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Maybe Johnnie Can't Read?



POINT OF VIEW BY **RANDY LLOYD**

It was to be one of those relaxing visits, a party for my niece. One of those get-togethers with the family and some friends of the family. Little did I know that it would be another one of those moments when I would find myself being attacked for being a teacher — I'm not really crazy when this happens although it really does get me thinking.

"They pay you guys the big bucks and still a lot of kids get through school without being able to read." I hated it when my cousin came after me like that. She works in business and you know what they think about educators!

The one thing that came to my mind, and seemed to stick there even after her statement, was the idea that maybe not every student will learn to read, at least not while they are with us. Taken off guard by my cousin's statement, I blurted, "What if some students will never learn to read?"

This sent an astounded look around the table. It was like I spoke some unspeakable question. "What do you mean?" my cousin said. "Of course all people should be able to read — eventually!"

I went through a number of questions about people and math — yes, we accept difficulty here — people with music — yes, we accept the concept of being tone deaf — we even moved to the area of sports — yes, people can have two left feet — yet, there is no way she was willing to accept even the possibility that some people may not be able to read. It is almost as though reading has entered into some divine area of human thought

that it is one of those natural rites of being human, yet is it really like that?

At this point I really must state that I'm not all bent on finding an answer to this question. I'd rather leave it to some graduate student in search of a Ph.D., yet it scares me because it seems to have entered the realm of unmentionable questions. It is one of those questions like whether the earth is really the center of the universe or whether people control their own fates. Yet, it also was a question that I was willing to push at the time and one that I still wonder about.

I started to think about reading in my family. It was one of those things that we all seemed to struggle with and something that each of my brothers had a different level of ability. Also, I began to think about what I have seen in my classroom. Some of my students experience reading as a magical event. Others work hard every time they sit down, with reading and comprehending always just beyond their grasp.

According to my cousin, the problem with getting students to read had to be teachers and the things that were going on in the classroom. "You teachers just haven't figured out how to get these students to read."

The problem with her statement is that it assumes that we teachers are not doing anything to figure out the problems with students reading. Many of us constantly struggle with figuring out the right method, strategy, or book to read so that all students leave our classrooms reaching that magical moment of reading. As it is, maybe we need to accept

that most of us are doing the best we can and there are students we many never reach. My point is this: saying some Johnny's and Jill's may never learn to read shouldn't be treated as a "dirty question." It's a question that we as a profession should tackle seriously — and then think of alternatives for helping these kids cope and thrive in the lives they choose to live.

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