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Working with Reading Problems in Norway

By Alf Preus

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Introduction

Some years ago, in the initial interview with a young adult Norwegian non-reader, I got the following amazing and thought-provoking information: "You know, I tried to get away from the problem by going to sea. Boy, did I feel lonesome out there. I was not able to read the few letters my parents wrote me, and asking one of the other guys to read them to me would make him know about my problem. I tried to write my mother a letter one day, but I gave it up and threw it in the ocean. And there were lots of things that I would have to read in order to do my job properly and take part in the activities on board: posters, signs and notices. I could not read them, and I tried hard to keep the others from knowing that I was not able to."

A statement like this makes one think. We, who are capable of reading, do not realize how frequently we use our reading ability. We are sometimes aware of it when we sit down with a book or a newspaper, but it takes a non-reader to tell us about all the times that we almost unconsciously make use of reading every day. To be a non-reader or near to a non-reader in our culture is a more severe handicap than most of us realize.

So what do we do in order to prevent a human being from developing such a handicap and to help him overcome it? In Norway as in the United States, we have only in this century had our eyes opened to this problem. The educational set-up, the viewpoints and methods may be different in the two countries, but we seem to make great strides in the right direction on both sides of the Atlantic. In this article I will try to show how Norwegians look upon reading problems and deal with them therapeutically.

Historical Review

Fifty years ago, and in some schools a much shorter time, a severe reading problem was looked upon as proof or indication of mental retardation. In fact, some teachers still think in this manner. But long

before regular remedial reading programs were initiated, many retarded readers were helped by understanding and ingenious classroom teachers in the one room rural school as well as in larger institutions.

Around the beginning of this century alert and interested teachers saw that extra effort must be made in order to identify and help students with reading problems. In 1919 Norway got its first residential school for children with speech and reading problems. Even if the existence of the school was unknown to many educators, there was soon a long waiting list of students who needed therapy in this school.

The end of World War II was followed by a great expansion of the speech and reading program in Norway. Two new special state schools were established, and more important, a training program for logopedists, specialists in treating children with speech and reading handicaps, was initiated. The therapists trained in this program all have a teacher's certificate and several years of classroom teaching experience. After one year of training, most of us go into positions as speech and reading specialists in the public schools, a few work in the state special schools and some at school psychologist centers. Since we are supposed to deal with both speech and reading problems, our caseloads are very heavy. In order to be able to help a larger number of reading cases, the Norwegian state has every summer for the last five years arranged six weeks summer courses for the training of remedial reading teachers. These teachers usually handle the reading cases, very often after they have been diagnosed by a logopedist and under his supervision.

Our public school laws make provisions for the handicapped in reading, and every child with a reading problem has a legal right to help. For example the *Act of November 23, 1951 Dealing with Special Schools* says:

The State shall provide the requisite number of

- (1) Schools for children and young people who can only derive partial benefit from the teaching given in the primary schools or in ordinary schools for young people, for the reason that they:
 - a. _____
 - b. _____
 - c. _____
 - d. have difficulty in learning how to speak, read or write.

How Do We Explain Specific Reading Problems in Norway?

In explaining the etiology of reading problems, Norwegian educators for a long period were influenced by Danish research and thinking. The idea that reading problems were caused by a congenital weakness, called wordblindness, found strong support in Denmark. Writers like Henning Skydsgaard, Knud Hermann and Edith Norrie and in Sweden Bertil Hallgren explained most reading problems as being caused by this constitutional deficiency. Studies showed that between four and ten per cent of the total population were expected to suffer from wordblindness.

Naturally, not all reading problems were explained as having their etiology in wordblindness. But many teachers, and even more parents, grabbed at this solution to their children's academic problems. The parents of a child with reading problems found the diagnosis wordblindness much more acceptable than mental retardation. Especially the misunderstanding that wordblindness could be diagnosed through special types of reading and spelling errors, like reversals, made many parents and teachers believe that wordblindness was the explanation to the child's difficulties. Sometimes wordblindness was thought of as a condition (like colorblindness) that not much could be done about, and instead of helping the non-reading child, the diagnosis tended to discourage him from making any effort at reading.

I shall never forget one little third grader who showed this attitude. Having taken over the class recently and found a very pronounced diversity in reading ability, I had decided upon individualization of instruction and group work. And here was this little boy who was only able to recognize a small number of two-sound words. Accordingly, I gave him a very small assignment to prepare for the next day. (Norwegian school children are supposed to have home assignments in reading.) The next day I found out that he had done nothing with his little text, and I asked him why. He looked at me, smiled overbearingly and said, "Don't you know I am wordblind?" This boy, who was emotionally immature and somewhat mentally retarded had found a very good excuse for not displaying any effort in school work.

The tendency to explain all reading problems in terms of wordblindness naturally led to the formulation of its antithesis, saying that no such thing as wordblindness existed. An exponent for this

view is the Swedish educator, Dr. Helge Haage. Haage believes very strongly in the phonetic method and says that the most important support a child has when he learns to read, is his spoken language (“talspråkstödet”). Spoken words are like chains of sounds, written words are like chains of written sounds, the problem is to know how to sound the words out and “draw them together.” Dr. Haage’s methods are sound and practical and applicable to most words in the Swedish and the Norwegian languages, since both are mostly phonetically spelt, that is to say the written image of the word is very similar to the “image” of the word. Danish is less phonetical, and that may be the reason why the phonetic method has been used in that country to a lesser extent. As to the English language, which is rather unphonetically spelt, Haage’s methods may have much less application in countries where this language is spoken.

The current view about the etiology of reading problems in Norway is that there is no one explanation. Reading problems usually have a multiple causality and may have different etiologies in different cases. Hans Jørgen Gjessing, a Norwegian researcher in this field, distinguishes between different kinds of “dyslexia:” visual, auditory, auditory-visual, educational, developmental, and emotional. He points to the importance of a thorough diagnosis of each reading case in order to ascertain specific problems and needs, and so tailor the therapy to these needs. Gjessing in his thinking seems to be influenced by American authorities like Gates, Robinson, and Monroe.

How Reading Therapy is Organized

Most students with reading problems in Norway receive therapy in either of these three ways: (1) A very small number are accepted as pupils at residential state schools for children with speech and reading problems. (2) The great majority of cases are treated in the public elementary schools by logopedists or specially trained reading teachers. (3) Some receive reading therapy as private tutoring by logopedists and reading teachers.

(1) Most of the students in the Special schools come from rural areas and small communities where there is no help available for speech and reading problems. There are still long waiting lists for children who need to go to these schools. The students accepted in the Special schools are either pure reading cases or combined reading-speech cases. Granhaug School, near Oslo, gives special training to

reading-handicapped children whom the public schools have not been able to help. At Stepperud School for Children with Central Language Difficulties is a group of children who show signs of both speech and reading problems.

(2) The reading cases in our public schools are treated in different ways. In the largest cities and in some medium-sized ones, some children with severe reading problems are gathered on a yearly basis in special classrooms, where they receive special, intensive training until they are able to return to their respective homerooms. The advantage of this system is that children with severe reading problems who are far behind their classmates are allowed to make gains in reading without having to compare themselves with better readers. Also they avoid being called upon to read aloud (a procedure very common in Norwegian schools) which usually tends to produce emotional concomitants and destroys good reading habits encouraged by the logopedist. It must be stressed that the children are kept in these "reading-classes," as they are termed, only until they are ready to profit from ordinary classroom teaching and not until they have overcome their handicap completely.

Most children however, are not removed from their homeroom, but only receive therapy in group or individually for a certain number of periods every week. This system is called "reading clinic." When working with these children, it is extremely important that the logopedist or reading teacher cooperates with the home-room teacher of reading, so that the child is given appropriate tasks when he is together with his own classroom group. Reading aloud, the use of too advanced reading material, and speeding up of the reading rate will as a rule have to be discouraged.

(3) Children from rural areas, where there is no school logopedist or reading teacher are sometimes referred to the nearest logopedist, who will diagnose the child, suggest materials and methods, and help the child's home-room teacher or another appropriate teacher to start some remedial work. Once in a while a logopedist will also work with a child as a private tutor. When a child is referred to a logopedist for diagnosis and/or treatment by a medical doctor (usually the school physician), the State Health Insurance will cover all travel expenses and about half of the logopedist's fee. This is also the case with speech therapy.

Logopedists, working with both speech and reading cases in the

public school will find some children who may be classified in both categories. Retarded readers, especially with auditory difficulties, frequently display minor articulation errors, and the combination of reading and stuttering difficulties is sometimes found. Most reading cases, however, do not display speech defects. The logopedist's caseload will therefore usually consist of two separate groups, reading cases and speech cases, and the relative size of both groups will vary. In 1960-61 about forty per cent of my caseload were reading cases and sixty percent speech cases.

What Kind of Methods Are Used?

Because of the phonetic structure of the Norwegian language, most of the remedial therapy is done through using an approach close to the phonetic method. However, meaning is constantly stressed. Non-phonetic words are usually taught through visual recognition methods, using picture clues, and configuration clues. Reading and spelling go hand in hand and tend to support each other. The child is trained in building a basic spelling vocabulary. Sounds are identified and drawn together utilizing visual, auditory, tactual and kinaesthetic clues. Ear-training and listening games, matching and completion exercises make the work interesting. A series of books with high grade interest level and low grade reading level have been published in the last years, books that have convinced the slow reader that reading is fun.

It is fascinating to be a witness to the growth of reading in a youngster who has never gotten any meaning out of written symbols. It was a great day to both student and teacher when the up-till-then non-reading fifth-grader, upon being shown the word MOT (meaning "against"), could tell his therapist that he had understood the preceding day the meaning of that word on a poster in a demonstration procession against selling liquor in town. He was just beaming at the thought that he had understood the message behind the three letters MOT.

Do We Need to Learn More About Educational Therapy in Reading?

Norway's greatest dramatist Henrik Ibsen in his epic drama "Peer Gynt" points out that the specific human trait in man is that he is open to others, not like the "trolls" whom he describes as being "themselves enough." It is extremely important for all of us, including those of us who work in the field of reading therapy, that we are open and

do not think that the methods that we have always used give the best answers to the problems, that they are "enough" or sufficient. When going back from Kalamazoo, Michigan, where I have mainly studied speech disorders, but also have had the opportunity to see some of the work done in the Psycho-Educational Clinic of Western Michigan University, I am bringing back to my work in reading therapy the viewpoint that reading for meaning is more important than any other principle upon which our reading therapy can be based. It is easy to get lost in the jungle of mechanism-and perceptual-training. The concept of "mental content" and the idea that reading is more than anything else a thinking process will somehow have to be incorporated in my methodology and worked into practical teaching procedures. How that is to be done, I will have to find out through experience, and I am sure it is going to be a challenge.

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Alf Preus, in his native Norway, has combined at the undergraduate level both speech correction and educational therapy in reading. He obtained his Master's degree from Western Michigan University in 1962. While completing the requirements for the Master's degree Mr. Preus participated in the activities of the Psycho-Educational Clinic.