

The importance of evaluating children's reading books

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Reading books are considered by educators as one of the main tools necessary in the development of children's literacy and cognitive skills. It is because of this role of books, that researchers and educators world wide emphasise the importance of selecting the *right* type of books for children.

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At face value this might seem a simple and straightforward task that anyone can perform by merely opening the book that is to be read by the child and taking a peek at the words printed inside. Some believe that by simply reading the review of the publishers on the back cover of the children's book, one can get to know the value of what is inside. In reality however, evaluating a reading book requires more serious reflection.

Before one can embark on an evaluation of a book, one must first of all keep in mind why the book is being read. Is the child about to read the book merely to pass his/her time during the holidays and therefore as a form of recreation? Is the child reading the book in order to improve on his/her reading skills, which may perhaps not be at the desired level? Or is the child reading the book as part of a reading scheme used by the school?

All three instances require a different approach to the evaluation. If a child is to read a book merely for enjoyment then the book chosen should have a good story line that will entice the young reader to continue reading. The West Sussex County Council of the UK (1976) in a report on the importance of reading and literacy emphasises the need for reading books to have a highly interesting content in order to motivate children to view reading positively. If the content of the reading book is boring then the child will be reluctant to continue reading and in time there is the danger that the child will be put off reading completely.

Research such as that of Southgate et al (1981) show that children of different ages prefer different type of stories. Older children tend to prefer mystery and adventure stories, while younger ones tend to prefer fairytales. There is also a percentage of children who prefer to read non-fiction rather than fiction. When choosing fiction Pagett (1990) suggests, that the story should not only be interesting but should also show the 'struggle between good and evil, cruelty and compassion'. According to the same writer, children's books like those of adults, should reflect 'fundamental fears we all have' and also our 'fundamental longings and aspirations'. When selecting books for children these considerations should therefore be kept in mind.

Another important aspect of book evaluation is the level of difficulty of the book.

When a book is being read for amusement, Southgate et al (1981), advise teachers and parents to select what is termed as *Independent* reading material. This implies that the child should be able to read the book chosen, independently of adult assistance. This however, does not mean that the book should be much below the reading capabilities of the child. A very easy book can also contribute to boredom. A child reading independently means that he/she does not have to stop too often to ask the meaning of words or of complicated sentence structures. Parents or teachers should make sure that the child is understanding the story by occasionally asking her to recount what is happening.

Other features of book assessment include an examination of the quality of the book with respect to physical appearance. Reading researchers world-wide consider the presentation of content to be of vital importance in motivating children to read. Front covers, book size and thickness, print size, illustrations and paper type are all aspects that may influence the children's desire to read the book. Hedge (1985) explains that often the front cover format may be the main reason why children pick up the book in the first place. Old books with yellowing and torn pages will not promote much reading enthusiasm.

Competitors of books

Adults encouraging children to read have to be aware that in the modern world books compete with more alluring media, such as the television, the video and the computer. A colourful book with glossy easy-to-turn pages and a good font stands a better chance in this competition. Font size and type are also crucial aspects, as children can easily be put off if these are not right. For children just beginning to read, the size of the font has to be large enough so that each page in the book will not seem to be too full of print. Too many graphics on the page may seem daunting and may put off even the older child who is a poor or reluctant reader. On the other hand, children who are post-beginners should be able to read different type of fonts with ease.

Illustrations are another important aspect of children's reading books. Fenwick (1975) claimed that children of primary school age



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preferred books that had between 10-20% of the content taken up by pictures. Publishers include illustrations for different reasons. Some illustrations are used merely for motivation and others are necessary to facilitate understanding. In both cases the importance of clear and relevant pictures cannot be underestimated. Irrelevant pictures may mislead children and they may end up misunderstanding the content especially where the book is non-fiction.

When a child is reading the book not merely for entertainment but in order to improve his level of reading, then a more careful choice of book is required. Although in this case aspects of book content and its presentation mentioned above are of great importance, of even greater importance is the level of the book and the reading age of the child. Reading age of the child may be different from chronological age and needs to be established by the teacher or educator. There are tests that a child can undergo in order to establish his level of reading. Books chosen for this child should match his reading age.

Durkin (1980) and Southgate et al (1981) suggest that the teacher should not only know the reading age of the children but should be knowledgeable about the readability levels of materials used by individual children. The readability level of the reading books can be determined by using readability formulae of which the most popular are the 'Fry's Formula' and the 'Spache Test'. Use and application of these formulae can be found in texts concerned with the teaching of reading. These formulae are arrived at by looking into the vocabulary, sentence structure and content of books.

The teacher should therefore analyse the contents of the reading books with a view of establishing the degree of difficulty of the

vocabulary as well as the type of sentences used. If the book is aimed at elementary school children then a certain degree of repetition is desirable. For the older children in the upper primary classes, Hill and Reid Thomas (1989), suggest that diversity of vocabulary is profitable as this helps to extend the children's knowledge.

Sentence structures should also be examined as these can cause lack of comprehension. Reading research has shown that learning to read with understanding is constrained by many factors, especially in the early stages. Chomsky (1969), Slobin (1971), Smith (1974) and Beaumont (1982) argue that complex sentences may be difficult to process. The greatest difficulty arises when the clause in the complex sentence is centrally embedded. In the case of subordinate sentences the difficulty arises when the subordinate sentence is not introduced by a subordinator. All this necessitates a proper perusal of the book before it is given to the child to improve his reading skills.

Instructional level materials

Books that are to be used to extend the child's reading skills should not be at the Independent level, but at the *Instructional* level. In this case an adult should be available to assist the child should the need arise. Instructional level material helps to keep the child challenged and motivated and to extend his reading skills. It is with the use of such material that a child with the help of an adult is led from one reading threshold on to another.

If the books being used for instructional purposes form part of a reading scheme then the reading scheme should be evaluated. In their criteria of selecting a reading scheme, Southgate et al (1972), emphasised the importance of ensuring that the author's 'beliefs', 'aims' and 'principles' backing the scheme are the same as those of the teacher/school using it. They suggest that the conditions imposed by the authors have to prevail in the classroom if the scheme is to be successful.

Others such as Rosen and Rosen (1974) are sceptical about reading schemes in general. They believe that because of the widespread use of reading schemes and the dependency on them, children have come to believe that all books are written in the same style as these books. Reading schemes need to be evaluated because as Obrist (1981) claims, there are occasions when the publishers of reading schemes are more concerned with fitting the text into a particular scheme, than with providing material that is interesting and motivating for reading.

As has been seen, whatever the reasons for reading, evaluation of books is a necessity. Local research such as that of Camilleri (1998) has shown that Maltese children need to be motivated to read more, as at present much of

what they read is in the form of school textbooks. Ensuring that the books children choose to read are motivating and intriguing is therefore necessary in order to stimulate their curiosity and their love of reading. Evaluation of material for reading should be an ongoing process because children should be encouraged to read as many books as possible. It is important that parents and teachers keep abreast of modern times and consider also alternative forms of texts, such as books on CDs. Reading materials on computer software may be an alternative resource for the reluctant reader and should also be considered as relevant texts provided these have been thoroughly investigated.

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