to prepare children and youth for the putative challenges of the future. Schooling is serious business, and pleasure has little to do with seriousness or business. From this viewpoint, reading for pleasure becomes a diversion at best or an impediment to an individual’s rigorous capabilities for lifelong learning at worst. Seeking pleasure through schooling or reading displaces class time that could be better spent and rewards unproductive dispositions. Moreover, it undermines the nation at public expense. Although the weight of this argument does seem acute at the moment, its roots run deep in the history of reading education in the United States (Shannon, 2017).

Tensions in the Past

Consider these statements from the turn of the 19th century. America was emerging as the world’s largest economy, and Americans faced industrialization, immigration and urbanization. Schools and reading were expected to prepare children and youth to meet those challenging times.

The end of all education should be to promote man's happiness, not only during his present transitory existence, but throughout eternity which is to follow. (Parker, 1884, 1)

Every subject which is taught at all in a secondary school should be taught in the same way and to the same extent to every pupil so long as he pursues it, no matter what the probable destination of the pupil may be, or at what point his education is to cease. (Harris, 1893, 17)

But after all we have thus far been content with trial and error, too often allowing publishers to be our jury, and a real rationalization of the process of inducting the child into the practice of reading has not been made. (Huey, 1908, 9)

Francis Parker, William Torrey Harris, and Edmond Burke Huey offered different sets of priorities for American schools in the 20th century. The father of progressive education, Parker focused on the “why” of reading, declaring the right of every learner to be her- or him-self; that is to be happy in self-initiated activity that makes sense for his or her stage of development. Learners needed to see, and then, construct answers for themselves to the questions “what is reading for?” and “what can writing do?” The U. S. Commissioner of Education, Harris featured the “what” of reading, advocating egalitarian traditionalism in which the best of the past (science, literature and history) would be presented to all students to ensure that they were initiated into accepted paradigms within each discipline. Learners must hear and take up the ideas and practices within each discipline, coming to understand its history, its ethics, its relationships to other disciplines before imagining how combinations might help them address personal and social issues properly. The author of *The Psychology and Pedagogy of Reading*, Huey emphasized the “how” of reading, inviting educators to replace traditions, values, and emotions (“trial and error”) with rational calculations of effectiveness and efficiency in reading education. Learners are to master transferable strategies enabling them to recognize and address whatever literacy challenges they might face.

Our current concerns about schooling and their hypothesized solutions are at least a century in the making. Echoes of Parker can be heard in Leander and Boldt's (2013) argument

that children and youth have different investments around literacy practices that are woven into the textures of their pursuit of passions and interests. The authors of *A Nation At Risk* (1983) restated Harris's call for (world class) standards to supplant the lack of rigor in a progressive curriculum, foreshadowing the position that higher Common Core standards are actually a civil rights issue (Gates Foundation, 2010). Examples of attempts at Huey's “real rationalizations” of reading education dot the 20th century from “Principles of Method in Teaching Reading as Derived from Scientific Investigation” (Gray, 1919) to *The Great Debate* (Chall, 1967) to *Becoming a Nation of Readers* (Anderson, 1985) and *The National Reading Panel Report* (2000).

Although Harris's and Huey's voices speak louder than Parker's in 21st century schools, the future of reading for pleasure might still be found in the past. The learner-centered strand of progressive education was founded on two principles—learning is natural, challenging, and enjoyable and learners are interested and interesting. “The process of learning is not painful to the child or wearisome to others; on the contrary, it is an amusement to both (Adams, 1879, 501). The “what” was to be learned and the “how” to learn it were subordinated to the learner's interests in and purpose for learning it - the “why” of learning. Advocates understood learning to have cognitive, emotional, social and physical dimensions that were neither easily separated from one another nor confined to traditional disciplines. They encouraged teachers to be less concerned about students “toeing the mark” and more interested in scaffolding their understandings toward more sophisticated approximations within stimulating environments. Pleasure and rigor, then, were moments of any learning and evidences of learning were found in student's processes, reflections, and changes in participation within the classroom and local community.

Both/And

In his late-in-life assessment of progressive education, John Dewey (1938) warned educators to avoid the tendency to polarize stances. Instead of “either/or” between traditional or progressive education, he recommended a both/and stance because either/or makes advocates too reactive to its opposite, and therefore, they are unable to grasp the full possibilities of their position based on its principles. For our consideration of the future of reading for pleasure then, we should ask what could it mean to see the pleasure of work, the focus of enjoy-

ment or the satisfaction of perseverance within school reading? Dewey suggested possible answers could be addressed in the assessment of the quality of the educative experiences that teachers make available to students.

Everything depends upon the quality of the experience that is had. The quality of any experience has two aspects. There is an immediate aspect of agreeableness or disagreeableness, and there is its influence upon later experiences. (p. 27)

These two sentences add three principles (to the learner-centered position) on which we might build cases for the pleasure of reading within our current school environment. 1) The long term matters, but so does the short term. In a high-quality educational experience, students must recognize its immediate value as well as teachers' understandings of the possibility of future payoff. 2) The personal matters, but so does the social. Experiences arise from the intersection of "continuity" with an individual's past experiences and "interaction" with the physical, temporal and social contexts of the event. Because no experience has pre-ordained value, high-quality sponsored experiences (curriculum) must be open to students' interests, impulses, and desires, to be judged against perceived (immediate) and actual (later) consequences within the classroom (and outside) community. By their choices within the curriculum, students participate to varying degrees in the formation of the purposes of these experiences. 3) Content matters, but so does the process. Learning brings informational change to be sure, and high-quality educational experiences require learners to reconstruct or redirect their interests, impulses and desires over time, enabling more sophisticated practices of participation within expanding circles of community.

Pleasure/Standards/Assessment

Dewey tested all five progressive principles at The Laboratory School of the University of Chicago (1896-1903), working from student interests toward enduring habits of inquiry that would enable them to take up immediate and future challenges. For example, weaving started as a student interest among the seven- and eight-year olds, connecting school, home, and community. This "domestic" work led to guided experiences surrounding weaving, extending students' understanding of physics, history, geography, mathematics, literacy and art. They built looms, interviewed immigrant weavers from the community, and consulted books about weaving throughout history and the world. "They learned

that the invention improved ways of living, had changed organization patterns of industries, and had left many industrial and social problems for later generations to solve" (Mayhew and Edwards 1936, 194). In this and countless other examples of progressive educational experiences between then and now, pleasure, work, focus, enjoyment, satisfaction and perseverance became inseparable, while preparing students to understand, cope, and ameliorate the challenges that surrounded them. Isn't this what rigorous academic standards are expected to do?

To tease out the literacy learning and its relationship to pleasure in such educational experiences over time, we could turn to the five literacy assessment questions from the Staff of the Maury School in Richmond, Virginia. Note how pleasure, choice, rigor, knowledge, and development blend together in teachers' efforts to locate evidence from what students do regularly with texts.

1. What evidences are there that children like to read?
2. What evidences are there that they are reading of their own volition?
3. What indications are there that their life is being influenced constructively by ideals and standards derived from reading experience?
4. Are there evidences of growing power of interpretation of life as a result of reading?
5. Are there indications that reading is increasing the capacity for richer living? (Staff of the Maury School, 1941, p. 38)

In order to rethink accountability in finding pleasure while reading during such educational experience, we could invoke Ralph Tyler's work from the Eight Year Study – a progressive attempt to renegotiate the relationship between high school experiences and college success. Tyler directed the national evaluation of the experimental programs, helping teachers to articulate the anticipated outcomes of engagements in high quality educational experiences and to locate evidence within each student's actions and artifacts across time. "This plan of evaluation was set up to provide a means by which each school could appraise its work by its purposes (Tyler, 1936, 67). In this way, teacher and student accountability became personal and social responsibilities.

Reading for pleasure might have a robust future in schools, but to make that happen, it will take advocates who are willing

to increase the volume of Parker's voice in his ongoing conversation with Harris and Huey about the purposes of schooling. For over 130 years, many teachers and researchers have augmented the argument that learning is natural, challenging and enjoyable and students are interested and interesting. Although adjustments are necessary to fit our times, we do not need to reinvent the entire case for pleasure in reading at school. Rather we can acquaint ourselves with our predecessors' ideas and work, add our own, and join the conversation. If enough of us speak and act based on shared progressive principles, then pleasure will return to the classroom. •

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