

THE READING RECOVERY PROJECT*

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AN INTRODUCTION

When the social and educational problems of the South Pacific region are considered, it is usually in terms of cultural and ethnic differences, of urbanisation and social change, and studies are centred at secondary school or adult level. The issues become complex and so awe inspiring that there seems to be little that the individual can do to bring about improvements.

Could it be, however, that these problems and the solution to these problems lies in something simpler and something more basic; the successful learning of a complex behaviour, READING?

For reading is the foundation for success in school, now that literacy is valued and necessary in South Pacific societies. Children who fail in this complex learning task fail at school so that when they leave, or as is more frequent, when they 'drop out', not only do they lack the ability to read at a satisfactory level, but they lack the self-esteem that success brings. It is easy to understand how young people can become resentful and anti-social when they feel worthless and unwanted. Major surveys of reading difficulties have shown a strong link between reading difficulties and anti-social behaviour (Tizard, 1969)¹.

Young people who have not reached an average 10 to 11 year old reading level before leaving school can lose the reading skills they have because they cannot get the practice needed for maintenance. Newspapers, notices and instruction forms are above this level. This is a depressing fact, as was shown in the survey by Elley and Mangubhai¹.

The vital importance of basic literacy does not have to be stressed. It must be developed by every means possible. We need teaching methods and materials that are effective, economic and practical; methods that will *prevent* reading difficulties and give every child the opportunity to learn to read, so that his time at school is enjoyable as well as productive. He will leave school *able* to read, and better still, *wanting* to read.

* Some of the material in this article is adapted from a broadcast to teachers given by Barbara Moore for the Schools Broadcast Unit of the Fiji Ministry of Education.

Reading difficulties are a universal problem (Downing (1973)³ and though in the South Pacific region this may be exacerbated by such variables as language or social conditions, the basic problem is still that of failure to learn.

Professor Marie Clay of the University of Auckland, a world authority on reading, has studied the acquisition of reading in young children for many years and her findings have been published as two major texts on reading. The second edition of **The Early Detection of Reading Difficulties** includes a summary of the Reading Recovery Research Project, 1976-1978, where children with difficulties were diagnosed after one year at school and tuition, emphasising reading strategies, was provided on an individual basis, enabling most of the children to rejoin their class group before poor reading responses were habituated and before they felt any sense of failure⁴.

The children had begun school at five years, had been exposed to a great deal of talking, listening, writing and reading in their own language and were using texts with natural language and methods that emphasised meaning.

The aim of this current Reading Recovery Project, being carried out through the Institute of Education, USP is to adapt the techniques of the Auckland Scheme to the conditions of the South Pacific region.

During 1980 groups of children at three contrasting schools will have been tutored in an 'Emergency' Reading Recovery Programme. This is at Class 5 and 6 level, for though early intervention is more likely to be the solution, older children cannot be neglected. Already several insights have emerged through working with these older children and it should be possible to produce a programme of practical, workable and inexpensive methods that all teachers could use.

During the first term children at an urban multi-racial school were tutored, following preliminary screening tests. A Fijian teacher worked with a parallel group and will continue using reading recovery methods; it should be possible to have given help to most of the children with severe reading difficulties before the end of 1980. They may not bridge the gap that has developed over the years but the opportunity will be there; some will succeed and the project will benefit from observing this work and learning from the teachers involved which methods and books have worked well.

The principal and staff have been involved too; they have taken part in talks and discussions on reading difficulties, new reading ideas, the benefits of running records and miscue analysis. The standard of reading was high in the school and it is probably that the percentage of children with reading difficulties will be found to be lower than in other schools. Data from this first school project is now being tabulated and evaluated.

In the second term tutoring has been given in an urban Fijian school; in the last term, in an Indian school. Findings will provide the basis for a Reading Recovery Programme For Older Children (and adults, perhaps) and will provide the basis for investigating the possibilities of an early intervention programme in 1981 applicable to the region.

Those taking part in the project are aware of the need for economy, for practicality and for an understanding of varying school situations. However, a strong argument can be made for spending money at the foundations of education, for it is an undoubted investment in the future. Success at reading and the avoidance of failure are aims that benefit individuals and the community as a whole. Although the project has only just begun already it has proved rewarding.

UNDERSTANDING READING DIFFICULTIES

To begin to understand reading difficulties we need to consider the actual reading process. Reading is not a simple matter of visual decoding; from letters to sound, to meaning. When we read we use two main sources of information; visual information or what we see through the eyes and non-visual information, what is behind the eyes. The non-visual information is what enables us to understand print. We need minimal cues from print which we combine with information from meaning and structure.

The patterning of complex behaviour that makes up reading can easily go wrong in the very early stages. Children have so much to learn that it is really rather remarkable that most of them *do* learn to read.

To begin with they have to understand what reading is all about, become familiar with book language and with conventions of print. Moving from left to right across the page does not come naturally; viewing letters in relationship to space has to be learnt, which is why so many children confuse b and d, p and q and other sets of letters.

One child may become bogged down in detail, overloading his memory with symbols he cannot process. Another may waste valuable time as he tries to scan print from right to left or from the bottom of the page to the top. He is learning nothing during all this time about the relationships of letter to sounds and he is not going to remember words, since what he says does not match what he sees.

A child with rapid oral language may be unable to slow his pace to the requirements of print. The word by word stage with careful finger pointing is essential for precise processing and for developing visual scanning skills.

It is probable that as many as 40% of beginning readers are slowed down because of such problems. Many of these will eventually make the necessary adjustments, but others will go on practising their errors until they become fixed habits and hard to change.

Until the 1970's reading difficulties were explained by a medical model and it was suspected that children who could not read perhaps had some organic problem, some very slight neurological abnormality that perhaps interfered with perception or sequencing or with some part of the reading process. Possibly a percentage of reading failures do have such a problem but it has never been proven. The controversy over the use of the terms is interesting but not constructive. Whatever the reason for failure the end product is a child who cannot read.

Think of any task that you have failed to master yourself and how you feel about it, how you avoid it, how you downgrade its value. When a task seems too difficult, when you are unsuccessful in spite of trying hard, it is hard to carry on. When parents are anxious, when teachers are concerned and when other children are moving on and may be critical, a child soon feels a failure, then reading becomes for him a tense and unpleasant task.

Even with industrious teachers and good methods and material a child can fail. Learning too is affected by health, by the way a child feels about himself, his happiness and his adjustment to school. Learning to read a

language he does not feel comfortable with could add to his confusion and compound failure though it is possible for someone to fail to read even with the best of language preparation.

If a child has not begun to read after two years at school or if his reading level is two or more years below class, age, and ability level, he is considered to be backward in reading. Some of these backward readers, however, may be doing as well as can be expected because they may be of a lower than average intelligence. A simplified reading programme at a level they can achieve will help them make any gradual progress they are capable of. But for children of average intelligence, who are reading below their obvious level of ability, help is urgently needed.

HOW CAN TEACHERS HELP?

The first thing to do and the most important thing is to find out what the pupil can do. Even if a child has only begun to read a little, try to find the level where he can read with only one or two errors — this will be his instructional level. At this level he can read enough running words, one after

the other, to get meaning from the text. Then if there are one or two hard words he will have to work them out for himself.

Try not to tell him the difficult word; it's better to encourage him to make an intelligent guess and perhaps give him the beginning sound or some other cue, if he's still stuck.

Of course, the errors can be used for word study but this should be kept brief; the more actual reading he does the better, because he will have already missed years of practice. But once his reading level has been established his practice reading must be easy enough to give him a sense of achievement.

If a pupil is reading a little, the teacher should listen to him read a page or two of a book the teacher thinks he can manage. The number of errors the child makes can be recorded and if it's more than one error in every 10 words, that book is too hard and he needs something easier.

When one is faced with the child who cannot read at all, even after several years at school, it is best to start with the simplest 'caption book' available. Talk about the book, the pictures and the words, read the captions to the child while the child points to the words you are reading. Then you can ask the child to "read it with your finger". Watch to see if he is matching spoken word to printed word. Is his finger pointing to the word he's saying?

Such a child may not know letter names, either, so let him learn these by writing them, verbalising the movements as he goes; for example, "down and around for a b" or whatever it is; then he could write it "small then big, fast then slow"; think of a word that begins with the letter, and so on. Again, the actual reading he tries to do is more important than learning separate items such as letter names, but it will build his confidence, and with constant encouragement and praise for every effort he may soon be on his way.

"But what," the busy teacher with 30-40 other children to cater for may ask, "what can such a backward reader be doing in the classroom when the other pupils are doing class work that involves reading and writing? Must he just sit and do nothing, or worse, get up to mischief?"

The answer to this will depend, of course, on the backward reader's age and capabilities. If he is very backward there may be very little written work that he can do. He will learn from oral lessons we hope, if he hasn't already become too disheartened to listen, and the teacher could ask him oral questions afterwards. Perhaps an able pupil in the class, someone who is patient and considerate, could read him the questions and write his answers as he dictates them.

There are other things that he could do such as drawing pictures in sequence to show what's happening; then he could add labels and captions to his pictures. Encourage the drawing of diagrams, and comic strips, adjusting the subject to his class level. After all, drawing is not 'baby work'; it requires planning, co-ordination and it's much better than doing nothing or copying down something the child cannot read.

Of course, finding a supply of the 'right' books can be a big problem, especially since books suitable for the slow reader's level are often associated with failure and with lower classes. But some selected supplementary readers can be kept specially for these children. Teachers and children can try making books from newspaper and magazine pictures; for example, stories about animals, or rugby or other children. Some of the more artistic children in the school could draw a series of pictures of something the slow reading child is interested in and then someone can write in sentences which the child dictates to make his own personal book. Or his own pictures can be used.

Perhaps one of the most effective, but sometimes neglected methods of helping any child to learn to read is *listening to a story*. All children (and adults?) enjoy listening to a story being read to them. They learn so much because they enjoy the excitement or humour or whatever quality they find in a particular story. Imagine how wonderful it is for someone who cannot read stories for himself to be able to listen to a story. He needs to be sitting near the front of the class, of course, so that he has the full benefit of the teacher's reading.

There is also a method we have tried called **Look and Listen** which helps children who can read a little but who are making very slow progress. Though not a substitute for individual diagnostic tutoring it is something that a busy teacher could try.

The pupil is read to by a good clear reader (perhaps another pupil in the class) and follows the text silently. The slow reader may follow the text with his finger or move a piece of cardboard under each line as a guide. As the slow reader becomes used to this and is attempting to follow the text, the story-reader stops and waits (hopefully) for the slow reader to say the next word or phrase.

The problem reader can choose the book and have his favourite stories over and over again. It is rather like a bedtime story and many lucky children probably did begin reading this way. (There are some notes available on this method for any teacher who would like to try it out.) When a teacher doesn't have time for individual lessons or is not sure where to start or what to do next, it could be worth trying.

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Editors' Note: if readers have any special questions on Reading Recovery they would like to raise with Barbara Moore; or if readers would like to receive any of her notes and articles on helping children to read, please write to:

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