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## PROFESSIONAL CONCERNS:

*R. Baird Shuman*, EDITOR

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# REMEDIAL PROGRAMS: SOME STRATEGIES FOR CREATING A SUPPORTIVE LEARNING ENVIRONMENT

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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.*

Barbara Fox is Assistant Professor of Education at North Carolina State University, Raleigh, North Carolina, where she specializes in Reading Instruction. In the contribution at hand, Professor Fox considers some of the affective factors which must be taken into consideration by anyone who works with students who have reading disabilities. She focuses on the teacher's role in creating learning environments which are conducive to the highest level of learning. She stresses the need for teachers to convey positive expectations to the students with whom they are working, to encourage the students' own perception of their success, and to work toward bringing about maximal individual achievement in them.

### Remedial Programs: Some Strategies for Creating a Supportive Learning Environment

Planning and implementing effective remedial reading programs is a complex and often frustrating task. Sound instructional programs can fail to produce significant reading improvement, leaving teachers and students dissatisfied. When remedial programs are designed to meet individual needs, it is assumed that increased reading achievement will result. Programs are designed to meet individual needs by carefully identifying student deficiencies and describing levels of performance expected to result from instruction. Student deficiencies and anticipated performance are considered from a cognitive and affective point of view. The cognitive domain includes abilities necessary for mastering reading as an intellectual task, while the affective domain includes student attitudes and feelings.

This plan appears to be a sound one, at least insofar as student behavior is concerned.

However, successful remedial programs must also consider the contribution and performance of the teachers. The teacher's role can be viewed from a cognitive and affective perspective similar to that applied to the student. Selecting instructional materials and applying instructional strategies are examples of teacher performance which can be associated with the cognitive domain. From the perspective of teacher competence, the acquisition of knowledge and the mastery of teaching skills form the basis for the application of good instructional principles. Methods textbooks and much of the professional literature are devoted to enhancing this type of teacher performance.

But like the instructional program for the student, a successful remedial program must also include the teacher's contribution in the affective domain. It is this dimension, the teacher's influence on the student's emotional response to instruction, that is so often ignored or dealt with in a random manner. The description of many remedial readers as characterized by emotional problems related to learning to read will come as no surprise to teachers. Having previously experienced failure, a student's self-esteem as a reader is likely to be low. From the point of view of the student, learning to read is a potentially threatening experience which may be more negative than positive. It stands to reason that a student's negative emotional response to learning to read can confound the successful application of sound instructional strategies.

One of the teacher's major responsibilities is to provide an affective environment which will be supportive, and therefore contribute to making learning to read a positive experience. Unlike behavior associated with the cognitive domain, changes in student attitudes and feelings toward reading are infrequently measured by standardized tests. Moreover, strategies used to improve attitudes and feelings are not stressed in the professional literature. Nevertheless, teacher expectations for student achievement, student perceptions of success, and comparisons of achievement among students are aspects of the learning environment to which the remedial reader is particularly sensitive. To create a supportive learning environment, the teacher must design the remedial program using strategies which deal effectively with these three affective areas.

#### *Convey Positive Expectations*

1. Convey to each student positive expectations for reading achievement. If the teacher views the student as a capable learner, then the student is more likely to adopt this orientation. Expectations should, of course, be realistic. Demonstrate positive attitudes by telling each student that reading achievement can and will improve. Positive expectations conveyed from teacher to student have the potential to improve student self-esteem and to contribute to a self-fulfilling prophecy oriented toward success.

2. Value the contributions of each student accepting with equal pleasure the accomplishments of the most and the least able readers.

Encourage participation by students of all ability levels and distribute any social or tangible rewards in an equitable manner.

#### *Encourage Student Perceptions of Success*

1. Plan reading activities which ensure that the student will be successful. One means to accomplish this is to select instructional materials which teach needed skills but are written on the student's independent level. If in doubt about an appropriate level of difficulty, select the easier material. Do not present more difficult materials until the student has developed some self-confidence in reading.

2. Make sure that success is recognized. For success to affect learning positively, each student must appreciate personal accomplishments. Demonstrate success by charting individual progress toward the attainment of instructional goals. In addition, make sure each student's success is known by other students in the school setting.

3. Set goals which can be met on a short-term, as well as a long-term basis. Achieving short-term objectives can provide a sense of accomplishment, and also help the student begin to recognize personal learning potential. Goals can be met in as short a time span as a single lesson or as long a span as a week or two. The important thing is to establish different time spans relative to individual student feelings and needs.

4. Increase praise and decrease criticism. A common miscalculation is to *over-correct* student reading performance. While the student needs knowledge of correct and incorrect performance, over-correction acts as a negative teacher comment on reading ability and undermines the student's sense of accomplishment. Praise student performance which is deserved, especially the achievement of short-term objectives.

#### *Maximize Individual Achievement*

1. Emphasize individual accomplishments rather than differences among students or comparisons with the group. Just as a criterion-referenced test compares a student with his/her own mastery of skills, the teacher should use each student's mastery at the beginning of instruction as a basis for comparison.

2. Use flexible grouping patterns which ensure that the lowest functioning students are not always grouped together. Group students along a variety of dimensions, such as interest, special assignments, etc.

3. When reading activities include students with a wide achievement range, make sure these activities are not competitive. Competitive activities frequently penalize the poorest readers thereby reinforcing negative attitudes toward reading. Use competition among students only when everyone has a reasonable chance of succeeding.

Without carefully planning the use of strategies associated with the affective domain, remedial programs may fail to result in significant achievement because of negative student attitudes and feelings. The fact that strategies associated with the affective domain are not emphasized in the professional literature does not prove that this dimension is unimportant. Student attitudes and feelings toward learning to read are critical variables in the successful completion of any remedial plan.