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how successful this scheme has been. It is obvious, however, that the students' general enthusiasm, awareness and desire to learn, have increased dramatically. Also, the problem of absenteeism has been almost eliminated.

There are now two teachers for the thirty-four students, and this has allowed us to extend our group work, introduce more individualized instruction, and use greater variety in content and methods

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Milingimbi



READING WITHOUT TEARS AT MILINGIMBI SCHOOL

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Something had to be done. The Gudschinsky approach, which we had been using for two years in our bilingual program, was working well with a group of children who happened to be both bright and making it to school five days a week. However, a large group had tried with the Gudschinsky method and, either because they were not yet ready for this approach to reading, or through irregular attendance, simply never got off the ground. The other children, in the middle, were off the ground but fluttering precariously.

The 'never-off-the-ground' group was given to me. It comprised over twenty children, about ten of whom would be at school on any one day. They were second and third year infants with whom I had an hour and a half every day in an open classroom. The children knew me well and I could speak to them in Gupapuyju (or in English to the one or two children from other settlements whose language was not Gupapuyju). Gupapuyju speaking children read in Gupapuyju, the others in English. Elements from the Ashton-Warner¹ approach and the Language Experience² approach were used.

The method was simple. Each child had a large paper bag with

his name on it. In it he kept all the pictures and stories which he had done. Every day he came to school he read all the stories in his bag to me. If he were keen, he would read them all to himself a dozen times as well, and probably inflict them on any small relative or friend he could find. While waiting for me, picture-in-hand, he would also read any other child's story, leaning over my shoulder, often getting to know these other stories as well as he knew his own.

When I arrived at school each morning, the children would come to take a piece of paper, and a box of craypas, and sit down and draw a picture. The keener ones came immediately; the ones pre-occupied with other activities came when I called them. I started by trying to encourage children to draw pictures of stimulating events in the environment, things which they had seen and done which had affected them. But they were not interested in doing this in the same way that I had found European children to be. Even the day one of the school buildings burnt down produced nothing! So I let them draw just what they wanted to, which was generally quiet domestic scenes, cooking, playing, hunting, riding in a boat and such.

The children would first fold back a section at the bottom of their page, and when the picture was finished to their satisfaction, they would bring it to me and dictate their story. Usually the stories started at about three or four words, increasing over the months to sometimes a whole page, but sometimes, for the children who were new, or shy, only one word or nothing at all, just a picture to look at and put into the bag.

With the children watching, I would write a story slowly in the space below the picture, using a thick black pencil and reading each word as it appeared on the page. The children would read back the sentence straight away, pointing to the words one by one, before they had time to forget them; instant success at reading! Then, one by one, they would read yesterday's story, the one from the day before, and so on until all the previous stories had been read.

I had to bear one important factor in mind. Whenever the child came across a word he didn't know, I told him immediately. He never had to fidget in silence trying to work out a word; right from the first day he was a fluent reader. Sometimes, for some children, this meant having every sentence read first, before they

read it themselves. But this stage never lasted long. The picture was always the most important clue to decoding the words. Everything the child read, he could thus read easily. As his repertoire grew, so did his dependence on recognizing word shapes and initial sounds, until I could easily fold down the picture of the better known stories and the children would read them without the picture clues.

Along with this came the incidental teaching of sight words and word attack techniques. Some of the children profited by flash-cards with words on them; just something else to pull out of the bag and read to me. Other children didn't seem to profit much from flash-cards. However, all the children enjoyed looking comparatively at their different sentences; this word appearing twice, but with a different suffix each time, this word very short and appearing in all the stories, and these two words exactly the same except for one letter different (notice how they sound nearly the same too). Some children learned quickly with this type of word study, others didn't.

Sometimes a child didn't want to draw a picture, or even cut out a magazine picture, or even paint or do any other suggested activity. He would just read his stories and go away. A child at school for the first time in a month would easily start off again where he had left off.

After a time, a long time, some of the children were obviously learning well. After three months they didn't want pictures any more, they just wanted stories. They didn't want only their own stories, they wanted everybody else's as well. I started making up stories for them to read. It came as a shock that they could read information that had started in someone else's head and not their own. But this excited them. I even managed to use the Gudschinsky supplementary material because it turned out that the sounds and syllables which we had drawn out to look at ourselves, were as often as not the same sounds and syllables as those selected for the first few lessons of the primer on the basis of their high frequency. These few well-started children are over the difficult stage; they know what reading is about, they know that it is meaningful, and not only that, it's rather fun.

However, the number of children who did not progress like this was also high. Perhaps a third of them. Possibly through lack of attendance, or through lack of motivation, or readiness, or previous failure experiences, they weren't progressing with the 'no tears' method either. As their bag became heavier, their task became more

difficult. Despite all my efforts to make the experience fun, and without pressure, sessions with these children were becoming long and tiresome. I solved this problem by carefully weeding out the pictures and stories which were continually misread, or causing difficulty, while keeping the number of stories for each child at about a dozen. No child was unable to cope with that many. Seldom did they notice that one of their valuable pictures had mysteriously disappeared overnight. If they did notice, the picture was hastily retrieved, and, incidentally, the story never again forgotten. Some of these children, rote reciting stories on a few pieces of paper, appeared to be making no progress. But left to right reading techniques, one-to-one correspondence of words and other basic reading techniques were being reinforced, and when the sentences were over-learned, and we started the game of folding down the picture so that only the story remained, even these children found that they were really reading and were exhilarated.

The stories never seemed to lose their mundaneness. However, I stuck to my principle of letting the children draw, dictate and read exactly what they wanted to, and they never seemed bored. And besides, this tendency had some real advantages. The same words and sentence structures began appearing again and again. Children sometimes had a dozen stories comprising a total of only about fifteen or so words. Fortunately, in Gupapuyju, word order is not highly significant within a sentence. Recurrence of patterns such as "I am playing in the ...", "Yesterday we went to the ...", "We went hunting for ...", made books easy to compile. The stories were cut off the bottom of the pictures and these pictures were pasted on to sheets of stiff paper and stapled to make a book. The text was written on the facing page of each picture; a basic sentence pattern with only one word different each time. Some binding tape and some spray-on fluid to preserve the drawings made the book professional looking and permanent. In the library these books had a hard time competing with the beautiful, highly coloured English language books, but the children loved to read them in small groups with a teacher.

Some of the problems remained unsolved. Firstly, despite the fact that the Ashton-Warner¹ approach and the Language Experience² approach both successfully incorporate the use of group teaching in their scheme, it didn't work at all well with this group of special children. Secondly, the reading of individual stories and incidental word analysis etc. would take about five to ten minutes every day for each child. Other interested children would have to be occupied with another activity until called for by the teacher; a situation ideal

in the open classroom, but probably difficult to organize in a one-teacher, small class. A third 'problem' was the tendency of the group to grow. Successful readers from all the other groups started coming to me with their pictures wanting stories to read and copy. There were children, envelopes, pictures, pieces of pictures, and books everywhere. These responses were channelled into a highly successful supplementary activity for the other children, one which the Aboriginal teachers could manage well for their own reading groups. All that these Aboriginal teachers needed was accurate spelling ability in their own language. As the teacher got to know each child's responses, she could decide whether this approach was better as the key method or as a supplement to another method.

Finally, two things were borne in mind during all of this. Firstly, there is a time and a place for teaching young children who are still learning English (or any other language) what 'correct' grammar and usage is. This is not it. The children dictating the story, whatever language they used, would get the story on paper just as they told it. Any attempt to correct grammar, and the child would not be able to read it back the next day. Secondly, the reading and word study as described here is only a small part of this reading program. In any reading program lots of time should be spent in creating a reading environment for the children. Even with only an hour and a half a day, I made sure that I spent about ten or fifteen minutes reading to the children, listening to my children and older children reading, or just looking at books with them. And reading would be brought frequently and meaningfully into every other activity in the open classroom.

Allen and Allen summarize a child's learning in a Language Experience program thus:

- what he thinks about he can say;
- what he says can be written (or dictated);
- what has been written can be read;
- he can read what he has written and what others have written for him to read.

This approach to reading is very slow. It takes a long time for any results to show. But it is also easy for both the child and the teacher. It makes the child conscious that the reading process

can be connected with real life; he can actually read and recall ideas that he had yesterday and forgot. Reading becomes very real.

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References

1. Ashton-Warner, Sylvia: *Teacher*, Simon & Schuster, 1963.
2. Allen, R.V. and Allen C.: *An Introduction to Language Experience Program*, Encyclopaedia Britannica Press, 1970.

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