

## ***Education Week***

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### The President's Reading Lesson

By Dennis Baron  
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One scene in Michael Moore's documentary "Fahrenheit 9/11" keeps playing in my head: George W. Bush placidly follows along as 2<sup>nd</sup> graders from Florida read a story called "The Pet Goat." Off camera, in New York City and Washington, planes are crashing into buildings. "The Pet Goat" is far from riveting, yet it keeps the president in his seat as the most devastating terrorist attack in the nation's history unfolds.

George Bush went to the Emma E. Booker School in Sarasota on Sept. 11, 2001, to publicize his "No Child Left Behind" education initiative, the one (now a federal law) that's supposed to turn around American schools. An amateur video of the president's class visit, available on the Internet, begins with an aide whispering to Mr. Bush that the second plane has hit the towers. The tape runs another five minutes and eight seconds, though given the context it seems to last forever.

When I saw Moore's film, I was appalled that the president stayed in the classroom and didn't react to the emergency. He just watched as the students droned on about a girl and her goat. When I saw the internet video of the complete classroom visit, I was appalled as well at the mindless drill that passes for reading instruction in too many American schools. I saw, not a class embracing the written word, exploring it and turning it inside out, but a class that's learned to follow orders, to chant a story as if it were a list of words and not connected prose. I saw a class of children being left behind.

In 1985, the Commission on Reading called for America to become a nation of readers, a goal we have failed to meet. In July of this year, the National Endowment for the Arts warned in a report called "Reading at Risk" that fewer than half of all Americans over the age of 18 read any literature at all. The president's reading lesson shows why: Reading in this school has become a group exercise, like jumping jacks, not an individual intellectual struggle in which readers are rewarded by discovering, questioning, and ultimately making, their own meaning.

"The Pet Goat" is a selection in a popular "direct instruction" textbook. The direct-instruction reading method claims to be teacher-proof and promises to raise student test scores, especially among at-risk students. Everything about the method is explicit; nothing is left to chance. Teachers follow scripted lessons, telling students, who do everything in unison, when to take

out their books, when to start reading, when to touch specific words, when to repeat, when to stop, and when to put their books away. Instead of thinking for themselves and learning through trial and error, students parrot packaged answers to preselected questions. There's less chance for teachers or students to fail this way, but there's also less opportunity for them to excel. Direct instruction is the reading equivalent of school uniforms, and it makes literature as exciting as a pressed white shirt.

While Mr. Bush observes the recitation, the teacher, mechanically following the lesson plan provided with the story, beats time on the desk to mark each word. If one student reads to a different drummer, the teacher orders a do-over. Once in a while, as they read, the teacher barks out, "Good job." It's in the script. When the class ignores a comma, she directs the students to place their fingers on the comma and tell what it signals. The children respond, "The comma says, 'Slow down.'" Then, when instructed, they repeat the sentence, slowing just the slightest bit after the comma as the beat goes on.

Chanting a text in unison won't turn these children into readers. Neither will the stories they are given to read. The plot of "The Pet Goat" is straightforward and moralistic, with all the drama of "See Spot run." There are four characters: a girl; her goat; her father, who wants to get rid of the goat because it eats everything in sight; and a villain called the "car robber."

Direct instruction asks students to read only words they've already been introduced to in their vocabulary lessons. There are no proper names on the 2<sup>nd</sup> grade vocabulary list, so none of the characters has a name. They are the girl, the dad, the goat. Stories with nameless characters sound strange enough, but a story with a car robber sounds stranger still. The class has surely heard of car thieves and even carjackers, but there are no thieves or carjackers on their word list. However, there are robbers. In fact, robbers knocked over a store in an earlier lesson, so the bad guy in this story has to be called a "car robber." The students know that "car robber" isn't idiomatic English, but it's in the book, so it must be correct.

"The Pet Goat" ends as the robber prepares to steal the family car. The denouement must wait for the next lesson, but it's not hard to guess what will happen: Goat gets robber; girl keeps goat. When the students finish reading and they've put their books under their chairs, President Bush, who is in no hurry to leave the room, banter with the teacher, asks a few questions, and compliments the class. He gives no indication that anything is wrong, not with the lesson, not with the nation.

What's wrong with the lesson sheds light on what's wrong with the nation: These students are being shortchanged. They regularly demand more of themselves and of one another, linguistically, than the controlled vocabulary and awkwardly simple sentences of their reading curriculum demands of them. But all they have to do to meet the school's low expectations is to follow the five-minute script. Reading takes a lot more time than that.

To become competent readers, students need real stories in ordinary English with real action, comedy, and tragedy. They need stories that raise difficult questions, questions which the

teacher might not anticipate, questions which students can't answer in unison. Characters with real names would be a start. When these students have to wrest meaning from an unfamiliar passage, something a nation of readers must do every day, I'm afraid that they will respond as George Bush did that day.

Sept. 11, 2001, presented the president with a real-world reading test, but like the 2<sup>nd</sup> graders in that Florida classroom, instead of accepting the challenge to interpret the unexpected, the president seemed content to follow the script laid out for him. He stayed in his seat and looked around with a dreamy, slightly bored expression, a docile student waiting for instructions. He seemed the kind of at-risk reader who will be left behind because he hasn't been able to do what all readers must do: Read, and think, for themselves.



*White House Chief of Staff Andrew Card tells President Bush, in a Florida school, that a second plane has hit the World Trade Center.*

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