

Summer 1970

A Description and Analysis of Children with Learning Problems Referred to a Reading Teacher

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A DESCRIPTION AND ANALYSIS OF CHILDREN WITH LEARNING
PROBLEMS REFERRED TO A READING TEACHER

A Thesis
Presented to
the Graduate Faculty
Central Washington State College

In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Education
Reading Specialist

by
Patricia M. Olson
July, 1970

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

To Delta Kappa Gamma, Alpha Sigma State Scholarship Committee for their consideration of my project.

To Dr. William Floyd, Chairman of my Committee for his advice and assistance. To Dr. Ralph Gustafson and Dr. Daryl Basler for serving on the committee.

To my husband, William E. Olson, for all the extra ways he made this project possible.

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Once factors are known and their possible causes are known, then it should be easier to apply a program aimed at a specific need to solve the causes and eliminate the factors. Do educators analyze problems enough? Do they use their powers of observation to the fullest? Could they diagnose more than they do? Does the classroom teacher leave too much of this to the writers of books and articles? Questions such as these prompted this particular study.

II. DEFINITIONS OF TERMS USED

Children with learning problems. For the purpose of this study, these are children who are not reading at the proper level for their age and grade, but they are not candidates for special education classes.

Special reading class. This is a group of six children who come to the reading room to receive extra help for twenty minutes, four days a week, in addition to their regular class work.

CHAPTER II

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

The three broadest topics which could be used to begin a study of the factors which influence failure in reading are: the child, his parents, and the school.

Those factors to be studied having to do with the child would be his physical, mental, emotional, psychological make-up together with his attitudes and interests.

Those factors under the topic of parent would be the parent's attitude toward the child, his interest in the child's learning, his own interests and background, his culture and the advantages he is able to provide, and the time he is able to spend with his child.

For the general topic of school could be listed: the district policy, curriculum, physical plant, and teacher.

It is possible to break these three very general topics into many facets for consideration. Now each of the factors will be considered in greater detail as they appear in the literature.

Factors Having To Do With the Child

These factors will be analyzed first. The most obvious thing about the child, often mentioned in the books and periodicals as a factor, is the child's sex. William Kottmeyer (41) has found in his clinics that 9 out of 10 remedial cases are boys. Frank R. Pauley (54) has studied further by combining sex differences and legal school

entrance age. Here he would bring in another important factor having to do with the child and that is his chronological age at the time reading is begun and his degree of maturity. More and more study is being made of the part played by vision, not only the visual acuity but in visual perception. Thomas C. Barrett (10) has done a study of visual discrimination tasks given as a possible predictor of reading achievement in first grade. It was found that there was a high incidence of perceptual problems among remedial readers. Gloria Mann (44) cites a cause of reversals found in dual directionality, thus relating vision and dominance. Arthur V. Olson (52) has done a study regarding the use of the Frostig materials developed by Dr. Mariann Frostig, long a believer in the importance of visual perception. His study showed little relationship between visual perception and mental and chronological age. As obvious as hearing would seem as a factor, there is more work in the study of the part it plays in the child's education done in speech departments than in reading departments. C. Van Riper (56) found that the only hearing loss which affects reading is in the frequencies of speech sounds and that high frequency losses, which are more common, do not affect reading skills. Joseph M. Wepman (64) found that hearing, in all its facets, is a developmental process so instruction must be matched to the individual child. He concludes that, should a child have a hearing loss in the speech sound area and hear a sound incorrectly, then he will speak it incorrectly and so most likely read it incorrectly. The reading problem may be caused by a neurophysical factor, in which there is an intersensory malfunctioning or developmental lag. William H. McClary (42) has done a study showing the complexities of this type of problem. That there are

psychological factors of the child's learning to read has been studied by many, but Henry P. Smith and Emerald V. Dechant (58) have written a highly reliable source for those who desire to study this factor and its effect on the child and his reading. Jules C. Abrams (1) says of the emotional impact of failure on the child that, "The pattern perpetuates itself, a vicious cycle which runs on the stream of the child's despair."

Parents and Family As a Factor

Environment is an important factor and a leading part of the child's environment is his family, since it is his first and most formative contact. Joseph Napoli (49) in his study of environmental factors found such things as the number of books in the home, the use of the library and parental attitude toward reading to be the most important. Wilma Miller (46) found the pre-reading experience to be a definite influence on first grade attainment and Millard Black (12) found that the lack of pre-reading experience suffered by the disadvantaged is a factor in their lack of success. According to Wayne Otto (53) the very position of the child in the family may have some influence. Is the child the youngest, the oldest, the only or the late born? All have to be considered when looking for the cause of a reading problem. The mobility of a family can make a difference as a study by Joan Bollenbacher (14) showed. Many teachers are familiar with the child who has moved often. Another factor of this constant moving is the child's emotional adjustment to the move, the new surroundings and all the new people to meet.

Educational Factors

John Holt (38) in his books would seem to blame the schools for almost all of the child's problems. He finds this especially true in the

more disadvantaged, inner-city areas. The degree of blame these factors deserve must be examined with an open mind. The many factors to be listed under education can be listed under several topics.

District. What is the philosophy of the district? What are the governing policies? What is done to control class load and provide helps for the teacher? What is done in school planning? What use is made of the kindergarten? Is there a curriculum of skills helpful to the child in his future schooling? What is felt about entrance age, retention and promotion? How much special staff is there to help the classroom teacher such as psychologists for testing, counselors and home visitors to aid in communication between child and school and home and school.

School. What type of physical surroundings does the child have? What opportunities are given him to broaden his experience? What materials are available to him to see, handle, use? Is there a central or room library for his use?

Teacher. Does the teacher understand the child and his problems at his level and is the teacher familiar with what comes before and after the child's present level? Is the teacher careful to diagnose what the needs of the child are and to meet these needs? Does the teacher make use of all resources supplied by the school and the district? Is the teacher familiar with the new things on the market? Does the teacher teach children or material? Robert M. Wilson (65) in his book offers many helps that can be used by the classroom teacher and the remedial teacher, if there is one in the building.

With these factors in mind a study was made of second and third grade children in remedial classes in one school in Everett, Washington. The study lasted during the 1969-70 school year. There was a concentrated effort to find out all that was possible about each child, to locate the factors present most often in the fifty-four children. There were thirty-six second grade children and eighteen third grade children included in the study. The findings for the two class levels will be reported separately in the following chapters.

CHAPTER III

DESCRIPTION OF PROCEDURES

In this chapter the procedures for selecting and testing, of students, will be discussed in detail.

Testing and Selecting

At the end of their first grade year the Stroud Hieronymus McKee Level 1 test is given. Teachers preferred giving it in May of first grade to September of second grade. They felt that children forgot much during summer vacation so May gave a more true picture of what the children knew.

New second graders are tested the second week of school. Tests are given and scored by the remedial reading teacher. When there is a score for each child, those who scored below grade level are discussed by class teacher, reading teacher and the principal. Those children are put in remedial reading classes if it is thought that they will benefit. In the daily schedule there can only be six periods for second grade so only thirty-six children can come to special reading.

The third graders are given Level 2 of the Stroud Hieronymus McKee reading test. The daily schedule allows only three third grade periods or a total of eighteen children. The main decision on selection rests with the class teacher and reading teacher. The only other stipulation made is that the child have good attendance so as not to waste one of the few vacancies on a child who misses school carelessly.

Parental Involvement

A form letter is then sent home with the child for the parent to sign. This is mostly for their information. It has been known that children neglect to tell their parents that they are going to special reading. The letter also invites them in to conference about their child, if they wish. There has never been a refusal to have the child in special reading as most parents are aware of the problem. There have been times when parents have requested the child have reading help. This is considered during the meetings of class teacher, principal and reading teacher.

Classes

Classes begin the last week of September. Children come six at a time for twenty minutes, four days a week. Fridays are kept open for conferences, testing and meetings. The main stress of the program is with the second grades. Each of the three second grade teachers sends twelve children. Further testing and diagnosis is done to find out all we can about the children chosen for the classes. In most cases there is an I.Q. score available as this is done in first grade. If the child is new a referral is sent in to the Testing and Guidance Department for a special test, or if there is a doubt about the group score an individual test is given.

In the class each child is given Test 6 of the Readiness Test published by Houghton Mifflin. This is an alphabet, letter naming test. Next, a Botel Word Recognition Test is given to find the child's level of Sight Word Recognition. The Botel beginning Sounds test is also given. The Harris Test for Lateral Dominance is also used to locate any possible mixed dominance. The district audiologist tests each child for any hearing problems. The school nurse checks eyes and general health. The speech

therapist screened all children for speech defects.

In late May the children will be retested and results compared to see growth made. A permanent record card is kept on each child recording the pre-test and post test and other important data such as material used, work done, and background information.

A "Report to Parents" is sent home in January and again in June. The January report again offers parents an opportunity to come in for a conference if they desire (see appendix).

Classes end the last week in May to allow time for final testing and record keeping.

CHAPTER IV

FINDINGS OF THE STUDY

In this chapter the findings of this study will be discussed as they pertain to the second and third graders.

Second Grade Children

The factors having to do with the child: all are very weak in (1) listening skills and (2) following directions. All have been observed to possess short attention spans. Of the students 13 of 36 were in the "young"* part of the class; 18 of 36 were boys (unusual to have even numbers); 3 of 36 wear glasses; 1 of 36 has a hearing loss in the speech range; 2 of 36 are seriously ill with cystic fibrosis (twin girls); 2 of 36 had possible mixed eye-hand dominance; 36 of 36 had kindergarten experience (morning or afternoon session seems to make no difference); 11 of 36 have very poor work habits in terms of being able to complete assignments, inability to concentrate, etc.; 9 of 36 have disinterested attitudes for they seem unwilling to try and further seemed unimpressed by their lack of reading skills; and 1 of 36 have been getting help at child guidance.

Factors having to do with the family show there are no only children. The average family size is 4 children; 11 of 36 are the youngest child in the family; 8 of 36 are the oldest child in the family; there are two sets of twin girls in the middle of the family; and the remaining 13 are

* "young" refers in this instance to the fact that their birthdays were very close to the November cut off deadline for school entry.

the next to the last child in the family. In 3 of the 36 families there is a divorce which happened since the child entered school. In 2 of 36 families there is a second language spoken in the home. In both cases it is German. Only 3 homes have working mothers. Of the students, 19 of 36 could be considered disadvantaged in a federal school, mostly due to family size and one working parent; 3 of 36 families have a history of mobility. One child has attended 11 schools and he is only a second grader. The families are all white or blue collar workers employed by local industry or self-employed. There are no doctors or lawyers.

Factors having to do with the school showed that 27 of 36 were in large kindergarten classes of 34 to 38 pupils; 9 of 36 were in kindergarten in another school; all were in first grades averaging in size from 32 to 34. Days missed in grade 1 averaged 12 out of 180; 4 of 36 had been retained in the Everett school district. Of these, 1 had been retained in grade 1 and the other in grade 2. Other findings showed that 9 of 36 were new to the Everett district during the 1969-70 school year; 14 of 36 had been taught by teachers using Words in Color approach of teaching reading; and 13 had a Basal Reading Program using either the Ginn or Houghton Mifflin series of readers.

Third Grade Children

Factors having to do with the child showed that 6 of 18 are in the younger part of the class; 10 of 18 are boys; 2 of 18 wear glasses; 1 of 18 has a slight hearing loss; 1 of 18 had surgery for hare-lip; 4 of 18 have moved a great deal; all had kindergarten experience; 12 of 18 have poor work habits; 7 of 18 have disinterested attitudes; all are weak in listening skills, especially in following directions and attending to voiced and written material; and 1 of 18 is getting help at child guidance.

Factors that have to do with the family point out that there are no only children; the average family has 4 children; 6 of 18 are the youngest in the family; 4 of 18 are the oldest in the family; 4 of 18 are the second to the youngest; 4 of 18 are third to youngest; in 4 of 18 families there is a divorce; in 1 of 18 families the father is deceased; in 3 of 18 families there is a working mother.

Factors having to do with the school indicate 7 of 18 are new to our school; all had kindergarten experience; all were in first grades averaging 32 pupils; all were in second grades averaging 32 pupils; those who were in first grade in our school had to double shift from September to December; 2 of 18 have poor attendance records; 9 had Words in Color in grade 1; and 2 had Basal Reading in grade 2.

CHAPTER V

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Generally speaking, this study seemed to verify many of the previous research based conclusions regarding the characteristics of children referred to a special reading teacher.

Among the most interesting of facts learned about the children in this study was the large percentage of them coming from larger families and that being the last born or next to last was true in 24 out of 36 second graders and 10 out of 18 third graders. This might seem to indicate that perhaps parents did not have as much time to spend with these children as they were developing pre-reading skills. There may be more noise and confusion in the home than children desire. Several times in the study children closed an open door to shut out hall noise. Due to the large number of children in the family, it is harder and more expensive to provide trips and experiences which build the language skills. This area is not the realm of the school, but it is felt that the size of the family and the conditions in the home may be a very important contributor to the reading problems. Many children are very poor in listening skills and following directions. They have very short attention spans. In a class of thirty it must be very easy for a teacher to lose their attention and not be aware of it. It can happen in a group of six, so it must happen in the classroom. Teachers must work to develop listening skills in their children and make learning more attractive to capture and stretch those short attention spans. A large part of the problem would seem to be motivation.

In the educational background of these children there are fairly large classes. Kindergarten classes have always averaged 35 to 38. There is no set curriculum guide at kindergarten level and what is done is left much to the teacher. More work is being done now for reading and mathematics readiness than was done when these children were in kindergarten. It would seem that a program such as Sesame Street would almost force kindergartens to develop more readiness for learning in general and reading in particular. This investigator is in favor of a stronger, more guided kindergarten program, hoping that there would be fewer type 4 and 5 readers when the Readiness Test is given in the first grade. Much could be done in the listening areas also. A program leading to knowledge of left and right, body awareness and muscle co-ordination is another area where kindergartens can be of real help to the Primary Teachers.

For those children who had Words in Color in the first grade, it does not seem at this time to be the most appropriate method for them. This was a common element that distinguished the children who needed special help and were referred from those who were not referred. It is acknowledged that reading problems may be due to poor listening habits, lack of readiness provided by home and kindergarten, class size or weakness in the program itself. Teachers who used Words in Color were probably sincere and worked hard. As first devised, Words in Color was designed for the older child in need of remedial help and tired of conventional approaches. This may be where it serves best. It was not possible to find reports of research done on it and its effectiveness at any level. Some schools have had success with Words in Color. Some schools have discontinued it. This particular group of children, coming from large families, lacking in readiness and listening skills may negate

its good points.

The investigator also recommends that reduced class size is a high priority item. The Everett district tries hard for an average class size of 25 to 27. Depending on voters and levy passage makes the ideal at times more difficult. Class size cannot be blamed on either district policy or philosophy. The population boom of two years ago caused by the Boeing 747 airplane plant being located in Everett must also share the blame for increased class size. Primary grade class size is considered very important and plans are under way to reduce class size to 20 to 23.

Another recommendation would be a concerted effort to make parents aware of the importance of the pre-school years in their children's learning. It should be made known to them that everything they do with the child can be of value if it is used to advantage. They should be encouraged to talk to their children more about where they are going, what they are doing, and things they are seeing. They should be urged to read more to their children and let the children see them reading. In appropriate ways they should develop interests and good attitudes toward learning. The home and the school should more effectively and efficiently communicate and work hard together for the good of each child.

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Everett Public Schools

DIVISION OF INSTRUCTION
R E A D I N G

Everett, Washington

Date _____

Dear Parent:

Through conferences with the school principal and your child's teacher, it has been recommended that _____ be enrolled in the reading classes offered at the school this year.

Reading classes on four days of the week have been scheduled in addition to the regular reading period in the classroom.

Since much more can be accomplished with your cooperation, I will be happy to schedule a conference with you on request. Please feel free to observe this class at any time.

Sincerely,

Reading Consultant_____
Principal_____
School

Everett Public Schools

Dept. of Reading

Everett, Washington

Parent's Comments

Report of _____

Grade _____ School Year _____

School _____

Dear Parents:

Reading is a skill that children need throughout all their lives. In the Reading Improvement classes we are endeavoring to help them develop this skill. To accomplish this, instruction is being given in the basic reading skills.

Children's attitudes and work habits influence their success in this field.

This report is made to indicate how your child is doing in the Reading Improvement class.

Parent's Signature

Reading Improvement Teacher

Principal