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# THE RECURRING ANNUAL PROBLEM

*Dorothy Towner*

The majestic strains of Elgar's "Pomp and Circumstance" being played on a rented organ from the stage of the beautiful new high school floated down the school halls. The joy and happiness of the girls and boys busily stepping into their earned places in the graduation procession were sobered only by the dignity of the blue caps and gowns to which they were feverishly giving last minute adjustment.

Robert, his face serenely triumphant, stepped into ninety-third place in the class of 200. "A MIRACLE," I thought, as the procession swayed in perfect, practiced rhythm down the center aisle of the school auditorium to the platform for the final ceremony which was to put a period (or exclamation point) after their high school careers, and would give them the right to answer "yes" to the ever-recurring question, "Did you finish high school?"

But who is Robert?

The next day, before locking my permanent record file for the summer, I reread Robert's folder to refresh my memory and to polish up my reasons for thinking this was a miracle. The following is what I read from a "running report" written following Robert's first year in the advanced special class in the large high school.

As certain as September, there appears on my classroom horizon each fall a pupil who has, among other problems, a hieroglyphic limp, no self-confidence, and very low self-esteem. Observed behavior, interest, and performance of this student does not 'true up' with measured achievement, or accumulated entries made in the 'job sheet' accompanying him. Such a student is always a challenge to sincere and competent members of the teaching profession, but equally puzzling. This year it was Robert.

His face was uncommunicative. He was silent and appeared frightened, especially when given books. Yet there was purpose and hopefulness in his face as he searchingly watched my face for a clue to my evaluation of him.

He was unusually well behaved and correctly dressed. He had none of the compensatory symptoms so often found in a pupil of this type in our urban school systems. I refer to eccentric appearance such as D.A. hair cuts, black leather jackets, gang boots, or Puerto Rican fence climbers. In other words, he had not supplemented his own deficiencies as a whole individual by becoming a fraction of a gang.

Robert was 16 years old. He had a brother one year older. He had a brother one year younger, and a sister two years younger. He had been transferred from a private school system in 1957 to a special class in a public grade school. The first entry in the record accompanying him is dated June, 1958; Robert was then 11—5 years of age. It lists as “helpful information”:

1. Not certain of himself
2. Needs reassurance
3. Day dreamer
4. Can count and write numbers up to 100
5. He has read “Ride Away,” “All in a Day,” and “Up the Street and Down” to page 100.

His scores on the California Achievement Test, Primary Form, are:

Reading vocabulary	2.0
Reading comprehension	2.2
Mechanics of English	2.5
Spelling	3.5

Following a conference, Robert’s mother volunteered to write her version of the history of Robert’s reading problem. She writes: “During 1952, I tried to help him read, but lost patience when he would know the more difficult words but didn’t know the simple ones. Anyway, I didn’t give him the help he needed, as I was quite busy with the younger sister who had a serious heart condition.”

The teacher in the special class helped him, but left to be married. The following year he had another teacher. I talked to her about Robert’s work, but she was hazy.

Robert’s scores on the California Achievement Test, Primary battery, at the end of the year were:

Reading vocabulary	3.7
Reading comprehension	3.5
Mechanics of English	3.4
Spelling	1.0

The mother’s history continues: “He was moved to another school—a Junior High School special class because of his age. He had to ride twenty-two blocks on his bike every day to get to school.” Again quoting from his accumulated record we found at the end of the year his scores on the California Achievement Lower Primary Test were:

Reading vocabulary	3.9
Reading comprehension	4.0

Mechanics of English	1.9
Spelling	3.9

Reading again from the mother's account: "I was informed that Robert thought he knew more than he actually did, and always wanted to read books way beyond what his scores on the test would indicate he was ready to read. Before the end of the second year at this junior high school, he was transferred to another school so he could ride on the bus." His California Achievement Test scores, Elementary Battery, that year were:

Reading vocabulary	3.9
Reading comprehension	4.0
Mechanics of English	1.9
Spelling	4.9

It is evident that his records were to be of little assistance, other than to spur greater effort to make up for past failures. Robert was squeezed in between two brothers and had a sister with a heart condition; a family who thought he should know little words before he knew the big ones; school personnel who felt his "scores" should be higher before he could read books he found interesting and wanted to read.

Now at 16, Robert, along with other members of the advanced special class, was issued all 9th grade books. This is the custom in the class no matter what the "earned" achievement score is. It has always produced immediate attention and appreciation. It is a high motivating factor to get students with reading problems to start anew—to try harder, and, most important, to stretch themselves. Our English books, or readers, were brand new. "Just for us?" the pupils asked. (All too often our books had been discards from the "regular" grades.) These had not been opened before. The books were beautiful, and after looking them over, Kipling's "Rikki Tikki Tavi" was chosen for the first story to be read. They were curious about the illustrations and from their comments and observations, it was felt each one could have a success experience from this story. After adequate motivation, the story was read to them until they were all "with it"—highly excited and filled with anticipation of what was to come. Some offered to read—others offered information about situations in the story. We had established a climate for learning.

They seemed to identify themselves with the plucky little mongoose in the story, who showed such courage in the face of danger. They revelled in his outsmarting the predatory culprit in the story. Their

excitement and anticipation were enough to carry them over the difficult places so that words weren't "stumbling-block" ends in themselves, but were symbols that were a means to understanding a delightful story.

Robert listened. Frequently he looked in the front of his book, observed, but did not offer to take part. Now and then suggestions of smiles played across his face, and a new light came into his eyes, indicating he was silently joining the group.

After school, Robert "hung around" until the other pupils had gone. He asked, "Is this really a high school book?" Then he wanted to know if he could take the book home. During the following days, he remained after school each day and here began a one-to-one relationship which was to assist him in achieving a positive self-concept, and ready him to go adventuring into the realms of the gold of learning alone.

It has been said, "If you want to get a measure of a man or child, take a snapshot of what he is dreaming about, brooding over, and longing for way down inside." So we visited. He asked about the books in the bookcases. Would he be allowed to read them and take them home? "Is it all right for me to read this, even though my score is not beyond third grade level?" "Will I have homework?" Very informally, each question was phrased in a positive statement and written on the chalkboard, such as: "There are many books of all levels of reading in our classroom bookcases. They are there for me to read. I may take any of them home. I am trusted with these books. I may read any book that interests me, no matter what grade level. I will have as much homework as I can do."

This "new to him" permissive atmosphere toward trying anything that interested him developed a feeling of joyous confidence and released new energy for positive achievement. We had found his understanding level and his "I'd like to" level. The dialogue continued each day after school as the teacher's desk was being "straightened up," and then, one day, after the last maple leaves had raced across the school yard and nestled against the sub-floor classroom window, the wind came to our assistance, gave an attention-getting moan and hurled some early snowflakes against the window.

"Oh, I like winter," said Robert, and this was hurriedly written along with the following conversation on the chalkboard.

"There is a pond in the park near my home where I skate every day after school."

“It is fun to turn the sharp corners and hear the scraping sound my skates make on the ice.”

“The ice sparkling in the sunlight is pretty too.”

“It makes me feel good when the sharp cold wind blows on my face.”

Here were clues, snapshot aids, to delight any teacher! He was sensitive to beauty and to sound. We could muster the total child to learn—to appeal to all of his senses at once; to intercept sight with sound; to use kinesthetic sense and visual imagery. “Would he like to hear one of the teacher’s favorite poems about Winter?” We could play it on our record player and then he could read it.

After listening to Robert Frost’s recording several times and following it in a book, he read, without hesitation:

Whose woods these are I think I know  
 His house is in the village though  
 He will not see me stopping here  
 To watch his woods fill up with snow.  
 My little horse must think it queer  
 To stop without a farmhouse near  
 Between the woods and frozen lake  
 The darkest evening of the year.  
 He gives his harness bells a shake  
 To ask if there is some mistake  
 The only other sounds the sweep  
 Of easy wind and downy flake.  
 The woods are lovely, dark and deep  
 But I have promises to keep  
 And miles to go before I sleep  
 And miles to go before I sleep.

Robert asked if the class could hear the recording and “study the poem.” He was asked to help plan the lessons. Pictures of snowy woods—cutters, sleighbells, were taken from the file on Robert Frost. Robert selected those most meaningful to him. Maybe we could memorize it?

The group responded to the poem; read and reread it. They talked about the woods filling up with snow. Some who had seen it in the park or on their grandmother’s farm but couldn’t describe it verbally, helped themselves to art materials and drew pictures of it. There were snowflakes, huge ones—someone said, as big as “promises to keep.” They felt the loneliness and anxiety of the little horse stopping without a house near. They discussed the longest night and shortest

day. They listened for a few seconds of stillness. They felt the sweep of easy wind and downy flake. They felt the moral obligation of leaving something so indescribably beautiful to keep a promise but they also felt the joy of being responsible persons. They ached at the idea of "*miles to go before I sleep!*"

They were asked if they would like to learn the poem. Robert said he had learned it already and could he say it. He stood before the class and recited the poem without error. He achieved admiration from his classmates. Another section of the mother's history shows how much improvement in status Robert had achieved in his home.

"Robert entered the special class in high school. From the first week in his new teacher's class Robert showed improvement. His father and I were thrilled to have him come from school one day and recite 'Stopping By the Woods,' by Robert Frost. It was as if a miracle had happened. In the next few months he learned eight more poems, many of Robert Frost's. This wasn't the only improvement we noticed. Robert was learning to read. He would read me long stories from a ninth grade literature book. He read slowly at first but we could see the steady improvement."

Robert's homework clattered across my desk every day. He was invited to come to regular English classes to "say" Robert Frost's poems. He was given a chance to say them before the principals and school guests. By this time all of his learning processes were "Go!" He had no trouble figuring out words. They were now tools for him to use in acquiring information he wanted. A few mistakes in pronunciation were no longer a tragedy in his opinion and in the established classroom climate, mistakes became stepping-stones.

Two years later, in October, it was necessary for the family to move to a suburb. Robert was to enter the suburban school as a Junior. On his last day in the urban school he gave a veritable concert of poems. His classmates clapped long and hard for him. Time was even allowed for an ice cream cone Farewell Party.

And so because of an awakened desire for learning, four years later Robert marched ninety-third in a class of 200.