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The Role of the School Psychologist in the Teaching of Reading

By Ruth C. Penty

Battle Creek Schools

The school psychologist or psychological examiner without specific training in the reading area can help the teacher of reading to better understand her task. The psychologist or examiner with background in the teaching of reading can be of even more help to the classroom teacher.

Estimate of Reading Readiness

A decision in regard to a small child's readiness to begin formal reading experiences must involve observation and evaluation on the part of the teacher over a period of time. Physical, mental, social, psychological, emotional and educational readiness necessary to successful reading experiences cannot be quickly assessed.

The psychologist can, however, assist the teacher of beginning reading in making the very important decision in regard to a child's readiness to begin reading. The manner in which a child relates to the examiner, the maturity of his responses, his attention span, his success or lack of success in establishing left-right progression and his freedom from reversals are among the observations which a psychologist can make in a short time. Cumulative records, teacher reports and observations assist physical, social and emotional evaluations. A child's vocabulary, his ability to detect likenesses, differences and analogies, his understanding of rhyming tasks, and his description of interpretation of pictures—skills tapped on the lower scales of the Stanford-Binet Tests of Mental Ability—help establish an estimate of his educational readiness for reading. The determination of whether or not a child has reached the mental age thought necessary for his success in reading is an accepted duty of the psychological examiner. Many reading specialists opinion that this mental age should be six years and six months.

Assessment of Potential for Reading

The assessment of mental ability and the estimating of a child's potential for growth in reading are two of the most important contributions of the psychologist in relation to the reading program.

Children with reading difficulties are penalized on group mental maturity tests which involve reading. They usually score much higher on individual tests administered by a psychologist, such as the Stanford-Binet and the Wechsler Intelligence Scales. Such intelligence tests involve less reading or measure fewer skills dependent on reading than do most group tests. The Wechsler Scales yield both a performance and a verbal quotient.

Reading ability is highly correlated with mental ability. Therefore, a comparison between a child's reading age derived from a reading test and his mental age inferred from an individual test, such as the Stanford-Binet, will help the classroom teacher to know if a child is reading at about mental age expectation, the approximate number of months which he is retarded in reading ability and therefore his probable mental potential for growth in reading. Many reading specialists regard a retarded reader in need of special remedial therapy as one whose reading age is two or more years below his mental age.

The Wechsler Intelligence Scales provide a verbal and a performance quotient. The verbal quotient which results from the assessment of vocabulary, information and other skills somewhat dependent on reading ability is usually depressed if a child has trouble with reading; whereas, the performance quotient will be higher, unless there are other conditions which affect performance skills. The quotient derived from the performance tasks then is usually a better measure of the mental ability of the child with reading difficulty. In turn, the discrepancy between the verbal and the performance quotient is some indication of the child's potential for growth in the reading area.

Suggestion of Effective Methods of Teaching

The manner in which a child responds to visual, auditory, and performance tasks on psychological tests helps the examiner to suggest to the teacher whether the child has the best chance of success in reading through word methods, phonic methods, tactual-kinesthetic methods or a combination of all three of these approaches.

A child's greater success on the visual retention tasks rather than on the auditory retention tasks of the Stanford-Binet points to the probability of his making better progress with the visual or word method than with the auditory or phonic method. Such tasks include copying of geometric forms and the reformulation of bead patterns from memory after a few seconds of exposure.

Likewise, the greater success of a child on auditory retention and rhyming tasks than on visual retention tasks suggests that he may make better progress through auditory or phonic methods. Such Stanford-Binet tasks include the recall of meaningful facts from reading selections read orally to the child and the recall and repetition of words, sentences and digits after oral presentation. Responses with rhyming words are also included among these tests. The Wechsler Scales assess ability to recall digits forward and backward after oral naming of such digits.

In turn, much more facility with performance than with verbal tasks on individual tests or observed skill in drawing can provide an examiner bases for recommending tactual-kinesthetic methods for the teaching of reading to a particular child. These methods can be especially recommended for the teaching of a child who has not met success through word or phonic methods or through a combination of these approaches. The Fernald Tracing and the VAKT (Visual, Auditory, Kinaesthetic, Tactual) Methods provide tactual-kinaesthetic training.

Poor auditory and visual retention will emphasize to the psychologist the need on the part of the classroom teacher to repeat both auditory and visual presentations several times in teaching procedures.

Detection of Emotional Problems

The evaluation of emotional factors which assist or impede a child's learning to read has long been considered among the tasks of the school psychologist. He is able to tap such factors through observation, test profile characteristics, projective techniques, child and parent conferences, records and case study. Not only is the psychologist expected to detect emotional problems which may be affecting the progress of a child in reading, but a recommendation is expected from him in regard to ways of relieving emotional pressures after they have been diagnosed. Diagnosis and recommendation in the emotional area continue to be two of the most important contributions of the psychologist to the teacher of reading.

Other Psychological Services

The psychologist who observes the child closely in a person to person relationship is frequently able to detect physical conditions which may have bearing on a child's success or failure in the reading

area. Visual and hearing weaknesses may be quite apparent. Possible thyroid difficulties may be suspected with resultant transfer to a physician for verification. The psychologist can make an estimate of dominance—handedness, eyedness and footedness—as confusion in dominance may be a factor in a child's inability to make progress in reading. The possibility of organic involvement which makes reading progress slow or impossible can be detected through observation of behavior, psychological test profiles and parent interviews in regard to birth and health history. The transfer to a neurologist for a neurological examination will then rule out or confirm presence of brain injury.

In addition to the services which the teacher of reading can expect from all school psychologists and psychological examiners, the technician who is trained in the reading area can give additional helps to the classroom teacher, if his time permits. He may help parents understand their role in developing reading readiness and in other aspects of the reading program through the building of their child's health, the providing of rich experiential background, the establishment of a climate in the home which will develop emotional security, and the stimulation of love for books and reading. He may assist in the determination of reading ability and also in the diagnosis of specific reading difficulties through the administration of reading tests and use of other oral and written diagnostic instruments. Besides preparing an evaluation of a pupil's current reading strengths and weaknesses, he can also prescribe teaching materials and methodology to assist the teacher in helping the child develop his reading ability.

Summary

Psychological services should help the classroom teacher in preparing a child for reading tasks, in deciding whether or not a child is ready to begin formal reading, in knowing why a child is not making progress in reading, in formulating an estimate of how much progress he can expect him to make, and in determining methods through which a child has best probable opportunity to succeed. Specific help in materials and methodology can be expected from the psychologist or psychological examiner who has background in the teaching of reading.

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