

The Other 'R's

In close to two decades, there has never been a case of dyslexia at Sudbury Valley. No one knows exactly why. The cause of dyslexia, the nature of dyslexia, the very existence of dyslexia as a true functional disorder are matters of great dispute. Some authorities say that as much as 20% of the populations suffers from this alleged disorder.

The fact is, we have never seen it at the school. It just might be because we have never made anyone learn how to read.

Reading puts us hard to the test. As with everything else, we let the initiative come from the child. There is no prompting from us. No one says, "Learn to read now!" No one asks, "Wouldn't you like to learn to read now?" No one suggests, "Don't you think it would be a good idea if you learned to read now?" And no one offers, with feigned excitement, "Wouldn't it be fun to read?" Our credo is: Wait for the student to take the first step.

It's easy to live up to your beliefs when things come out the way everyone would like them to. Take my own family. Our oldest child got Interested in reading at the age of five. On his own, he was a reader at six. No problem. Everything "worked" Just fine.

Then came our daughter, two and a half years younger. As with everyone else at school, we waited for her to ask to be taught to read - or to teach herself. We waited. And waited. And waited.

That she didn't read at six was fine, as far as the world was concerned.

That she didn't read at seven was not so hot in people's eyes. Grandparents, acquaintances, began to get uneasy, dropped hints in our direction.

That she didn't read at eight was a scandal with family and friends. We were seen as delinquent parents. The school? Well, the school could hardly be a proper school if it allowed eight year olds to be illiterate without taking remedial action.

At school, no one seemed to notice at all. Most of her eight year old friends could read. Some couldn't. She herself didn't care. Her days at school were busy, and happy.

At nine, she decided she wanted to read. I don't know why she made that decision then, and she doesn't remember. By nine and a half, she was a complete reader. She could read anything. She wasn't a "problem" for anyone now. Of course, she never had been a problem.

There was nothing atypical about our personal experience. At school, some kids read early, some read late. All of them read when they are ready, not a minute earlier. All of them eventually read, just fine.

Some of the late readers become bookworms. Some of the early readers master the skill and then rarely crack a book.

We don't have a single elementary reading textbook in the school. No first grade, second grade, third grade primers. I wonder how many adults, other than professional teachers, ever looked at an elementary reader. They are stupefyingly simple-minded, boring, and irrelevant. To the modern child, streetwise and nurtured on TV, these books can only seem idiotic.

Certainly, I've never seen a child pick one up to read for pleasure.

In fact, no one at school bothers much about reading. Only a few kids seek any help at all when they decide to learn. Each child seems to have their own method. Some learn from being read to, memorizing the stories and then ultimately reading them. Some learn from cereal boxes, others from game instructions, others from street signs. Some teach themselves letter sounds, others syllables, others whole words. To be honest about it, we rarely know how they do it. And they rarely can tell us. One day I asked a child who had just become a reader, "How did you learn to read?" His answer: "it was easy. I learned 'in.' I learned out." And then I knew how to read."

It turns out that reading is much like speaking for kids. Society doesn't put kids in speaking classes. (Probably that's only because they virtually always learn to speak before the schools get hold of them. I guess if one year olds went to school, there would be speaking classes too, together with a full panoply of newly-discovered "speaking disorders.") A very few unfortunate children have functional speech disorders that require treatment. The overwhelming majority somehow and no one knows how - teach themselves to talk.

Why do kids learn speech? The fact is. Infants are surrounded by a world of humans who communicate through speech. There is nothing children want more than to master that world. Try to stop them! A child's struggle to learn how to speak is an epic of determination and persistence.

The same thing happens with reading at Sudbury Valley. When kids are left to their own devices, they eventually see for themselves that in our world, the written word is a magic key to knowledge. When curiosity finally leads them to want that key, they go after it with the same gusto they show in all their other pursuits.

And it's so much easier for them than learning how to speak. They are older and more experienced at learning new things. They know what language is, how it works, what words are. Learning to read takes a fraction of the time and effort needed for speech.

Writing is something different again.

A lot of kids want not only to write, but to write nicely. It's a matter of aesthetics. So they go to someone to learn the art of writing nicely. It's like painting, or embroidery.

The perception of writing as an aesthetic skill can sometimes lead to real oddities. It's not unusual to see little kids spending hours learning pretty script. But it's strange when half of them don't know how to read!

"Why are you learning calligraphy if you can't read?" I have often asked.

"Because it's pretty," comes the answer.

Some kids learn handwriting as an art, then move on to something else and forget it. A few years later they learn how to read, and learn to write all over again!

I guess it's worth repeating. At Sudbury Valley, not one child has ever been forced, pushed, urged, cajoled, or bribed into learning how to read. We have had no dyslexia. None of our graduates are real or functional illiterates. Some eight year olds are, some ten year olds are, even an occasional twelve year old. But by the time they leave, they are indistinguishable. No one who meets our older students could ever guess the age at which they first learned to read or write.