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Pearl Sarno

Covert, Michigan Public Schools

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A NOSE IN A BOOK BY HOOK OR BY CROOK

Pearl Sarno

In any community, the children are like the sand dunes of Lake Michigan, blown about by the lake winds. During a winter, the dunes may move to a different location and the face of the shore line appears different each spring. A bit of beauty may have been buried or destroyed, roots of trees may be exposed to threaten its life but green, tough grass does appear each year, saplings spring up and survive a few years, even here and there a few forest-edge flowers and vines grow and spread. However, to be productive and produce more than chance beauty and breath-taking stateliness in tall straight trees reaching to the sky and unplanned patches of spring flowers or clumps of tall dune grass waving in the summer breeze, the ingredients of sand, rain and sun are not enough.

Many children have been moved in and out of the community and school situation by the winds of our times. The faces in the classroom may look different each year, but the needs of all children are there to be met. Some children may ride the tide and show no ill effects. Others may be hurt and destroyed by the storms of prejudice, resentment, and loneliness. Here and there may be found beauty in a bright child or the tallness of a child displaying courage in truthfulness or in meeting disappointment.

The agriculturalist has the soil analyzed and adds the proper ingredients to make it produce the kind of crop he needs. Children also need to be studied, and the proper ingredients added because the youth of today have a changing world to face and the task to make them as productive as they need to be is a challenge.

Parents' Role

Millions of teenagers are still seriously limited by the amount of education their parents received a generation ago. Despite our claim that we offer universal education to all youngsters, no matter what their circumstances, illiteracy and poverty are still inherited. The census findings dramatize facts long suspected but, until recently, not backed by hard, nationwide statistics. They are finding that home environment, family income and parents' educational levels are crucial factors in the child's educational prospects and economic future. The tradition of under-education must be broken. (8)

Every time parents read aloud to the child, every time a visit is

made to the library or books are read by them, they are exerting an influence on the child's reading. He sees by their action that they are interested in reading and he realizes this is a pleasure available to them. In this receptive state of mind, the child learns more easily and quickly at school. The influence continues, whether it is planned that way or not. (5)

Parents could and should develop in the home an educational and emotional climate which would encourage not only reading but an ever-widening interest in our world. Generally, children who make rapid progress in learning to read do so because of their interest in books and their desire to share in the experiences of others. (3)

The Children

Picture, if you will, the kinds of "sand dune children" that appear each fall in my classroom. Children with one parent receiving Aid to Dependent Children or a "new" father every few months is one kind of background. Many with working mothers, because of family need, seem to lack the home touch of mothering care. You find them hurried off to school with uncombed hair, unwashed faces, their clothing untidy and soiled and often times not dressed properly for the weather. For the most part, they have a mere subsistence income and there is little left for books, magazines and newspapers. Some are Negro children, who have arrived in the last few years from the south or a segregated section of a city. These children are shy and self-conscious at first. They are unsure of their reception and need to feel consistent acceptance before they become natural and trustful. All of these children reflect the feelings and values of their parents. Some of the parents cannot read and write and it is difficult for these children to compete with a child whose parents have many years of schooling.

Because our community has the largest area in the world of cultivated blueberry plantations, this locale attracts about 1,000 white migrants each year from the southern states and each year a few more families have stayed to make this their permanent home and to find employment. The social and educational underprivileges of the migrant are being relieved but they have no real status and the children of these families are often lonely and need friends. They, too, are economically deprived, and their clothing, cleanliness and food habits show this. Their achievement is retarded because their school attendance has been irregular and they have not been in school for consecutive periods.

Can parents of these children provide interesting experiences to

talk about when often times their experiences are meager and unspoken because they are unaware of what to be aware? Can these parents provide books for children to look at and give them the idea that reading is important when frequently they are unable to provide even school books? Can these parents pronounce and tell them the meaning of words in their environment which children want to know when the parents themselves are unable to read and write? Can they provide their children experiences with things, people and places when they are self-conscious, shy and defensive at times? Can these children have a feeling of security in the parental relationship when there is no relationship there? Can these children talk about their day-to-day experiences and feelings when parents are not in the home?

The answer to these questions is “no” and in this community most of the children fit this bleak picture. How, then, can the “soil” in this classroom be developed to break the tradition of parents’ under-education?

Good teachers know that a brain never comes to school alone. Brains and bodies, thinking and feeling, living and learning, the past and the present, the home and street and school all mix together in every child and ever stay mixed. (4)

How can a reading willingness as well as a reading readiness be established? How can they be inwardly motivated and become willing to gain from the school environment an interest and desire to read at any cost as Lincoln did?

The School Program

The incidental information obtained in the course of school activities and contacts is probably the first tool used to study the children in order to find their individual needs and it is not done in one or two sessions. Private conversations, listening during play periods, informal inventories, interest inventories, incomplete sentence tests of “I wish . . . ;” “I love . . . ;” “My mother . . . ;” film and filmstrip discussions, group discussions, and trips are worthy approaches and their utilization and interpretation depend much upon the individual teacher’s skill and insight. (2)

Standardized tests early in the school year in reading and spelling are used to measure reading achievement and to find where the child needs help, but these tests need to be used discriminately because they are based on the vocabulary of middle-class culture.

Each child is provided a book in a series for reading, a basal reader with an accompanying workbook, a spelling workbook, two

number workbooks, the Weekly Reader and Phonics workbook. The school has been slow in buying supplementary books to be used in the classroom. There is no elementary school library where the children can borrow or browse.

There is a storeroom, however, where a limited number of books in other series and grade levels are available along with copies of out-dated series that can be used. A few beginning-to-read books are sometimes at hand. In the room, the library corner has a few story books and some out-dated, old textbooks. For our use, we have a film and filmstrip projector with some filmstrips and films.

The basal reader and suggestions from the teacher's guide are followed more or less in sequence because there is security in knowing that a well-balanced and sound program of instruction is being utilized. A different series, however, is used for each reading group so that each group does not come "trailing behind" reading the same stories.

The stories in the series do not really fit the children in this classroom, but most of the situations can be given meaning during discussions. It is generally recognized that difficulty experienced by many children in multicultural neighborhoods is primarily a language problem. Many children lack ability to speak grammatical sentences, to use descriptive adjectives and to develop their ideas beyond a noun or phrase. Their speech patterns are those of the culturally disadvantaged. (6) The problem then is to produce meaningful materials they enjoy and understand.

Teacher Aids

An early-in-the-fall project is the use of the chalkboard covered with tablecloth paper and the outline of a dream house sketched on with felt pen. The children look for pictures to fill the dream house from magazines and the items are labeled as they are pasted on. Interesting conversation comes from other findings as they look through the magazines. Often they will ask to have pictures identified as questions and discussions follow some of their findings. Later, this may be changed to such topics as dogs, pets and food. Available resource books are utilized as needed. Holidays also have their turn. Thanksgiving finds them looking for "thankful" pictures while at Christmas time use is made of all the catalogues as well as magazines. Interest in words runs high as they write letters to Santa Claus.

An activity, started early in the fall and carried all year in a variety of ways, is a written chart called "Our Daily News." To begin, it is usually a sharing time, but it is used to discuss the date,

days of the week, month and year. Weather is noted, the thermometer used and findings recorded by a different child each day. News from the radio, television or newspaper is gradually introduced. Interesting articles, usually pictures from the newspaper, begin to come in and new articles are posted each week. The highlight of this is a newspaper of their own, mimeographed, with a copy for each child.

Every morning, a poem or a story, and later their own stories are printed on the chalkboard with three questions to answer. This is a printing exercise too, for how can you learn to print unless you print. Sentence structure, context clues, vocabulary, reading for meaning, phonics and punctuation can be brought to the whole group's attention.

To motivate children to write stories, a picture is displayed and together, a story is written. Later this is typed on a large size typewriter and displayed on a folding screen bulletin board with illustrations. These are put in booklet form later for children to re-read. Toward the end of the year, the more able children are writing their own stories.

A paper boy and girl doll which have been magnetized for the magnet board say short sentences. This is written in comic book style and has safety rules or holiday facts or health rules. As the sentences are changed, each child likes to be the one to read them first.

Games with a purpose are used and are intended to give incentive for and practice in some of the reading skills. Word Bingo has been a favorite and is made up of words from spelling lists and words with which they have difficulty. Two sets were made, an easy set for beginning and a more difficult one for use later in the year.

Trips in the community to such places as the fire department, bank, library, grocery store, dairy and post office are taken for background experiences. Simple science projects are carried out, usually in connection with the Weekly Reader and some paperback science books. The filmstrip projector has been an excellent means for building mental content with these children.

Evaluating the day's work is important and with a few planned minutes at the end of the day questions are asked: "What have we learned today?" "What should we try to improve tomorrow?" "What did we enjoy most today?" Answers frequently provide a sense of accomplishment for both student and teacher.

An independent work-study type of reading was developed in a group last year and proved so successful that it is being tried again.

One series of books had questions after the stories. Some of the children wrote these questions and answers and the papers were corrected. A record was kept and interest became apparent as a gold star was put after the name of successful participants. A file of stories and questions clipped from juvenile magazines was added to our materials. From these activities we went into the Reader's Digest Series. There was a limited quantity of these so questions and answers had to be written on paper. Enthusiasm was keen and promotion to the next book was an event. Sometimes, turns were taken to read orally to the whole class when an especially interesting story was prepared for audience listening. This stimulated the uninterested readers and they became ready to participate. With this activity, time is available for the less able children. A program is planned so every child has a chance to read a book of his choice to the teacher alone.

It has been pointed out that to develop reading proficiency, children need a variety of experiences. They need to listen to stories of a higher interest level than they can, at the time, read for themselves. Through listening to the teacher or parent read, children will "glimpse the delight that lies between the covers of books." They will gain many types of information and may develop new interests. They will learn to listen and use ideas gained this way. (7) A continued story is read each day. Often, favorite story books or new ones are brought to school to be shared. Television is a window to look out on a new world and many programs have stimulated children to become interested in having the story they have viewed read to them.

At conference time, the parents are acquainted with inexpensive books that can be purchased. Some of these books are ordered by our children with hard-to-come-by change, but it is like Christmas when they arrive and interest runs high. When several have chosen the same book, a reading group is formed. When they finish, they exchange them with another group until all who are interested get a chance to read them. Often part of a new book is read to the children and they are left with the challenge to finish the book. This has created a desire to be the first to learn the outcome.

Coming from homes where reading material is scarce, a plan of letting children take easy-to-read books and magazines home was devised. Envelopes and cards were put in the books and magazines. One was allowed to be checked out overnight. It had to be returned before another one was borrowed. One book is selected from the returned ones the next day, and the child who read it reports on it to his classmates or he may read it to the group if it is a short one.

This has been a rewarding experience and although the books are shabby, finger-printed and worn, only one has been lost. New ones are added each month. *At least a nose is in a book.*

Certainly not all of the possibilities have been tried to make reading as meaningful as possible, but it is fairly certain if we persist, we can find ways to help these children. One reason for making them good readers today is that tomorrow they will be parents of children who will need their help.

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Pearl Sarno is a teacher in the Covert, Michigan, public schools.