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## New Life for a Reading Program

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# NEW LIFE FOR A READING PROGRAM

*Alice Pietryka & Norma Searle*

TEKONSHA COMMUNITY SCHOOLS

Many early elementary classroom teachers have difficulty finding reading material that will supplement a basal reader. Because the thoughts and actions of young children often revolve around their own personal interests and experiences, classroom teachers are bombarded by students anxious to relate what to them are momentous happenings. Children are vitally concerned with themselves; why not take advantage of this enthusiasm and build it into a learning experience? Why not have your children write their own stories?

The process of writing stories can begin in kindergarten. It would be effective for the kindergarten teacher to accumulate a collection of pictures which would be of particular interest to children in her classroom. For example, pictures of animals, forms, race cars, airplanes, bodies of water, slums, industrial areas, or mountainous scenes could be included. To involve the child further, the teacher may suggest that each child bring a picture from a newspaper, magazine, children's book or comic book which he likes. When each child has either chosen or supplied himself with a picture, the exciting process of composing a sentence about it can begin. The teacher must realize that this first sentence will reflect the home background and oral experiences of the child and may be quite "crude" at first. The following is a suggested procedure by which to elicit these first sentences:

1. The teacher discusses each child's picture with him.
2. The child and the teacher compose a sentence with which the *child* is happy.
3. The teacher carefully prints the sentence, reading it slowly as she writes.
4. The child and the teacher read the sentence together.
5. The child reads the sentence aloud to the teacher.

As the teacher is working with other children, the child can paste his picture and sentence on a colorful piece of construction paper. In developing this program further, the class could compose a story about a picture, have the teacher perform the mechanics of writing it, and then all could "read" the resulting composition.

Typically, the first grade is considered the grade level at which the child learns to read. The child begins first grade expecting to learn to read. Too often he leaves disappointed. To fulfill the child's desire

to read the first day of school, the basic process as used in kindergarten can be repeated. The child goes home feeling successful and eagerly anticipating a return to school. One of the teacher's main goals—in-stilling interest in reading—has been achieved! It is now the teacher's job to keep the program meaningful, enjoyable, and exciting. It is the teacher, not the system or the materials furnished, that is the key to a successful reading program (2).

After several experiences of writing one sentence stories, the child may progress to two and three sentence stories. Each child must be treated as an individual, because some children may need further teacher supervision while other children may go on by themselves. The teacher must give up her role as director of activities and assume a lesser supportive role; she is present in the room if the child needs her. Some children may exhibit a large amount of independence and write several sentences, also attempting spelling on their own. Other children may desire and need an interview process to help them verbalize their thoughts.

This program is most beneficial for first graders, but it can be broadened to include intermediate grade children. For example, a one-to-one grouping situation can be developed, involving the cooperation of two teachers, such as a first grade and fifth grade teacher. Just how would older students be involved in this program? The fifth grader, sitting with the first grader as he writes his story, is there to help the first grader transfer his mental thoughts into printed words. The older student may question the younger concerning his general topic, but he should be careful not to become domineering. The general procedure might be:

1. What would you like to write a story about?
2. After the first grader has chosen a general topic, the fifth grader may continue his questioning until the first grader has verbalized a complete thought.
3. The fifth grader may then encourage the first grader to put the thought on paper.
4. The first grader is encouraged to spell for himself, but he may have at his disposal a basal reader or a picture dictionary to find words that he wishes to spell correctly. If he cannot find a word in either of these two sources and he is determined to spell the word correctly, the fifth grader can spell it for him. (Dictionaries can be supplied for the fifth graders to use.)

It is evident that this process is highly beneficial to the first graders, but the participating fifth grader can also profit. A low achieving

fifth grader may experience feelings of success, self-worth, and pride by having helped a first grader write a story. He may reflect a renewed interest in his own academic pursuits. In this situation, low, average, and high achieving fifth graders participate in an activity on an equal basis. The grouping may vary with each session, but increased involvement is achieved when the fifth grader stays paired with the same first grader for an extended period of time. The older child sees, as each session is completed, growth and progress in "his" first grader.

The first grader, too, feels involvement with "his" fifth grader. This is very evident when a situation arises which prevents a pair from meeting. The younger child seems less eager and often inquires, "When will we have the buddy system again?" Open expressions of interest such as this are also rewarding to the teachers.

After the child writes his story, he may illustrate it, include his original picture, and make a cover for his own "book." A follow-up and reinforcing activity involves the use of the tape recorder with the author reading his own story. He is thrilled at hearing himself, and has proof that he *can* read.

In *Teacher*, Sylvia Ashton-Warner discussed having a child choose the words he wishes to read and having teacher print the word on a card which is given to the child. The concept involved is that a child will learn to read a word that he has expressed a desire to learn (1). The "buddy system" extends this concept by having the child express several words to form sentences. In most cases success is high because they are "his" words—an extension of himself. After writing and reading his own book, he shows more interest and skill in reading his basal reader.

Not only is a child expanding his ability to read by writing stories, he also becomes very aware of and makes use of sentence structure, punctuation, and capitalization. The child also uses phonic skills when he sounds out a word he wants to write. These skills do not have to be taught separately, but may be incorporated into one integrated learning experience.

The key to the success of the program is based upon the enthusiasm, approval, and words of praise the teacher gives to each child's efforts!

#### REFERENCES

1. Ashton-Warner, Sylvia, *Teacher*. New York: Simon and Schuster, 1963.
2. Stauffer, Russell G., "You Are the Key to Your Reading Program," *Instructor* (March, 1971), 80:43.