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PROFESSIONAL CONCERNS

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Professional Concerns is a regular column devoted to the interchange of ideas among those interested in reading instruction. Send your comments and contributions to the editor. If you have questions about reading that you wish to have answered, the editor will find respondents to answer them. Address correspondence to R. Baird Shuman, Department of English, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, Urbana, Illinois, 61801.

Patricia Cunningham's exposure to the teaching of reading at a variety of levels has been extensive. She has most recently served for three years as reading consultant in Alamance County, North Carolina. She left her position there quite recently to join the faculty of the Department of Education at Wake Forest University. She is well known through her contributions to professional journals.

In this contribution, Professor Cunningham suggests extremely practical solutions to very widespread elementary school reading programs. Her techniques have proved highly successful in the schools in which she has employed them. Her use of the structured language experience program is described in detail here, as is her use of the Imitative Method. As Professor Cunningham points out, the reading tactics which she suggested were most successful "where the teacher was willing to try something 'unorthodox' and carry out the new approach in a day-by-day systematic fashion." Perhaps the key to Professor Cunningham's success is that she is not willing to give up on any child who has a reading problem.

They Can ALL Learn To Read

They can ALL learn to read! "A naive assumption," you may surmise, "typical of those ivory-tower college professors who teach courses in reading rather than teach children to read!" This conclusion, however, was reached after much daily work in elementary classrooms and before returning to the halls of ivy. Actually, my suspicions that, given the will and the inspiration (not to mention perspiration), we could teach all children to read began way back when, thirteen years ago, I was a fledgling first-grade teacher. For three years, I taught first grade. Then, having obtained a Master's degree in reading, I taught fourth grade for two years and worked as a reading

specialist for a year. During all those years, I can't claim that I taught every child to read. I had neither the knowledge, the resources, nor the confidence to achieve that end. I can honestly say, however, that I believed every child could be taught to read and that their failure to do so had more to do with us and our approach to teaching them than it did with their inadequacies.

For the past three years, I worked as a reading director in a medium-sized, small-town/rural county in the Southeast. For the first two years, I bustled about inservicing, demonstrating, meeting, and befriending my 300 plus elementary teachers. I observed and assisted in numerous classrooms, tested and made recommendations for numerous children, talked with and encouraged numerous discouraged parents. During these two years, my bias that ALL children could, indeed, learn to read grew stronger and my craving to know if this was indeed truth became insatiable. I spent most of my third year satisfying this craving!

I began the year by meeting with various groups of teachers and letting them know that my personal challenge for the year was to teach all our children to read! I volunteered to come into their classrooms and work with those children who were not meeting with success in spite of the teacher's best efforts. I then followed up this offer with visits to individual classrooms, always asking the same question, "Do you have any children who just aren't making progress with their reading?" There were many who fit this criterion and, class by class, I began to work with these children. The strategies and materials I used were many and varied. Some were even unorthodox. A few examples!

In one first-grade class in our most rural and most disadvantaged school, more than half the children were not meeting with success in their basal reader instruction. The teacher knew the basal approach was not working with these children but didn't know what else to try. She had tried language experience in the past but had given up on this approach because the children's language was limited to words and phrases rather than sentences, and they couldn't remember their dictated stories from one day to the next. In that classroom, we put two groups of children into a "structured" language experience program. This approach (described in detail in an article in the Spring, 1979 issue of *Reading Horizons*) does not require that students talk in sentences and have good memories for dictated stories. Readiness skills are built into the lessons and all children can successfully begin the reading process.

Very briefly, the structured language experience lesson takes 25 minutes daily for one week. On Monday, oral language and vocabulary skills are built as students discuss pictures from a given category. On Tuesday, they dictate a story in which each sentence is exactly alike except for each child's chosen picture. (*I like to eat ham. I like to eat cake. I like to eat pizza.* Etc.) This dictated story is then used for sentence and word matching activities on Wednesday. On Thursday, the children work with a typed version of the same story, again matching sentences and words. On Friday, each child makes a book by cutting and pasting the typed sentences and appropriate

pictures. All children can read “their book” by Friday and proudly take the book home to read to anyone who will listen!

This strategy was used in numerous first-grade classes throughout the county. Each week the teacher selected a new topic and gathered appropriate pictures. The steps were strictly followed to insure success for each and every child. Many groups of children were able to succeed in initial basal reader instruction after six or seven weeks of structured language experience lessons. All first-grade teachers agreed that “Structured language experience was an approach that really worked with all their ‘not ready’ children!”

One day, I wandered into a fifth-grade class. The teacher had a group of large boys sitting in a circle with preprimers open. The teacher and the boys were valiantly struggling to somehow get through the lesson. “Debbie,” I said, as we talked in the hall, “what are those fifth graders doing in a preprimer?” “But you told us to give an IRI and put them on their level,” she responded. “It’s awful, but they can’t read above that level. In fact, they can hardly read at that level.” Debbie and I proceeded to the bookroom and found some old *Sailor Jack* books. The first book had 38 words. “I hate *Sailor Jack*,” protested Debbie. “I don’t care,” I responded. “It’s a hardback book. It’s certainly more interesting than those preprimers and we have to convince these kids they can learn to read. Do you know how many years these boys have sat with preprimers on their laps?”

Debbie agreed to forget her own likes and dislikes and give it a try. We taught all the words in the book with a Bingo-type game before giving the boys the book. When they had learned all the words, we introduced the characters, previewed the book and then paired them up to read the whole book! At first hesitantly, then jubilantly, those boys read the entire book in one sitting. Perhaps, the first book they ever read independently, cover to cover! As the year went on, Debbie continued this practice of teaching all the words as sight words before presenting the boys with a new *Sailor Jack* book. She also taught them to use context plus initial consonants and rhyming word families as decoding tools. By May, all five boys were reading comfortably and fluently in a *Sailor Jack* book which was a strong first-reader level. The boys, all labeled educably mentally retarded, were delighted but not as delighted as their teacher and I!

There are many other stories to be told about that year. There was the second-grade teacher who called me in February. She was a first-year teacher and having a most difficult time. She had four reading groups which were making some progress and Billy and Tony. Billy and Tony had been in the preprimers all year and were not progressing in their reading although their repertoire of disruptive tactics had certainly increased! I observed in their classroom for a short while and left, telling the teacher I would bring her some materials and ideas tomorrow. This was a stall tactic, on my part. I could think of lots of ways to get the boys moving in reading, but this teacher could not reasonably carry out anything else that required her time and energy during the school day.

After a sleepless night, I decided on the only approach I knew which

had any chance of success—the Imitative Method. (For a detailed description, see James W. Cunningham, “Providing Students with an Automatic Pilot for Decoding,” *Reading Teacher*, 1979.) That afternoon, I helped the teacher tape record one of the boys’ favorite “easy-to-read” books. She made the tape very personal, telling the boys when to turn the page and calling them by name. She recorded the book at a much slower pace than commercial tapes are recorded. The next day, she sat down with the boys, the tape recorder and two copies of the book. She explained that she had made a tape especially for them and that they were to listen to the tape until they could read the entire book to her. They could listen to the tape as many times as they liked during the day but they must listen to it at least twice each day. At first, the boys were not enthusiastic (To say the least!). They did, however, listen to the tape. After three days, they began to discover that they could read much of the book. After that, they spent many spare minutes listening to the tape. On their own, they turned off the tape before each page to see if they could read it first. After seven days, each boy could read the entire book and proudly read it to the kindergarten class. The teacher taped three more books and was then able to use commercially-taped books. By May, those two boys could read 19 easy-to-read books and were successfully reading in the primer of the basal series.

As the year drew to a close and the word got around that I really was serious about wanting to find the most stubborn cases and helping the teacher set up a program which worked, my phone rang off the hook. In all cases, where the teacher was willing to try something “unorthodox” and carried out the new approach in a day-by-day systematic fashion, we were able to find an approach which could get the students moving in reading. They did not all read on grade level and their beginning success in reading did not solve all discipline problems, but they all experienced success and began to see themselves as readers.

We did not teach every child in our county to read that year. I heard about one during bridge the other night—a third grader who had been in a second grade class in which the teacher had assured me “everyone was doing just fine!” We didn’t teach him to read, but we could have!