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THE "PETAL-PLUCKER"*

by Annette L. Johns

Life is not a simple process. Most people agree. Reading is not a simple process either, but the petal-plucker disagrees. For the petal-plucker, reading is very simply what children do in the formal reading program, usually and preferably at the beginning of the school day. Regardless of what children may do with other types of books or materials, even though it may appear to be reading, is not actually reading, nor should it be classified as such. Generally speaking, the petal-pluckers in education have this characteristic in common: a firm belief that there is one and only one way to reach reading.

The petal-plucking teacher who believes the basal reading program is *the* method for teaching all children to read has, in some respects, a relatively simple task to perform. Her duty is to follow the suggestions in the teacher's manual. She may rest assured that the students who *can* learn to read *will* learn by this method. The children who have difficulty learning (even the petal-plucker admits that there are children who have difficulty) are disadvantaged, unmotivated, immature, too independent, unloved, emotionally disturbed, under-achievers, maladjusted, or "just plain stupid." The petal-plucker has many labels which she frequently employs to label children who have difficulty or who do not succeed. Finally, we have a label for her.

Keeping in mind what a petal-plucker is, let us consider some possible explanations for why she is what she is. Three major factors contributing to the petal-plucking syndrome have been isolated: insecurity, investment, and especially ignorance. It should be explained that any one of these factors present in an individual

may influence attitude and behavior to the extent that eventual petal-plucking is the result. It goes almost without saying that if all three factors are present, the possibility of having a genuine petal-plucker on one's hands is frighteningly great.

In what way does insecurity contribute to the petal-plucking personality? One who does not have confidence in oneself, confides in someone or something else. Not sure that her own ideas are good ones, she accepts, often without question, other people's ideas. Unsure not only of her own ideas, but of her creativity, her resourcefulness, and her expertise as a teacher, she relies on those who claim to know. Although some of the people in education claiming to know a great deal about teaching reading may never have had any experience in actual classroom teaching, the insecure teacher will accept what the "expert" has to say. The insecure teacher is particularly receptive, for example, to programs in reading that guarantee success for every pupil. She doesn't have the confidence in what she thinks might work to ever attempt to experiment with her own ideas. Many of the complete programs tend to be highly organized, systematic, and static. The insecure teacher particularly appreciates the routine and the unchanging nature of this type of program. Before long, the insecure teacher has become secure in this respect; she knows the program she uses is the best one, the only one that works. Consequently, she does not have to worry about experimenting with other methods or ideas.

*A term used by Dr. Walter Loban which describes the individual who thinks life, and all things, is as simple as plucking the petals off a daisy.

It would appear that the only people who petal-pluck in education are teachers, but this is not so. A second factor, investment, reveals the fact that the administrator is highly susceptible to developing petal-plucking tendencies. An administrator, probably somewhat insecure, may invest the resources of an entire school district in one program to teach reading. Basing this investment, of course, on the teachers' choice, one basal reading program for all elementary grades is adopted. The choice given teachers was merely, which *one* of the three programs do you want for grades K-6? The administration is in the unenviable position, having adopted a series for all the elementary grades, of defending the investment. Regardless of the results or effectiveness of this program in meeting the individual needs of teachers as well as students, the program must be carried on for a number of years. The number of years the program will be used depends, at least in part, on how much money has been invested. One can expect the program to remain in operation for quite some time due to the fact that not only textbooks have been purchased but also charts, tests, pictures, toys, filmstrips, workbooks, and of course, manuals which accompany the books.

These materials are no doubt useful. They are not, however, the only good materials available. Perhaps it would be better to say there *should* be other materials available and if not available, at least not discouraged from being used. The fact is, however, that in some instances, the administration that has committed an entire system to one approach, rules out any other methods for teaching reading. This

type of petal-plucking behavior results in an over concern for implementing a program rather than a genuine concern for effective teaching.

There is another type of petal-plucking which occurs due to ignorance. Some people are actually unaware of the many techniques which can be used to teach reading. These people are not laymen, nor are they always first-year teachers, but in some cases are so-called "experienced" teachers. Total ignorance is probably rare, but some lack of knowledge concerning the variety of methods and materials is not at all uncommon. Not a few teachers are under the mistaken impression that the ideas they may have read or heard about are merely theories which have never been put into practice. While some teachers are unaware of the ideas and others are not aware that they have been tested, still others are not genuinely interested or concerned. These, the real petal-pluckers, choose to ignore the ideas, the research, and the materials. These different methods are a threat to the artificial security that the petal-plucker has established for herself by her inflexible method of teaching.

There are many petal-pluckers about. Perhaps you know some. The situation would appear to be somewhat bleak were it not for the fact that information has exposed the factors which contribute to the disease. Consequently, knowledge of these factors not only aids in early detection but also gives some indication of the treatment and possible eventual cure.

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