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READING AND RISK TAKING: THE TEACHER'S ROLE

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Among the most puzzling students for the reading teacher are the children who say they can't learn to read or don't want to learn to read. Despite excellent objectives and activities which the skilled reading teacher has planned, these children seem determined to avoid the reading task, and to deny the teacher the opportunity to help them learn.

From the child's point of view, such oppositional behavior may well be a survival skill. Most likely, repeated confrontations with expectations related to the reading task have met with failure. Parents, teachers and peers value reading, and people who read well are valued in the classroom. The child's self message may reflect the certainty that there is something wrong that causes failure at this very important task. The response is to avoid the situation which causes the exposure of this inadequacy, and the child says he/she does not want to learn to read.

Causes of Reading Failure

The causes of reading failures are many and varied, but the results tend to be similar; avoiding the reading task at all costs. Sometimes a child will use a direct approach such as announcing, "this is dumb," or "I'm not going to do this stuff." At other times a child may be more indirect and claim inability to find the page, doesn't have pencil or other materials, complains that eyes hurt, or engages in other off task activities. Whether the child is direct or indirect in the way he/she communicates feelings about reading, the message is the same; the intent to avoid the reading task.

In order to turn this situation around to where the child can and will engage in the reading task willingly, we need to take into account the amount of risk we are asking the child to take. Reading is risky; one makes incorrect responses, often does not know what is expected, what is correct or incorrect, and exposes these inadequacies to the view of peers and teachers. A successful remedial program must be structured in such a way that the risks the child is asked to take are those that can be managed. A gradual increase of risk taking should be built into the structure of the reading task until the child is able to deal successfully with the risks inherent in a traditional reading session.

Before considering structural components as they may be related to the amount of risk for the child, attention should be given to characteristics of the structure of a learning experience as well as to a hierarchy of risk taking.

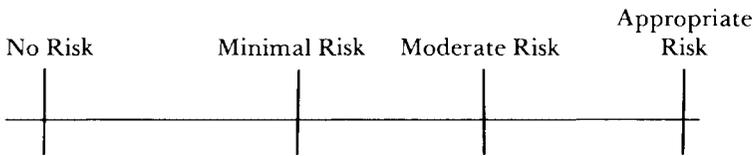
Characteristics of Structure

Structure is described by Hewett (1968) as the conditions under which the learning task is performed and contains five characteristics:

1. What -- the task the child is expected to perform.
2. When -- the time the task is to be performed as well as the length of time to be devoted to the task.
3. Where -- the location of the task performance.
4. How -- the process to be used to complete the task.
5. How Well -- the degree of accuracy and quality with which the task is to be completed.

Hierarchy of Risk Taking

Risk taking may be considered on a continuum from none to appropriate. At one end, the child takes no risks and the teacher does all the risking, while at the other end, the child takes those risks that are appropriate for the particular classroom and the teacher takes fewer. Check points on such a continuum may be labeled:



The teacher uses the variables available in the structure (what, where, when, how and how well) to design the reading experience for the child in a manner that reflects the child's ability to take risks. The design can and should be modified as the ability to risk increases.

Design Considerations

No Risk — Initially, the teacher should take full responsibility for the success of the reading session, the tasks should be structured in a manner that the child cannot fail. The teacher should consider:

1. Beginning with tasks that don't look like reading to the child (games, conversations, exploratory walks, etc.). Such activities permit manipulation of what, where, when and how.
2. Setting up situations where the child is "caught" reading (recognizing signs, labels, etc.) and demonstrating surprise and pleasure that the child can "read" (what and how well).
3. Reading to the child (what).
4. Rewarding the child for engaging in the activity (how and how well).
5. Planning the activity in such a manner that the child's responses are acceptable (how well).
6. Teacher taking responsibility for all materials (how).

Minimal Risk — Once the child has become comfortable with the teacher and the sessions, consideration can be given to increasing risks

for the child. The teacher continues to take the major responsibility for the success of the sessions. The structure of the sessions should now include the following:

1. Begin discrimination tasks. Because discrimination inherently implies the possibility of correct and incorrect responses, the teacher should begin with obvious differences and move slowly to fine discrimination (comparing o and x and moving to p and b) (what and how).
2. Consistency. As principles of phonics are introduced, expectations to principles should be avoided (what).
3. Corrections of all errors as they are made. The opportunity to correct each error as it is made helps the child begin to take a few risks. If there is advance awareness that mistakes can be erased and corrected with the ultimate product accurate, the child is more likely to venture into risk taking responses in reading (how and how well).
4. The process the child uses to arrive at a response is more important than the accuracy of the response (how and how well).
5. Continue reading to the child and encouraging participation as interest is indicated (what and how).
6. Teacher continues to take responsibility for materials (how).
7. Keep progress charts (what).

Moderate Risk—As the child increases the ability to take risks, the teacher's role gradually shifts to taking minor responsibility for the success of the sessions. The structure may now include:

1. Asking the child to work independently for increasing period of time (how, what and when).
2. Inviting the child to participate in evaluation of work (how and how well).
3. Reward the child for asking for and using help (how).
4. Invite the child to take responsibility for his/her own materials and gradually increase this requirement (what, how, when and where).
5. Continue to keep easily visible records of progress (what).

Appropriate Risk—The teacher continues to take minor responsibility for the success of the reading sessions by careful attention to the quality of the task expected of the child (what). In terms of risks, the structure should not be similar to that for other children in the class.

Summary

Consideration for the amount of risk taking a child can productively tolerate can have direct implications for designing the structure of a reading session in such a way that the student experiences success.

For those children who can tolerate little or no risk taking, the teacher takes the major responsibility for the success of the sessions and little or no attention is given to correctness or quality of response. At this level, an individual session with the child is probably necessary.

As children begin to experience success and are able to tolerate increased risks, the teacher shifts to taking less responsibility for the suc-

cess of the sessions and more emphasis is placed on the quality of the child's response. From the time children are able to take minimal risks, they can participate in small group reading sessions.

By gradually increasing the risks children are asked to take according to their ability to tolerate, they continue to experience success and no longer need to avoid the reading task.

Periods of backsliding should be expected. However, careful records will show both the teacher and the child that continued progress is being made overall.

As progress continues, avoidance of reading tasks should be replaced by acceptance, and, perhaps, even willingness and eagerness.

REFERENCES

- Hewett, Frank M. *The Emotionally Disturbed Child in the Classroom*. Boston: Allyn and Bacon, Inc., 1968, Chapter 10.