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LET'S READ

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A new program, Let's Read, began operating at Western Michigan University in 1972. No sooner had it started than it won an award for creative programs from the Adult Education Association of Michigan. Let's Read is based upon the idea that mothers, even poor and uneducated mothers, can learn how to provide intellectual stimulation for their young children.

The impetus for Let's Read came from a group of black women who participated in a workshop for women offered by the University counseling service. These women, in addition to seeking new roles as individuals, considered how they could work cooperatively on some problem common to minority women. Knowing that black children often fail to learn to read as well as other children and suspecting that nursery school or Head Start cannot compensate entirely for an impoverished background, they conceived the idea of a reading program for pre-school and early elementary school children with the dual purpose of teaching the children and training their mothers. To teach mothers how to teach reading at home or to teach reading to pre-schoolers was not the aim. The purpose was to show mothers how to provide a variety of experiences for their children and to foster opportunities for talking, listening, and problem solving.

Some sixty children were enrolled in two sessions. Pre-school children met in the morning; kindergarten, first and second grade classes met in the evening in classes designed to supplement regular school reading instruction. Operating under a Kalamazoo Foundation grant, the program employed four teachers and two professional consultants. Mothers provided transportation, served as aides in the classes, and attended bi-weekly parent education workshops.

The program was in operation for twelve weeks. What were the strengths and weaknesses of it? The children's social progress in the pre-school class was most evident. Those who had cried for their mothers or sat on the sidelines were finally joining in, the too-good teacher-pleasers were vigorously showing a growing independence, and some aggressive children were easier to manage. Several parents commented that at home their children were singing songs and talking about things they had learned in Let's Read. Children in the evening class showed a strong preference for learning games rather than paper and pencil seat work. During the cold, wet spring the school age

children came eagerly to class; but, not surprisingly, attendance dropped sharply when the weather warmed late in May.

Throughout the twelve weeks the need for carefully thought out planning was sorely felt. Some of the teachers had never heard of Let's Read until they were hired, the day before the program started. Supplies, equipment, and the room itself were not available until the last minute, when the grant was received. Because of this, the curriculum was hastily sketched and filled in with resources on hand.

Parent involvement, of course, is the key to Let's Read. Without it, the program is merely free nursery school and tutoring. Of the mothers' workshops there were several rewarding evenings of good exchange between mothers, consultants, and teachers. A number of meetings were poorly attended by mothers, but those mothers who were present actively cooperated with the staff.

While one of the big weaknesses was that there were not enough mothers working in the classes, several assisted regularly. They became acquainted with the children and the materials and were able to work with little direction from a teacher.

Apparently many mothers did not fully appreciate their role in Let's Read. The consensus seemed to be that it was a free program at the University for black children and that any mothers who did not have jobs or babies at home were welcome to help. One mother was reported to have said that volunteer work is for white women; if black women go to work, they should be paid. This misunderstanding had not been anticipated, and it came as a surprise. After all, black women had planned the program for black women. However, the women who organized Let's Read were in most cases not the same women who sent their children to the classes, their children were older, generally. The idea that Let's Read is a means of training mothers to enrich their homes was not effectively communicated to the mothers of children enrolled.

In planning for fall, the first consideration was to arrange time for the present teachers to write a basic curriculum for next year's teachers to expand. Because some of the teachers were undecided about remaining in the program, qualifications of possible replacements were discussed. That some of the teachers should be black was agreed, but it was decided that one white teacher per class could be helpful because the children will be likely to have white teachers in school. Presumably the black teachers would understand the children's speech and mores best, while the white teacher could provide a bridge from black neighborhoods to integrated public schools, but it was of para-

mount importance that the teachers be able to work well together.

To convince the parents of their importance in Let's Read, two registration and orientation meetings will be held before the children begin classes. At that time mothers will be scheduled to work in classes every three or four weeks, and fathers will be encouraged to participate in the woodworking and the field trips. Knowing how many and which parents are working on a given day will enable the teachers to plan a variety of activities to suit the levels and interests of the children. Variety is particularly important since there is a three year age span in each class.

If necessary, baby sitting cooperation will be organized so that mothers with small children at home are free to come. Those parents whose working hours make it impossible for them to help in classes will be required to attend all the parent workshops in order to maintain their children's eligibility.

One can foresee having to decide whether or not to drop a child from Let's Read because his parent is not participating. Failure to enforce the policy will very likely result in a repeat of last spring's half-hearted parent cooperation, yet the thought of barring a child from what may well be his only pre-school education or badly needed tutoring is unhappy indeed. A youngster whose mother cannot or will not take advantage of the training offered probably needs the most help.

Perhaps Let's Read ought to take a hint from television advertising and use the children to get the parents' cooperation. If children can be stimulated to pester their mothers to buy toys and sugar-coated breakfast foods, maybe the same techniques can be used to sell parent education.