Helping Children with Reading Difficulties

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> *I do not need an elaborate definition of reading difficulties. One simply takes the pupil—child, adolescent or adult—from where he is to somewhere else. There is not one of us who could not read better if we had individual instruction in reading now.*
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> *Marie M. Clay (1987)*

An integrated literacy programme based on whole language experiences—poems, songs, stories, discussion, writing, shared and guided reading—will provide appropriate learning activities for pupils at different stages of development. Even with a wide range of achievement in a class, or with multiple classes everyone will benefit. Those who are making rapid progress are not held back. As independent readers and writers, they can explore ideas and themes further and share their findings with others. Those who are not making such good progress can still participate fully in the programme and learn through the reading and writing they do.

There may be pupils, however, who cause concern because they seem to be failing to learn. In this article we will discuss the possible reasons for difficulties, ways of preventing failure and ways of providing assistance.

Possible reasons for reading and writing difficulties

Is it personal?

When children fail to learn to read in their first years at school it is sometimes thought that they must have a specific learning disability. This may be so in rare cases, but usually the causes are more obvious.

If children are frequently absent from school during their first years, or change schools frequently and have to settle in again, some delay in learning would be understandable. If their health is poor because of malnutrition or illness and they are tired and listless, failure to make good progress is also understandable. Problems with sight and hearing must also be considered.

There are many factors at home that can affect a child's performance. Parents may be over anxious and expect too much from a child. They may compare a child with older or younger brothers or sisters and show their disappointment in his or her progress.

A child may be neglected because the family is too busy or is troubled. There may be no one to take an interest in the child's progress or provide the support and encouragement needed. Or a child may be over protected, with parents or older sisters who care for him or her so well that the independence needed for learning does not develop.

The role of self-esteem

In Sweden, Karin Taube investigated the relationship of learning to read and confidence.

She found that fear of failure affected successful learning. Learning to read requires "concentration and the mobilisation of mental resources". Beginning readers have a great deal to learn and can easily become confused. Confident children do not mind making mistakes but less confident children stop trying because they do not want to fail.

When this happens, their teachers and parents show their concern in ways that affect the child's already diminished confidence. The cycle of failure begins. This vicious circle or cycle of confusion, concern and failure may continue throughout school.

It is not difficult to imagine how children must feel when they cannot accomplish the tasks other children appear to do with ease.

Teachers and parents need to provide them with the encouragement needed for development as readers and writers. They need to be positive about them and their accomplishments. They need tasks that they can be successful with, so that they are able to take small but steady steps along the road to literacy.

Is it the programme?

When Marie M. Clay began her research on emergent reading in the early 1960s, she asked the question 'Can we see the reading process going wrong in the first year of instruction?' She studied 100 five year olds who were in Primer 1 in Auckland schools and discovered that the answer was 'Yes'.

The children who made slow progress had become confused even when the classroom programme was a good one and books were plentiful. Some of the children thought that all you had to do was remember the words. They made up stories to fit the books or memorised the text and 'read' without attending to the words. Other children found it hard to slow their oral language rate to match the words on the page. Others read from right to left or up the page while others became bogged down in the details of print, thinking that each letter was a word, or that you had to sound out each letter as you read aloud.

High progress readers read for meaning using cues from the illustrations, story context and print. They read thoughtfully, predicting, checking, self-correcting, and attending to the print so that they gradually recognised some words on sight. They learned about the relationship of letters to sounds through their reading, and of course the more they read, the more skilful they became.

The pupils who had become confused, practised their errors and found reading unrewarding and difficult. The cycle of failure began, as concern was shown by the teacher and by parents. The children began to dislike reading, to avoid reading and to feel that they were failures.

Marie M. Clay's research has led to a programme of early intervention known as Reading Recovery. After a year at school, diagnostic tests are given to children who are showing signs of confusion, and tutoring programmes are devised to enable them to "recover" and manage within the class programme.

In Pacific Island schools failure occurs for many reasons, including the lack of good reading material and programmes that may not be broad enough help to all children. Detailed individual diagnosis and tuition are not possible when classes are large and teachers are busy. However, there is much that can be done.

Ways of preventing and overcoming reading and writing difficulties

A great deal can be done to prevent and overcome reading and writing failure. This includes:

* valuing and building on the children's preschool experiences;
* maintaining close links with the family and the community;
* providing integrated literacy programmes where reading and writing are based on enjoyable, purposeful experiences of life, poetry and story;
* offering early intervention;
* assisting older pupils.

Before children come to school:

All the normal language using activities of early childhood prepare children for learning to read happily and well at school.

As children interact with their family, their friends and with other people in the community, they learn about themselves, and the people and world around them.

They learn to use the language or languages of their community: they hear and join in songs, rhymes and stories: they play games that require language and action. Knowledge and intelligence grow through these natural language using experiences.

In many rural communities books are not readily available but the children will still see that literacy is valued. Their parents will read the Bible regularly, and use a hymn book for singing and prayers. They may write letters to family and friends far away.

Many children today, especially children in urban areas, do not have the rich traditional experiences of storytelling and village life. Their lives may be difficult because of the social circumstances of their families.

However, their experiences of life are to be valued. The life going on around them, the excitement and entertainment of city life—the people, the market, the traffic, the park, the videos watched, the songs on the radio, literacy material in the form of signs and posters—provide rich examples of language in use and a starting point for becoming literate.

All children bring valuable experiences with them to school and a power-to-learn that will lead to literacy.

The school and the community:

It is important for parents to know about the type of programme being followed in school. Their acceptance and support are very important.

A close relationship between the community and the school makes it easier for teachers and parents to discuss concerns. Where children are having difficulties with reading, teachers can explain that encouragement is needed rather than criticism. And ways of helping can be suggested such as:

- making time for conversation
- telling or reading stories
- talking about TV or video programmes
- fostering independence

An integrated literacy programme:

An integrated literacy programme provides a rich variety of whole language experiences for children. They listen, discuss, read and write about a wide range of worthwhile events and ideas. Language, literacy and knowledge will develop through such a programme.

Early intervention:

Children who are not making good progress need help as soon as possible. Here are some simple suggestions:

Helping with Language. Find time to talk with the children who are particularly quiet and shy. They may benefit too, from sharing a book in a small group setting where they have a better chance of being heard.

Helping with Print. Watch for the children who are not yet attending to print in a systematic way. Check their knowledge of reading by asking them to point as they read. Note what they do and gently encourage them to change their reading strategies.

Helping With Books. Try to find books that the less successful can read with only a little guidance. They need to know what it feels like to be a reader. It can be hard to provide enough books in the child's first language which is why writing is so valuable. You may be able to make a few handmade books about topics the child is interested in or ask older pupils to do so.

Helping Through Writing. Encouraging children to write can be one of the best ways of overcoming difficulties. Begin as the secretary who writes what the child dictates, then gradually encourage independence—invented spelling, finding words for themselves—and appreciate what is achieved. Writing with a partner may be equally effective.

Check the pupil's knowledge of letter names and fill in gaps through the normal programme of writing, songs and shared reading. Alphabet books provide enjoyable opportunities for learning more about letters. Emergent readers sometimes reverse letters or confuse letters such as b, d, p, q, but this is not really abnormal. Some children use mirror writing, much to our surprise, but a quiet reminder to start at the left and move to the right will soon change this behaviour, too.

Helping older pupils. Helping older pupils can be difficult as they have years of failure and humiliation behind them and are convinced that they cannot read.

They have their own rituals for trying to read and when these do not work they think that they have missed out on some magical trick that other people know about.

Very often they will have suffered years of remedial help, both good and bad - phonics, spelling, exercises - all adding to their confusion and sense of failure. Margaret Meek gives valuable advice in her book, *Learning to Read.* In a chapter on 'The lost adolescent' she writes:

> To help a lost adolescent to read or write is a serious and rewarding undertaking, but it can never be plain sailing. Reading inadequacy at this stage never comes alone; it is the outward symptom of a number of ills, social and psychological as well as those of illiteracy. It would be foolish to hope that by teaching him to read we can cure every adolescent's other problems, but all non-readers should have individual attention, understanding and help to learn. Young people who leave school unable to read are very bitter about it. They tell how easy it was to skip lessons, how teachers never had enough time or patience. Looking back, they say: 'She should have made me do it.'

She explains that these pupils have never known what it is like to be a reader. They have never felt themselves being fluent, and they never take risks by trying to follow the plot of a story. They concentrate on letters and words. They have to be encouraged to take risks, to make mistakes and to learn from them. The teacher should find out what they can do and try to convince them that they can learn to read, that it requires effort, that it is a challenge they can meet, that support will be given.

Margaret Meek recommends the use of literature and an informal atmosphere where a good book is shared. Katherine Paterson writes in *Frugal Chariots* of a prison scheme for illiterates which takes the form of a Book Discussion Group. A particular theme such as jealousy is discussed and books about the theme are available at several reading levels. *The Great Gilly Hopkins* and *Jacob Have I Loved* were two of the books used.

Shared reading sessions for small groups of older pupils are not too difficult to organise and can be very effective. Books of interest and importance in their lives can be read to them, discussed, and used as the basis for writing. Newspaper articles and sports magazines may provide suitable material. Where suitable written material in the pupils' language is not available, discussions could provide the basis for group or individual writing.

References

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