

GIVING BAD STARTERS THEIR CHANCES

This addition to our information leaflets first appeared in the Educational Solutions Newsletter Volume II No.5. When this article was written, the author Katherine Mitchell and some of her colleagues from Educational Solutions Inc., had completed nearly two years at work in the Twin Park Schools project in the Bronx District of New York. Her special priority at that time was the elimination of illiteracy in Grades 3-6.

In spite of the enormous challenge that learning to speak represents, most children manage it very early in their lives. This functioning pre-supposes that the speaker has access to a system of meanings as well as a system of arbitrary sounds which are substitutes for those meanings. When he listens or utters, he knows how to shift from one system to the other. Reading requires one additional system - an arbitrary system of signs which are a substitute for the sounds of a language. Why, then does this far easier task of learning to read present obstacles for some children?

In the last two years I have worked primarily with about 100 children considered 'reading problems' by their schools. Although they come with varied difficulties, what strikes me in every case is that they have all of the equipment needed to be a reader - what they don't have is the proper use of themselves. Like running, swimming and speaking, reading is a functioning. But the children who come to me think that reading is remembering what their teacher told them. Because of who they are or how they have been taught, the children I've met hold tenaciously to the alphabet (which will not help them learn to read). Many have managed to retain sight words, but they are lost when presented with a word they haven't seen before. Most do not know that reading is related to speaking. The challenge of giving these bad starters their chances is straightforward. Can I use these bits of knowledge they have (which are useless in themselves) as springboards to replacing the inefficient use of memory with sure, effective word attack skills? Can I replace useless habits like guessing, with dependable strategies like looking and using what they already know to solve new questions? A more subtle demand of making remedial readers into independent readers is finding the entry into the unique person that each learner is. What activity will mobilise him to work in areas where he has not been successful?

Educational Solutions has addressed itself to the demands of reading English as well as to the requirements of meeting the uniqueness of each learner through an approach called Words in Colour. Perhaps its greatest asset is that it is not a program; rather, it is a set of materials or tools which are compatible with bridging the gap between spoken speech and written speech. Moreover, it is a way of working that allows the teacher to be out of the way of the learner. Children are made responsible for their learning - independent from the start. I meet the children who come to me in rooms where the twenty one word charts and fidel are displayed on the walls; other materials (primers, word building books, worksheets and the chalkboard) are also

within my reach. This environment offers as many possibilities for entry as there are children.

My first assignment when I meet the children who are referred to me is to engage them in an activity which will let me know them better. I might ask them to read a passage from a book and I note how they relate to unfamiliar words; and whether they read with the melody of speech. Some children who come to our clinic need only to become aware that in spite of the equal spacing between words in print, these words are linked in certain patterns of phrasing as in speech. This awareness and a few hours of practice is enough to change them into 'comprehenders' and not only 'decoders'. I might ask a child to use the word charts to find all the words he already knows. Knowing something of what he brings with him, I then test to see whether he has the tools to use it in decoding unfamiliar words. For example, if he reads pam, would he be able to read the same signs in reverse order? On the charts I indicate map. While getting to know which competencies he already has in learning to read and where his obstacles are, I have another important responsibility. I watch to see how he uses himself to solve the various questions I put to him. If I point to 'ate' and he says "eat", I might reply "This is what you say if you guess instead of look. Now this time look." If I point to 'examination' and he says "explanation", I might ask him to look again. If my words of direction are not adequate, I may assist him by other means, for instance covering parts of the word so that he focuses on smaller words within the bigger word.

As I work to help children make sense of reading, I take care of motivating them by some powerful techniques. Because the words on the charts are linked algebraically, we can make it possible for children who know a little to generate a lot. This practice of making many words and lots of sentences from a restricted set of known signs is a clear indication to the learner that he is putting his time to good use. What seems to matter most to these children, however, is that they are finally in control. Because I never ask them to remember, they don't forget. Because I work first in restricted areas - doing with just a few signs all that is required for reading - it is possible for the children to know very early that, in a given area, they are as competent as their teacher. Finally, because I replace telling children whether they are right or wrong, with developing their own criteria to judge for themselves, their uncertainty soon leaves them.

Since motivation is not a problem, my work with poor readers can be more intense than most people imagine - from one to three hours in a session. Once they know what to do with themselves (and this is a matter of hours, not years) they return to their classrooms to work as actively and knowingly as anyone else. □

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*The **Words in Colour** materials described in this article are published in Europe by **Educational Explorers** the publishing division of **Educational Solutions (UK) Ltd**. Detailed accounts of the work being done in classrooms at various levels is available in the series *Words in Colour in the Classroom*, written by teachers and published by **Educational Explorers**.*

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