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# GREEN LUMBER, AN INTRODUCTION TO FAILURE

*John Brewster*

As a comparative newcomer to the study of the problems of reading instruction, I have that frustratingly inadequate feeling that goes along with having many, many questions and very few answers. Many of my questions are concerned with "why." Why is it that this child with adequate mental capacity, physical health, experiential background and stable environment fails to learn to read? I'm aware, of course, that many answers are available in the volumes and volumes of current literature, but I haven't dug them all out for evaluation. Somehow, I expect I'll be a little late in getting around to them all. And so far now, my answers will be confined primarily to observations.

The first "observation" concerns a farmer I once knew. Let me tell you the story as I have learned to relate it.

Once upon a time there lived a farmer who desired to build a house. Being a very frugal man he took his chain-saw and tractor to the forest on his farm to cut trees for the lumber. Now this man selected only the very soundest and straightest of trees because he realized the value of quality material. After the logs had been cut and the limbs removed, this very methodical farmer took his logs to a saw mill to have them sawed into lumber. When the lumber had been cut and planed, he began to build his house. Being a very precise farmer he followed his plans without deviation. When he was finished, he had a very beautiful house. It was square and plumb and it shone with its coats of clean, glossy paint. But after a few months a door began to stick and then a window and in a short time not one of the doors and none of the windows would work and even the paint began to peel.

Now this very frugal, methodical and precise farmer was also very ambitious and followed a carefully planned schedule, for it was only in this way that he could accomplish all of his work. When, after the lumber had been cut, he found himself to be behind in his schedule, he reasoned that the lumber would not require the time-consuming curing process. As he saw it, if he built the house correctly and was careful to do a good job of nailing and bracing, there could be little or no warping. But, the proof of his judgment is in the house. As the green lumber dried and aged, it turned and twisted, pulling nails and screws and warped what might have been a sound structure.

Our poor farmer, though wholeheartedly trying to do the very

best job, was nevertheless guilty of an error in judgement. The pressure of the schedule was allowed to take precedence even though he knew of the dangers of using green lumber. Do teachers, like the farmer, sometimes try to build with green lumber in order to meet a schedule?

The other illustration I have to make may also serve to illustrate this point. It has to do with a boy named Bill. Bill is one of those children who cause me to ask "why."

Bill seems to adjust in my remedial room quite readily. He is not surprised to find himself there. I can imagine him saying to himself, "What's all this fuss about remedial reading? You're gonna teach *me* to read? Fine! Go ahead." And away he goes to sharpen a pencil, get a drink or tease a neighbor; anything to put off this threat of a new and inevitable failure.

Bill is a failure in reading. He knows it and he figures everyone else does too, but he finds ways of compensating. He doesn't let on that grades mean anything to him anymore. He laughs at D's and E's when he's with the other kids. He has found out about oral reading too. He thinks, "The thing to do is not to stop if you don't know a word, put something in there just as if you knew what it was. Don't stop and try to figure the thing out. They'll know you don't know. Just keep going and get it over. Then no one will bother you again for a week or so."

Bill is in the second semester of the fifth grade, ten years and three months old, of high average mental capacity. His independent reading level is about 1.5; his instructional level, 2.5 and his capacity level, 5.0. In interviews he is quiet, polite and wants very much to please. His father is a factory worker and he and Bill hunt and fish together. Mother is a homemaker, and apparently a very good one. Bill is well dressed, well fed and well thought of by both parents. Mother and Dad have a real respect for education and teachers. They try "not to interfere" with the teachers' work. They are sure the teacher "will do the right thing for Bill."

In the fourth grade there were lots of interesting science projects, but Bill didn't get far with them because most of them depended upon independent reading of resource material and there just wasn't anything worth reading at his reading level. He felt "pretty bad about that," he said.

When we confer with his other teachers we hear that, "He was a good boy, but he just fooled his time away," or "He could have learned to read, he's just a lazy boy," or "He just wouldn't learn

the vowel sounds." In the first grade his teacher commented, "He had trouble with his readiness work, but we had already been on readiness for six weeks. We couldn't stay there forever, so during the seventh week we started reading. He didn't want to read then and I don't think he ever will."

His kindergarten teacher told Bill's parents, "Bill is a little immature. He depends too much upon me. His drawings indicate poor eye-hand coordination. He is never able to finish his readiness work." When Bill's mother asked if maybe he should stay another year in kindergarten the teacher advised not, since she felt Bill would have "outgrown his problem" by next fall.

In a diagnosis of Bill's oral reading, we find not a pattern of strengths and weaknesses, but a confusion of error types from one day to another. He makes practically all of the errors. He clips off the ends or the beginnings of words; word attack skills are practically nonexistent; he continually makes wild guesses at words and repeats himself constantly. Some days he will omit words, some days he doesn't. He confuses b and d and b and p. Consonant blends confuse him. For all of his errors, his comprehension appears to be quite good. He has become an expert at analyzing illustrations and story plots from the scanty information he gets from his reading.

Bill, like all too many boys, started school with two strikes against him. Strike number one was his age when he started kindergarten. He was four years and eleven months. Bill was not only several months in chronological age behind the other boys but add to this the fact that boys, in general, tend at age five to be twelve months behind girls in biological development and we see that Bill is starting his long career in school almost a year and a half inferior in development to at least fifty per cent of the class. If that isn't bad enough, Bill, though alert and interested in the world about him, is rather dependent upon mother and in a kindergarten class of thirty, he is fearful and insecure. Strike two!

It would be hard to determine precisely when strike three was called. It may have been before Bill left kindergarten. But, I think perhaps about seven weeks after he began first grade, the pitcher let the ball fly and sometime later Bill, the batter, and his own most critical umpire, called strike three. It was all too hard for him while it seemed so easy for others. Bill had been introduced to failure and he accepted it as his way. Perhaps the carpenter was trying to build a workable structure from green lumber.