



Santiago, miércoles 24 de Octubre de 2007.

Charla Magistral
“The Habit of Reading: Promoting Reading for Children”
Linda Pavonetti (*)
XII Conferencia Internacional de Bibliotecología
“*Lectura y Bibliotecas: Información y Cultura para la Sociedad*”

Gracias. Buenos Días. Good morning. I am thrilled to be with you this morning, speaking with one of my favorite groups of people—librarians. I bring greetings from the United States Board on Books for Young People and would like to extend an invitation to each of you to learn more about your own Chilean section of the International Board on Books for Young People and in two years, come to the IBBY Regional Conference, which I believe, will be held in Chicago. The goals of the International Board on Books for Young People—IBBY—seem to be a perfect fit with those of the Chilean Librarians and all of you here today.

At the end of World War II, the western occupiers were looking for a way to reconstruct and reeducate Germany—to make up for the years in which families—and especially children—suffered. Children suffered in many ways—lack of food, separation and even the death of family and friends, no opportunity to be children. Possibly the most difficult loss to overcome was the lack of education during the war years. For most teens, the books they had enjoyed so much as toddlers had been systematically replaced by treatises on loyalty to Hitler’s ideology. For younger children—born immediately preceding the onset of hostilities or during the war—joyful books were not part of their schema. They had never known fairies and goblins, trips to the moon in a sailing ship, knights and pirates—the flights of fancy that good books can conjure in a reader’s mind.

So what did the Americans do? They beseeched a German Jew who had escaped to Britain to return to her native land as “Advisor on the Cultural and Educational Needs of Women and Children in the American Zone.” Jella Lepman wrote in her autobiography, “More and more clearly, I came to realize that I must not look backward, but to the future, and that I must begin with the children” (2002, p. 15).

Begin she did. What might have defeated most people became a challenge to Jella Lepman, and so it is with all of us. If we are of a mind to build lifelong readers, we must begin, like Ms. Lepman did in 1946, with the children.

In 2007—in Santiago, Chile or New Orleans, Louisiana—what does that look like. If I were in charge of the world, what programs would I originate to build a nation of readers? Why, after all, begin with children?

There are many aphorisms about children being the future—the light—the hope of the world. However, at the heart of every folksy saying there is a kernel of truth. Children, after all, are born without prejudices, or hatred, or anger. For centuries, the question of nature vs nurture has sparked contentious discussions among educators, psychologists, medical professionals, and geneticists. Many say that we are all born with a combination of traits that will play out over the course of our lifetimes. We are what we are—a combination of the good and bad traits of our parents and grandparents, great grandparents and great-great grandparents, ad infinitum. We cannot change our nature.

Hogwash, say the nurture camp. Take an infant from violent parents, put him into a kind loving family, and the child will grow to be a kind, loving adult. The truth is that we are a combination of both, but when all is said and done, children do begin their lives with a fresh worldview. If we are to begin changing the world, we must begin with the children. That's not to say that parent and grandparents can't change—it is just more difficult for them to unlearn a lifetime of habits.

So let's start with the children. Research suggests that even before children are born, they hear their parents' voices, the songs they sing, the books they read aloud, the stories they weave. When babies are born and their parents repeat those songs and books and stories, there is a change in the newborn children's heartbeat that is not present when other people speak or sing or read. Children can hear and learn to recognize the sound and cadence of their parents' voices even before they are born.

Much of the research on very young children revolves around “motherese”—the talk of a mother to her child. But what we know from research in these areas is that the amount of talk that children hear correlates to their vocabulary, which in turn effects their reading abilities once they enter school.

What does this implicate for our perfect world we are designing? I would suggest that the most important things we can do to create good readers is to educate parents to talk with their children and not put them in front of a television or a video game. Again, I'll cite statistics, drawn from US research, for the major sources of spoken and written language (sample means): the script of a TV show like Sesame Street offers 2/1000 rare words for the child to hear. For other children's TV shows, the ratio is 20.2 rare words out of every 1000. For preschool books, it jumps to 16.3 rare words per 1000. **A children's book raises the ratio to 30.9 per 1000.**

Why is this important? Again, I'll return to the research. Frank Smith writes about the necessity for children to **hear** language before they can incorporate the vocabulary into their **reading** vocabulary. Words must be part of children's listening vocabulary before they become part of children's reading vocabulary.

What we are doing is building a staircase of practices that, when taken all together, erect a lifelong reader. Begin by singing, speaking, reading, telling stories to infants. Then we need to continue those practices through early childhood, exposing them to all kinds of oral and printed matter.

The next step, or for some families it might have been the initial step, is to share poetry with the children. In my university classes I recommend several types of poetry: first, and most important for several reasons, are the Mother Goose rhymes. In the late 17th century, a Frenchman named Charles Perrault published a book entitled "Contes de ma Mere L'Oye"—the Stories of my Mother Goose.

Why the appeal?

- 1) The appeal of language pattern:
 - a) rhythm; Babies hear their mothers' heartbeats so rhythm is soothing and familiar to them.
 - b) the growth stage of the child--playing with the language;
 - c) sound devices
 - i) alliteration--Hickory Dickory Dock; Wee Willy Winkie
 - ii) onomatopoeia: Hark, hark, the dogs do bark
 - iii) rhyme-- Hickory Dickory Dock, the mouse ran up the clock
- 2) Participation:
 - a) they are short
 - b) they have a refrain
 - c) children can memorize them and own them
 - d) These small poems include counting rhymes and children are just learning to count
 - e) there are riddles and children love them, the sillier the better.
- 3) Good narrative quality: they tell a good story
 - a) quick action—leads to a
 - b) climax then a
 - c) good conclusion.
- 4) There are ludicrous situations—an old woman who lived in a shoe, people who get locked in pumpkin shells, a cow who jumps over the moon
- 5) They appeal to a child's sense of justice: if I do wrong, I'll be punished. Lawrence Kohlberg's pre-conventional stage of morality. (I don't want to get punished; I want to get a reward)
- 6) Characters are interesting and likable: 4 year olds can really love them.
 - a) Mother Goose tells the bad aspects of children: Tom stole a pig; the little girl with the curl.
 - b) This increases a child's ability to identify -- to have empathy with the characters.
- 7) Content reflects the interests of 5 year old children:
 - a) animals
 - b) every day experiences like losing mittens
 - c) childhood pranks -- throwing kitty in the well
 - d) misfortunes -- falling down the hill and spilling something
 - e) weather: Rain, rain, go away is important when you can't go out for recess.
 - f) humor -- low level, slap-stick, limericks, riddles

All of these characteristics align with Ann Terry's (1972) seminal study on children's preferences in poetry. Children love humor, narrative, and poetry about modern topics.

One of the books I brought with me fulfills all of these criteria and what I would suggest is that you, librarians who are interested in creating lifelong readers, beseech your poets, authors, illustrators, and publishers to create a body of works appropriate for young children—books that resemble the Mother Goose rhymes from more than 300 years ago.

Then, as children begin playing with language, it is important to demonstrate that parts of words always sound alike. In English, this might mean taking the /at/sound and adding different sounds at the beginning. These words can be incorporated into short simple books for emergent readers. The book might read something like this:

Matt is a cat.
Matt is a fat cat.
Matt has a hat.
That hat fits Matt.
Matt has a bat.
Matt wears his hat when he has his bat.
Matt hit the ball with his bat.
Matt and his hat ran and ran.
After his bat, Matt sat.

There is not a lot of plot here, but the illustrations that would decorate the page help the novice reader make sense of the text. Not only that, but new readers feel a sense of accomplishment when they can leave school or the library with a book they can read “all my myself.”

In order to have children who comprehend what they read, who understand the meaning of the word they are calling out, several things need to happen. First, the children need to learn the words. There are many ways to approach teaching vocabulary—and that is where teachers come in. We won't get into the particulars because teaching children to read is outside your job description.

However, in order to reach the point when comprehension is possible, children must practice reading in order to become fluent and automatic readers. When children struggle to identify each word on the page, there is no mental energy remaining to construct meaning from the text. Consequently, the librarian's role becomes connecting children with books that are on their level—easy and fun to read—and within their ability to decode. It is only through repeated re-readings of either the same text or one that is similar that reading becomes fluid enough for children to make sense of the words—for them to understand the meaning.

This is where series books become important. G. Robert Carlsen described the five **stages of becoming a mature lifelong reader**.

**** Illustrate this concept with a ladder metaphor**

1) **Unconscious delight** stage: This is the time in our reading life when we read series books. We were really into reading. We had to be shaken for dinner and then read at the dinner table. We got such pleasure from books.

Most people go through it only once.

Teachers, librarians and parents can ruin this stage when they say you are wasting your time -- read some good stuff. Better to keep giving the youngster books like *The Baby Sitter's Club*, *Nancy Drew*, etc. till the child outgrows the series.

What the children are doing is getting better at reading and internalizing the important things such as character, plot, setting, foreshadowing--all the literary conventions that will be in every novel.

Some may go through this stage again. However, if someone does not go through it as a child, they may never go through it.

48% of all Americans never buy a book

19% buy only one book a year

12% buy 5 to 10 books a year.

I read a figure that Americans read 1 hour a week and spend 6 hours a week shopping (Trelease).

What is the implication for us as teachers and librarians? Our job is to introduce children to books that are similar to what they are reading—and like—but better quality.

Lev Vygotsky talks about the “Zone of Proximal Development.” It is an important concept because if children stay where they are too comfortable and never stretch and grow, they will not improve.

In our classes we discuss the three levels of text: independent, instructional, and frustration levels. Independent is relatively easy reading where the students read with approximately 95% accuracy. These are the series books—they know the text format, the characters' names, they can predict the action, and they feel comfortable to attempt one new book after another.

Instructional level text is the level we want children reading on in the classroom—with about 90% accuracy. These are the types of books we hope to read aloud to the children, often as a whole group. These books should whet their appetites to hear more of the story. This is how we, as librarians, can encourage children to read better books than some of series books they can become addicted to.

The level we want to avoid, as librarians and as teachers, is the frustration level. These are books that are too difficult for the child—where they misread more than 10 out of every 100 words. However, these books can be read aloud to children because young people need to continue to increase their listening vocabularies.

The other piece that becomes important at this stage is repeated re-readings. This does not mean boring! There are numerous ways a child can practice the same piece—just as a concert pianist practices for a recital.

- a) Reading with an adult—reading is pleasurable
- b) Choral reading—with a group of peers
- c) Partner reading
- d) Reading into a tape recorder
- e) Readers theater

A poet friend talks to children about practicing a poem for weeks until they feel comfortable standing in front of the group to perform the poem. He makes the comparison with singers or musicians. They would never perform without practice.

In many of our libraries currently, the librarians are sponsoring Poetry Slams, a kind of performance theater where people practice reciting their favorite poems—either by other writers or ones they have composed— then stand up and perform. The audience judges them and selects the best.

2) The second step on Carlsen's five **stages of becoming a mature lifelong reader** is **Vicarious Experiences**. The reader is interested in learning about a wide variety of people, times, places. The greatest overall lasting impression in this phase comes from literature. Many children read non-fiction or historical fiction at this time.

3) Reading is a means of **understanding ourselves and our own personal problems: We measure ourselves against the main character**. Child wants to read about someone two years older than herself: *Hatchet* shipwrecked and must survive -- I pit myself against the main character. Would I do it better? *Alive* popular with 8th graders: "Could I eat my best friend?"

4) **Read to examine philosophical problems** (Late teens and beyond Grades 11-14) How do I feel that I have food and there are starving people in ... What about Haiti? Iraq? North Korea? Bombing? Big Issues

5) **Aesthetic Stage** (Grades 14 and up): many Americans never reach this stage. "Listen to how beautifully this is written..." We read for the beauty of the prose. This is when we say, "Wow! Listen to this!" Abraham MASLOW ranks it as fulfilling the highest of human needs.

Children won't force themselves to read to learn like an adult might. If children miss step 1—that wonder of the places books can take us— they may never be a reader.

All of what I have said up to this point is good—but it is the underlying theory behind creating a lifelong reader. We begin, hopefully, before the child is born and continue nurturing the love of language—of sounds of words—through her years of formal education. Then the child is out of our hands. Life takes over and we hope the child has entered into that elite club—readers.

The most important points I'd like to make today are still to come. Yes, they are based in research also. But these are almost intuitive—we do them without anyone telling us to do so.

The first is to read aloud to children. In the United States, library programs revolve around the story hour. Parents begin bringing their children to the library when they are very young—3 years, 4 years, 5 years old. Before they begin school. We can hope—but we cannot ensure—that parents have been reading to their children even before this time. Regardless, this is where we take over. The important part is finding books that the children will **WANT** to hear. We need to build up the length of the children's attention span—how long they are willing to sit and listen to a story. It may be for just a few moments—but each time the children attend story hour, they will be willing to sit still for a bit longer. We are fortunate to have an early childhood center in our building at the university. Sometimes, when I want to teach my students about reading to children, I take them to the center and I read a book to the children. My students are always surprised by how much the children know, but also how great the range of abilities is within a small group of children. Some can sit for 15 minutes, some for only two minutes. Some can relate the entire story back to me at the end, others will respond with a comment that's totally out of context—my grandma is coming to my house today—when the book we read is about pirates. But listening to stories is a skill we need to build. And it is only through repetition that children will be able to increase their attention span.

Why do we read aloud to children? There are many different reasons, but let me comment on a few.

- 1) First, and most importantly, we read aloud to children to advertise good books. I like to pick a scary part, or a funny part, or an exciting part of a book. I find a good place to start and a great place to stop. I read the text with a pencil in my hand and I mark the places I want to skip. I lightly mark the words that I need help pronouncing. I mark words that need defining. Then I practice reading—and practice again. I think about the children's background knowledge. Will I have to set the stage before I begin reading? How will I end the read aloud? What questions will I ask the group?
- 2) WE read aloud for other reasons also. WE read to inform children—books about science and history. If you are a school librarian and one of your teachers is teaching the children about plants, you can read a nonfiction book—or part of a book— about plants and how they produce fruit. You can find poems about plants, biographies of botanists, novels about children who live on farms.
- 3) This is important—a point that I always come back to—whenever we create a unit of study for children, we need to integrate books from all genres—from all kinds of structures. There might be a girl who wants to know all the facts sitting next to a boy who wants to write a poem about corn and wheat. We have to appeal to all the children, and we have to know what kinds of books will grab their interests.
- 4) We read aloud to advertise good books. When we get new books in our libraries, we need to share parts of those books with our patrons.

- 5) We read aloud to provide good examples for young people that adults are literate people who enjoy reading. I have a friend who teaches 4th graders—about 10 year olds. Every morning when the classes began, she would sit on her chair with the children sitting around her feet and tell the class what she had been reading the night before. It didn't matter if it was a sexy love story or a comedy, she'd choose a small section and read that to her students. They learned she was a reader who read for pleasure every evening at home.
- 6) We read aloud to children to create critical thinkers. It is up to us to ask questions after we read. Research in this area tells us that children comprehend more of what they read, or more of what was read to them, if the reading time is followed by an opportunity to discuss the text. This can be a discussion with other students, a discussion with a best friend, or a group discussion.
- 7) Frank Smith tells us that we need to encourage children to join the literacy club. Most children go through stages where they want to be part of a group. Why not make it a group of readers? In the US, Oprah Winfrey's show has made reading groups extremely popular. Why? A television celebrity started talking about some of the books she liked to read and invited others to join her in reading other good books and talking about them. Many years ago, one of my professors said something I had never thought about. He said, "reading is a solitary activity. That is why it is so important to allow children to discuss a book after they read. We are social people and we need to change that solitary activity into a social activity.
- 8) My own research study of 626 college students suggests that the most important factor in their reading lives was the read aloud. When I asked what influenced you to become a reader, more than anything else, they responded—someone read books aloud to me.

There is much, much more I could say about librarians building lifelong habits of reading. But I'd like to summarize by saying the most important jobs of a librarian—in a school or a public library—is to read books aloud to children.

The other very important task is to follow up with probing questions—ask the children to predict what will happen next. To evaluate the story, to analyze clues. But in order to keep children coming back to the library you must have good books. [Insert story about "good books" and more good books.]

WE need to make our libraries inviting and safe places for children. My elementary school did not have a library but I did have a neighborhood library and a bookmobile came to my school every month. When I was about 12 years old, I spent many summer afternoons in the library reading and selecting new books to take home. One day the librarian tapped me on the shoulder and said that my mother had called and she wanted me to come home immediately. My brother had been hurt and she had to take him to the hospital. I was angry—furious. How dare my brother ruin my special time at the library! That happened almost 50 years ago and I still get angry when I think about it.

Charlotte Huck taught teachers and librarians about children and books for many, many years. These are a few of the many wonderful things she said about the reasons for sharing books with children.
[Read some of the points.]

Katherine Paterson, winner of the IBBY Hans Christian Andersen award for a lifetime achievement in writing literature for children, and also recipient of the Astrid Lindgren Award, wrote this.

A teacher in Texas explained to me what she thought her task as a teacher of reading should be. For a long time, she said, we have been trying to train stoplight readers. We ask the children to read a bit of a story, stop, and talk about it. But what we should be working on is flashlight readers—readers who take a book under the blanket with a flashlight, because they cannot bear to stop reading what may very well be the best book they have ever read. If you want illumination, friends, a flashlight will beat a stoplight every time.

(Paterson, Katherine. (1989). *The spying heart: More thoughts on reading and writing books for children*. New York: Dutton. pp. 137-138)

(*)

Linda Pavonetti, Profesora Asociada del Departamento de Lectura de la Universidad de Michigan y Presidenta Electa de The International Board on Books for Young People, IBBY (Organización Internacional para el Libro Juvenil) de la Sección de Estados Unidos USBBY. <http://www2.oakland.edu/sehs/staff/index.cfm?ID=414>