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THE RETARDED READER

HOW CAN WE HELP HIM?

Dorothy J. McGinnis

One of the chief concerns of any school system is what to do with the underachiever. This paper discusses one type of underachiever—the retarded reader.

Who Is the Retarded Reader? What Is He Like?

The retarded reader is a person whose reading achievement falls significantly below his potential for learning—significantly below his physical, emotional and social development as well as his intellectual maturity. He is the child whose reading performance is below expectations by one or more years. He is the child who is penalized severely for his reading deficiencies—penalized socially, emotionally and academically because he is not achieving in reading. The retarded reader presents to us a serious challenge for if he is not helped, he may drop out of school or become delinquent. Even if he avoids these two pitfalls, the retarded reader seldom contributes fully to society.

Some weeks ago in the Psycho-Educational Clinic we examined a boy who is seriously retarded in reading. John is 12 years old and in the sixth grade. He has normal learning ability. He talks well and he learns a great deal from listening. If his assignments are read to him, he has the ability to participate in the discussions of his classmates. He does well on tests when they are read to him and he can give his replies orally. John dislikes school, however, particularly the periods in which reading is involved. He says that he is a “can’t reader,” that no one can help him, and that he hates reading. John is bright enough to go on to college, but he says that he is going to drop out of school as soon as he can. This sixth grade boy has ability, but he cannot read. His continuous frustration in the classroom is creating inferiority feelings, tension and an aversion to reading. He is an example of severe reading retardation.

Now, not all poor readers can properly be termed disabled readers. Many poor readers are merely slow learners. For example, a fifth grade child who is capable of reading only at second grade level and who is reading at second grade level is not a retarded reader. He is reading as well as his level of maturity can justify.

The retarded reader is the capable child whose serious deficiencies in basic reading skills are impeding his entire reading growth and his academic adjustment. He is the child who is showing a marked discrepancy between his achievement in reading and his ability.

How Can We Help the Retarded Reader?

Every school system has its share of retarded readers. The important question is what can we do to help them? What can we, as teachers and administrators, do about reading retardation? As we discuss this question, I want you to think of the word, PIT. I want you to think of this word for two reasons. First, it represents how many poor readers feel about themselves and their reading problem. Many of them feel that they are at the bottom of the pit and that there is no way for them to scale the walls and get to the top. Many retarded readers feel that they will never be able to get out of the pit and into the bright sunshine of success. They feel that they will never learn to read.

I want you to think of the word, PIT, for another reason. The letters of the word indicate what we, as teachers and administrators, can do about reading retardation. There are three things which we can do. We can PREVENT. We can IDENTIFY. We can TREAT. P I T prevent, identify, treat.

We Can Prevent

Education should be concerned with the prevention of maladjustment just as the medical profession is concerned with the prevention of disease. The vaccines for smallpox and polio are two examples of how concern with prevention has stamped out the ravages of two dreadful diseases. The school can reduce the destructive power of reading retardation by being concerned with prevention. We can prevent many cases of reading maladjustment by being aware of potential causes of reading retardation within the school itself. Some of these causes are inappropriate teaching methods, oversized classes, and failure to provide for individual differences.

Administrators can play an active role in preventing reading retardation by developing an all-school awareness of the reading needs of boys and girls, an awareness on the part of every teacher in the school system of his responsibility in the area of reading. In addition, administrators can provide an effective library program so that

adequate materials in terms of needs, interests and difficulty levels can be used by the children. Administrators can prevent many cases of reading retardation by selecting qualified teachers for developmental reading. We need teachers who are warm, understanding and encouraging. We need teachers who have the ability to perceive the needs of pupils and to vary techniques and materials to satisfy these needs. We need teachers who know how to teach reading and who are enthusiastic about it.

Let me tell you briefly about a recent study. Wallace Ramsey(5) conducted an experiment in which three matched groups of children were taught by three teachers who also were matched in ability. The classes were organized differently—one on the three-group plan, one on the individualized plan, and one on the Joplin plan. The reading results obtained by the children were about the same for all three groups. Ramsey concluded that the influence of the teacher was the most important factor. He states, "I've thought that this study indicates most clearly is that the influence of the teacher is greater than that of a particular method or special plan of organization. Given a good teacher, other factors in teaching reading tend to pale to insignificance."

But at this point I think we should face some hard facts. Many teachers are inadequately prepared to teach reading effectively. New elementary teachers, at best, have had only one reading course. More often than not, the high school teacher has had no course at all in the teaching of reading. Experienced teachers returning to the profession after a few years of absence frequently have little understanding of the newer attitudes toward reading and materials in the field. Few teachers have had courses in the prevention, diagnosis and treatment of reading retardation.

Now, it is a waste of time to deplore these facts. Administrators must take the teachers as they come. But if we are to prevent reading retardation, we must help these teachers to grow and to develop on the job. We must examine our own practices to see if we are giving teachers the kind of practical help they need.

Are we helping teachers with problems that are significant to them as they work with their students or are we satisfying ourselves with theoretical lectures delivered at an occasional teachers' meeting?

Are we following through from year to year so that all teachers are growing in understanding or are we emphasizing reading one year and then coasting for the next two or three?

Are we content that a special reading teacher is taking care of the retarded readers and do we neglect the classroom teacher's understanding of the problem even though she is responsible for the children most of the time?

Are we conducting well-planned, continuous, year-to-year, in-service programs for our teachers?

Are we really providing the kind of leadership in our school which is essential to effective reading instruction?

These are the types of questions which the administrator must answer. I maintain that to prevent reading retardation we need good teachers of developmental reading, and we need administrators who are doing all they can to mitigate potential causes of reading retardation within the school.

We Can Identify

But prevention alone cannot help the retarded reader. If your school system is typical, approximately 15 per cent of your present student body can be classified as retarded readers. How can we help them? In order to help them, we must know who they are. We must identify them, and early identification is essential. It has been estimated that if we can discover and work with reading problems no later than the third grade, we have a 70 to 80 per cent chance of correcting the problem. If we wait until the seventh grade, our chance of success drops to 30 per cent, and if we wait until senior high school it is almost hopeless because by this time we have to deal not only with the reading problem but with the student's intense feelings of failure and inadequacy.

How can we identify the retarded reader? We can identify him in several ways: by teacher observation and study of the child's academic history, by informal reading inventories, by formal standardized procedures, and by a combination of these approaches. But whatever method we use, we must identify these children early.

We Can Treat

Once the retarded reader has been identified, we must provide him with adequate treatment. There are several basic principles which apply to the instruction provided for retarded readers. These principles apply equally well to all children, but they are especially important to the retarded reader. What are these principles? The first is, *pay attention to the individual*. The retarded reader needs to be accepted

as a person and at his level of development. He needs to be understood, respected and liked by his teachers and his associates.

Second, *emphasize interpretation of the child's performance rather than merely an evaluation of his achievement*. We must be concerned with *why* the child is having difficulty in reading. We must get at the causes of his maladjustment if we are to help him. Physical, psychological and environmental factors adversely affecting reading performance should be discovered and eliminated, if possible. I might add at this point that recent research indicates that many causal factors have their origin in the home(4). Our experience in the Psycho-Educational Clinic suggests the need to work with parents as well as with their children.

The third principle, *select and modify instructional procedures so as to meet the student's needs*. Instruction should be directed toward helping the student overcome specific weaknesses, but it should also be balanced. Skills should be taught sequentially, not haphazardly, and methods of instruction should be chosen which harmonize with sound principles of learning and especially those which are most adequate for the child. It is essential that at every stage of development the student be given guidance in becoming an independent reader. Instruction should be meaningful to the student. He should know his strength and his weaknesses, the goals of instruction, and how these goals are to be achieved. He should know the purpose of each lesson and how mastery of each skill will help him to become a better reader.

Fourth, *instructional materials should be selected which are appropriate to the needs, reading level and interest of the student*. The needs and abilities of retarded readers vary tremendously. Consequently, no one book is adequate for all. A variety of materials is needed, materials which are of real interest to the reader. Easy materials to insure success should be balanced with more difficult ones to provide stimulation and growth. Any book which students associate with failure in reading should be avoided.

And the fifth principle, *avoid frustration and emotional set against reading*. The instructional climate should be one in which the student can make progress. Success must be the keynote. With the retarded reader, we must accentuate the positive, eliminate the negative. The retarded reader needs to experience success early and continuously.

Who Should Provide Instruction for the Retarded Reader?

Many students experiencing minor retardation in reading can be helped effectively by regular classroom teachers. For very seriously retarded readers, special classes or clinical instruction is needed. This means that the school will have to employ reading specialists who can diagnose and treat the most seriously handicapped. Unfortunately, these teachers are difficult to find, and they are expensive. Some schools have solved this problem by selecting a well qualified teacher from their staff, one who is an excellent teacher of developmental reading, one who has a special interest in children with learning problems. They have encouraged her to do graduate study in this field, to learn the causes of reading retardation, methods of diagnosis and special instructional procedures. They have encouraged her to broaden her background in psychology, sociology and medicine. They have encouraged her, by salary increases, to return to their schools to meet the needs of their retarded readers. Perhaps this is a plan of action which you can follow in your school.

Conclusion

We can do much to reduce reading retardation. The essential steps in attacking this problem are prevention, early identification, and proper treatment. We have a job to do.

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