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The Disabled Reader and the Reading Process

by

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Traditionally we have come to regard the disabled reader as one who is deficient in ability to recognize words in isolation/context, whose word attack skills are so deficient that we throw up our hands in horror at his inability to come up with anything like what is in print, and who is generally unable to obtain a glimmer of understanding into the meaning of what he is reading. At a somewhat lower level than this type of reader is the illiterate, and whether the illiterate is entitled to be regarded as a "reader", disabled or otherwise, is problematical. However, for the purpose of this discussion today, I intend to incorporate the illiterate into some aspects of this paper.

The common methods of diagnosing the disabled reader usually include tests of visual perception, auditory perception, word accuracy, word attack skills and almost as an appendage, comprehension tests. I have chosen the title of this paper — The Disabled Reader and The Reading — Process — quite deliberately: I want to suggest a new environment for the study of the disabled reader, and that environment is the reading process. I have serious doubts as to whether we have really looked at the problem reader in the natural environment: Rather, we have tended to isolate what we regard as the constituents of reading and analysed the reader's performance on the separate variables. I believe that the outstanding contributions of the research conducted by Kenneth Goodman, with whom I worked for two years in Detroit, and by Marie Clay of this country, is that they have observed the child in the process aspect of reading.

One of the great wonders facing teachers of reading-disabled children is that quite often their pupils are able to succeed in coping with phonic and similar tasks despite their reading problem. The explanation lies in the fact that once the process aspect of reading is ignored, reading instruction steps back into the dark ages.

Burke (1972) provides a fitting comparison in this regard with her example of scientific inquiry of the 16th Century. Before the discovery of the atom, chemists described materials by their elements, e.g. water 2 parts H and one part O. During a later period science classified the elemental content of material. But when the atom was discovered scientists realised that the significant aspect of a material is the smallest particle which retains all of the properties of the whole, i.e. matter was to be treated as a process and the interrelationships of the elements in the process were what needed examination.

It seems to me that views of reading are often compatible with 16th Century view of science. We have described reading by what we see as its elements, and taught these as if they are going to combine in some way and result in the process. And reading is a process — a language process — and when we try to break it down in to its constituents it becomes something other than reading. We thus ignore the interrelationships among the symbols, the grammar and the meaning all of which are integral to any language process.

Now what has been said is not new. The truth is we do concentrate on the elements in our reading instruction. The primary emphasis is on the grapho-phonic aspects of reading. But if we concentrated on the "atom" of reading, our emphasis would shift to a consideration of the syntax and meaning as well. The reading process is based on the interrelationships of the symbols (grapho-phonic), the grammar (syntax) and the meaning (semantics). Any form of reading instruction that ignores any of these three aspects is doomed to failure. Any form of testing that ignores these interrelationships gives a false impression of the reader's problems.

Any consideration of the problems posed by the disabled reader must take cognizance of what the reading process means to the able reader and I'd like to consider this first.

The reader acquires information from both visual and non-visual sources. The visual information is obvious. The non-visual includes concepts that the reader brings to the task, language that he has at his disposal, and, of course, knowing how to read. Probably because of the heavy instructional emphasis on the visual aspect of reading, very young children tend to rely very much on the visual source, sometimes to the exclusion of using non-visual information. Goodman (1970) suggests that the model of the young reader is something like this:

Graphic Input —————> Oral Output Aural Input —————> Meaning

As the reader matures, he starts to bring into his reading style more non-visual information. Research suggests that the more non-visual information one has the less visual information one requires. The best example of this occurs when you ask an American child to read an extract about the cricket tests played between New Zealand and Australia. Because his conceptual insight into the topic is zero, he uses all the visual information. But give the same extract to an Australian boy of ten or twelve years, and he needs so little of the visual information to process the story that he departs, often quite radically, from the print in front of him. The more information he has, the less he needs to use. In obtaining meaning the reader with the strong conceptual base tends to predict, not always correctly, the syntax and meaning of the passage. If his predictions of either are not met he usually re-reads or checks. As proficient readers we've all had this experience. The model of this proficient reader with sufficient non-visual information is akin to this:

Print —————> Meaning

The point is that there is a great amount of redundant information available to the reader. This redundancy allows efficient comprehenders to read meaning rather than words. Where the syntactic patterns are highly predictable very little visual information is required. Where the alternatives in visual information are many, the more visual information is sampled.

In summary, the proposition is that proficient readers interact with the visual information in a manner that allows a processing of the grapho-phonetic relationships, the word order (syntax) and the meaning. At the same time the amount of visual information required to be processed bears an inverse relationship to the amount of non visual information brought to the task. Visual information is sampled through its redundancy in a manner that reflects an awareness of linguistic patterns and likely meaning. If word omissions, substitutions or insertions occur, these will reflect a competent use of language that preserves acceptable grammatical patterns (Rousch, 1975).

How then does the disabled reader operate by comparison?

In the following section the findings of research conducted at Riverina College of Advanced Education by the author, and in the U.S.A. by Goodman, about the attitudes and reading styles of disabled adults and children, will be put.

Some general comments are in order first.

- (1) The children who came for "remediation" manifested other literacy problems also, e.g. spelling and written expression.
- (2) Boys outnumbered girls 3 to 1.
- (3) A small proportion referred (about 12%) seemed to have adequate comprehension but were not fluent on oral reading analysis. Perhaps this group reflects some teachers' perceptions of what reading is all about.
- (4) A large proportion (about 40%) were classic stereotypes of "word callers" i.e. they did not attempt to correct themselves when they uttered nonsense, or when there was a mismatch of meaning between the print and what they read. This group, while able to utter grammatical sequences in normal conversation, ignored syntax in the reading process.
- (5) A significant majority (75%) manifested negative attitudes towards books and literacy in general. This information was tapped from an informal attitude inventory. Approximately 95% of this group had never been read to at home before they attended school.

Adults

- (1) Majority were of normal intelligence 90 - 110 I.Q.
- (2) Majority had excellent memories (one man carried building directions and measurements in his head).
- (3) Majority tried to conceal the fact that they were non-readers e.g. carried broken glasses, asked others to read the restaurant menu, etc.)

- (4) Majority believed they needed to learn the alphabet first and didn't believe they were learning unless they were taught the sounds of letters straight off.
- (5) Adults wanted to learn to read usually because their children were at school and wanted help; or because they wanted some promotion in their job or their wives made them attend!

The drop out rate amongst adults seems to be about 5% and children (under 18) about 10%.

The majority of adults had tried to learn elsewhere and failed; they had a history of being labelled "dumb" (according to their memories) at primary school, or of missing much time at primary school.

Most of the subjects responded to a language-experience approach with a meaning emphasis if this was on a one-to-one basis.

Low achieving second, fourth, sixth and eighth graders vary considerably in their use or non-use of reading strategies. While the second graders omit intentionally unfamiliar words, the older children tend to make substitutions that preserve syntactic patterns. In many cases the older children search for some meaning, but the second graders often fall into a routine that ignores not only meaning but also graphic and sound problems.

A marked feature of the older children's reading is their use of correction strategies. This contrasts strongly with the behaviour of the second graders who usually ignore correction. In fact, it is the attempt to draw on the grapho-phonetic, syntactic and semantic aspects of the reading process, allied with correction strategies, that sets the older readers apart from the second graders. It is their inconsistency in the use of desirable strategies that often causes problems for the older readers.

I think that in 1973, when I was last in New Zealand at the Wellington Conference, Marie Clay referred to the group of infant readers who did not correct as being "at risk". I agreed then with her assessment and wondered at the time why we often encouraged them to read dangerously by such exhortations as "don't go back" and "read on". The interesting aspect of the low fourth graders is that despite their poor ability they intuitively correct and use what they know of language as a basis for this correction. They also try for meaning in some cases, although success is not forthcoming.

One of the phenomena of the reading process is that the oral reading behaviour of the normal child seems to break down around fourth grade. Teachers often comment that previously accurate readers up to grade three tend to "fall apart" in grade four. I am prepared to suggest that this is the time when children begin to get involved in more meaningful silent reading, at school or at home, and their quest for meaning replaces an earlier desire for accuracy. The differences between the reading behaviour of the low second and low older graders to whom I have referred is a reflection even in these groups of a different view of what reading is.

In the reading process the child attempts to reconcile the relationship between sound and symbol, sort out the grammatical pattern of the language, and interpret meaning. The disabled reader tries to cope with these aspects of the process to a varying extent, depending upon his age and his understanding of what reading is all about. Normal readers cope with the three aspects as long as the conceptual load of the material is within their grasp. As soon as the concepts of a story become too difficult, the normal child bogs down into a word-by-word rendition but he tries to make his reading sound like language. It is the meaning that he loses. But the disabled reader, faced with a heavy conceptual load in a story, is shattered to the extent that he falls back on a highly grapho-phonetic rendition in which his purpose is to match sound and symbol. Without any meaning or syntax to support his endeavours he snatches at visual information sometimes in a haphazard fashion. One of the most vivid memories I have of this kind of child is of a boy of nine in San Diego. As soon as he was faced with a new extract to read he chose printed letters at will and responded orally to them. In a word such as **talk** he would utter "l", "k", "a", "t". What was even sadder about this child was somebody's diagnosis that he didn't know his sounds. To me, it was the only thing he did know.

What, then are the implications for instruction of some of the research findings. It is obvious that our instruction needs to have a wider focus. The emphasis needs to shift beyond the graphic-sound aspects to language and meaning. Education is fraught with clichés, none probably more often heard than "start where the child is". In reading instruction, "where the child is" means he has language at his disposal. Instruction needs to emphasise to the child that it is this language that he uses when reading — no nonsensical, artificial, sound-bound strategies can substitute for his use of natural language. Early instruction needs to focus on silent reading more than it has in the past, and children need to be told what to look for specifically in their silent reading. They need to be given directive clues e.g. "Find out what happens to Tom after he falls into the pool" rather than be left with a conglomerate of meaning.

We need to be aware of the problems posed for inferior readers by certain text material. I could summarize these briefly as follows:

- (a) Inflexional endings.
- (b) Negatives.
- (c) Changes in grammatical categories.
- (d) The dash.
- (e) The apostrophe.
- (f) Quotation marks.
- (g) Hyphenated words caused by narrow columns of print.
- (h) Unusual use of words, especially after quotation marks as in direct speech.
- (i) Certain passive forms.

WHAT READING INSTRUCTION NEEDS:

1. Emphasis in early years needs to be on meaning through more silent reading.
2. While, as Dr. McCullough correctly pointed out, many children learned to read on "primerese", the "See Carlo run" style presents problems in some contexts.
The language of the text must be such that the child can get meaning from it. The "See Carlo run" problem might not have been a problem in its traditional setting. It is **now** in a **different** contextual setting.
3. Emphasis on instruction needs to shift from a prepossession with the symbol and the word to total language, with children using their knowledge of phonics to verify choices rather than use them as the base.
4. There needs to be a greater tolerance of the kinds of material used by children. If they like comics they should be encouraged to read them. We learn to read by reading.
5. We need to be wary of labelling children as having specific learning problems without trying to understand why they exhibit the behaviour that they do in the reading situation e.g. Is their difficulty in reversing symbols caused by an habitual confusion between words such as "was" and "saw"? Or are they focussing on the visual information to the exclusion of syntax and meaning? It is educators who will have to solve reading problems and not medical people.
6. We will have to review many aspects of testing especially those that concentrate on the elements and not the process.
7. There needs to be a closer link between home and school. e.g. 4 year old children can sit down at night with their teddy bears and "read" to them i.e. turn the pages and make up the story as they go along. In this way they learn to focus on reading as having meaning and natural language.
8. The authors and publishers of children's reading materials might avoid some of the traps that I referred to earlier as causing problems for some children.
9. There is a great need to give teachers, through in-service work, a thorough understanding of the theory of reading, as well as the opportunity to apply this knowledge to the practical situation. I am suggesting graduate diploma courses in Reading/Language rather than courses in Special Education.
10. In the future, a distinction needs to be drawn between comprehension and comprehending. **Comprehension** is the product. Comprehending is an aspect of the process and is what the reader does as he searches for meaning.
11. With the move to accountability gathering momentum in education, and tests likely to be used with greater frequency to find out how we

measure up, it is time to consider our accountability to the children and stand firm against invalid measures of the reading process.

12. There is a need to reject once and for all the view that reading is only visual. As Kolers (1969) suggests, it is only incidentally visual. Our instruction needs to reflect this.

I would like to conclude with an extract by Paul Kolers (1969) "One would think that with a topic of such importance, people interested in the subject would try to find out how the phenomenon occurs rather than merely make pronouncements about it. The subject matter of the reading process in its present development repeatedly brings to mind the anecdote told about medieval scholastics. At an important conference called to decide how many teeth a horse had, these good schoolmen argued fiercely and debated long and hard on the matter. Authorities from Aristotle to Aquinas were cited; sacred books were consulted; the veracity of witnesses and even of authorities was called into question; accusations and counter-accusations were made; insults hurled as steam, sound and fury characterized the proceedings. Eager to quiet the spirits of his revered masters, one young acolyte finally worked up the nerve to interject a comment, a suggestion that he thought would help to solve the matter. He offered to catch a horse and count the number of its teeth. Deadly silence greeted the suggestion; and then, on a signal from the chairman, the poor acolyte was thrown to the wolves. Empiricism, pragmatism, some effort at informed fact-gathering had neither charm nor interest for those medieval philosophers. A similar lack of respect for data characterizes many contemporary students of literacy. By data here, is not meant the mounds of correlational statistics and the millions of reading comprehension and reading achievement scores that have been tabulated. Such data can tell one very little. What is needed are data that illuminate the processes that characterize reading and that raise questions rather than 'prove' theories."

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