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TEACHING GUIDES FROM THE FIRST LEARNING ENVIRONMENT

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Given intact psycho-neurologic and perceptual systems, all children from birth to school entrance are successful language users. For many, however, failure begins during their initial exposure to reading instruction in kindergarten. This paper will examine how the application of certain learning principles in the young child's home foster successful learning while ignoring those same principles in the schools allows or fosters failure.

The major purpose of this paper is to demonstrate how these guides from the first learning environment, the home, can be better implemented in the schools so that reading problems can be prevented or ameliorated in a more hospitable environment.

The Hidden Curriculum

Children are born with the proclivity toward dynamic communication. Beginning at "ground zero" they build language competencies. In most homes, the preschooler is exposed to a hidden curriculum that is consciously or unconsciously maintained by parents and older siblings. Parents realize that children learn in different ways and at different rates. This understanding, coupled with the application of effective learning principles, such as reinforcement and individualization, become an integral part of the hidden curriculum that is informally applied at the child acquires and develops language. By the age of five most children have command of thousands of words that they can arrange in syntactically correct, meaningful sentences. Chomsky (1972), Baratz (1968) and others state that the

average child of six or seven appears to exhibit linguistic competence which approaches that of an adult. With the foundational language abilities and skills developed the student should be well equipped to take the next step on the language ladder: reading. Yet, paradoxically, many language competent children become incompetent readers.

The good teacher is one who has some understanding of the established principles of learning. Examination of the first learning environment and its hidden curriculum yields specific instructional guides. What do these first "teachers" do in contrast to what may happen in the classroom? What lessons may be learned from the first teachers and how may these be applied in the classroom to encourage and promote reading development?

Learning Principles

Intermittent vs. Concentrated Instruction

Language learning begins soon after birth and is a continuous, though unconscious, process. Learning occurs intermittently, throughout the day, with new language components and processes gradually acquired over a period of years. How quickly a child will achieve language competence depends on individual ability and readiness. There is no universal age at which all children are equally verbal.

In contrast, the onset of reading instruction is relatively intense. Although some attempts are made to introduce reading in pre-school and readiness programs, formal reading instruction often begins by January of kindergarten. It is expected that all of the basic skills will be learned within two years of the starting points; this is much too rapid for some of the less ready children.

Moreover, most reading instruction occurs during the early morning with little direct instruction during the rest of the day. Such concentrated attention to the subject creates frustration in many children who, as noted, have previously acquired their language unconsciously and intermittently throughout the day.

Curriculums must be designed to accommodate those children who need more time to develop readiness or more advanced skills. When a child starts to demonstrate frustration, teachers should attend to those aspects of formal

reading instruction which are overwhelming the child and introduce those factors much more gradually and repeatedly throughout the day and over a longer time span.

Primary vs. Secondary Motivation

Oral-aural language is a primary language system. To the learner it is satisfying in and of itself as a tool used to receive and express meaningful information.

Reading, on the other hand, is a secondary language system: the child does not relate learning to read to his survival in his environment. Thus, the learner often sees the acquisition and development of reading skills as an end in itself. The gaining of skill expertise is seen as far more important than the gaining of meaning from print.

It is crucial that the student appreciate that reading is a tool used to gain personally useful meaning from the printed page. Moreover, s/he must see that reading is a means by which s/he can: develop his/her self-image; identify with peers and siblings; and be able to find another avenue of recreation.

Primary and Social vs. Token Reinforcement

Reinforcement, viewed as a reward system, is an integral component of any learning experience. A young child learns language because s/he has needs which must be satisfied (e.g., food, water, warmth, and others). Early on s/he learns that communication of these needs to others usually results in getting that which the child requires. When the child first says "bottie" he is given a bottle; when the child says "baybee," s/he is given a baby doll. The bottle and the doll become strong, primary positive reinforcers which motivate the child toward continued language development.

Similarly, when adults are engaged in verbal communication with children they not only use the language to be learned with the child, but they use it primarily to do something besides teach the language. The prime focus in using the language appears to be to accomplish something else - to make contact, to comfort, to direct behavior, to entertain, to obtain objects, etc. (Schacter et al., 1976).

In addition, strong secondary reinforcers are abundantly available in the attention, smiles, and sounds of approval of people in the environment.

The developing reader cannot learn without doing, but often will do little without some relevant reward. Too often the only rewards available to students are weak. A report card once every three months or a sticker for a few days work are not meaningful to many children; moreover, many a child who is having difficulty with reading receives far fewer stickers or acceptable grades. Adequate rewards and reinforcement must be available to the reader or the behaviors which are prerequisites for the new reading goals may weaken. If this happens, progress in learning to read will slow down or cease. The best rewards for many children are often the encouragement of a teacher who ensures and notes small successes in a pleasant atmosphere. Put another way, the student needs "strokes". The more intensive or difficult the learning is for that student, the greater the need for more "strokes".

Immediate vs. Delayed Feedback

Further, when adults and children interact through language, the language directed to the child is for that child and inherently entails immediate feedback (Cazden, 1972). The request for a "bottie" is usually granted or the child is told why the request will not be met. The child's question, "What's that?" is rarely ignored.

In the school situation, reading instruction involves a group of children. Much of the work takes place in reading groups or independent seat work making individualized, immediate reinforcement difficult. Only when the child works or performs individually may his/her reading behaviors be immediately reinforced by teachers; unfortunately, only a small proportion of the teacher's time will be occupied with the behavior of one child.

It is important for the teacher to confirm, reinforce, or correct the student's reading behavior soon after the behavior has occurred so that the correct response is strengthened.

Individual vs. Group Needs

Although an important determinant of learning, practice does not cause learning. Practice is important only because of the conditions that operate during practice. Such conditions include: selection and introduction of new skills to be learned; the amount of new skills to be learned;

selection of the appropriate teaching styles; the amount of demonstration needed; and the amount of practice needed. During language learning those conditional factors are all individually and informally applied at the child's own learning rate.

Conversely, because of the large number of students in the class, the teacher is forced to select those reading goals, teaching techniques, materials, and amounts of practice which will meet the needs of the average students. Often these conditional factors are determined before the teacher has met with the class.

As opposed to language learning, skills are introduced, demonstration is provided, and practice is assigned in an unnatural, extrinsically induced, and formally applied manner. Too often the child must accommodate the teacher and materials; too little is done by school personnel to accommodate the individual child's learning differences and needs.

It's little wonder then that teaching machines and computers seem, at times, to have much success in teaching. Following their lead, more time must be spent on individualizing the rate of skill presentation, providing appropriate amounts of practice, and giving of immediate reinforcement.

Acceptance vs. Anxiety

Adults are rarely anxious about language acquisition. They delight in the child's progress and accept with equanimity that some children will learn faster than others; that individualized learning is part of the nature of language acquisition. At the same time, they are fully confident that the learning will in fact occur and that their baby will not grow up saying "all gone ball" when playing tennis. Children are not "blamed" if a language problem does develop. Parents believe the problem/lag is out of the child's control; that the child is the unfortunate object of the problem.

On the other hand, parents and children alike have high expectations about the child's ability to acquire and develop reading skills. If s/he does not progress according to school expectations everyone becomes anxious - parents, teachers, and ultimately the child. When a reading problem

occurs the child is often, directly and indirectly, held partially responsible by parents and teachers alike. S/he is too easy a scapegoat. The reading problem becomes the child, the child becomes the reading problem. We seldom say, "John is a problem language user" but we often say "John is a problem reader."

The teacher can act as the buffer who maintains calm and objectivity. She can present and deal with the child's problem in a realistic and positive manner, conveying confidence that she will work with the child and parents so that all will see a steady improvement in the skills. Some progress, albeit slow, is always possible.

Unconscious vs. Conscious Work

Although the language learning which takes place prior to school is at least as complex as reading acquisition, children do not think of it as trying. The pre-school child is often unaware of his language growth and the sum of his development is an unconscious product and, as such, is relatively free of negative emotional associations. Furthermore, youngsters seldom just talk; they talk as they eat, they talk as they play games, they talk as they walk and run.

On the other hand intensive teaching of reading may present some negative correlates to the child. Children know what is expected of them. Teachers and tests let the child know how well s/he is, or is not, doing. Many successful readers describe school and reading activities as "work" and speak of such activities in very adverse terms.

School is not a recreation center, and school work should not always be thought of as fun. However, many kindergarteners are barely five when they begin receiving reading instruction and six when they enter grade one. They may be intellectually ready to read, but they may not be emotionally or socially prepared to spend relatively long periods of time in a physically quiet "work" atmosphere. Formal instruction should be interspersed with relaxed or fun learning activities so that learning becomes more gamelike, lifelike, or interesting and less "work"like. The quiet periods of effort can be gradually and appropriately extended.

SUMMARY

Outstanding educational programs can be built only on principles and practices which are in accord with what we know about learning. Teacher application of these principles in the classroom during reading acquisition and development would, at the very least, ease the negative emotional effects suffered by a child who is a poor reader. At best, it could eliminate part or all of his/her reading problem.

Taken together, the lessons from the child's first learning environment imply that whole, meaning-focused, authentic, personally relevant, here-and-now, purposeful, relaxed reading instruction and teacher/parent attitudes can be correlated with success in reading acquisition and development. Teachers can feel confident that use of the guides from the hidden curriculum along with their own professional intuition and instructional knowledge will produce much success in developing children's reading competencies and confidences.

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