The Researcher's Perspective

The Purpose of Education, Free Voluntary Reading, and Dealing with The Impact Of Poverty

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"The meaning of life is to find your gift. The purpose of life is to give it away." Pablo Picasso.
As we mature, we find our unique talents and interests, develop them, and discover how to use them to help others. Among the ways school can help in this process is to encourage free voluntary reading, an extremely pleasant activity. This cannot happen, however, without access to books and other reading material. Unfortunately, children of poverty have little access to books: Often, their only source of books is the library.

We Are All Different, We Are All Special

Each of us has unique talents, interests and desires. Along with many others, I will assume in this column that in our younger years, we are supposed to find out what our talents, interests and desires are, and as we grow up we start to develop our unique talents. And as we mature, we discover how to use our talents to help others. There are thus three steps: 1) Find your talent; 2) Develop your talent; 3) Use your talent.

Things Change

"It's hard to predict, especially about the future." (Yogi Berra)

The history of science and technology has taught us that new developments are nearly always a surprise. This is, of course, a problem for education.

A popular view is that we must prepare today's students for specific "21st Century Skills." Many "experts" behave as if they know what these skills are. Most of us have no idea. In fact, it is impossible for societies to make detailed plans for the future.

There is a solution. Instead of training students for professions that may be obsolete by the time they graduate, school should help students "pursue their strengths":

> ... it is...difficult to predict what new businesses will emerge and what will become obsolete. Thus, what becomes highly valuable are unique talents, knowledge, and skills, the ability to adapt to changes, and creativity, all of which calls for a school culture that respects and cultivates expertise in a diversity of talents and skills and a curriculum that enables individuals to pursue their strengths (Zhao, 2009, p. 156).

Thus, the path of discovering your talent, developing it, and using it for the benefit of others is the best path for both the individual and society. School should be a place to help young people on this journey:

> ... if you don't discover things you're good at and things you love to do, then you never quite discover what you're capable of or really who you are. I think that, increasingly, the

> mission of schools has to focus on the development of our individual talents and abilities, among all of the other things that we need to learn in common. Schools should also help us discover more about ourselves and the lives that we should be leading (Robinson, 2014, p. 159).

An Example: Free Voluntary Reading

There are many ways to help young people along the path. One powerful way school can help is to encourage free voluntary reading.

Free voluntary reading means reading because you want to and what you want to, without book reports or any kind of accountability. It is a very pleasant means of finding our talents, developing some of the competences that help us get better at our chosen path, and developing ideas on how to use our talents.

The Pleasure of Reading

Abundant research showe that self-selected reading is pleasant: In fact, it is much more than pleasant.

Reading for pleasure produces "flow," the state we reach when we are deeply but effortlessly involved in an activity (Csikzentmihalyi, 1991). In flow, the concerns of everyday life and even awareness of the self diminish and even temporarily disappear - our sense of time is altereded; nothing but the activity seems to matter.

Reading "is currently perhaps the most often mentioned flow activity in the word (Csikzentmihalyi, 1991, p. 117). Pleasure readers' reports confirm that they are often in a state of flow: A resident of Northern Italy noted that when he reads, "I immediately immerse myself in the reading, and the problems I usually worry about disappear" (Massimini, Csikzentmihalyi, & Della Faye, 1992, p. 68). A reader interviewed by Victor Nell (1988) told him that "reading removes me ... from the irritations of living ... for the few hours a day I read 'trash' I escape the cares of those around me, as well as escaping my own cares and dissatisfactions (Nell, 1988, p. 240).

Somerset Maugham, quoted in Nell (1988), had similar comments, and mentions reading addiction: "Conversation, after a time, bores me, games tire me, and my thoughts, which we are told are the unfailing resources of a sensible man have a tendency to run dry. Then I fly to my book as the opium-smoker to his pipe ..." (p. 232).

In a review of surveys done between 1965 and 1985, Robinson and Godbey (1997) confirmed the pleasure of reading: Adult Americans consistently rated reading as enjoyable. In their 1985 survey of 2,500 adults, book and magazine reading was rated 8.3 out of ten in enjoyment, compared to 7.5 for hobbies, 7.8 for television, and 7.2 for "conversation." For much more evidence of the pleasure of reading, in-school and outside of school, see Krashen (2004).

Free Voluntary Reading Develops Competency: Literacy. Research done over the last three decades has shown that free voluntary reading is the source of our reading ability, our ability to write with an acceptable writing style, much of our vocabulary knowledge, our ability to handle complex grammatical constructions, and most of our ability to spell.

These competences emerge as a result of reading, as a by-product, generally without the reader being aware this is happening. This is a far more efficient and effective means of mastering language "skills" than direct instruction (Krashen, 2003, 2004). The research in this area is extensive and can be described as belonging to three categories:

In-school reading (Sustained Silent Reading). In Sustained Silent Reading (SSR), a few minutes (e.g., 10 to 15 minutes) per day is set aside for free voluntary reading: There is little or no accountability, no book reports, and few restrictions on what can be read. In successful programs there is a plentiful supply of reading material in the classroom library, and often teachers read

while the students read. When these and other conditions are met, students are typically fully engaged in reading (Krashen, 2011a).

Studies have compared the progress of those doing SSR and traditional language arts in both first and second language, using standardized tests of reading comprehension and vocabulary. The most negative result, with few exceptions, is no difference in gains. Many of the studies showing no difference are short-term, some as short as ten weeks or two months, barely enough time for students to find reading material and get involved in reading. Longer-term studies show consistently positive results (Krashen, 2004).

Case histories. Case histories provide excellent evidence for the "power of reading" as long as a sufficient number of them are included in an analysis: When we look at only a few cases, we cannot determine what factors are responsible for success, but when a number of case histories are analyzed, a consistent pattern emerges: access to interesting reading material and the presence of a pleasure reading habit. Two such cases are presented later in this paper.

Correlational studies. Correlational studies show that those who read more show greater competence in a number of aspects of literacy. Especially interesting are multivariate studies controlling for other potential contributors to literacy growth and competence.

I mention here our most recent result, a study on the impact of free reading on six subjects, a combination of case histories and correlational approaches: Beniko Mason has done a number of individual case studies of intermediate adult acquirers of English as a foreign language Japan who engaged in independent self-selected reading for time periods ranging from a few months to over three years. After an analysis of seven cases, we (Mason & Krashen, forthcoming) concluded that for each hour of self-selected reading readers gained about one-half point on a well-known standardized test of English, the TOEIC. This suggests that acquirers of English as a second language can progress from the low intermediate level to advanced levels by reading for about 1200 hours, about an hour a day over three years, showing that self-selected reading is an efficient as well as a very pleasant path.

Free Voluntary Reading Develops Competency: Knowledge

Studies by Stanovich and colleagues confirmed that those who read more know more about literature and history (Stanovich & Cunningham (1992) and have more "cultural literacy" (West, Stanovich, & Mitchell, 1993). This is no surprise, but readers also know more about science and even have more “practical knowledge” (Stanovich & Cunningham, 1993).

Among those adults who are regular readers, a large percentage of what they read is fiction; about half of what women read and about one-third of what men read (NEA, 2015; figure 5.2, p. 86). The percentage of fiction readers is highest among those with the most education (65% among those who attended graduate school) and those with the highest income. This suggests that current trend, encouraged by the Common Core in the US, toward requiring more non-fiction in the schools, should be reconsidered (See also discussion of Sullivan & Brown, 2014, below).

Free Voluntary Reading as the bridge. An interesting hypothesis is that free voluntary reading is the bridge between everyday "conversational" language and highly advanced levels, sometimes referred to as academic language, or specialized language. Free and voluntary reading alone will not bring a reader to the highest levels of literacy, but instead brings the reader to the point where more challenging texts start to be comprehensible, thanks to the contribution self-selected reading makes to literacy and knowledge. It is also likely that free voluntary reading helps us decide in which area we want to specialize, that is, it helps us identify our talent is and how we want to use it.

In support of this claim is evidence that free voluntary reading leads to more "serious" reading later on: Greaney and Clarke (1973) reported that high school students who did SSR in

elementary school reported reading more books, and more non-fiction than those who were not in the SSR program.

Free Voluntary Reading and career success. Evidence for the overall impact of free reading on career success comes from Simonton (1988), who summarized a number of studies of the development of creativity and concluded that "omnivorous reading in childhood and adolescence correlates positively with ultimate adult success" (p. 11).

More specifically, Emery and Csikszentmihalyi (1982) compared 15 men of blue-collar background who became college professors with 15 men of very similar background who grew up to become blue-collar workers. The future professors lived in a much more print-rich environment and did far more reading when they were young. They thus had a better chance of finding what for them was compelling and discovering their interests, in addition to building literacy and knowledge.

Another example of the impact of reading is American civil rights activist Malcolm X, who specifically gave reading the credit for his education: "Not long ago, an English writer telephoned me from London, asking questions. One was, 'What's your alma mater?' I told him, 'Books'" (El-Shabbaz, 1964, p. 179).

Still another case is Michael Faraday, one of the greatest scientists of all time, who came from a poor family, and left school before he was 13. Faraday worked for seven years as an apprentice bookbinder, which meant he had lots of access to books. His employer encouraged him to read the books around him. Faraday "read voraciously" and also attended lectures and classes on his own (Howe, 1999 p. 266). Howe speculates that Faraday's interest in science grew gradually, becoming firm when he was around 18 (p. 88). Working as an assistant to a famous chemist, Humphrey Davy, Faraday immediately took advantage of the facilities available to him and "plunged into research of his own" (Howe, p. 102) at age 21, and published his first paper at age 25, leading to his stunning career.

The Big Problem: Poverty

Poverty has a huge negative impact on school success, Among the obvious reasons are the fact that children of poverty often suffer from food deprivation and lack of quality health care (Berliner, 2009). The best teaching in the world will have little effect if students are hungry or ill.

Less widely known is the finding that children of poverty have very little access to reading material. This is serious: Studies confirm that more access to books means more free voluntary reading, and more voluntary reading means greater progress in literacy development (Krashen, 2004).

Studies done in the United States (Krashen, 2004) show that children of poverty have far fewer books at home, in their school libraries, and their classroom libraries. They live in neighborhoods with fewer bookstores and with public libraries that are open for far fewer hours and contain far fewer books (e.g. Newman & Celano, 1999).

In the following two case histories from the United States, access and a reading habit were given the credit for school success. Geoffrey Canada, whose book Fist, Stuck, Knife, Gun (2010) described dealing with poverty and violence while growing up, managed to get access to books from a friend as well as his mother:

> I loved reading, and my mother, who read voraciously too, allowed me to have her novels after she finished them. My strong reading background allowed me to have an easier time of it in most of my classes (Canada, 1995).

Elizabeth Murray's story is similar. Her source of books was her father, who would get library cards from as many local libraries as he could, take out books, and never returned them. Their house was filled with fugitive library books from all over New York. This provided Ms.

Murray with access to books, which allowed her to pass the yearly exams with mimum attendance:

> Any formal education I received came from the few days I spent in attendance, mixed with knowledge I absorbed from random readings of my or Daddy's ever-growing supply of unreturned library books. And as long as I still showed up steadily the last few weeks of classes to take the standardized tests, I kept squeaking by from grade to grade." (Shanahan, 2010).

In addition to these case histories, several correlational studies have strongly suggested that having a source of books can offset or balance the effect of poverty on literacy development. I reviewed several of these studies in Krashen (2011b).

Our study (Krashen, Lee & McQuillan, 2012) was an analysis of predictors of achievement on the PIRLS reading examination, a reading test given to ten-year-olds in over 40 countries, with students reading in their own language. As usual, the strongest predictor of reading achievement was poverty, and as usual, the correlation was negative: High poverty was related to low achievement. But the presence of a school library of at least 500 books was a strong positive predictor, nearly as strong in the positive direction as the effect of poverty was in the negative direction. In other words, the library, to some extent, balanced the effect of poverty.

This makes sense: Children of poverty read poorly because they have less access to books. When we supply this access, they read more and they read better.

A long-term reading habit can completely overcome the effects of poverty on literacy development. This certainly happened to Geoffrey Canada, who went on to found the Harlem's Children's Zone in New York, and Elizabeth Murray, now a college graduate and author (described earlier). An additional correlational study provides very strong evidence:

Sullivan and Brown (2014) is the most recent report from a series of studies of a single group of people going back several decades. Sullivan and Brown administered a vocabulary test to 42-year-old adults in the UK, and correlated the results with personal data gathered from a questionnaire. They reported that the amount of reading done at age 42 is a clear predictor of vocabulary test scores, independent of the amount of reading done at age 16 or younger. In other words, you can improve in vocabulary through reading at any age.

Of importance to this discussion is their finding that reading done as an adult has an impact on vocabulary development even when researchers controlled for parents' occupation and education, as well as the reader's own education. This confirms that reading can help overcome the effects of poverty. Sullivan and Brown also reported that reading high quality fiction was a very strong predictor of vocabulary knowledge, and reading "middle brow" fiction was also a good predictor, confirming the value of fiction for both language development.

Conclusions

When we talk about finding one's talent, developing it, and using it for the benefit of society, we are talking about arete, a Greek term for achieving one's full potential. "The Greeks assumed, however, that arete had as many social as personal reverberations and that, given all the feedom in the world to develop one's potential, one would naturally develop it in a way that was best for everyone" (Jones & Wilson, 1987, p. 260).

We are also talking about one's "life theme," which entails a path that each individual selects on his or her own, what Csikszentmihalyi (1991) referred to as a "discovered" life theme, as opposed to an imposed one.

The diversity of life paths is important for the survival of the species:

> "If we were all more or less alike, humans would grow into narrowly specialized organisms. It would be difficult for us to adapt to changing conditions …" (Csikszentmihalyi, Rathunde, & Whalen, 1993, p. 23).

Csikszentmihalyi et. al. further pointed out that following one's life path requires perseverence, but the path itself is satisfying and often highly exciting. It becomes more so as we get closer to our life's work, and very enjoyable when we discover it:

> In 1934 Schlick pointed out how important enjoyment is in sustaining the activity of scientists … Galileo Galilei … used to comment on the fun he was having setting up his experiments … when asked why all through his life he kept experimenting with the measurement of the speed of light, Albert Michelson, who was the first American to win a Nobel Prize in science, is said to have answered 'It was so much fun' … Francis H.C. Crick, co-discoverer of the double helix, along with other scientists interviewed in a recent study, rated 'enjoyment of work' as the characteristic more responsible for his success – ahead of 32 other traits, such such creativity, competence and breath of knowledge (Csikszentmihalyi, Rathunde,& Whalen, 1993, p. 8).

It is plausible that one reason self-selected reading is considered to be so pleasant is that it helps in discovering and following one's own path.

School

If this view is correct, school has the responsibility to provide the means for students to develop their talents and explore their interests so they can reach their full potential. This means broadening curriculum options, rather than making them narrower (Ohanian, 1999, p. 4; Zhao, 2009): "I contend that, instead of insisting on more and more standardization, we should be increasing variety, flexibility, and choice in what we offer in our schools (Noddings, 2008, p. 34).

One of the easiest ways school can do this is to make free voluntary reading possible, by investing in libraries and librarians, by setting aside time for self-selected reading, and by innovative literature programs that introduce students to a wide range of reading options (e.g. Miller 2009).

Of course self-selected reading is not the only way school can help young people find their talent, develop it, and learn how to use it: Many activities that do not involve much or even any reading can help, such as hobbies, movies, etc. But self-selected reading can be a big help, requires little change, and a tiny financial investment compared to what we often pay for unnecessary tests.

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