

Foreword

For educators, these general principles have long been clear:

1. Children learn best through trying and undergoing rather than through listening or through prescriptive drills.
2. Children learn not only with others but through others, through discourse, and through the sharing and comparing of beliefs.
3. Written language is embedded in and is an extension of oral speech, and structure is acquired in the context of function.
4. Even in the context of the most enabling teacher, it is still the child who does the learning and who must ultimately become responsible for that learning.
5. It is not only the teacher and the society that judges the student's work by assigning praise and blame but the child and his or her classmates that must be able, in the longer term, to make the judgment as to whether or not a performance has met some acceptable standard.
6. The school plays a critical role in integrating children into learning communities rather than separating them into streams with divergent futures.

Progressive educators have long held these principles, but successes to put them into practice have not been sufficiently impressive to challenge the entrenched traditional methods: setting specific goals, teaching to them, testing the students, assigning praise and blame, and reward and punishment. Indeed, even the recently updated version of No Child Left Behind (NCLB) adopts this traditional teaching-testing format, merely adding more carrots and whips, prizes and threats. The traditional methods survive in part through an unwarranted narrowing of the goals: namely, to those goals that are easily stated, for which materials are profitably manufactured and published, and achievements readily monitored through tests. Only as an afterthought do other goals—such as developing the students' ability to make cognitive and moral judgments—come to be mentioned, and the goal of developing student's ability to take responsibility for aspects of their own learning and behavior is overlooked entirely.

It is for these reasons that McCallister's program, described in this volume, offers something new and exciting to the practice of education. All of the principles mentioned above are exemplified in the activity she calls Unison Reading: the practice of allowing small, diverse groups of children to read together orally and to stop and discuss what happened when individual readings diverge. Reading resumes when the local difficulty is resolved. In Unison Reading, learning is collaborative: That is, the children share their understandings and misunderstanding with others, and resolving those differences is what promotes learning. Students take on responsibility not only for deciding what text to read and with whom to read it, but also for judging when they or someone else understands or misunderstands, succeeds or fails. Reading is not primarily a matter of learning the rules of phonology but

rather of learning to use language for a number of important social purposes such as persuading others, offering information, enticing others to share an interest, reporting, and criticizing. Phonological issues involved in word and sentence reading are addressed when they arise, rather than as part of a linear, prescribed program. Nor is the program dictated by the mandates of the publishers and curriculum designers, but rather by the expressed interests, goals, and problems of the learners themselves; materials are readily found in the highly literate environments of the community and the school. Most importantly, accountability is conspicuous throughout the program. Not only are children tested with standardized tests as the state requires, but accountability is distributed through the learning system. Accountability, we may say, begins at home. The children themselves are not only given opportunity for taking on responsibilities for their own learning and actions, they learn to judge when and whether they have met those responsibilities.

Carrots and sticks have been proven more effective with mules than children. As critics note, rewards and punishment are as likely to produce “stupefied acquiescence” as they are to produce genuine learning. The accountability that matters is that which develops as children learn to take responsibility for their own learning and their own actions and when they help others to make judgments about theirs.

How does the program Unison Reading accomplish all this? Both the art of teaching and the organization of the classroom and the school change importantly, as McCallister’s account describes. In essence, there is a basic appreciation that literacy is primarily an extension of using language for sharing experience on a one-to-one basis rather than on the more usual impersonal “broadcast” mode typical of whole-class teaching. The program amplifies children’s opportunities for speaking and for speaking to attentive others about the texts they are writing and reading and for clarifying misunderstandings in the process. It offers children boundless opportunities for speaking, changing the classroom from one where listening and remembering are primary to a classroom where speaking to others about what they are reading is the focus. Misreadings and misunderstandings come up for discussion, offering opportunities for grasping ideas and sharing epiphanies. It takes a bold teacher to recognize that children may learn new ideas, such as the difference between “suspecting” and “believing,” just through talk with others, rather than through definitions offered by the teacher. Most of us have an irrepressible urge to teach. McCallister’s classrooms prove that—not always of course, but to a remarkable and previously unacknowledged extent—children in groups often arrive at the correct solutions, by themselves. That is how they learn to take responsibility for their own learning, to know when they understand or don’t understand. In the process they are acquiring the sense of responsibility that the traditional model of teaching and testing either ignored completely or delegated to something loosely called “moral education.”

Many of the principles that underlie McCallister’s work are supported by the contemporary research programs described in Preiss and Sternberg’s (2010) *Innovations in Educational Psychology: Perspectives on Learning, Teaching and Human Development*. These principles include the importance of building on what children already know implicitly, small-group discussion between the children themselves in arriving at new knowledge, learning to make judgments about one’s own and other’s work and of learning the standards involved in making those judgments, and children’s agency and responsibility. Unison Reading offers a format for implementing these principles. If the dramatic effects so far shown by early testing results continue to demonstrate the effectiveness of Unison Reading and its pedagogical underpinnings, Progressives may at last have a viable alternative to the teaching and testing, the carrot and stick model of education, that has dominated research and practice for a century.

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