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[Review of the book Achieving literacy: Longitudinal studies of adolescents learning to read by Margaret Meek]

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MEEK, Margaret. 1983. Achieving literacy : longitudinal studies of adolescents learning to read. London : Routledge and Kegan Paul.

A book in the RKP series: Language, Education and Society edited by Michael Stubbs.

Meek's book is a welcome addition to this series. The problem of literacy is examined within the "broader educational and societal issues" that Chall acknowledges is absent in her work. Meek and Chall are concerned with different target groups, different research methodologies - and come to vastly different conclusions.

Meek and her co-workers have confronted the problems of delayed literacy with enormous sincerity. The book is a narrative reporting of participant observation of the total reading environment of the teacher and her adolescent non-readers. Meek begins by examining the view of literacy presented by schools and the society they serve; she then looks at the social process of identification of the 'weak' reader and finally examines in great detail the social interaction of the reading lesson.

This is an introspective work which reports the interaction of the researchers as they worked together to clarify central issues. These detailed accounts reveal tremendous sensitivity and insight into some of the difficulties of mastering reading:

> ...our chief problems lay with what we least understood: children who did not want to read because they had no idea what reading was FOR, and little idea of what success would be like, in the private or the public realm. We came to an appreciation of our cultural alienation, but counted on talk with our pupils as our way back to the tap roots of their experience in order to begin transforming these into discourse they could SEE on a page, as well as hear in inner speech. (pp48-49)

One of the researchers reports with rare understanding her observation of the response of the reading-delayed adolescent:

> I have often seen an expression of hopeless incomprehension come over the face of a child as I explained to him some highly logical (to me) way of making reading easy. What is logical to the teacher is not necessarily logical to the child; it may merely be one more proof that he's too stupid to ever understand how it works. Our kids often associate reading with failure and humiliation ... the social stigma of not being able to read is immensely strong and we should not underestimate its influence on our kids. (p.59)

The group met regularly for three years and kept a detailed record of each lesson taught. Transcripts of tapes of all lessons taught were analysed in merciless detail and we are fortunate to have these records. As Meek points out, the 'language of teaching' is an important part of learning to read.

Some of the conclusions of the group are startling:

> ...remedial lessons, as generally practised, work against those pupils they are intended to help. (p.24)

The rationale behind this is clear in the text. Meek does give us clues to answers too:

> Our pupils learned to read when we made it seem worthwhile, and to the extent that we expected them to be able to. They learned best when, instead of grinding away at unfamiliar text with intermittent success, they COMPOSED the text. Then the roles were reversed; they were the authority for what was said and their frame of reference became the dominant one. In addition, when an inexperienced reader reads what he has written he discovers the vital secret - that readers tell themselves what the

> author says. The basic knowledge or skill is not the ability to decode print, but literary competence in the written language - an extension of the primary socialization into speech - the ability to make it mean. (p.224)

This is an excellent book. I would recommend it to any teacher - not only those involved in teaching reading. It lends great insight into the nature of learning and teaching across the curriculum.

MARY GROEN