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Vern L. Farrow
Western Michigan University

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NONREADERS ARE NONEXISTENT

Vern L. Farrow

Jack stared impatiently at the red traffic light and waited. He was anxious to get back to school after lunch. The light changed to green but as the boy stepped into the street, the sound of an approaching siren told him that the light must be ignored and he returned to the curb. The emergency car passed, the traffic light cycled green again and Jack made his way safely across the street where he was suddenly confronted by a very large dog. The boy's initial reaction of fright was instantly dispelled when he recognized the dog's friendly intentions by its wagging tail and playful manner.

As Jack sauntered along enjoying his new friend he became aware that the air was strangely sultry and still. Glancing at the horizon, the boy noted a large bank of black clouds rapidly building in the west. He stopped and studied the clouds uneasily. The formation was familiar. From past experience he recalled that just such clouds had developed into a tornado. Jack's thoughts were interrupted by the sound of the school bell which, although he could not tell time, told him he would be tardy if he did not hurry. The clouds bothered him and he appraised their growth frequently as he approached the school. Was there a funnel emerging from that angry black mass? It was still small and ill-defined but wasn't it clearly the beginning of a tornado moving toward town?

The tardy bell rang as Jack ran through the corridor. He was late and the expression of irritation on his teacher's face spoke eloquently to him of her disapproval until she pieced together the grave significance of Jack's breathless warning. The children were led to the safety of tornado shelters to wait out the storm. Jack, 15 years old with an IQ of 75, still laboring with first grade work; Jack, the "nonreader" for whom printed words were an enigma, had done a great deal of reading on the way to school that afternoon!

But, you may protest, what did he read? Certainly the story gave no indication of his having read anything. He merely saw a traffic light, heard a siren, met a dog, watched some clouds, heard the school bell, and observed the expression on his teacher's face. What did he read?

If this was your reaction, it was typical, for in the accepted definition of the term, Jack read nothing. But, it is my thesis today that one of the essential considerations in providing for individual differences among pupils with respect to reading is that of realistically

adjusting expectations and, more specifically, accepting a definition of reading which is broad enough and flexible enough to be appropriate for children of all intellectual capacities.

Because educators have generally defined reading as a process of recognizing printed language symbols which serve as stimuli to the recalling, interpreting, evaluating, or reconstructing of meanings from the reader's experience, the act of reading has been assigned a purely verbal connotation. This is most unfortunate since such a definition fails to recognize that reading, in its broadest concept, involves interaction with and behavioral adjustment to everything in the realm of sensation. When viewed in this way, it becomes clear that Jack did more than merely see a traffic light, he read it! The sound of the siren was more than an undulating sequence of vibrations stimulating his auditory sense, he read its meaning and modified his behavior. In like manner, Jack read the dog's intentions; read the meaning of the school bell, the ominous clouds, and the irritation evident in his teacher's facial expression. None of the foregoing involved skill in recognizing or interpreting verbal symbols. Yet in each case, interaction with sensory stimuli resulted in the recalling, interpreting, evaluating, or reconstructing of meanings in the light of the individual's experience and purpose. Therefore, I submit that an acceptable and useful definition of reading is one which makes allowance for perception and comprehension through all sensory channels. Within such a framework, it is amply evident that no individual who enjoys the state of consciousness can be properly classified a nonreader.

Again, you may protest that such a distinction is hair-splitting and serves no useful purpose. On the contrary, let me point out the vital importance of a definition of reading which allows for diversity of ability and achievement. We have long felt and are becoming increasingly convinced that at the root of most reading problems among intellectually able children, and to a significant extent among educable mentally retarded children, lies an attitude of discouragement, inability, and unworthiness (3, 4, 6). When we seek to discover the cause for such a negative self-concept we can only conclude that it has been communicated to such children by teachers, parents, siblings, and peers as a result of failure to meet the requirements of an inappropriate definition of reading (2, 5).

It is easy and, unfortunately, convenient to label children, but, human nature being what it is, labels cannot remain confidential. They soon become public knowledge and result in devastating conse-

quences for the educational growth, social adjustment, and development of worthy self-image for the less academically oriented or retarded child (3, 9). The proliferation and narrowing of diagnostic categories in the field of reading, while it may have clinical value, has served to elaborate the number of labels available. The most destructive among these is, of course, that of "nonreader."

When we indicate to a child, no matter how kindly, or inadvertently that he is a nonreader he will soon accept the label, as well as the concomitant self-defeating attitude. When we predicate reading achievement solely upon proficiency with printed verbal symbols, we leave no alternative for the mentally retarded or able slow starter but to see himself as a nonreader. The label will produce a negative and nearly irreversible mental set in opposition to further constructive contact with the reading program (7).

On the other hand, if we eliminate the nonreader label by broadening our definition of reading and concurrently adjusting our expectations to the needs and abilities of each child, we will obviate, or at least attenuate destructive feelings of inadequacy (1). If we capitalize upon every opportunity to show a child like Jack; for example, that his skill in interpreting daily experiences is actually reading, not something apart from but merely another facet of the total reading process, he is likely to view himself in a more worthy light and to see himself as a "can-read" person. Such a positive approach can be expected to produce a favorable self-image which can play a major role in motivating the child toward greater understanding of and enthusiasm for reading in the strictly pedagogical sense.

What I am suggesting here, although perhaps radical, is not new at all but is only an extension of accepted philosophy in beginning reading. At the heart of the reading readiness program is considerable emphasis upon "reading" pictures. We guide children in making identifications and literal descriptions; in interpreting sequences of events, drawing inferences, and predicting outcomes from pictures. But, wherein lies the difference between "reading" pictures and "reading" personal daily life experiences which are immeasurably more vital? I submit to you that to see, to hear, to touch, taste, and smell; to be aware of and to utilize all information obtained first hand is to read. I further submit that such a concept of reading does no violence to educational philosophy, goals, or curriculum. On the contrary, it makes truly meaningful the oft repeated admonition, to "start with the child where he is."

When we accept the point of view that no matter what age or

level of ability, all children come to us as readers, we are focusing on strengths rather than limitations. It is our obligation to build on this positive base and to assure that every child perceives himself as a reader. It is then our challenge to find ways to help children raise the level of their natural reading skills and to guide their growth along the broad continuum which encompasses the sum total of the reading process (8).

Indeed, there are no nonreaders. The unfortunate designation remains only as a useless artifact from the narrow educational catacombs of a less enlightened era.

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Vern Farrow is assistant professor of education at Western Michigan University.