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ABSTRACT

This paper argues that the best way to teach reading to children is through literature that reflects children's own language and what they consider relevant. Only those materials written in a language very similar to that which the child hears and uses himself, the author argues, will serve as the best teaching devices. Since the language of literature, more than any other written language, contains the same patterns and behaves much the same as oral language, the teacher should begin reading instruction with stories based on actual experiences children have had and should encourage children to create stories from their own experiences. The author discusses a number of children's books which reflect children's interests and experiences. The author also argues that an individualized reading program can help to improve reading skills and to facilitate critical thinking ability, and she discusses various stories and poems that may help to accomplish these goals effectively and naturally. (Author/DI)

Using Children's Literature in the Reading Program

by
Patricia Jean Cianciolo

Michele Murray, author of Nellie Cameron, a realistic novel about a little black girl who viewed "reading like a mountain she could never see cross," is one of many contemporary writers of children's literature who knows children will learn to read more effectively that which reflects their own language, their own world, that which they consider relevant. The approaches to teaching reading as portrayed in the very fine junior novel are worthy of consideration by every teacher interested in really helping children become competent readers. Keep in mind, if you will, that this is a book addressed to children. Miss Murray emphasized through dialogue between the characters and in the situations portrayed that the primary purpose of reading is to get meaning from the printed word and the best way to accomplish this is through literature written in a language that is not artificial, that approximates the total range of language and pertains to something of interest to the reader. What best meets these criteria than literature? It is in the language of literature that one finds a significant approximation of the total range of language.[1] The few thoughts which follow elaborate and justify the claim that literature should be used as the main source for teaching children to read.

[1] E. Brooks Smith, Kenneth S. Goodman and Robert Meredith. Language and Thinking in the Elementary School. (Holt, Rinehart & Winston, Inc., 1970), p. 194.

Language and Reading Instruction. Language is a code, a system for communicating meaning. The reason for reading is to reconstruct meaning from the

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symbols of language that appear on the printed page.[2] Only when the reading

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[2] Ibid., p. 262

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materials consist of language very similar to that which the child hears and uses himself will the reader bring the greatest possible meaning and understanding to the printed word. It is important that the beginning reader be able to use his language powers right from the beginning.

What reading program today is built on solid knowledge gained from a systematic study of language? Most reading programs that I know tend to be built on principles of psychology, child growth and development, physiology and sociology. Also, the vocabulary used and structural and phonetic analyses skills taught are arranged heirachily moving from the simple to the complex. They do not appear to be based to any significant extent on what is presently known about children's language power. Yet few educators would deny the cardinal percept that the beginning reader read language that he understands, that he deems interesting and relevant and can get involved in when teachers give consideration to the devices within language that convey meaning and ways that readers interpret and help children to interpret to and react to these devices the entire process of reading can best be understood by the learner.

The language of literature more than any other written language contains the same patterns and behaves much the same as oral language. It follows logically then that at first the "literary selections" one uses with beginning readers should be the stories the child, group or class dictates to the teacher. These would be stories based on actual experiences the children have or could be summaries of stories the teacher reads aloud or tells to the children. Later,

when the fundamental decoding skills are acquired and the learner need not be so strongly "ego involved" in the content of the selections he reads, the literature that is available in the excellent children's literature trade books can be used. (This is not to say that relevance or identification of the reader with the actions and the characters in the literature is unimportant!) Moving from the language experience approach to an individualized reading program constitutes a natural transition and avoids artificial language and synthetic methods and materials.[3] Through the language of literature the reader gets a

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[3] Ibid., p. 285

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unified experience that harmonizes knowing and feeling. Thereby, he brings greater depth of meaning to the printed word.

Storymaking Experiences and Literature in the Reading Program. It is important that the child who is learning to read realize the similarities (and differences) between written and spoken English. The language experience approach to teaching beginning reading demonstrates this relationship effectively. The practice of using the child's own dictated story goes along with the principle of using the real language patterns and sequences in the materials used in reading instruction.

When directing and stimulating storymaking experiences the children's minds and emotions have to be aroused before they can be expected to create. One cannot say to them "write or make up stories about anything you want." They cannot create from or in a vacuum. The teacher must confront the children with new experiences and happenings that will warrant talking, writing and reading about. The experiences that one provides should cause the child to express in

ever widening oral and written language, his feelings and thoughts about what he sees, hears, tastes, smells and touches. The experience must be of the nature that will cause the child to use language that evokes images, feelings, thoughts and visions. They should be experiences that will permit him to relate to that which he reads and bring a depth of meaningfulness as he reads his and other people's stories.

Motivators as the following could be used as a basis upon which children can create stories and record actual experiences: figurines, toys, combinations of familiar words (plot words!), sound effects, field trips, stories read aloud, told or on phonograph records, autobiographies, and doll's diaries.

The following group composition, The Footprints of Skippy, was motivated by the plot words girl, dog and puddle. The teacher wrote the story on the chalk board as the children made it up. It was then divided into parts for purposes of illustrating and children volunteered to illustrate each part. The text of the story and the illustrations were then put into a booklet. This book was then placed in the classroom library and read by the children on their own or in small groups.

The Footprints of Skippy

Susan called her dog Skippy. One day after he ate Rival Dog Food for breakfast Skippy went for a walk. He stepped in many puddles and got wet feet.

Susan was still sleeping when Skippy got back home. Skippy wanted to go into Susan's bedroom to give her his bone. So Skippy walked through the frontroom and left his footprints on the rug.

Skippy jumped on Susan's bed and made his footprints on it, too. He could not dry himself because there was no towel. Susan let Skippy stay in bed with her so he would keep warm. She did not want him to catch cold.

The following story, entitled One Cloudy Day motivated by the Bertha Hummel figurine "The Little Wander" reveals how children use their own background of experience in their creative storymaking efforts. Further proof that a varied background of experience and opportunity to think about the experiences and motivation to use them will help children grow in their creative efforts.

One Cloudy Day

One cloudy afternoon David took a walk with his dog, Buttons. He was carrying an umbrella because the weatherman said it was going to rain in the afternoon. David was on his way to pick up his brother Dickie. Dickie was in the afternoon kindergarten.

On his way to the school it started to rain, so David opened his umbrella and covered his head with it. The umbrella was so big that it covered Buttons' head, too. Buttons didn't get wet, either. The wind was blowing so hard that the umbrella was turned inside out. But David and Buttons still didn't get wet.

David was late in getting to school so he missed his brother. All the children went home already. David waited and waited for Dickie. But then he started to go back home again.

David saw his brother on the other side of the street and Dickie was crying. When he reached the corner, David crossed over to the other side and stepped into a puddle. He said to Dickie, "Don't cry. I'm here and I will take you home."

Both boys walked under the umbrella and got home dry and happy.

A group of kindergarten children composed the following invitation which they sent to a second grade class. The teacher served as a scribe for their message.

Dear Children:

Please come to our room to see Minnie's babies. Minnie is our pet rat. She had seven baby rats Tuesday morning.

Yours truly,

Kindergarten, B4

After the second graders visited Minnie and her babies they went back to their classroom and each child recorded his observations and thoughts about their visit. Here is what Bruce W. wrote:

Minnie's Babies

Minnie has seven babies. 4 of them are black and white. 3 of them are white. Minnie is a female. She is a young lady. Minnie has cow things under neth (sic) her.

She is black and white. They belong to Miss Cianciolo's kindergarten.

Signed B.W.W. - Bruce

When encouraging storymaking experiences in the reading program, it is important to keep in mind this thought: Exposure to an abundance of fine literature (prose and poetry) contributes immeasurably to a richer, more adequate expression and expands one's oral and written language power.[4]

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[4] This practice is supported by the research done by Carol Chomsky with children five to ten years of age. See: Carol Chomsky, "Stages in Language Development and Reading Exposure," Harvard Educational Review 22: 1-33 (February 1972)

Conversely, the effort to write one's ideas effectively and colorfully heightens sensitivity to good literature.

Excellent literature abounds. If the teacher shows that she cares about literature and reading and if she makes the books accessible to the children, the children are more likely to care about literature and read it, too. A beautifully drawn book entitled Me, Myself and I, written by Gladys Yessayan and illustrated by Don Bolognese is the kind of book that would be a catalyst for creative and written expression. Importantly, too, the question "Who am I?" as presented in this book is certain to provoke a deal of thinking. A wealth of ideas that could be used to facilitate considerable use of oral and written

language for the language experience approach to teaching reading is found in A Little House of Your Own, an imaginative and thought provoking picture book by Beatrice Schenk de Regniers and illustrated by Irene Haas. Another book that serves as a good stimulator of language expression is Hosie's Alphabet illustrated by Leonard Baskin, a celebrated sculptor and graphic artist and written by his wife and children. This is a unique alphabet book; it offers a sophisticated blend of mind stretching and imagery building captions for truly accomplished expressionistic paintings of creatures. Captions as the following reveal the expressive and effective use of language in this book: "a ghastly garrulous gargoyle," "a gangling entangling spider," and "a furious fly."

Books without words are superb for use in the language centered experiences for teaching reading. This fairly new literary innovation ranges from the simple concept book to the well developed storybook. Shapes of common things that children can identify are presented in Shapes and Things, a concept book by Tana Hoban. The life cycle books by Iela and Enzo Mari, namely The Apple and the Moth and The Chicken and the Egg are concept books that would be good for use in language experience activities. Mercer Mayer's series A Boy A Dog and A Frog and Frog, Where Are You? are pleasant and amusing storybooks told in the wordless picture books. An enchanting and heart warming story about the friendship that develops between a lustrous red bird and a goldfish is told by Peter Wezel in The Good Bird. Wordless picture books are for the mature and sophisticated child, too. Consider George Mendoza's The Inspector and Erich Fuchs' Journey to the Moon. The Inspector, illustrated by Peter Parnell tells a macabre and dramatic tale about a myopic inspector and his hound as

they make their way over wasteland, sea, swamp, and cliffs among grotesque monsters. In Journey to the Moon, illustrated in an art style suggestive of Paul Klee the eight day mission in space of Apollo 11 is dramatically and imaginatively recorded. These last two books could be used with children as old as ten and twelve years who have not learned the fundamental decoding skills. The children would enjoy, I am certain, dictating stories or statements they read in the pictures of these wordless books and subsequently reading from the printed word.

The teacher may read books aloud for the pleasure they give to the children. She may read these stories as fare for enriching, enchanting, instructing and/or giving the children something to laugh about. Occasionally she may ask the children to dictate summaries or reactions to these stories and use their statements as instructional material in the reading program. She might simply put the books in the classroom library and let the children read them on their own.

Both enriched language and sharpened perception to one's surroundings are necessary for effective speaking, reading and writing. Genuine poetry gives breadth and color to the child's speech and stimulates a sharpened perception to beauties around. The use of figurative language, especially as found in poetry, intensifies meaning. Images can permit the child to personalize the meaning to the point of making the idea worthwhile and memorable.[5] Poetry,

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[5] Ibid., p. 295

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perhaps more than any other form of literature, evokes sensory imagery and emotional response. Read aloud any of the following haiku selections to evoke sensory and emotional responses.

A bitter morning
Sparrows sitting together
Without any necks

J.W. Hackett[6]

or

A cooling breeze --
And the whole sky is filled
With pine tree voices.

Onitsura[7]

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[6]Untitled poem by J.W. Hackett in Harold G. Henderson. Haiku in English (Rutland Vermont and Tokyo, Japan. Charles E. Tuttle Co., 1967) p. 31

[7]Untitled poem by Onitsura in Hackett, Ibid., p. 59

A poem more in keeping with the American style of the poetic form is Whispers by Myra Cohn Livingston, but this could evoke sensory images equally as well as the haiku.

Whispers
tickle through my ear
telling things you like to hear.

Whispers
are as soft as skin
letting little words curl in.

Whispers
come so they can blow
secrets others never know.[8]

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[8]Myra Cohn Livingston. Whispers and Other Poems. (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Co., 1958) p. 11.

Just a few lines of poetry read aloud can stir children's imaginations, extend their background of experience and extend their language power and, thus, assure more solidly the likelihood that they will become effective and thoughtful readers.

Individualized Instruction and Literature in the Reading Program. A teacher might very well start in September with what she considers a "homogeneous group" of students. If she is a good teacher, at the end of the school year the children should evidence a wide range of achievement in all curricular areas but especially in reading achievement and reading interests. There is considerable evidence that the teacher of reading can acknowledge and facilitate this kind of individuality by implementing an individualized reading program. In this kind of reading program some direct instruction in skill development must occur, of course, but the sequence in which the skills are taught is not nearly as tight as in basal programs. Also, a large portion of the skills and habits are taught in an integrated fashion, they are incorporated in all areas of the curriculum.

Presently the scope of evaluation of progress in reading emphasizes the importance of comprehension and reflective or critical thinking. This is applicable also to beginning stages of learning to read, where considerable emphasis is placed on decoding. The reason for reading and thus the major emphasis of the evaluation program is on the reader's ability to reconstruct meaning from the printed word and to think about the meaning. Numerous longitudinal studies demonstrate that children participating in individualized reading programs evidence a dramatic increase in comprehension skills[9] and

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[9]Patricia J. Cianciolo. "Criteria for the Use of Trade Books in the Elementary School Program" (unpublished Ph.D. dissertation. College of Education, The Ohio State University, Columbus, 1963) Pp. 267-271.

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increased skill in critical reading. One study of significance is the critical reading study conducted at The Ohio State University. In this study, literature

was used extensively with children ages four through eight years and was found to be effective material when used in a program involving direct instruction in critical reading.[10]

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[10] Willavene Wolf, Charlotte S. Huck and Martha L. King. Critical Reading Ability of Elementary School Children. Project No. 5-1040, contract no. OE - 4-10-187. (Columbus: The Ohio State University Research Foundation, 1967), 250 p.

One of the advantages of using literature to teach comprehension skills is that in literature rather than some expository form of writing, fact and feeling are integrated. Knowledge gained becomes more significant, is retained longer and mastered more quickly with less effort. This combination of fact and feeling offers the reader an effective means for satisfying such needs as relaxation, information, vicarious experiences, intellectual stimulation and an understanding of self.

One's purpose for reading a selection will influence the speed with which one reads that selection, the attention he gives to details or the way he responds to the theme expressed by the author. A young reader interested in nature stories or survival techniques will read My Side of the Mountain or Julie of the Wolves. Jean George very carefully, noting the innumerable, minute observations of the weather and the plant and animal life during the changes that are included in these selections. On the other hand, one could read these books for the general effect, focusing instead on the plot and reacting to it as uncomplicated family stories about not too unusual problems in parent relationships. One story that can hardly be appreciated

fully unless the reader pays careful attention to details is The Mysterious Disappearance of Leon (I Mean Noel). Eilen Raskin, the author of this masterfully clever story offers a pleasant challenge to the young reader to consider all of the details in order to solve the mystery.

Different comprehension and thinking skills are called into play for the reading of such science fiction pieces as the Jules Verne stories or the recent Newbery award winning science fantasy by Robert C. O'Brien entitled Mrs. Frisby and the Rats of NIMH or even the humorous mystery science fiction by Jerome Beatty, Jr. entitled Bob Fulton's Amazing Soda Pop Stretcher. Children would enjoy distinguishing between the actualized and in some instances the unrealized scientific feats portrayed in Jules Verne's novels about rockets zooming toward the moon, nuclear submarines slithering under the North Pole and explorer's engaging in a great expedition conquering the South Pole. They would find this quote from O'Brien's survival novel (as they would the whole story!) a great motivator for distinguishing fact from fantasy.

> . . . there was one book, written by a famous scientist, that had a chapter about rats. Millions of years ago, he said, rats seemed to be ahead of all the other animals, seemed to be making a civilization of their own. They were well organized and built quite complicated villages in the fields. Their descendants today are the rats known as prairie dogs.
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> But somehow it didn't work out. The scientist thought maybe it was because the rats' lives were too easy; while the other animals (especially the monkeys) were living in the woods and getting tougher and smarter, the prairie dogs grew soft and lazy and made no more progress. Eventually the monkeys came out of the woods, walking on their hind legs, and took over the prairies and almost everything else. It was then that the rats were driven to become scavengers and thieves, living on the fringes of a world run by men.
>
> Still it was interesting to us that for a while, at least, the rats had been ahead. We wondered if they had stayed ahead, if they had gone on and developed a real civilization -- what would it have been like?

> Would rats, too, have shed their tails and learned to walk erect? Would they have made tools? Probably, through we thought not so soon and not so many; a rat has a natural set of tools that monkeys lack: sharp, pointed teeth that never stop growing. Consider what the beavers can build with no tools but their rodent teeth.
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> Surely rats would have developed reading and writing, judging by the way we took to it. But what about machines? What about cars and airplanes? Maybe not airplanes. After all, monkeys, living in trees, must have felt a need to fly, must have envied birds around them. Rats may not have that instinct.
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> In the same way, a rat civilization would probably never have built skyscrapers, since rats prefer to live underground. But think of the endless subways - below subways - below subways - they would have had.[11]

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[11] Robert C. O'Brien. Mrs. Frisby and the Rats of NIMH. (New York: Atheneum Publishers, 1971) 233 p.

A story written on the fourth grade readability level but of interest to children thirteen and fourteen years old, tells of enemy foreign agents trying to get the formula for a non-fiction producing book which Bob Fulton created quite accidentally when conducting a chemistry experiment in the garage. This funfilled, exciting story would motivate the child to read for details, in order to solve the mystery before the author presents the solution. In all probability the young reader would want to check out the extent to which such a non-fiction producing book as Bob Fulton created is indeed a reality or at least a probability.

It is a sound educational practice to use multi-level books in helping children to grow in comprehension and critical thinking skills. For example, The Black Sheep by Jean Merrill, on one level, is a simple animal fantasy about a black sheep whose revolutionary ideas threatened and unsettled an advanced society of white sheep known worldwide for the beautiful wool

sweaters which they themselves knit. On a more sophisticated level, this brief novel is an allegory that amounts to a social commentary on the practices of built-in obsolescence and bowing to the pressures of peer conformity.

After having read the poetry written by children encamped in the concentration camp at Terezin and compiled by Tages Behfel in the illustrated book entitled I Never Saw Another Butterfly or the graphically realistic story about the Vietnam war, The Man in the Box by Lois Mary Dunn or The Return to Heroshima by Betty Jean Lifton, the readers should have some thoughts about the effects of war -- the loneliness, deprivations and indeed the suffering it causes. Children should be given opportunities to mull over and then express these thoughts. They should be led to notice contrasts, make comparisons or gather more solid information as they react to, think and talk about the situations and issues that are raised in books as these.

Every good piece of literature has a theme or message, directly stated or implied. A competent reader will be able to recognize the theme, think about it, react to it and evaluate it in terms of his own experiences, knowledge about the subject that is commented upon by the writer and appraise its worth, perhaps in terms of his own moral or ethical code. The theme of Wild in the World by John Donovan is that no one is an island unto himself. This talented author demonstrates the theme of the sociability of mankind in masterful understatement and offers the reader not only one of the most moving stories that I have read recently but also something quite "meaty" to think about. The reader of Wild in the World can hardly help himself from empathizing with John, the hero, as he strives desparately to prevent something he loves

from dying. Because of the author's skillful us of descriptive detail, the reader is able to create vivid visual images of the dog's body swelling almost beyond recognition because of the poison of the rattlesnake's venom, he can hear the dog's piercing and loud howls as it reacts to the intense pain throughout its body, he can hear its forced breathing. Graphic descriptive detail arouses the attentive, responsive reader and makes the reading act more satisfying. It also helps the reader to grasp the author's message and react to it with greater depth.

Another contemporary literary selection that offers the young reader a thought provoking message is One is One by Barbara Picard. I read this historical fiction novel to a group of sixth graders. After they finished listening to the story I quoted some passages from the book and asked them to react to their message. One that stimulated effective discussion is this one:

> . . . Sir Pagan asked, 'Would you like to be really brave?'
> 'Of course!'
> 'Then in that case you are fortunate in being a coward,' said Sir Pagan with cheerful conviction. 'Only a coward can ever be truly brave.'
> Stephen was startled into turning his head to look straight at Sir Pagan. 'What do you mean?'
> 'Why, what I said. One's valour is in proportion to one's fear. The man who is always entirely unafraid can never be brave. He has nothing to be brave about. One can only show real courage if one is afraid. The coward, therefore, being afraid of nearly everything, is alone capable of the highest courage.'
> The paradox was too much for Stephen. He stared incredulously at Sir Pagan. Sir Pagan was smiling, but he had spoken quite seriously: he was not making a jest of Stephen in any way.
> 'Think it over quietly by yourself sometime,' he suggested, 'and you will see what I mean.'[12]

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[12] Barbara Picard. One is One. (London: Oxford University Press, 1965), p. 116-117.

The children responded to the thought expressed in this passage in terms of their own notion of "heroism," their level of maturity and background of experience. They responded with intensity to the message expressed as a totality in this piece of literature. The thought was seasoned with fact and emotionalism typical of the language of literature. Thus, it was given greater significance than if it were presented as an isolated statement or even as a proverb.

The theme presented in Midge Turk's biography of Gordon Parks is timely and reflects the thinking of some people who have lived "the black experience." Today Gordon Parks is famous as a photographer, he is known for his auto-biographical novel The Learning Tree as well as the film version of this realistic story which he produced, directed and wrote the musical score. This easy to read and brief biography offers the reader some "food for thought" in statements as:

> "Gordon," his Momma said, "don't use your fists to fight the white man. You'll get hurt and into trouble. Fight with your brain. It's got a lot more power."[13]
>
> or
>
> "Gordon," she said, "if a white boy can do something so can you. Never give up trying to do your best."[14]

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[13]Midge Turk. Gordon Parks. (New York: Thomas Y. Crowell, 1971) p. 10.

[14]Ibid., p. 12.

Another thought-provoking message is offered by Tom Feelings, talented black author/artist, in Black Pilgrimage. In this beautifully illustrated autobiography he tells his readers:

> . . . the only idealogy that will liberate black people is one which involves the linking up of African people throughout the world, all working together, instead of in isolation.[15]

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[15]Tom Feelings. Black Pilgrimage. (New York: Lothrop, Lee and Shepard Co., 1972) p. 72.

Literature offers the reader information about himself and others. There are several fine professional resource books that offer the teacher suggestions for literary selections that are especially appropriate for helping children gain information and insights about aspects of human relations and ordinary problems of growing up from childhood through adulthood. Three such resources are Reading Ladders for Human Relations[16] and Junior Plots[17] and Introducing Books.[18] With appropriate follow-up activities books may be used

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[16]Virginia Reid (editor). Reading Ladders for Human Relations (5th edition). (New York: American Council on Education)

[17]John Gillespie and Diane Lembo. Junior Plots (New York: R.R. Bowker, 1967).

[18]_____. Introducing Books. (New York: R.R. Bowker, 1970).

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with children to cope with such problems as death of a parent or loved one, alcoholism in the home, divorce, mental retardation of a sibling, identification of sex role, peer relationships and physical handicaps.

People's reaction to mentally retarded children is portrayed in moving and well written realistic fiction selections, a few of which include Take Wing by Jean Little, Hey Dummy by Kim Platt and the Newbery Award book Summer of the Swans by Betsy Byers. The pangs of loneliness is told in an exciting book by Zilpha K. Snyder, namely The Witches of Worm as well as in the wordless picture

book by Mercer Meyer which is entitled Vicki. Alcoholism and the effect this has on members of a family is the problem treated in I'll Get There It Better be Worth the Trip by John Donovan and Take my Waking Slow by Gunilla Norris. Books such as these may be used to help the young reader to understand himself as a growing and functioning individual. They may be used to help him build pleasant and positive relationships with members of his family and/or peers. Books that may be used for purposes of adjustment abound and children are interested in reading them. The teachers and librarians need to make them accessible. They need to provide children with worthwhile and interesting opportunities to read the books, think about them and talk about them.

Summary. Literature can be used as the main source for teaching children to read. Literature reflects closely the natural language of the child. If the language of literature is used in the reading instructional program the child will learn quickly that reading the printed word is a meaningful process as well as a thoughtful process. When literature is used in the reading instructional program the development of comprehension and critical thinking skills can be facilitated in an effective and natural way.