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OBSTACLES TO READING ACQUISITION: PREVENTATIVE AND CORRECTIVE CONCERNS

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In spite of the vast expenditure and research on the process of learning to read, there is little if any evidence that the incidence of reading disability is declining. Some, in fact, would argue that the contrary is true.

Two things are clear. We need to discover more efficient ways of treating disabled readers. Second, we need to discover means of teaching the young child in ways that will reduce failure hazards. The focus, then, in my view should be on both corrective and preventative measures.

In this paper I am developing the point of view that the obstacles confronting the disabled reader have parallels in many of the problems the young child faces in learning to read in the first place. I am discussing some of these obstacles in the hope that awareness of these obstacles may aid in programming to reduce the failure hazard in beginning reading, and increase the incidence of success in treatment of disabled readers.

Individual Expectations: Purpose of Reading

Many hold the view that the process of learning to read is an unnatural act whereas the process of speech acquisition occurs naturally. While it would be foolish to argue against the existence of differences between the two processes we should recognize that a child typically learns to speak in an environment where it is natural and, indeed, profitable to learn to speak as a means of satisfying his basic needs one of which is to establish some control over his environment. The incentive to learn to speak is, so to speak, "built-in."

Contrarily, the environment in which a young child typically gets initial exposure to reading provides little, if any, incentive to learn. The material often is divorced from the central purpose of reading, the communication of ideas and feelings. The child has to accept in good faith (totally unaware as to the reasons why) that if he learns the "bits and pieces" presented to him he will learn to read.

While the older disabled reader may be cognizant in a very general way of the purposes of print, for many the purposes are as global as "to find out what is in books" or "what books say." It is interesting to see the number of adolescent and adult *self-referrals* to our reading clinic

motivated by concerns such as "I can't read the driver's manual," or "I don't know how to read a menu" or "I can't read well enough to get into vocational training." An even more dramatic case—a lady in her mid-thirties recently came for reading assistance because "I can't read books to my five year old like my friends are doing." The point is that these people have failed to learn to read in school. They sought assistance motivated only by a need and a purpose to learn. While there is no suggestion that there may not have been debilitating circumstances in the early reading environment of these clients, our experience has been that they learn to read given a purpose to do so and appropriate guidance to complement the purpose.

In summary, learning to read is certainly an act less natural than the act of learning to speak. The argument can be made, however, that demonstrating explicitly the purpose of print is one means of creating a more natural reading environment.

Individual Expectations: Process of Reading

The abstract nature of written language presents obstacles for the young learner. He is unaware of the relationship between the global oral utterance and a corresponding display of written symbols. He is unaware of the segmentation of oral utterance into words, phrases and sentences and even more so of the conventions of segmenting written expression into corresponding units. Reid (1966) and Downing (1978), among others have documented the fact that the young reader typically lacks the concept of letter, word, sentence, etc.

Certainly, if the child is unaware of or confused regarding these basic literacy concepts he is unaware of how to proceed in his attempt to match ideas he has heard in speech with corresponding ideas in print. Indeed, this limits any attempts at anticipating or predicting units of meaning as part of the child's initial notion of the process of reading. As a result, the child invents his own, often bizarre, notions of what he is supposed to be doing when he is "trying to read." Just to document with one example, much has been written about difficulties children face in left to right orientation. Often treatment has involved little more than mechanical "tracking" or other "perceptual" tasks. While I have no reason to degrade training of a perceptual nature, much of this training is designed to treat a symptom rather than a problem. The problem frequently is that the child does not understand the basic relationship between the temporal flow of spoken language and the corresponding spatial flow of written language. He develops his own "hit and miss" approaches which might as well be right to left and left to right, or perhaps, random.

It comes as a surprise to many that disabled readers range in intelligence as widely as the normal population. While part of the explanation for failure of bright individuals learning to read may lie in the physiological-psychological domain, it is my observation that many have not learned because of confusion over the expectation of the pro-

cess of reading. It matters little whether the I.Q. is 70 or 170 if efforts are focussed on the "wrong thing." We have had clinic referrals who have attended school for ten years and, after much probing, discovered that they had no concept of the process of reading. For example, we have had a number of adult disabled readers (average and superior I.Q. ranges) who had the expectation that if they learned to spell silently the letters before them quickly enough, the magic of reading would one day happen. The only difference that intelligence may make here is that the more highly intelligent person may learn to "spell" more quickly (not generally transferable to written spelling) but also that he may develop more subtle masks and emotional overlays resulting from the futility of his attempts.

Reading As Passive Behavior

Learning tasks for which goals lack clarity are likely to promote considerable passivity on the part of the learner. Ignorance of the purpose and process of reading tends to create, at least initially, a passive attitude toward reading. What typically follows from such attitude is the development of a variety of behaviors antithetical to learning to read. Perhaps the most pervasive of these "non-reading" behaviors are inattention and a general lack of persistence, both prime prerequisites for learning to read. Putting this another way, the child is unaware of why he is to be pursuing a task and at the same time unaware of *how he* is to proceed with the task. On the contrary, the active reader hypothesizes and questions and uses the grapho-phonemic information to confirm or refute these hypotheses. This does not mean that he won't flounder in the process. The point is that he has at least some awareness of what he is searching for and some awareness of what to do in order to achieve the goal.

Mager (1968) proposes that we develop either "approach" or "avoidance" tendencies toward life experiences depending on the degree of satisfaction we have received from an experience. It becomes clear from observation of floundering beginning readers and older disabled readers that the range of avoidance behaviors exhibited defy listing. Clearly, many disabled readers, young and old, invest more energy inventing avoidance tactics than in actual reading pursuits. This should not surprise us when we recognize the futility of a pursuit for which purpose and understanding is lacking.

Teaching Strategies Which Isolate Rather Than Integrate

I have alluded earlier in this paper to the fact that the act of learning to read is less natural than the act of learning oral language. Unfortunately, we often compound the unnaturalness through the teaching strategies we employ. There are still programs which promote a piecemeal approach to teaching reading as a series of isolated skills in the belief that when the child has mastered each skill he will read. Some children do learn in spite of the program. Others fail to make the

necessary generalizations and transfer. Many of these programs pose reading as totally divorced from the world of ideas and language. These programs view reading as the acquisition of a certain base of sight words complemented by the learning of sound/symbol correspondences. The assumption, generally implicit, is that the accumulation of these isolated skills will lead to the discovery of meaning from print. The use of the knowledge of syntax and semantics acquired in oral language is capitalized on only incidentally if at all.

There is no intention to down-grade the teaching of skills. However, many beginning readers who are capable of completing exercises in visual discrimination, auditory discrimination, phonetic skills, etc. to mastery level are unable to "put these skills together" in the act of reading. In fact, for many the attention seems to be so heavily focussed on specific grapho-phonemic aspects of reading that these stand in the way of reading in the true sense. Two points need to be made here. First, most beginning readers if exposed to meaningful print will, with appropriate direction and prompting, induce many of the grapho-phonemic generalizations necessary for fluent reading. Second, when direct instruction in grapho-phonemic skills occurs (and I recommend such instruction) these skills should be taught as facilitators of reading rather than as reading per se. This means that whatever specific grapho-phonemic skills are taught are taken from a language context—a context clear to the learner. When the practice of the skill is completed, the skill is applied to a total reading context to ensure transfer of the "facilitator" to the act of reading.

What about the parallel for the disabled reader? Assessment of the disabled reader has typically been based on a medical model. The client is given a battery of skill checks. After a profile has been established remediation ensues in an attempt to "bring him up to level" in the deficient skill areas. Two cautionary notes are in order. First, the assumption is often made (fallaciously) that the skills check samples adequately all the "facilitators" of the reading act. What is, in fact, often the case is that a limited sampling of grapho-phonemic skills is assessed without cognizance of the semantic and syntactic components of reading. Second, even if instruction in the areas of deficit result in mastery of specific "facilitators," transfer to reading (and especially long-term improvement) frequently does not occur. The incidence of disabled readers scoring high on specific subtests, yet unable to read is well documented. In fact Seraficia (1970) found poor readers to score higher in visual discrimination than good readers. To illustrate with a specific example, an eight-year-old referred to our clinic scored between a grade five and six level on a "visual synthesis" subtest yet he was virtually a non-reader. Perhaps the comment made earlier in the paper is applicable here. Lack of knowledge of the process of reading, including the inability to distinguish between "facilitators" of reading and the act of reading, may cause a totally misguided focus in the learner's attempt to acquire reading skills. I propose that programs emphasizing isolated

"facilitators" as opposed to integrated instruction, promote such misguided focus.

Programs Designed Around the Learner's Deficits

If one holds the view that the process of reading involves use of graphophonic, semantic and syntactic cues, one is faced with the challenge of designing instruction aimed at the most efficient use of these cues. This has important implications particularly for the beginning reader for at least three reasons. Instruction which focusses attention on use of the three cues (in concert) is likely to induce in the young learner the concept of reading as a communication process. (Note my comments earlier regarding the hazards involved in failing to understand the process of reading.) Further, such instruction provides a basis for "bridge-building" between what the child brings to school in the way of syntactic and semantic knowledge and process of reading. Indeed, most children by the time they reach school age are competent users of language and are able to anticipate and predict on the basis of their linguistic knowledge. Ironically, some programs of instruction ignore almost totally this resource both in terms of instructional methodology and choice of reading materials. The instruction frequently focusses heavily on the grapho-phonic domain (the child's greatest deficit). Finally, a combination of trying to cope with an area of little knowledge and inability to transfer whatever grapho-phonic knowledge is acquired often results in the development of failure complexes before the learner has really been given a fair chance.

For the disabled reader the problem may be at least as critical. It is important that the resource person designing instruction for him is aware of the nature of his reading failure. He may well have "broken down" in a program attempting to build heavily on grapho-phonic skills. If such is the case, it is absolutely critical that his "second chance" is built on a broader language base. This should help in minimizing some of failure cues associated with the kind of instruction that has failed him once. Further, as far as the younger child, it will provide him with an opportunity to build on what he already knows about language.

Viewing Reading As "All or Nothing"

All of us recognize both the melody and lyrics of a piece of music long before we may be able to produce, in total, the composition. When do we "know" the composition? Only after we are able to perform the number? Or do we "know" the number even at the stage when we recognize it and are able to anticipate what follows what? For many young learners the task of reading demands that they are able to "produce" in total what is on the page. My strong view is that much opportunity should be provided for children to recognize in print ideas they already have in their heads in order to gradually become familiar with the conventions of print in relation to the ideas and corresponding words which they already understand. For many young children to follow with their eyes, word for word, a simple nursery rhyme which

they have committed for memory is a major feat. Yet many are forced into print in which ideas are totally foreign to them (if ideas, indeed, exist on the page) before they have developed some of the very basic recognition skills through nursery rhymes, songs, slogans, signs and labels. For the child, especially from a non literate environment, such an expectation is unreasonable. We need to learn to think of the acquisition of reading as gradually-emergent behavior. Instruction based on such a view is likely to develop confidence in the learner's ability and encourage more risk-taking behavior than is frequently the case.

Many disabled readers (not all) have acquired a kind of recognition-level reading behavior. If such is the case, some of the material learned at such a level should be used to aid him in gradually acquiring production-level reading behavior.

Teaching "Reading" in the Absence of Reading

Earlier I have endorsed direct instruction of reading skills, particularly skills taught in context with a direct view to transfer. For some children this is enough. They will be motivated to find material to "practice" their newly-acquired skills. Others (and there are many) need constant encouragement and exposure to interesting materials which they can use to refine and extend what they have learned. Smith (1975) has said that the child learns to read only while he is reading. The child who is motivated and has the confidence to take risks is likely to spend a good part of his waking hours on reading-related tasks trying a simple story book, perusing the toy section of a catalogue, deciphering what is on the cereal box and making sense of the television guide. In fact, it is my view that, given appropriate instruction and encouragement, the child will learn more outside of the "reading instruction period" than he will during the "period."

What I have said about the young reader is at least as true of the older disabled reader. Practically every one of our clinic adolescent and adult referrals admit to resisting any attempt at reading-related activity. Most have never read a single book and few attempt even the headlines in the newspapers. It is no wonder they remain disabled. The implications are clear. What these clients need at least as much as specific skill instruction is encouragement and guidance in spending time at reading activities at the risk of making many mistakes. Elsewhere I am suggesting ways of promoting the shift from a non-reading attitude to one of reading pursuits.

Limited Listening Activities to Extend Syntactic and Semantic Competence

While it is true that many children come to school having acquired the basic language patterns of adult speech, it must be recognized that flexibility in the use of language and the ability to elaborate these patterns is still limited. They have the requisite linguistic competence to anticipate and predict much of what appears in print. It is the responsibility of the school to provide constant opportunity for children to

listen to literature so that they can extend and refine at a listening level the language they have learned in their pre-school years. Such exposure should lead them beyond the simple extension of syntactic and semantic competence. It should give them increasing knowledge of how language works in oral communication—awareness of the subtleties of pitch, stress and juncture in communicating feeling, humor, sarcasm, tongue-in-cheek expression, irony, etc. Such a basis in the awareness of metalanguage is absolutely essential for the development of interpretive reading skills.

The older disabled reader may have acquired much of the knowledge of how language works. However, we need to recognize that he may not have acquired sufficient awareness of the process in order to apply the knowledge to reading. Further, the older disabled reader often has another deficiency. Since he has not read widely (if at all) he may have a deficit of ideas to bring to the reading task. If we subscribe to Pearson's (1978) notion that learning to read is building bridges between what the reader knows and what the author writes, we have to recognize that for the older disabled reader the gap is often vast. In order to program adequately for him there may need to be considerable input of ideas as well as instruction in the mechanics of reading.

Summary

I have outlined somewhat cursorily some of the obstacles that appear to impede reading progress. In discussing the problem, I have attempted to draw parallels between obstacles and barriers to reading for the young child and the older disabled reader. I believe that recognition of some of these parallels may be useful in correcting problems of disabled readers, but more importantly, in preventing some reading failures from developing in the first place. In another paper I am expanding on some practical approaches to circumventing some of the obstacles outlined here.

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