

7-1-1980

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Recommended Citation

Nelson, D., & Sternberg, L. (1980). Reading Instruction for the Handicapped Child: Questions and Answers. *Reading Horizons*, 20 (4). Retrieved from https://scholarworks.wmich.edu/reading_horizons/vol20/iss4/2

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READING INSTRUCTION FOR THE HANDICAPPED CHILD: QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS

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The concern of parents and teachers that some children have needs significantly different from the majority of other students has brought about educational opportunities which provide special learning environments and unique teaching procedures. From this educational endeavor, programs entitled "special education" have been established for the purpose of helping handicapped children develop their abilities to a maximum. It is important that the teacher of reading be aware of several essential principles regarding special education. First, teachers often become frustrated because the screening process for special education is often such a time-consuming procedure. Some children may remain in a regular classroom for almost the entire year while diagnosticians and other specialists test and prescribe for their particular learning needs. Secondly, many children are classified as "borderline handicapped" and, as a result, may not have the opportunity to participate in special education programs. In such cases the regular classroom teacher must retain the primary responsibility for meeting the "special needs" of some students.

1. *Why has there been a surge of interest in and concern for the handicapped?*

In recent years a greater awareness of the needs of special students has emerged. Even with the more enlightened attitude, it is estimated that only slightly more than one-half of the handicapped students are being provided the kind of educational program they need, either in special or regular classes or schools. During the past decade, court decisions and state laws have consistently determined that handicapped children are to be afforded the same educational rights as other students. As a result, handicapped learners are entitled to instruction according to their needs, whether in special or regular classes, or both; schools must be changed to accommodate the handicapped. Although local and regional awareness has been augmented by state legislation, it was not until quite recently that the full ramifications of such awareness were realized. The passage of "The Education for All Handicapped

Children Act,” (Public Law 94-142) gave full weight to the need for educational equality for all children.

2. *What are some of the key components of P. L. 94-142?*

Its essential features are similar to the requirements that some state courts and legislatures had previously set forth in order to ensure that each handicapped child would receive a free appropriate public education. Public Law 94-142 simply brought some badly-needed uniformity and consistency to disparate state laws. In Public Law 94-142, the term “free” means the government or school cannot charge parents for the expense of special education. A combination of local, state, and federal funding must provide the necessary support for the handicapped child’s education. “Appropriate” refers to the requirement that schools are now obligated to provide all handicapped children an opportunity to achieve at their level of potential in the “least restrictive environment.” For some handicapped children, this might merely mean short-term integration with other students for non-academic work such as physical education. On the other hand it might mean, for some handicapped students, assignment to a regular classroom with appropriate special instruction as needed.

3. *Are the terms “least restrictive alternative” and “mainstreaming” the same?*

Mainstreaming means moving students from their segregated status in special education classes to the mainstream of regular classrooms where they are integrated with their peers. Least restrictive alternative describes an individual placement. That is, one child’s least restrictive alternative might be a self-contained special education class; another’s, a regular education class. Therefore, mainstreaming is merely one step in the continuum of the term least restrictive alternative.

4. *Should educational programs be based upon labels indicating a handicapping condition?*

The Education for Handicapped Children Act reflects a general movement toward development of programs designed to meet each child’s unique educational needs. When needs are adequately met, the handicapped child has a chance to become all that he or she is capable of becoming. Under such a plan, grouping on the basis of a disability is no longer advocated. Writers and supporters of the law make the point that while there are many classifications and types of handicaps, children, both with and without disabilities, are more alike than different. As a matter of fact, to label and precisely classify every disability has a way of preventing a child’s full and total integration with non-handicapped peers. Although the federal and state laws tend to define handicapped children by some diagnostic or handicapping label, this requirement is basically performed to count students for formula funding. Realistically, this is an inefficient procedure because many handicapped pupils of differing labels exhibit the same learning or behavioral problems.

5. *If labels should not be used for programming what is a better way?*

A more efficient measure of special educational needs are the terms “high-incidence,” “low-incidence,” and “sensory-impaired/physically handicapped.” For example, mild to moderately mentally handicapped, language or learning disabled, and behaviorally disordered children manifest similar school related behaviors. Such children are classified as high-incidence handicapped because they represent the largest percentage of handicapping conditions. High-incidence handicapped children are those who have less severe learning problems and are those who will be most easily afforded the mainstreaming option. The movement of high-incidence handicapped children into regular classrooms is likely to be accelerated.

The federal law establishes priorities for special educational services to handicapped students not currently being served by existing programs and to handicapped pupils with severe learning impairment. As a result, most of the “priority” children would fall under the second category, low-incidence handicapped—severely or profoundly mentally handicapped, or emotionally disturbed. Low-incidence handicapped children are relatively few in number but are clustered because of the severity of their disability. The major difference between the high and low incidence groups, then, is in degree of severity of learning and/or behavioral problems. Low-incidence children will most likely *not* be afforded the total mainstreaming options in their education, and will probably remain in full or part-time self-contained special education units or special education classrooms as their least restrictive alternative.

A third category of handicapped children are classified as sensory-impaired/physically handicapped. Such children include those with auditory, visual or motor handicaps. The needs of sensory-impaired/physically handicapped children are much more obvious than those of high-incidence children. Their impairments typically involve input problems rather than learning or behavioral problems. As a result, program options and environment modifications are possible within the regular classroom, and many of these children will be able to function in the mainstream.

6. *What are the major curricular differences between handicapped and non-handicapped learners?*

It is the consensus of professional educators that there are really no content differences between a curriculum for the handicapped and a curriculum for the non-handicapped child. The difference between educational programs for special and non-handicapped children is essentially a matter of applying one or more of the following instructional strategies:

- modifying the way in which the content is presented.
- modifying the way in which a child is asked to respond to the content.

- modifying the position where the child may fall within the content sequence.

7. *How would a reading teacher deal with each of these program modifications?*

In reference to the first two strategies mentioned above, Cawley, Fitzmaurice, Goodstein, Lepore, Sedlak, and Althaus (1976) developed a comprehensive and systematic plan for incorporating teacher input and learner output in mathematics instruction. Its utility, however, is apparent for the reading teacher. Based on their model, the teacher of reading can present material in one of four ways to the learner: (1) by gesturing or constructing something; (2) by presenting pictures; (3) by stating words; or (4) by writing words. Likewise, the learner can respond to material in one of four ways: (1) by gesturing or constructing; (2) by identifying pictures or objects given choices; (3) by stating words; (4) or by writing or reading words. Each teacher input can be used with each learner output thereby producing sixteen possible instructional interactions *for any reading objective*. If a handicapped child cannot acquire information in one interaction, the teacher of reading has multiple options to fall back upon.

In reading, a preliminary content might be auditory synthesis and the corresponding objective for the child stated, "The learner will synthesize auditorily presented sounds." In this case, the teacher behavior is fixed (stating sounds). However, the teacher might ask the child to point to the picture that represents the synthesis of the sounds (identifying pictures); to demonstrate the sign that represents the synthesis of sounds (gesturing); to say the word that represents the word that represents the synthesis (stating); or to write or read the word that represents the synthesis (writing or reading). Which interaction(s) he or she chooses obviously depends on the individual child's strengths and weaknesses.

A higher level reading skill might be comprehension and the corresponding objective for the child states, "The learner will answer vocabulary type questions." Here, the teacher behavior is not fixed. Typically, the teacher orally reads a passage to the youngster (stating), or presents a written passage (writing). The learner could respond by gesturing (signing a word that means the same as another in the passage); by identifying (pointing to a picture that corresponds to the meaning or structure of a vocabulary word); by stating (saying a word that starts like or rhymes with another vocabulary word); or by writing/reading (writing or reading a word that is similar in structure to another vocabulary word). Again, the choice of effective reading interaction(s) is based upon the child's present skill.

In reference to the third instructional strategy, it is imperative that the reading teacher relate the developmental sequence of language with the level at which the handicapped child can perform within that sequence. If the handicapped learner cannot meet curriculum expectations at one level, the teacher *must* place the child at a different position

within that content sequence. It is probable that the teacher will also have to adapt content presentation and expected learner response once the appropriate level is determined.

A sound reading program is based upon a defined content sequence. It is possible that the handicapped child will require individual placement and advancement on the reading continuum. For example, the word attack skill of pronouncing initial consonant sounds is preceded by a recognition of the alphabet. For all children, the developmental skill of “visual literacy” may precede instruction in phonetic analysis. Visual literacy refers to a child’s capacity to decode pictures and encode the results; the ability to orally place coherent thoughts into words, words into sentences, and sentences into larger units (Stewig, 1978). In other words, teachers need to help children talk about what they see in the visual stimuli of everyday life before asking them to break the language into segmented units. Obviously, the reading teacher must become keenly aware of a valid content sequence so that appropriate placement within and effective instruction from the sequence will take place.

8. *What other general instructional practices are advocated for use with the handicapped learner?*

- Develop short-term instructional goals to meet the special needs of the handicapped child.
- Prepare realistic and specific objectives that comply with the program requirements of the handicapped child.
- Tell the child exactly what is expected to successfully complete a particular learning objective.
- Teach content information in smaller, meaningful units to the handicapped child.
- Provide meaningful opportunities for the student with special needs to receive recognition for accomplishments.
- Encourage the handicapped child to compete with self rather than peers.
- Promote the wide use of different kinds and special types of reading material.
- Create an organized and systematic, instructional plan that includes an appropriate evaluation procedure.
- Remain patient and understanding in dealing with the behavioral aspects of special students.
- Make non-handicapped children sensitive to their role in maintaining classroom stability for the child with special needs.

Effective teachers have always attempted to meet the unique and individual needs of diverse learners. Recent legislation and current school policy makes it inevitable that the once isolated handicapped child will now become part of the regular classroom environment. As a result, teachers of reading are likely to become partners with those in special educational programs. The difficult task of maximizing learning potential for the handicapped child may be realized through a greater

awareness of handicapping conditions, an increased understanding of program modification, and the realization that successful reading instruction continues to be based on sound teaching practices.

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(Continued from Guest Editorial)

Research studies indicate that when boys are exposed to nontraditional role models in texts, their attitudes can be positively affected without a loss of reading interest or comprehension. Well written and moving stories such as "Mushy Eggs,"² about an 8-year-old boy who comes to understand why people often cry at ship docks and who cries himself because his babysitter is leaving on the ship of her homeland, will be enjoyed by both boys and girls.

At present males are not being depicted in a full range of roles in reading texts. As long as individuals of either sex are expected to adhere to a limited number of occupational roles, personality traits, or types of activities, sexism will continue. Educators have an opportunity to address this inequity through the use of reading materials which show expanded roles for males as well as females. Publishers need to adhere to their guidelines to produce sex fair materials, and educators should insist that schools buy such texts. All children will ultimately benefit.

²Allyn and Bacon, *Pathfinder* (Boston: Allyn & Bacon, Inc., 1978), Level B.