
The Aims of Reading

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It has been said that “Readers make Leaders” (Voltaire). Since all of us gathered here tonight must be interested in reading, I hope, we can pride ourselves that we belong to this category.

Thomas Jefferson wrote in one of his letters “People who read can be free because reading banishes ignorance and superstitions.” More modern scientific research has found that these two statements are more than true. Many of the world’s leaders and successful men do a lot of reading. This is not surprising since books have the power to revolutionise our ways of thinking and living. One example is the writing of Karl Marx.

What are the aims of reading? The aims are many but not all of them may be valid for us and our needs. However, whether reading fulfills one or several aims, the end result remains the same – reading takes place. It is essential to all of us if we do not wish to become isolated in our thoughts from our fellow human beings and environment both near and far.

Reading in childhood years is one of the most important experiences a child should have. It is a great pity that in many parts of the world, including ours, there are children who are deprived of the privilege and pleasure of reading the written word. One of the most wonderful gifts a parent or a teacher can give his child is the ability to read and to *enjoy it*. That is best done by example rather than force. If parents themselves enjoy a healthy reading habit, their children are bound to follow them for children are imitators by nature. A child who has been taught to love the written word is opened to a wide field of adventure, exciting tales, useful information and instructional materials.

Even before children begin school, parents should read to them. There are reasons for this.

Firstly, reading helps a child to develop his potential intelligence to the fullest. It has been found that talking to small children improves their intelligence and reading to them from the written word is a natural extension of the spoken word. For one thing, their vocabulary is enlarged by leaps and bounds. The love for books and the habit of reading is passed on naturally. While we have no say about the genes or the looks we pass on to our children, at least in this we do have a measure of control! So pass on a good reading habit to your children.

Another aim of reading is to place in the hands of your children a pleasure which is far more valuable than the money you spend on buying books. Children's books stimulate their imagination – everything is possible in the world of books. It is a pleasure to see children gripped by the pages of the written word and for a while, they soar away to faraway places, out of the confines of their body and environment into a new, wonderful world. I know that because I can shout myself hoarse calling my children and nobody hears anything but the call of Peter Pan and Disneyland.

Besides reading for pleasure, children read to find out things. They discover a new source of information far better than their parents! At this age, I'm afraid, they begin to realise that parents don't know everything. It may be a blow to our ego but we can still redeem ourselves by directing them to other sources of information – books. You must have met children who know fantastic things like the number of parts there are in a car or whether monkeys shed tears and ask questions like "What animal is rated next to man's intelligence?" When asked this question, one father promptly replied, "Your mother!" It is no doubt that

sometimes the things children learn from books can discomfort even the most composed parents – like the occasion when my six year old son announced to me in the presence of guests that he knew where babies come from; and before anyone could hush him he launched into an accurate and detailed description. I later discovered that his information was gleaned from a book for children on this subject, which he came across in his cousin's house.

Another aim of reading is that it leads to a fuller personal development of both the child and the adult. A life time of knowledge is stored in books. The literate person is capable of rubbing shoulders with the greatest minds in human recorded history, sharing thoughts and ideas, drawing from a fund of knowledge that is locked away from those who are illiterate. A person who reads widely is therefore less narrow-minded, more knowledgeable, and a more interesting person to talk to. It has been said "A reading man is a thinking man, a thinking man is a perceptive man and a perceptive man is an understanding man – a man of wisdom and depth

Reading certainly helps to shape attitudes of both adults and children, I am sure you can recollect occasions when something you have read affected your way of thinking quite profoundly. It is therefore important that reading materials for those under our care are of a suitable quality.

One aim of reading which matters to teachers and parents, of course, is that reading is necessary for learning and studying. You as teachers know that schools cannot do without books and children cannot learn without a certain amount of books. So the ability to read becomes a child's basic tool for learning. It is a sad thing today that in many of our schools, we find a certain percentage of children who cannot read. We find them in every standard right up to Form Three. It seems unbelievable that after nine years in school they have failed to master even the rudiments of reading. Somewhere along the line, something must have gone terribly wrong. Surely in the primary schools, teachers must have spotted this problem. All it needs is someone to take these children aside, forget about the syllabuses and examinations and take time to teach them the basics of reading. Without this foundation, such children can never fit into the main school stream – and so year after year the responsibility is passed on till they are seived out in Form Three. The real tragedy is not failing their examinations but that they have been constantly marked as failures. This stamp scars them for life.

There may be other aims of reading which I have not covered and do not intend to do so. However, I wish only to mention one more – reading as a means of communication – Communication begins when a writer puts down his thoughts in writing – but it remains imprisoned there until the written word is read. Then and only then, communication takes place – between people of different status, between different races and cultures, different ages and different periods of time.

A book then becomes a companion – one is never quite lonely with a book in hand.

To a person who can read, it is not only a dog that is a man's best friend – it is also a book.

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