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Hilda Edgar

Golden Valley Schools, Minneapolis, Minnesota

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THE BEGINNING OF A SPECIAL READING PROGRAM IN A SMALL SCHOOL

Hilda Edgar

This article has been written to tell simply how one school district inaugurated its special reading department. The writer has been asked to share with "Horizons" readers some of the considerations and courses of action which went into the formation of the special reading program.

A major consideration in the establishment of this program was that of "preventive maintenance." While there was a group of elementary children with reading deficiencies that were to be helped, most of the time and energies of the special teacher were to be spent with the child at the very onset of trouble.

To achieve efficiency in this program, there needs to be a maximum amount of communication between the classroom teacher and the reading teacher. Help in providing the classroom teacher with special materials for the individual needs of her students is a preventive measure that pays dividends and is one provision for the accelerated student. Just discussing the needs and problems of individuals helps to give a clearer insight to possible solutions. The special teacher should have sufficient time in her schedule occasionally to sit in on the classroom performance of the child with a reading need.

Students to Participate in the Program

One of the first problems to be solved was that of how to choose the students for this help. A good classroom teacher knows and understands her people better than anyone else could, so the prospective students were referred to the special reading teacher by her. The next step seemed to be to get the cooperation of the students. With second and third graders this was easy. An attractive reading room, small classes, a reading game, some individual attention sold them on the advantages of going to this special room, but the older ones needed a little different approach. After the records had been studied, tentative plans were made to meet the needs of each one. Each individual was interviewed and then he was asked if he felt a need for help and, if so, in what area. He was told just how special reading would be planned to meet his needs. He was then given a

chance to register for this special reading course. He could reject it if he wished, but there was 100 per cent acceptance.

It seemed best to work with each one alone for a short time so that an Informal Inventory could be given and the right material found that would interest, as well as help, each one. A week or two later, after instruction had begun, several could come to class at the same time. There is always the problem of what will be missed in the regular classroom while the pupil is in special reading, so a schedule has to be worked out that is acceptable to the classroom teacher.

Daily Program

Work needs to be varied. Sometimes a gimmick for motivation helps to stimulate, but there is always the danger that some will work fast but carelessly just to try to get ahead on the chart. A thirty-minute period every day worked out quite well. If some special event involving all students took place, these people were always excused from special reading so that they could participate.

Grades Involved

The first grade became involved in this program quite early in the year because of a few late entries. It was felt that if these people could receive individual help to catch up at once, problems would be avoided. Sometimes absences would be made up in this way, too. By the middle of the year the first grade classroom teachers were referring some for special help who seemed to need more drill or a different approach.

When progress occurs, tests are given to demonstrate growth to the student and to the classroom teacher, but the determining factor in the termination of special reading is achievement in the regular classroom. As soon as possible, special help is removed so that the child will not become dependent.

Parental Involvement

It has proven wise to talk with the parents about the special help given. They are usually relieved to know that the problems are to be dealt with. If they understand the methods to be used, there can be reinforcement at home through encouragement and a healthy attitude. There are those few who do not admit to a problem on the part of their children.

Reading Materials

Materials were chosen slowly as the need arose. A fine school library is a big help and can be supplemented by books purchased especially for the reading room. Games chosen wisely help and in some instances can be loaned out in the same manner as library books. Boxes of sight words are necessary. A flannel board with material on vowels and consonants is a good visual aid, and much can be done with a blackboard. The more manipulation done by the student, the more he becomes really involved. A projector adds to the variety of presentation, by using films which coordinate with many reading systems. A hand-operated tachistoscope costs little and, if manipulated by the child himself, may help to develop a sight vocabulary.

The Scholastic Teacher reading materials are good for multilevel purposes. Programmed reading seems to have a terrific appeal and children show much enthusiasm. It is good for the more able student, too. A Controlled Reader has been added to the inventory and is an excellent addition.

Testing Materials

In many instances it is wise to have an individual measure of mental maturity. The Stanford Binet and Wechsler are, of course, well known. The Peabody Picture Test takes only 15 minutes to administer and gives an idea of the pupil's understanding vocabulary. Gates Survey is a good instrument to use, from third grade to twelfth. The Botel Inventory is easy to administer and shows phonetic skills and vocabulary. Gray's Oral Reading Test is helpful. An Informal Reading Test devised by the teacher and given individually shows the student's problems.

In Conclusion

Our program has been functioning for nearly five years and, as the pupil population increases, the special teacher has to look with a very critical eye at each aspect of her work to be sure that each minute is used to the fullest. It is hoped that there will always be time for some "one to one" experiences, as well as the "small group" approach.

Hilda Edgar is a special teacher of reading in the Golden Valley Schools of Minneapolis, Minnesota.