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Joan Chapman

*Kalamazoo Public Schools, Michigan*

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# SOME OBSERVATIONS OF PERCEPTUALLY IMPAIRED CHILDREN IN TWO APPROACHES TO READING

*Joan Chapman*

*Kalamazoo Public Schools*

Reading is one problem facing children having perceptual lags in their development. Some children may reveal clinical evidence of brain injury while others merely show uneven developmental patterns on psychological tests. These children cannot respond to the usual methods of instruction presented during their early school experiences. The regular educational materials and methods are inappropriate for them and must be adapted to meet more primitive learning needs.

Special instructional methods have been designed for brain-injured children and are discussed in the texts presented by Strauss(8) and Cruickshank(2). Reading instruction is individually designed to develop one or more areas of perception as well as instruct in beginning reading. The use of concrete, tactual learning aids are combined with adaptations of the reading materials in the teaching of reading. Such an approach to beginning reading is outlined in a study by Talmadge(9). Early learning may be approached through what might be termed a "part-to-part-to whole" method. That is, the various reading skills—word perception and analysis, auditory training, ability to deal with concepts—are taught simultaneously but as separate exercises. As the child shows his capacity for handling an increasing number of elements at one time, a greater number of skills can be pulled together into one lesson. This procedure of integrating the various elements used in reading is perhaps one of the most difficult educational assignments for these children.

The teacher of these children must have available a variety of approaches to reading in which the special educational techniques may be applied, systematically, and in which reading elements can be integrated.

It is the writer's purpose to describe a fifteen week reading program in which two remedial approaches were used with some perceptually impaired youngsters.

**Description of Children**

Eight children from Perceptual Development classrooms participated in the special reading instruction. Five were in their first year in the classroom, two in their second year, and one in his third year. As part of the criteria for placement in the special classrooms, it had previously been determined that the boys had average intellectual ability but were unable to learn and adjust in a regular classroom. They all happened to be boys, were between the ages of seven and eleven years, and displayed the behavior and learning characteristics commonly described for brain-injured children. In varying degrees, the boys were distractible, restless, "driven" in motor behavior, perseverated, had foreground-background disturbances, poor impulse and emotional control, and poor body concepts and self-image.

All but one child were retarded in reading; however, they all displayed reading characteristics which Strauss and Lehtinen(8) describe as being similar in "all of these children."

"Reading disability is characterized by absence of an adequate approach to new words and faulty recognition of familiar words, confusions of similar words and letters, omissions of words, phrases, and sentences with a general careless attitude toward the content of the material read. All these children show evidence of general disturbances in the classroom situation: distractibility, hyperactivity, and disinhibition as expressed in difficulty in conforming to the usual standards of group and classroom management."

The boys differed, observably, in the extent to which they were disabled in their reading by a visual or auditory perceptual problem. Four boys had well developed auditory perception but lagged in visual perceptual development. They had poor eye-hand coordination, making pre-writing and writing assignments extremely difficult and tiring for them. They did not seem to know *how* to look at visual stimuli to derive adequate meaning out of what they saw. Whether looking at a word, coloring a picture, or throwing a ball, their eyes were elsewhere than focused on the "target" or object of their goal.

Two of the boys had well developed visual perceptual skills but were handicapped by poorly developed auditory perception. Although their hearing tested normal, they did not seem to know how to listen. They seldom could remember what they heard and found it difficult to discriminate between sounds and to express or remember ideas. They responded equally to background noises as they did to verbal instructions which were often meaningless to them. These two boys were noticeably more hyperactive than the other six children.

The two remaining boys were about equal in perceptual skills: one was severely retarded in both perceptual areas; one did adequately for his age but had difficulty pulling together meaning from what he saw with what he heard.

The last four boys mentioned had better eye-hand coordination than the first group, but exhibited tension in their writing. They were, however, further handicapped by articulation defects for which they received speech therapy. They had difficulty hearing and reproducing the correct sequences of sound in enunciating and pronouncing words.

Whether their problem was in the visual or auditory perceptual area of learning, they all had one problem in common: integrating what they saw with what they heard or said into meaningful language experiences.

#### Method of Presenting Two Reading Approaches

Two remedial reading approaches—"A Visual-Visual Approach to Word Development," and the "V.A.K.T." (Visual, auditory, kinesthetic, tactual) process of word study(1)—were combined and presented as follows:

#### The Special Reading Program

##### Step I. PROJECTOR WORK (Visual-Visual approach)

- A. Project transparency slide onto chalkboard. Discuss picture, labeling objects in cursive writing over picture as children name.
- B. Children name words on chalkboard with projector turned off. Projector briefly turned on for "forgets."
- C. Words printed in manuscript on cards as children dictate them from chalkboard. Children check words on card with those on chalkboard for spelling.
- D. Children answer questions containing study words with complete sentences. Example: Teacher: "Do you wear—(show word card)—on your head?" Pupil: "No, I don't wear *shoes* on my head."

##### Step II. V.A.K.T. WORD STUDY

- A. Look at beginning and ending of word.
- B. Pronounce word aloud (whisper it), count syllables.
- C. Spell word aloud.
- D. Trace word on table with index finger in cursive writing. Correct errors in letter formation at this time.

- E. Write word on paper.
  - F. Compare written word with word on card.
  - G. Repeat process until word can be spelled and written correctly.
- Modification for Steps D and E for children with poor coordination.*
- D. Spell word with cut-out letters onto flannel board; trace over letters with index finger.
  - E. Turn over word card, scramble letters, spell word.

### Step III. STORY (Visual-Visual approach)

- A. Children dictate story as teacher writes in cursive on chalkboard.
- B. Teacher dictates study words, sight words and phrases as children underline.
- C. Stories typed in primer, read by children, placed in notebooks.

The combined reading approaches were presented as a special program to supplement the regular reading assignments.

Two objectives were pursued in presenting the program. The first was to establish an effective method for presenting the instructional procedures. The second objective was to determine an effective method for evaluating growth resulting from the special program.

#### **Presentation of Instructional Program**

Planning the instructional program involved the consideration of specific learning disabilities. Reading instruction for the perceptually disturbed child is directed towards correcting weaknesses rather than developing strengths. To avoid frustrating the child, tasks must be short and hold promise for success. Routines need to be simplified and highly structured.

The special reading program was, therefore, developed into three steps for convenience of pacing the procedures to the individual needs of each child. Each step could be completed during one period. A period of instruction lasted twenty to thirty minutes. Three to five words were studied with each picture. Initial words were of one syllable, and "bigger" words came later.

The amount of time each child received instruction depended upon his capacity for handling the material. Five children received instruction two to three times a week, while three participated in the program every day.

The children were grouped so that no more than three participated at one time. One very hyperactive boy had to receive individual instruction. Writing skill became the basis for grouping, since the

amount and kind of words studied often depended upon writing coordination. Also, the written assignments in the "V.A.K.T. Word Study," although performed individually, presented the only area in which the children might have to wait for each other. Waiting is too much to expect of these children.

Special attention was given to the selection and presentation of transparency pictures. Reliance upon children's special interests can cause a remedial reading method to become inappropriate and unsuccessful when used with perceptually impaired children. Lehtinen(8) gives the reason for avoiding highly stimulating personal interests.

"The child is unable to maintain a perceptual or conceptual foreground while his special topic of interest remains as an emotional background. As a result the highly charged interest area intrudes into and finally dominates the lesson to the exclusion of the topic of the lesson."

Transparency pictures on subjects of general interest to boys were, therefore, used during the first seven weeks of the program. By this time, the children were accustomed to the program's routine, and pictures of the boys themselves were used along with the ones of general interest.

*Instructional Materials.* Most of the materials were already in use in the classroom, such as the slide projector, special writing paper, flannel board with cut-out letters for those too poorly coordinated to write, a primer typewriter for typing stories, and the children's notebooks for recording words in dictionary form and for keeping stories. A printed chart of the "Steps in Word Study (V.A.K.T.)," by Carter and McGinnis, provided added incentive for the children during this procedure.

*Teaching Objectives.* Certain objectives were emphasized in presenting the program. These were to: 1) increase concept that words hold various meanings; 2) integrate perceptual processes in the word study; 3) develop ease in ability to associate manuscript and cursive writing in reading and writing; 4) develop language expression in telling stories so as to increase abilities to form meaningful relationships, understand sequences in events, and express sentences in correct structure.

#### Methods of Evaluation

Information was collected on each child at the beginning and conclusion of the fifteen week reading program. This included: 1) two forms of the Detroit Word Recognition Test(6), 2) first and final

stories by each child, and 3) two informal inventories of learning and behavior.

### Results

Evaluation procedures were inadequate for providing objective evidence of growth which resulted from the special reading program. Initial scores on the Detroit Word Recognition Test revealed one boy with above average scores and seven boys with inferior scores, ranging from 1.5 to 3.6 years below age level. Five of the children repeated the test after fifteen weeks and showed gains ranging from four to eight months.

In interpreting test results, the ability to follow instructions alone became an element for evaluating the performance of perceptually impaired children. A reading test which measured a variety of reading skills would have been more meaningful.

The anecdotal records and the beginning and final stories provided the most effective means for evaluating observational growth resulting from the program. The two informal inventories were of little or no value.

### Observations and Conclusions

The procedures of the combined reading methods possess the inherent qualities for developing visual skills. The program, on the other hand, provided few opportunities for developing beginning auditory skills.

The children with visual perceptual problems were observed to gain new insights into the use of their vision. Not only did they literally *see* meaning in words, but the concept itself was developed.

The emphasis in this program was different for each child and changed as the program progressed. Immature readers needed emphasis in word recognition techniques. The story was less important to them. They seemed to know that the skills must come first for them. First significant learning came through the "V.A.K.T." word study. This process provided a simple and meaningful structure in which they could use all senses at one time. The tracing *makes* them focus their eyes on words.

Once they could look at a word and see all of its elements, phonetic techniques could be applied to the "V.A.K.T." process. They were later able to transfer the use of these skills into the "Visual-Visual" projector work and in picking out words and phrases in the story. Not until after the children began to understand these word analysis

methods were they able to remember the whole word configurations. The presentation of personal pictures, during the eighth week, brought this new meaning of whole word configuration into focus.

Five children responded to their own pictures in the same startling manner. They could not remember the words. Instead of using word analysis skills to help them recall words quickly, they had to refer constantly to word configurations in their respective positions on the chalkboard where the picture had been projected. Because of their heavy reliance on the words on chalkboard, it took two to three sessions to complete the projector work alone with each of these five children. After another two to three weeks of alternating general interest pictures with personal pictures, the children were able to integrate the new concept with structural techniques. The situation was a confusing but insightful one for these children. Whether they could have handled this material before the routine was sufficiently structured is something that would have to be tested.

Improved spelling, as might be expected, resulted from the "V.A.K.T." process. Associations between letters and sounds became apparent to children who had sufficiently begun to understand sound sequences as related to pictures. This basic auditory skill could not be taught through this process, but had to be developed before a child could use the "V.A.K.T." process meaningfully in spelling and recognizing words. This became particularly apparent with the two boys who were handicapped by auditory perception but had adequate visual perception.

Working out stories provided many suitable opportunities for pulling organized thinking from the children. The children could be observed to use more purposeful thinking throughout the school day. Freedom of expression was the first accomplishment to be achieved with the stories. Once the children could express their ideas without too much self-consciousness, they proceeded in the following order: 1) describe picture; 2) relate picture to sequence in detail (What is happening? What will happen next?); 3) tell sequence, eliminating the minute irrelevant details; 4) put self into story; 5) put feelings into story (How would you feel if . . .? What would you do?); 6) structure sentences.

Skill in handwriting became one of the most rewarding and unexpected by products of the entire reading process. The fine motor coordination of these children is such that writing becomes the most tedious and frustrating task for them. The use of tactual and kinesthetic senses in the tracing provided a meaningful and successful method



for learning to write. Having real words to write was important to them.

A good beginning had been accomplished with regards to the four teaching objectives mentioned earlier. Particularly evident was the ease with which the children shifted between reading cursive and manuscript writing.

In the writer's opinion, the following conclusions may be drawn with regards to the practicability of presenting the reading approaches to children with perceptual impairment:

1. A certain amount of readiness should be expected of a child before starting him in either of the two remedial reading programs. The child should have succeeded in reading the first pre-primers, have the basic sight vocabulary, and have a working understanding that letters combine to make words. He should also have the basic auditory skills used in reading. These skills should include an understanding of sound sequence in oral work and an ability to match sounds to pictures. In other words, the basic readiness skills cannot be taught through either remedial method.

2. The "V.A.K.T." Word Study process is a successful means for teaching spelling in combination with instruction in structural and phonetic analysis. For more immature readers, it helped them look at a word and its parts more meaningfully.

3. The tracing procedure in the "V.A.K.T." process provides a meaningful method for learning to write. The tracing on the bare table brings in some visual imagery, at which time errors in the letter formation can be corrected before writing a word. Purpose, lack of any failure experience, and use of tactual and kinesthetic senses combine to help poorly coordinated children develop writing skills.

4. The use of the projector work in the "Visual-Visual" procedures is an appropriate method of presenting word meaning to visual-perceptually impaired children. The eye-level work and lighted subject in darkened room aided these children to direct attention.

5. Children with adequate visual perception but poorly developed auditory perception would profit more by using acetate pockets in which opaque pictures could be slid rather than projected pictures. These children were highly distracted by sounds of the projector and its movable parts. Other procedures than those used in the program are more practicable for children with auditory perceptual problems.

6. The use of personal pictures should be delayed until after the children are accustomed to the procedures and are secure in using beginning structural techniques (i.e., beginning sounds, recognizing

different elements in similar word forms). The children are then ready to learn whole word configuration and meaning when presented with personal material. A slowing down in progress can be expected from the children as they integrate this information into their learning skills.

7. The amount of time each child spent in the program had little bearing upon observable gains. Some children seemed to benefit more from a time lapse of several days between programs.

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Joan Chapman received her Master's Degree in Education from Western Michigan University. She is currently a consultant in Perceptual Development, Kalamazoo Public Schools. Prior to the fall of 1963, she taught for three years in the classroom program for Perceptual Development.