

What Our Sixth Graders Need to Read

Mario Marlon J. Ibao

INTRODUCTION

Let me go straight to the point. Anyone who has gone through the middle school reading curriculum is expected to be capable of reading works written by great writers, past or present, who have contributed works of great value to our civilization such as Homer, Plato, Virgil, Machiavelli, St. Augustine, Dante, William Shakespeare, and Hobbes. This is a valid expectation since the middle school curriculum is aimed at leading students to the “mature stage” of reading, a stage when they can already read on their own, and assimilate their reading experiences, i.e., to carry over concepts from one piece of writing to another, and to compare the views of different writers on the same subject. (Adler and Van Doren, 1972) If we want our students to be truly prepared for these challenging materials, it is imperative that at the sixth grade level they be introduced and exposed to works with more profound themes, more complicated structure and vocabulary, and with broader historical, socio-cultural, and psychological contexts. At this level, students should already read **great works of literature**.

As a language arts teacher, I have always believed that reading **great literature** is essential to the development of my students’ knowledge about human civilization, to the formation of their skills, habits, and attitudes as readers, and to the nurturing of their inherent capability to read. By ‘great literature’ I am referring to those written works that have the capacity to engage the whole person, the imagination, as well as the intellect. These are works that form us, not just as readers who engage in academic activities, but also as persons who participate in humankind’s search for meaning. By “essential” I mean that these works have to be taught and read during our students’ academic foundation years, if we are to instill in them the habits of mind that characterize a self-reliant thinker, learner, and reader. On the other hand, it also means that failing to provide our young students the opportunity to read these works could deprive them of the chance to learn the “aesthetic qualities, timelessness, and universality” that these works provide – qualities that are not available in lesser works of literature (Bloom, 1988).

Throughout the years that I used **great literature** as the focal point of my reading curriculum, I have seen a lot of students turn into readers who could think for themselves, and who had the persistence of mind to search for meaning. In the Philippines and in Japan, where I taught for more than twenty years, I saw students engage in communicating complex ideas using a language (English) that is not their own, and expand their own thoughts by reading about cultures and traditions that are different from theirs. Consequently, many of them have become enthusiastic, lifelong readers. It is due to these experiences that I naively assumed, when I first came to teach in the U.S. a year ago, that most reading teachers here share my belief about the value of great literature.

But I was wrong. Or at least that was how I felt when I realized that a majority of the current crop of teachers at my school are convinced that the reading classroom has to be a place where mass culture (i.e. movies, television, music videos, advertising, cartoons, and performance art) can provide short cuts to turning the students into knowledgeable, skillful, and habitual readers (Delbanco, 1999).

My realization came during a recent English department meeting that was aimed at deciding a standard reading list for all our students at my school. The moment came when one teacher reacted angrily to the inclusion of *Anne Frank*, *Oliver Twist*, and *Animal Farm* to the list by saying, “Students are just not interested in reading those books!” This reaction, validated by similar consenting views by almost all teachers in the department, suggests that the interest value of books based on what students deem as entertaining has become the primary criterion for choosing what our students must read in the classroom. Consequently, this preoccupation with the mundane and trivial has legitimized the inclusion in the curriculum of such titles as *The Imp That Ate My Homework* and *Fright Time*, to mention just a few.

What has brought about this attitude in education? Tracing a historical account on how American education, in general, and language arts teaching and learning, in particular, have changed from the knowledge-driven curriculum of more than forty years ago to its current skill-driven form is necessary in order to have a broader understanding of this disturbing trend. However, this paper just doesn’t have enough space for such a synoptic pursuit. Nevertheless, one thing that we can do, given this limitation, is to examine the current catch phrases and slogans that characterize today’s educational approaches; from these we could glean some insights into the mindset of the majority of today’s educators.

Rereading Current Slogans

E.D. Hirsch, in his introduction to his core curriculum series *What Your K - 6th Graders Need to Know*, observes the unexamined acceptance by many teachers and parents of such oversimplified slogans as “critical thinking” and “learning to learn.” These slogans saturate most of our educational pursuits; in fact, their partial insights have been recently elevated to the level of universal. (Hirsch, 1993) Sound-bytes coming from school administrators and managers, down to trainers and teachers have been the many variations of the following themes: “What students learn is not important; rather, we must teach students to learn how to learn,” or “The child, not the academic subject, is the true focus of education,” or these more imposing commandments such as “Do not impose knowledge on children before they are developmentally ready to receive it,” and “Do not bog children down in mere facts, but rather, teach critical-thinking skills.”

We have heard these admirable, humane, and – up to a point – true sentiments, and most of us have eagerly followed their positive spin by putting more emphasis on the teaching of skills and of understanding in our daily grind in the classroom. But for

reasons that baffle common sense, we have ignored, and even worse, stopped the teaching of important knowledge in our rush to follow the trend. Hirsch rightly observes that those who have entered the teaching profession for the past forty years have been taught to scorn important knowledge as “mere facts,” and to see the imparting of this knowledge as somehow injurious to children. (xix) I think this trend bodes ill for the state of learning and teaching at my school and in many other schools in the country.

Adverse Effects

I have experienced first hand the adverse effects of this one-sided approach to teaching to my students, to my teaching, and to my classroom. As individuals, my students have become too impatient to learn, overly demanding of their right to consume entertaining and perverse materials in the classroom, and very indifferent to the ideals of education. As a group, they act as if being in school and working hard for academic achievement are anathema to what they consider “cool.” With students like these in the classroom, instruction is almost impossible, especially because a significant amount of my time is spent on classroom management instead of academic activities. Disciplining and motivating the students under these circumstances can leave even the most dedicated teacher frustrated and demoralized. With students who are too engrossed about themselves to pay any attention toward schooling and education, and with the state of teaching that has become hostage to students’ needs, it is easy to understand how “messed up” the classroom has become. Populated by teenagers who think that this public space is but a mere extension of their television and Nintendo-dominated living room and bedroom, they expect activity-laden lessons planned like reality TV, paced like music videos, facilitated like videogames, and presented like MTV.

It would be unfair to say that all these problems are caused by a simple misjudgment on the choice of readings. As a matter of fact, the reasons are many, ranging all the way from various kinds of deprivations in the home environment – economic, social, and/or intellectual (including parental illiteracy) – to personal problems of all kinds (including total revolts about “the system”), and to a curriculum that is so preoccupied with standardized tests. On the surface these justifications seem acceptable enough to excuse the dismal performance of most students at my school. But while knowing what causes a problem can be helpful in solving that problem, knowing the causes that we have just cited above, is not helpful at all to any teacher who may wish to improve the situation. This is because these problems are beyond and outside our duties and responsibilities, and there is only so much that we can do to help our students overcome their off-school problems. As has been pointed out earlier, de-emphasizing the importance of carefully chosen readings shortchanges our students’ chance at improving themselves, academically and personally. Our continued failure to give due importance to the value of challenging readings to our students pushes us deeper to the vicious cycle of student indifference towards education and our desperate measures to get their attention.

Certainly, these problems are not only confined within the four walls of the classroom. In the real world outside, the consequences are no less disturbing. In a famous passage by Allan Bloom, a keen observer of the American mind, in which he captures the effect of rock music on the young, one right away sees the blithe hedonism that permeates the lives of many Americans:

Picture a thirteen-year-old boy sitting in the living room of his family home doing his math assignment while wearing his Walkman headphones or watching MTV. He enjoys the liberties hard won over the centuries by the alliance of philosophic genius and political heroism, consecrated by the blood of martyrs; he is provided with comfort and leisure by the most productive economy ever known to mankind; science has penetrated the secrets of nature in order to provide him with the marvelous, lifelike electronic sound and image reproduction he is enjoying. And in what does progress culminate? A pubescent child whose body throbs with orgasmic rhythms...life is made into a nonstop, commercially prepackaged masturbational fantasy.

It is understandable why the above passage has been much castigated by ultra-liberals. It paints an accurate picture of what happens to people reared in an educational milieu that are interested mostly with what is entertaining. But Bloom is not the lone voice in the desert. Many others have lamented the deteriorating qualities of teaching and learning in many schools across grade levels, even at university levels. Andrew Delbanco (1999) narrates an incident at an English lecture where a speaker discussed a “pornographic performance artist.” “The artist,” informs the speaker, “sells flashlights to anyone in the audience wishing to give her a speculum exam. By looking down at the mirror at just the right angle, she is able to see her own cervix reflected in the pupil of the beholder, and thereby, fulfill the old Romantic dream of eradicating the distinction between perceiver and perceived.” The lecturer had a winning phrase for this accomplishment, “the invaginated eyeball.” One wonders why a “pornographic performance artist” is being talked about in a university. She sells. That is why. It is not hard to imagine how many eager students lined up to see and listen to this perversity than to a lecture on Shakespearean tragedy.

The examples above are meant not just to shock you into rereading skills-driven teaching from a different, or more accurately, critical light. They are intended most of all to argue for a return to great books, to a return to teaching that puts a premium on knowledge. This is my reason for attending the Houston Teachers Institutes seminar, “Reflections on a Few Good Books,” and this is my goal for this curriculum unit.

Curriculum Objectives

The objectives of this curriculum unit is to provide the students with learning situations where they can use their analytical skills to discuss the depths of insights and complexities of language of some great works of literature. At the end of each lesson,

they will create a journal that uses some of the expressions found in the selections, and that relates the insights learned from the readings to their personal life. Specifically, this unit aims, first of all, to have students learn commonly shared knowledge of the human experience; second, to develop reading skills that will enable them to reach the mature stage of reading; and third, to nurture the students' inherent love of reading. Although stated differently, these objectives reflect some of the more crucial sixth grade objectives listed in the Texas Essential Knowledge and Skills (TEKS), particularly the following:

- Objective 6.14: The student reads to increase knowledge of his/her own culture, the culture of others, and the common elements of culture.
- Objective 6.11: The student expresses and supports responses to various types of texts.
- Objective 6.10: The student comprehends selections using a variety of strategies. (Project Clear, language arts, sixth grade, p.14-16)

WHAT TO TEACH: GREAT WORKS OF LITERATURE

In the preceding discussion, I have stated the reasons why I cannot subscribe to the idea that the dual processes of teaching and learning must acquiesce to the dictates and perversity of what is entertaining and fun. I am convinced that in order for learning and teaching to be effective both processes must prod students to overcome the challenges of "levels of difficulty," to probe depths of meaning, and to encompass the breadth of knowledge. Despite today's very liberal climate in the choice of readings, as what has prevailed at my school, I still adhere to Mortimer Adler's belief that works of great literature must be read because they make us "wiser, in the sense that we become more deeply aware of the great and enduring truths of human life" (Adler and Van Doren, 1972).

Hierarchy of Books

In *How to Read a Book*, Adler and Van Doren classify books into three classes. They estimate that more than 99 percent of the millions of books that have been written in the western tradition alone will not make sufficient demands on readers for them to improve their skill in reading. These are books that can be read only for amusement or information. The amusement may be of many kinds, and the information may be interesting in all sorts of ways, but one should not expect to learn anything of importance from them. In fact, one doesn't have to read them analytically at all. Skimming will do.

The second class of books is that from which one can learn not only how to read but also how to live. Less than one percent of all books belong in this class. These are the good books, the ones that are carefully wrought by their authors, the ones that convey to the reader significant insights about subjects of enduring interest to human beings. There are in all probability no more than a few thousands of such books. They are worth reading analytically – once. These are books that you read once and then put away on

your shelf. How do you know that you do not have to read such books again? Adler and Van Doren suggest that you monitor your own mental reaction to the experience of reading them. Such books stretch your mind and increase your understanding. But as your mind stretches and your understanding increases, you realize that you are not going to be changed any more in the future by this book.

Of the few thousand such books there is a much smaller number that cannot be exhausted by even the very best reading you can manage. How do you recognize these books? Again, Adler and Van Doren describe a mysterious process whereby after analytically reading such book to the best of your ability, you have a sneaking suspicion that there is more than you got. You find that you cannot forget the book, that you keep thinking about it and your reaction to it. Finally, you return to it, and discover that the book seems to have grown with you. You see new things in it that you did not see before. Such book belongs to the highest class, the very small number of **great books**. These are the books that will teach you the most, both about reading and about life. They are the books to which you will return over and over.

There is something of a classical paradigm in the way that this hierarchy of books is presented. Plato, in *The Republic*, describes a “magnificent myth,” wherein God fashioned men so that gold was put in the composition of the rulers; a lesser metal, silver, in the auxiliaries; and mere iron and bronze in the farmers, and other workers. (BK. III) Plato uses this hierarchy to explain the benefits of having a rigid classification of people in a just society. He argues that if everyone knew his intrinsic worth and would remain content to stay where he is, we would have an end to social envy. Many centuries later, Machiavelli picked up this paradigm to explain the three kinds of mental ability. In *The Prince* he writes:

And because there are three kinds of brains: one understands on its own, the other discerns that which others understand, the third neither understands on its own nor through others; the first is most excellent, the second excellent, and the third useless; it must needs be by necessity, therefore, that if Pandolfo was not of the first rank, he was of the second: because whenever one has the judgment to know the good or evil that someone does and says though he is without invention himself, he will know the minister’s bad and good works, and he will extol the latter and correct the former; and the minister cannot hope to deceive him and thus keeps himself good. (Chapter XXII)

What this classification suggests is that the first two kinds of brains are of use to society, while the third, as Machiavelli curtly says, is “useless.”

There are two implications of these frames of thinking to our job as language arts, teachers. First, these rigid classifications of books and people suggest a predetermined matching between mental abilities and social status, and the three kinds of books. This means that the “gold” people who have the “most excellent” brains are predisposed to

gravitate towards the great books, and they do not have to stretch themselves trying to understand these books because they are born with the mental capacity to do so, anyway. The “useless” minds of “farmers and other workers,” on the other hand, will never be attracted to, much less understand, those great books, no matter how hard they try, because they are just not mentally equipped to do so. It is with the “silver” people who are mentally “excellent” that our job as educators would be more useful. Since these people have enough mental ability to understand good books, we can provide them with appropriate learning situations and challenging materials to raise them to a higher level.

Clearly, this paradigm stands in direct contrast to democratic principles that promote equality in education. Many would contend that it is elitist conceptions like this paradigm that hinder universal education. A closer look at the realities of our educational system, however reveals that our promotion system does thresh out the mentally unsuited population, and provide more educational, and thus, more career opportunities for the more “excellent minds.” In fact, a recent study estimates that most of the students in the nation’s major universities and 4-year colleges come from the top 20% of the population, and that a majority of college graduates from every field of scientific study had IQs between 110 and 120. (Jones, 1982) The other 80%, whose mental capacity is lower than a 110 IQ, is left to do jobs equivalent to what Plato classifies as “farmers and other workers.” The ideas of Plato and Machiavelli may not be democratic, but they do have a better grasp of the realities of human potentials.

This leads us to another implication. If we go by the argument that the attainment of our educational goals is more possible with the population that has the capacity to “discern that which others understand,” then our curriculum must be geared towards addressing the needs of this population. What are we to do, then, with those whose mental capacity Machiavelli considers “useless?” Sensible teachers must be able to modify the curriculum to the level appropriate to the various needs of those students. The curriculum should not be designed simply to meet minimum expectations. It must have expectations higher than what the 20% of the population can do, although it must also be flexible enough to include the rest of the population. Thus, when choosing topics and formulating objectives for the curriculum, we must prioritize first the “enduring, complex, engaging, and big ideas,” because only these will lead to more deepening and broadening of knowledge and skills. Those that are “important to know” and those that are “worth being familiar with” (like those interesting and fun books we have referred to earlier in this discussion), may be taken up next, although at a much reduced time. (Wiggins and McTighe, 1998)

TEACHING GREAT WORKS OF LITERATURE

Having argued why reading great works of literature is essential to the education of our students, the question that remains now is: How do we teach these works? This section will discuss the teaching strategies used in the curriculum unit. We will begin with the

reading list and how the works in this list were chosen, and then end with a short description of the lessons.

Reading List

For this curriculum unit, the following works will be studied: *The Ring of Gyges* (excerpt from *The Republic*), *Romeo and Juliet* by William Shakespeare, *The Book of Job* from the *Old Testament*, *I Have a Dream* by Martin Luther King Jr., *The Road Not Taken* by Robert Frost, *Musee des Beau Arts* by W.H. Auden, and the classic myth, *Icarus and Daedalus*. This list begs the question, On what basis were these works chosen? Before we discuss the teaching strategies used in this unit, it is important to explain, at this juncture, the criteria for choosing these readings.

Criteria for the Choice of Readings

Adler and Van Doren argue that works of great literature can be read by anyone who has reached the elementary reading level. This claim, however, raises some serious questions. In practice, is it really possible for sixth graders to read through the overwhelming lengths and encyclopedic background information of such works as *The Dialogues of Plato*, or *The Confessions of St. Augustine*? Even more realistically, will students, of the kind found at my school, be able to handle the level of difficulty of these works? Are sixth graders psychologically and mentally ready to explore the depth and complexity of insights inherent in these materials?

On the first question, it is indeed not possible for sixth graders to read any of the great books in their entirety and in their full version. These works, however, are peppered with many short analogies and anecdotes that could be read separately without sacrificing much of the essence of the works. Many of the analogies found in Plato's *The Republic*, for example, could be read independently from the book. These analogies – *The Ring of Gyges*, *The Analogy of the Cave*, and *The Story of Er* – are excellent examples of stories that can be analyzed on their own, or used as illuminations of the philosopher's complex ideas. On the question regarding the book's level of difficulty, one only needs to search the web to find hundreds of simplified versions of many of these works. The Great Books Foundation and the Core Knowledge Foundation are but two of the most notable sites in the Internet that produce modified versions of great works of literature. The best versions are those that adjust the vocabulary and language structure to a level that is comprehensible to sixth graders, but with the same depth of insight and complexity of meaning as in the original. The Core Knowledge Foundation's retelling of Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet* and *Julius Caesar* are some of the best examples. The third question addresses a developmental psychology issue. Without any doubt, there are great works of literature that appeal to sixth grade children because these works' subject matters and themes relate to world events or to emotions that are beginning to engross young

adolescents. Homer's story of the Trojan War, for example, would interest teenagers in the same way that such movies as *Star Wars*, or *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone* attract them.

The skeptics among us may argue that these are all easier said than done. This is a valid argument, given that you cannot force students to read materials that they think are too difficult to them. Careful selection of these materials must be done. The readings in this unit are chosen because they meet a set of criteria I deemed necessary to achieve the curriculum objectives. These criteria are determined by our primary educational goal – to develop in all students the knowledge, skills, habits, and attitudes that characterize successful readers. What are these criteria?

First and most important, the readings enumerated above are the kind that appeal to the maturing inquisitiveness of sixth graders. Twelve-year-olds love to talk. They are at an age when they begin to talk about relationships, the future, and of life's many mysteries. Furthermore, sixth graders are also starting to participate in collaborative search for meaning in a work. Given these, the kind of readings suited for this age group must, therefore, invite and support a variety of interpretations. Only selections that are sufficiently rich in ideas, and in which the author's meaning is not explicit, will invite interpretive questions that even sixth graders are capable of asking. *The Road Not Taken* and *I Have a Dream*, for example, are chosen because they are thematically complex and cohesive, and because they suggest real answers – that is, interpretations that can be supported with evidence from the text rather than merely being a matter of personal opinions.